The Argentine military, the military family and the violence of the 1970s:
an ethnographic study of kinship

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ABSTRACT

This thesis addresses the military of the last dictatorship in Argentina (1976-1983). The findings are based on original empirical data, gathered through interviews with former subaltern officers of the 1970s, their wives and children. By adopting an ethnographic approach, this study contributes to understandings of Argentina’s recent past in two ways: on the one hand it describes how military families reconstruct life in the 1970s, showing how kinship works in the military world; on the other, it explains the centrality of kinship in the broader process of perpetrating and representing the violence of the 1970s, Argentina’s cultural war. Since the end of the dictatorship, the military lost their historically prestigious position to be morally and judicially condemned for the abuses committed during the regime. Repudiated by large sectors of the society, the military became target of stereotypes that affect both studies of this group and its interaction with society, serving to limit the understanding of the violence and its aftermath. By extending the focus from the officers to their families, this study recovers the neglected human dimension of the military; it explores their narratives of family life, relationships with the institution and involvement in the violence, as well as their reactions to the trials for crimes against humanity. Fieldwork revealed the existence of an informal solidarity network within the military world which is based on kinship and works in parallel with (and often in opposition to) the prescriptions of the Army. This thesis therefore questions the tensions between military families, the Armed Forces and the State in post-authoritarian Argentina; it builds on kinship an alternative analytic path to look at the military acting within Argentine society; and thereby shows how military power is embedded into it, reinserting military families within the cycle of violence and trauma that still affects Argentina.
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# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AFAViTA</td>
<td>Asociación Familiares y Amigos de Víctimas del Terrorismo en Argentina (Association Relatives and Friends of Victims of Terrorism in Argentina)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AFyAPPA</td>
<td>Asociación Familiares y Amigos de Presos Políticos en Argentina (Association Relatives and Friends of Political Prisoners in Argentina)</td>
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<tr>
<td>OAS</td>
<td>Organization of American States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CELS</td>
<td>Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales (Centre for Legal and Social Studies)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CELTYV</td>
<td>Centro de Estudios Sobre el Terrorismo y sus Víctimas (Centre for the Studies on Terrorism and its Victims)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CEMIDA</td>
<td>Centro de Militares para la Democracia Argentina (Centre of Military for Argentina’s Democracy)</td>
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<tr>
<td>ERP</td>
<td>Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (People’s Revolutionary Army)</td>
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<tr>
<td>ESMA</td>
<td>Escuela Superior de Mecánica de la Armada (Naval School of Mechanics)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acronym</td>
<td>Full Name</td>
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<tr>
<td>H.I.J.O.S.</td>
<td><em>Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio</em> (Children for Identity and Justice against Forgetting and Silence)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HyN</td>
<td><em>Hijos y Nietos de Presos Políticos</em> (Children and Grandchildren of Political Prisoners)</td>
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<tr>
<td>MTP</td>
<td><em>Movimiento Todos por la Patria</em> (Movement All for the Fatherland)</td>
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<tr>
<td>PRT</td>
<td><em>Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores</em> (Revolutionary Worker’s Party)</td>
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<tr>
<td>SFI</td>
<td><em>situación familiar irregular</em> (irregular family situation)</td>
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<tr>
<td>UP</td>
<td><em>Unión de Promociones</em> (Promociones Union)</td>
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GLOSSARY

**antiguo (más)**  
“older”, referred to an officer whose rank is superior to another, and “better” in terms of results, performance and qualifications during training in the Military Academy

**Argentinidad**  
national spirit of “Argentiness”

**barrio military**  
“military quarter”

**Carapintadas**  
military mutinies that took the name from the subaltern officers that led them, nicknamed “painted faces” for the habit of camouflaging using black paint on the face.

**Casa Rosada**  
the executive mansion and office of the President of Argentina in Buenos Aires

**Cerco**  
“fence, siege” (mil.)

**Comisión Nacional de Padres de Combatientes Desaparecidos en Malvinas**  
“National Commission of Parents of Malvinas’ Disappeared Combatants”

**Desaparecido**  
“disappeared”. The term addresses the victim of State terrorism in the 1970s; it refers to the condition of “detained-disappeared”, the illegal and invisible prisoner whose body was made disappeared by the military authorities
Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo  “People’s Revolutionary Army”. Armed organization

ejuesta familiar  “home enquiry”

Escraches  From escrachar, which is slang for “to put into evidence, disclose to public, or reveal what is hidden”

Escuela Superior de Guerra  “Superior War College”

Familiares de Caídos en Malvinas  “Relatives of Fallen in Malvinas”

Familiares de Desaparecidos y Detenidos por Razones Políticas  “Relatives of Disappeared and Detained people for Political Reasons”. Human rights organization

grupos de tarea especiales  “special task forces”

Hermanos  “Siblings”. Human rights organization

informe ambiental  “environmental report”

jefe  “commander”

lesa  abbreviation for crímenes de lesa humanidad, “crimes against humanity”
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<tr>
<td><em>Libertador</em></td>
<td>“Liberator”. It refers to José de San Martin, general of the Army and founder of independent Argentina.</td>
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<td><em>Liceo Militar</em></td>
<td>Military secondary school</td>
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<td><em>Liga Patriotica</em></td>
<td>“Argentine Patriot League”</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Argentina</em></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Liga Republicana</em></td>
<td>“Republican League”</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Madres y Abuelas de</em></td>
<td>“Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo”. Human rights organizations</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Plaza de Mayo</em></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Malvinas (Islas)</em></td>
<td>Argentine name of the Falkland Islands</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>mate</em></td>
<td>traditional herbs infusion</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>milico</em></td>
<td>pejorative for “soldier”</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Montoneros</em></td>
<td>armed organization</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Operativo</em></td>
<td>“Operation Independence”. Large scale military operation</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Independencia</em></td>
<td>launched in 1975 against the guerrilla active in the Tucumán province</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Padres de Plaza de</em></td>
<td>“Fathers/Parents of Plaza de Mayo”</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Mayo</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>pater familias</em></td>
<td>Latin locution addressing the male head of a family or household</td>
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<td><strong>padre de la patria</strong></td>
<td>“father of the fatherland”. It refers to José de San Martín, general of the Army and founder of independent Argentina</td>
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<td><strong>picana</strong></td>
<td>electric tool used in torture sessions</td>
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<td><strong>Proceso de Reorganización</strong></td>
<td>“Process for National Reorganization”. Official name adopted by the military juntas for their program of national restructuration (1976-1983)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>promoción</strong></td>
<td>cohort of cadets who graduate in the same regiment in a same year</td>
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<td><strong>Punto final y Obediencia (leyes de)</strong></td>
<td>Final point and Due Obedience (laws of)</td>
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<td><strong>relato</strong></td>
<td>“tale, story”. Used by participants to refer to the official discourse on the Seventies established by the Kirchners’ politics of memory (2003-2015)</td>
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<td><strong>resistencia peronista</strong></td>
<td>“Peronist resistance”. Action of opposition against the proscription of the Peronist party and the persecution of supporters of the movement</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Triple A (Alianza Anticomunista Argentina)</strong></td>
<td>Triple A (Anti-communist Argentine Alliance)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>torre</strong></td>
<td>“tower”, building that accommodates several military families</td>
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zurdo  “left-handed”. Derogative term for left-wing person, supporter of the revolutionary movements, or guerrilla member
INTRODUCTION

“Es un país muy especial, Argentina. Muy especial”. A very distinctive country: this is how sometimes the participants for this study described their homeland, Argentina. By using such words, some people I interviewed during fieldwork in Buenos Aires (2015-2016) referred not so much to the majesty of the nature, or the inherent charm of the inhabitants, but especially to the tormented past of Argentina, which is still so present in its culture.

The heinous violence that upset Argentina during the last military dictatorship (1976-1983) marked its people indelibly. The repressive action led by the regime against and beyond any form of political opposition, and the subsequent process that led to the criminalization of such phenomena deeply affected the fabric of relationships within Argentine society. State terrorism represented the climax of a broader process of escalating violence that became a tool to solve political disputes between 1955 and 1983. Especially in the Seventies, the years immediately before and during the dictatorship, guerrillas, paramilitary groups and the security and Armed Forces got involved in a harsh political and ideological confrontation, a war of cultures (Robben, 2005a) that ended up with thousands of victims.

The experience of political violence and State terrorism changed the way Argentines reflect on the idea of State, how they think of themselves as a Nation, how they come to terms with the past and project towards the future. After more than four decades, the different groups that constitute the vibrant social body of Argentina are still in conflict when it comes to narrating and taking a position towards the violence. Countless studies have been conducted on the Proceso de Reorganización Nacional (Process for National
Reorganization), as the military of the dictatorship named their plan for political, economic and social restoration. The military regime killed and disappeared many thousands of Argentines in a plan of political repression that constituted the glue of its project. This aspect has been thoroughly analysed by historians, anthropologists and sociologists; however, exhaustive empirical studies on the military of that age are still found wanting.

According to the now dominant, deeply rooted vision of the “recent past”\(^1\), the military are the ominous architects of a brutal attack against the society. Especially during the presidency of Nestor Kirchner (2003-2007) and his wife Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007-2015) the commissions for truth, the longed-for trials of the military, the creation of sites of memory, the reduction of the Armed Forces’ agency and functions, and the incessant anti-military rhetoric spread by the media, installed a narrative of the Seventies that depicts the military as an intrinsically evil subject at the origin of all Argentine misfortunes. On top of that, the inability of the Armed Forces to recover the archipelago of the Malvinas/Falkland islands during the war against Great Britain (1982) convinced society of the military’s ineptitude, nothing more than a mob only able to persecute their unarmed compatriots.

As a result, the Argentine military became the target of stereotypes that affect not only its interaction with society, but also the social sciences approach to this group. This thesis represents an effort to overcome the limits in knowing and understanding the military, a social group that – like it or not – is constitutive member of Argentine society.

In order to enrich the field of empirical studies on this actor, this ethnographic research offers unprecedented insights into a generation of military families, contemporary to the

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\(^1\) This expression in Spanish, *pasado reciente*, is popular in the Argentine academia and particularly among social scientists who work on violations of human rights, the dictatorship and the transition to democracy.
dictatorship; it analyses the experiences of members of the military community during the years of the violence, before and during the regime, shedding new light on their relationships with the State and society in an age of public condemnation. By reading this thesis, it will be possible to understand what it meant to be part of a military family before and during the dictatorship, and what the implications for these people are forty years later, during the trials for crimes against humanity inaugurated in 2006.

A society branded forever

In the last three decades, alternative ways of defining, remembering and justifying the violence of the Seventies succeeded one another in Argentina, affecting the overall process of reconciliation. The repression perpetrated by the regime has been represented as a dirty war, State terrorism and more recently as genocide. These different frameworks are the product of the evolution of political, legal and moral disputes around the violence carried out by State and non-State actors – some of them already adversaries in the Seventies – and that still struggle to coexist (Robben, 2012a). The human rights organizations formed by relatives of the victims had a crucial role in the process that led to the creation of a public memory of State terrorism. The military represent the other essential tile to recompose the mosaic of political violence, and created its own memory of the Seventies according to changes in the political context, social sentiments about the past, and the judicial process for accountability.

Historically, the Argentine military interfered with politics whenever social disorders came to threaten ruling class interests. The 1960s and 1970s were decades of strong political unrest that was systematically repressed by the Armed and security forces, and culminated
in the insurgent action of leftist armed organizations. When the military took power in 1976, at first they experienced a phase of wide legitimization (Romero 2007:88): the regime was in line with the objectives of certain political parties and social sectors, and many Argentines expected the Armed Forces to restore order in the usual way. However, the repression delivered by the regime was unprecedented, and marked a point of no return in the spiral of violence targeting not only the guerrillas but also civilians suspected of “subversive” activities. The prolonged and clandestine repressive action included the extensive use of torture, kidnapping, summary executions and forced disappearance, an Argentine trademark that became sadly famous in the rest of the world.

The regime made thousands of victims amongst political activists and their relatives, swallowed by hundreds of secret detention camps dispersed in the country; it took mostly young people – political militants, students, workers – from their families; families who were then left in bewilderment and isolation. In the attempt of knowing more about the fate of their disappeared children (desaparecidos), in 1977 a group of mothers gathered outside the Casa Rosada in the main square of Buenos Aires. Since then, every Thursday in that same square the Madres de Plaza de Mayo claim for the reappearance of their children.

Despite the initial support, the regime ended up being highly criticised in its final stage due to the catastrophic economic situation, the sound defeat suffered in the Malvinas war, and the increasing protests against the violations of human rights. Before resigning power in 1983, the military published their own public version on the “counterinsurgent war”, the Military Junta’s Final Document on the war against subversion and terrorism, and promulgated the so called Law of “Self-amnesty” (Canelo, 2008a). On the one hand, the junta denied any clandestine action and the systematic forced disappearance of citizens; on the other, it presented the use of force as a necessary and heroic response to a deadly
enemy that was threatening the values and the institutions of the Nation under the exceptional circumstances of an internal war. In the face of such blatant denials, the human rights organizations put forward the term “State terrorism” to denounce the crimes of the Proceso (Salvi, 2009).

In the wake of the protests of the human rights front, the first democratic government started thorough investigations in 1983 to ascertain the responsibilities of the military in the disappearance of thousands of Argentines. After the publication of a relevant amount of information about the system of forced disappearance adopted by the regime (CONADEP, 1984), the military juntas were condemned in a historical trial in 1985; however, such achievement was frustrated by the concession of presidential pardons to the ex-generals a few years later. More than twenty years of impunity followed, during which the former military of the regime were free to walk side by side with their ex-captives. This on the one hand increased the people’s hate and mistrust towards the military; on the other, it put this actor in a position of immunity that seemed irreversible. Only in 2006 president Nestor Kirchner reopened the trials for crimes against humanity, after the Supreme Court proclaimed invalid the impunity laws and the pardons that had benefitted the military in the 1980s and 1990s. In the last ten years, more than 2,500 people have been involved in the trials for crimes against humanity; among these, hundreds of former officers are serving severe sentences in State prisons.

The generation born at the end or immediately after the dictatorship was raised under the aegis of an official discourse that promoted the desaparecidos’ narrative (defended by their relatives and constructed on kinship) as the only legitimate way of looking at the period of the dictatorship. The cruelty of the crimes, the vividness of the victims’ testimonies and the extensive judicial prosecution started in 2006 reinforced the image of the military as
monsters. The trials and the imprisonment of hundreds of former officers sealed the moral and cultural superposition between the labels of “criminal” and “military”, contributing to install the uncritical assumption in the society according to which all the military are perpetrators. Ultimately, more than twelve years of public invective against the military during the Kirchners’ governments, strengthened the anti-military feeling within Argentine society.

After decades of impunity, it is now a repetition of widespread social sentiment in Argentina that the military should not be allowed to talk and express their view, as part of their punishment for the abuses perpetrated. While of course the crimes of a military in power cannot be belittled, the military have become almost a taboo subject, and it became extremely difficult to conduct studies about them. This is due not only to the military’s own reticence, but also to an understandable lack of empathy towards this actor, a mixed feeling of mistrust and fear, and a general resentment towards perhaps the most problematic component of Argentine society.

Why the military family?

This study adopts a specific angle that allows innovative reflections on the military of the Seventies, now object of judicial prosecution. It explores indeed their narratives of everyday life by accessing families who were contemporaries of the dictatorship, who are in turn members of the Argentine military community. The research focus is therefore extended from the officers to their wives and adult children, tracing back the informal social structures of the military world based on kinship. To understand the relevance of a research focus on kinship, it is necessary to consider some specifics of the Argentine case.
Family is a central actor in Argentine politics and identity. Like in other Latin American countries, the Catholic Church had a strong impact in shaping public life since colonial times, permeating the culture with its model of traditional patriarchal family, the basic nucleus of society (Jelin, 2011). Historically, the State has regulated its relations with the family according to this set of values and ideas promoted by Catholicism. After the colonial period, between the end of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century, considerable influxes of European migrants, especially from Italy and Spain, reached Argentina injecting the social body with new lifeblood. Guber (2001a) explains how “foreigners” converted into “immigrants” and constructed their “Argentineness” (argentinidad) and their relationship with the adoptive fatherland in terms of kinship, more specifically filiation, the “social recognition of relationships between parents and children” (Seymour-Smith, 1986:118).

In the history of independent Argentina, a country culturally forged on the horizontal concept of generation articulated in families (particularly families of immigrants), the military played a paternalistic role towards the Argentine Nation, as custodian and protector of its values and institutions, among which the family was key. The Armed Forces historically proposed themselves as the moral reserve of the Nation, also as a result of their role in winning independence, whose symbol and national hero is General San Martin, “the father of Fatherland”.

With the last dictatorship, the military regime emphasized again the centrality of family and kin ties. The threat identified by the military in the subversion had a strong cultural component besides its political elements. Not only the guerrillas aimed to impose an alternative political system, but the whole culture in that period was seeing huge transformations on several fronts, with new parameters based on a renegotiation of the traditional roles within the family, the emancipation of women and the values promoted by
the counterculture of the 1960s. The military of the *Proceso*, in contrast, were determined to defend what they saw as traditional Catholic values expressed in the patriarchal family. Moreover, as values associated with the “subversion” tended to take root into the youth, the military considered the parents responsible for the political choices of their children (Jelin, 2011) and the parents also became the target of a special propaganda (Feitlowitz, 1998). Not only the Nation, but especially the family needed to be warned and controlled in order to stop the propagation of the subversive virus; therefore its defence became one of the military government’s top priorities (Filc, 1997). This also explains why the repression entered private life in such a deep way, often dividing the “subversives” from their parents. With almost 45% of the *desaparecidos* being between 16 and 25 years old at the time of their abduction (CONADEP, 1984:294), the regime made indeed most of its victims among young people, aiming to break the family ties that had been compromised by what it saw as the subversive cancer.

Interestingly, the main front of opposition to the regime was built on the same kin ties that the juntas aimed to destroy through the practice of forced disappearance. In fact, the movement for human rights is formed by organizations founded by people who claim kin ties with the victims: relatives (*Familiares de Desaparecidos y Detenidos por Razones Políticas*), and especially mothers and grandmothers (*Madres* and *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo*), but also children (*H.I.J.O.S.*) and siblings (*Hermanos*). In the wake of the struggle carried out by such groups, the democratic governments that succeeded in the now three decades since the end of the dictatorship promoted public policies through the intervention of the Parliament and the Judicial Power aiming to “investigate, judge and repair” the abuses perpetrated by the State during the *Proceso* (Vecchioli, 2005:254). Such politics of human rights include trials of the criminals, the creation of a genetic bank containing information on the relatives of the *desaparecidos*, the effort in reuniting the children of the
victims with their biological families, the public opening of the sites of memory of the dictatorship.

Kin ties played a fundamental role in the construction and legitimization of the memory of the dictatorship; the condition of relative of the victim conferred the families the exclusive right to impugn the memory of the desaparecidos, and has had the effect of limiting any other memory in being represented and accepted by the society (Jelin, 2011). Vecchioli (2005:263) notices this is for example the case of the memories of ex-militants of armed organizations, that identify with a narrative anchored to the figure of the fallen combatant rather than the victim, and an identity imbued of political attributes. She also argues one of the results of the politics of memory privileging kinship was the consecration of a narrative and a group of categories that define the protagonists of the “recent past” (desaparecido, relative of the victim), and the loss of recognition of others (subversive, terrorist, combatant). In this frame, the definition of the juridical figure of the desaparecido and his/her condition of victim does not stem from political activism but from the belonging to a family to which they were literally removed, being most of the times young people abducted from their homes. As Vecchioli points out, this definition of the desaparecido that happens in the judicial field emphasizes characteristics that put kin ties at the centre of the dispute.

In view of the centrality of family in Argentine culture, in the violence of the past, and in the quest for memory and justice, and considering the profusion of studies on such issues, it sounds almost necessary to ask about the experience on the “other side”, among the families of the military. However, investigating the other essential actor of those events, adopting a perspective that embraces the family dimension, and questioning directly the members of those families seems to be, in some ways, inappropriate and worthless.
Rethinking the military in familial terms is a knowledge process that is still pending in Argentina, and I believe it is a direct consequence of the military becoming a taboo subject since the age of State terrorism, dehumanized because of the inhumane practices they have been involved in as a social group and an institution. Argentines came to believe that society had been attacked by the military in the intimate field of the family, and thus the conviction that the military actor was separated and irreversibly different from society took hold. As a result, it is challenging for civilians to think of the military as fellow Argentines, or sometimes even as humans. Consequently, it has been difficult to develop academic research looking at this social group in all its complexity.

Others have examined the Argentine military in the past and in contemporary age (Guber, 2004b, 2007; Robben, 1999, 2005a, 2006, 2011, 2012b; Salvi, 2009, 2011, 2012b; Badaró, 2006, 2009; Frederic, 2013) and research into this group developed innovative perspectives that also address their family life (Frederic, 2016; Guber, 2015), as it is also in other Latin American contexts (Silva, 2016). However, no studies have yet looked at the military of the last dictatorship in their family dimension, and in relation to the violence of the Seventies and its consequences. Based on almost one year of extensive fieldwork, this thesis finally manages to answer questions that perhaps had never been asked before: how did military families live the years of political and State violence? How do they construct narratives of those lives? What was the role of kinship in the military’s everyday life? And also, how do military families react to their judicial prosecution decades after the dictatorship, and how do they interact with a society that publicly condemns them?
The ethnography of kinship

To answer these questions, first of all it has been necessary to observe how kinship works in the military. Getting to know how the military interact, and how they express their own view of the world became a crucial step in grasping their point of view on the Seventies and the trials. In this way, I could learn how the military construct and transmit their own understanding, experience and representations of the past, and then make intelligible the consequences of that past. In order to develop a holistic approach to the military, embracing the family dimension and able to disentangle from the traditional perspective that conceives them exclusively as “perpetrators” or professionals of violence, I selected ethnography as the method to conduct my research.

When I started fieldwork in 2015, at the end of Cristina Kirchner’s presidential mandate, the military were generally reluctant to talk: in the context of the trials, publicly condemned and socially isolated, anything they said could have been used against them in the trials and by the media. The military came from twelve years of strong social criticism, and felt like the target of a witch hunt: according to them, the trials would be motivated by political vengeance rather than a real quest for truth, for example because the actions of the guerrillas have never been recognised and sanctioned. So, despite their proverbial hermetic attitude, the military community did look for opportunities to gain some public space for their claim, but at the same time tended to mistrust people who do not belong to their environment.

Therefore, an institutional approach – that would probably have been easier in some aspects – had to be excluded, because it would have not provided the information relevant to answer the research questions that addressed the family, domestic sphere _par excellence_. The mediation of the Army had to be avoided. The solution was to adopt a non-
institutional approach in order to reveal and retrace the human bonds within the military community. Fieldwork progressively revealed in fact the existence of a solidarity network around the military accused and convicted in the trials: recognizing and obtaining access to this network became a premise for the research; understanding its nature became the main objective.

According to one of the principles of ethnography (Fonseca, 1999:60), a new hypothesis had to be constructed not a priori, but in the field. Interviews and participant observation led to the collection of data on how informants interacted in the society, with the researcher and with fellow participants. The sample included a conspicuous group of former subaltern officers of the Army of the Proceso, military wives and children born before and after the return to democracy, a total of 21 participants. The officers I recruited had entered the Military Academy between 1964 and 1977. In this thesis I adopt the expression the Seventies, which is the way participants refer to the years of political and State violence before and during the dictatorship, in which they became military, husbands and fathers. In this period, the men I interviewed were junior officers, subal terns, as I define them; they carried the ranks of Second Lieutenant, Lieutenant and Captain. This term in no ways aims to hide their liability; it corresponds to the division the Argentine Army does among subaltern (oficiales subalternos), middle (oficiales jefes) and high command officers (oficiales superiores), a distinction I also adopted in my study as a criteria that shaped the sample of my participants. During my fieldwork the issue of gender relations within the military family repeatedly presented itself. My observations would suggest that the military family was structured around gender relations that would usually be described as patriarchal (Boldry, Wood and Kashy, 2001; Carreiras, 2006; Enloe, 2000; Izraeli, 1997; Kronsell and Svedberg, 2011; Sasson-Levy, 2003; Segal, 2006). It could have been possible to include analysis of how gender helped to embed the military family into
Argentine society; however, this would also have detracted from the main thrust of my analysis, which was to prioritise how these military members presented themselves, better to understand their attitudes. Therefore, this thesis is not a contribution to literature in gender studies nor in gender and the military, nevertheless, the gendered nature of roles inside the military and within military families is of course important, and I always kept in mind the impact of gender on what I was observing and hearing, and on my interactions with participants.

During fieldwork I took any opportunity I could to spend time within the military community. I had multiple meetings with participants, individually or in groups; I interviewed husband and wife, pairs of siblings. I usually met informants in Belgrano, the neighbourhood with the highest presence of military residences and institutions in Buenos Aires; participants invited me to their houses, but we also met in cafes, parks and in the military clubs. I recorded interviews but also participated in informal social events, religious and secular commemorative acts, and associations’ weekly meetings. The climax of the fieldwork experience was reached when former officers invited me to join them in their regular visits to the prisons to see their convicted comrades.

What this study is and what it is not

This study raises quite pressing ethical issues. The one that better synthesizes such questions is whether or not the military of the Proceso should have the right to tell their own version of the story. Such a research objective is likely to be undesirable for some; many in Argentina think the military should be excluded from the process of historicization of violence for reasons that will be better analysed in the thesis, but have to
do with the fact the military are basically considered to be perpetrators, killers and criminals before Argentines.

In his seminal book on Holocaust studies *Ordinary men* (1992), Christopher Browning portrays a micro-history of a Nazi police battalion during the implementation of the Final Solution in Poland. His argument is fundamentally that ordinary people, when put in a situation of normalization of extreme violence, tend to comply with orders, no matter how aberrant, to avoid alienation. His focus on the everyday life of a social group that has been largely investigated and punctually demonized, has been criticized by many, but also earned him the recognition for contributing immensely to the knowledge on the Nazi and the dynamics of perpetration of mass violence. In the very first pages of *Ordinary men*, Browning expresses slight disappointment with old cliché that nurtures the idea that the degree of empathy necessary to understand and describe the behaviour of perpetrators (but I would add, the behaviour of any human being) implies taking the side of our interlocutors. Browning (1992:xviii) says clearly that “explaining is not excusing; understanding is not forgiving”. To the likely critics that this study on the Argentine military might raise, and without commenting Browning’s statement any further, I answer by asking more questions: how can we claim we understand a phenomenon if we refuse to explore the experience of every actor involved? How could we produce new knowledge on people and their actions if we refuse to ask them questions from a different position? How could we possibly prevent such things from happening again if we do not look at how military power is embedded into society? Victims, perpetrators and bystanders of violence are categories that need to be questioned, cross-analysed and cannot be separated, because they all belong to the same national and societal body.
This study does not aim to prove whether or not the interviewees have participated in gross violations of human rights during the Seventies in Argentina. It does not give detailed, cold-blood accounts of torture, killing, or child abductions. This is not a study aiming to ascertain the degree of brutality a man can possibly reach in the context of an extremely authoritarian State; it has no interest in assessing whether a wife can be more ruthless in her words than her husband in his actions, or in finding out whether “evil” is transmitted from one generation to the other. It is not even an attempt to find traces of regret, pride or distress among participants for inflicting violence on other human beings, as it was not pushed by any voyeuristic interest in speaking to human rights abusers. This study is rather an attempt to understand who are the Argentines accused of crimes against humanity. It shows how participants describe who they were in their twenties, when they entered the military, and who they are today, when being military under certain circumstances made them perpetrators. This study also aims to understand who the wives of those men are, who their children, and how they live in contemporary Argentina, and in the Argentina of the Proceso, as families.

Chapter One provides a review of the leading literature on political and State violence in Argentina, and a view of the existing studies on the Argentine military; it also aims to highlight the gaps that made this thesis necessary. Chapter Two explains the reasons behind the methodological choices adopted in this study, as well as the conceptual tools used in the analytic process; this section also contains an account of the “vicissitudes” of fieldwork, in order to clarify the limits in the exploration of the field and the negotiation process that led to access it.

Chapter Three, Four and Five represent the analytic corpus of the thesis; they describe how military families reconstruct their the daily life of the Seventies, interpreting their
narratives about the officers’ entrance in the Military Academy, the wives’ adaptation to military life, the men’s actions in the field, the daily situations of life under the dictatorship. In this chapters there is a constant tension between past and present, between what we know had happened in the Seventies and what we can further understand of this age by recovering the testimonies of the people who lived it. To this aim it has been essential to deconstruct such narratives and analyse the process by which participants compose them in light of the present from which they speak. These chapters also give an account of how life changed for military families in the three decades since the end of the dictatorship, and how they deal nowadays with the process of condemnation that affects them since the reopening of the trials, how the balances within the military community are altered and how its relationships are transformed. The subjectivities of officers and wives are especially explored in Chapters Three and Four, respectively addressing the symbolic spaces of the battlefield and the prison, representing two crucial moments and two emblematic spaces in their narrative. Chapter Five instead centres its analysis on the subjectivities and the narratives of adult children of military families of the Seventies.

Finally, Chapter Six constitutes the conclusive analytic chapter that interprets the different forms of kinship observed in the military world, and the role of kinship in the broader process of narrating and understanding violence in the public arena, reflecting on both the struggle of human rights movement and the claims of the military family.

Personal data about the informants have been anonymized. Names, places and dates that would make their identity recognizable have been changed for confidentiality reasons, without altering the relevance of their testimony. All citation from original sources in Spanish is the product of my own translation work.

This interdisciplinary study benefits from the contributions of history, sociology, anthropology and, to a certain extent, human rights and memory studies. In particular, it draws on the leading literature in two fields: the studies on political and State violence in Argentina; and the studies on the Argentine military produced before and after the end of the dictatorship.

The research questions addressed here stem from two considerable limits within this literature: on the one hand, the need for developing a more critical understanding of the Argentine experience of violence by focusing on the military’s perspective; on the other, the need for exploring a neglected everyday dimension of this social group such as human bonds and family. This chapter provides a historical framework to contextualise the participants’ narratives and to clarify the events they refer to; it explores the literature on some crucial aspects of political and State violence; it explains the difficulties in producing empirical studies and holistic approaches to the military of the 1970s and the need for questioning this actor from a different position; and thereby it shows the reasons why this ethnography has been designed as such, and which gaps it aims to fill in.
1.1 The politicization of the military and the militarization of politics: 

Argentina before the last dictatorship

The social rejection of the military and their perception as an actor separated and different to the rest of society is a sentiment that only arose with the democratic transition in 1983, and was reinforced during the government of Nestor and Cristina Kirchner (2003-2015). Assuming this attitude as a constant feature of Argentine political life would be a mistake.

To support this point, which in turn is a premise to this thesis, I cite among others the pioneer work of Robert Potash (1961, 1994) and Alain Rouquié (1981a, 1981b, 1986), who finalized their analysis just before the last dictatorship, and more recent contributions from Sabina Frederic (2008).

According to Frederic (2008) the socio-political process that led to the explosion of violence in the 1970s and the last military coup in Argentina, was characterized by a convergence between the political and the military spheres. On the one hand, the militarization of politics in 20th century Argentina involved not only the Armed Forces, which gave their first coup in 1930, but a multitude of ideological positions and political groups that clashed at increasing degrees of violence in the 1950s, 60s and 70s. We will see this phenomenon installed in the Seventies a specific way of understanding politics and militancy, as well as its causes and the way of “solving” the controversies it generated (Frederic, 2008: 12).

On the other hand, the politicization of the military was a quite tolerated phenomenon in Argentina which dates back to the end of the 19th century (Frederic, 2008:13). At that time, the Argentine oligarchy of big landowners and financial lobbies used to rely on a subordinated political elite that protected its interests and excluded the popular masses from the political arena; and a military elite, which lent the Armed Forces the role of
internal police (Urriza, 1984:69-75). By repressing the masses’ impulses of emancipation, between 1862 and 1930 the Armed Forces used to keep the status quo in the interests of the ruling classes, and in this context of relative stability the presidential succession continued accordingly to the constitutional rules (Rouquié, 1981a:12-13).

Between 1930 and 1983, however, Argentina experienced six military coups in 1930, 1943, 1955, 1962, 1966 and 1976, which made it an extreme case of “militarized political system” (Rouquié, 1986:124). Studies on the preponderant political role of the military in this period (Potash, 1961; Rouquié, 1981a, 1981b, 1986) reveal that the coups did not represent a cataclysm imposed by an actor external to the system; the military were rather an essential part of the political texture in Argentina. Their intervention, which alternated to democratically elected governments, was every time pushed and welcome by different political factions, and was often a reaction to the increasing mobilization of popular sectors. Every political party used to raise their own generals and colonels, men they could rely on within the Army, and no political force in Argentina ever condemned this practice (Rouquié 1981b:341). In turn, the political factions within the military projected onto the political management of the State (Frederic, 2008:15).

Within this historical double tendency it is possible to identify a turning point. Among other scholars, Romero’s excellent work (2006, 2007, 2012) has provided historical grounding for this study; he maintains that since the military overthrew Juan Domingo Perón in 1955, several wider processes converged into a spiral of violence culminated in the installation of State terrorism in 1976. The two governments of Perón (1946-1955) had brought radical transformations taking the working class to acquire more political power (Zanatta, 1999, 2008). Although as an ex-general Perón initially counted on the support of a sector of the Army, he was eventually overruled and forced to leave the country in 1955;
his party was proscribed and his supporters harshly repressed. The overrule inaugurated a long period of social unrest (Romero, 2007:5-18), and generated the so called Peronist resistencia fomented by the leader during his long exile in Spain.

Between 1955 and 1973 the Peronist issue dominated the political debate and permeated all unsolved social conflicts, definitely contributing to a further factional division of politics. Potash (1994) observes in fact that the political scene did not imply a division between civilians and military, but between Peronist and anti-Peronist factions, both formed by civilians and military. According to Romero (2007:30), with Onganía’s military regime (1966-1970) and the closure of further spaces of political freedom, violence became much more widespread, with a grassroots mobilization of urban riots started in Córdoba in 1969 and extended to more cities until 1973. Within this wide multiform mobilization, more actors became involved in different level of intensity: the unions, the youth – a crucial social category that emerged at that time – the artistic and academic vanguards, and the most progressive section of the Catholic Church.

In 1971, President General Lanusse opened some space for an electoral resolution of the crisis that would bring Perón back to the Argentine political arena. In 1973 the leader returned to Buenos Aires, he publicly condemned the use of political violence and joined the electoral competition. Perón won with the 62% of the votes, the most popular government ever elected in Argentina. However, this longed-for event did not stop the violence in the streets: the return of the leader brought out the irreconcilability of the trends within his own party.

Frederic (2008:16) stresses that since the mid-1960s, the militant and military dimension of political confrontation had become more visible with a division in those years between the people’s militias, identified as “leftist”, and the regular (elite) militias of the Armed and
security forces, identified as “rightist”. Among the former, described by Altamirano (cited in Romero, 2007:61) as “armed parties” to hint at their double political and military dimension, there were about a dozen of organizations that resorted to armed violence between the 1960s and 1970s (Robben, 2005a). Two were prominent: the People’s Revolutionary Army (ERP) and *Montoneros* (Romero, 2007:61-70).

The ERP was the armed branch of the Revolutionary Worker’s Party (PRT), made of different Trotskyist and anti-imperialist groups, which switched to the armed struggle in 1970. Despite Perón’s victory in the elections, the ERP decided to go on with the armed action, contravening the Guevarist recommendation of never opposing legitimate governments (Gillespie, 1980). Although its action was usually led in urban areas, the organization decided to establish a liberated zone in the mountains of the northern region of Tucumán in 1975, but within a year it was decimated by the Army. Montoneros, a group with Catholic and anti-imperialist influences (Gillespie, 1998), was also born in 1970 and chose as foundational act the political assassination of ex-president General Aramburu. Its members claimed for being the true interpreters of Perón’s political message but went undercover when the leader, who at first supported their struggle from the exile, repudiated the extremist fringes of his own movement once he returned to the country.

Especially in the case of Montoneros, the initial targets of the armed groups belonged to the Armed Forces, the police and the oligarchy, but their action gradually became more indiscriminate, as they came to care less whether uninvolved civilians were caught up in their attacks (Gillespie, 1998 cited in Romero, 2007:70). According to Novaro (2005:35) in the moment of maximum expansion the armed organizations counted between 2,000 and 3,000 well trained and equipped members, although they lost 700 combatants only in 1975.
Still, in 1976 the guerrilla managed to cause 167 casualties among police and military personnel.

In July 1974 Perón died. His widow Isabel (Maria Estela Martínez de Perón) took over, inheriting a society in relative chaos. In February 1975 her government authorized the Armed Forces’ intervention in the region of Tucumán to “annihilate” the rural guerrillas: by decree 261/75 the *Operativo Independencia* was launched, a large scale operation coordinated by the General Command of the Army involving the Third Army Corps, the national gendarmerie and police forces (Robben, 2005a:149). Isabel Perón also instituted the *Triple A* (Anti-communist Argentine Alliance), a right-wing paramilitary group with the objective of contrasting the revolutionaries’ armed action. However, her government failed to manage the situation that even worsened, with hundreds of people shot in the streets in 1975 (Romero, 2007:77).

In March 1976, the Armed Forces took over in a bloodless coup and established the *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional*. Confirming the attitude of Argentine people before military interventions at the time there were no protests, likely large sectors of the population even agreed with another military rule because they thought it could bring stability and social peace. Anyway, the handover of power passed almost unnoticed (Straßner, 2007 cited in Ruderer, 2012:88).

With this historical excursus of the events that preceded the 1976 dictatorship, I aimed to highlight a first big controversy around the Seventies. Not only the military were one component of a plurality of actors and responsibilities involved in a scenario of broader militarized political confrontation; but also – as Frederic (2008) points out – the division between civilians and military, and the rejection of the latter, settled into society only after
the recuperation of democracy, and seem to be even in contrast with the characteristics of Argentine politics before 1976.

The two tendencies identified by Frederic are the two faces of the same phenomenon. However, in the eyes of Argentine society, the politicization of the Army – responsible for a large list of political prisoners, victims of torture and desaparecidos – is far more recognized (and condemned) than the militarization of politics, although they represent two inseparable issues. The last tendency was definitely evident in the action of the armed groups in the Seventies, both leftist like the guerrillas, and rightist like the paramilitary Triple A. Until that point, the politicization of the military actually coexisted with the militarization of politics, and this led to the application of common political principles based on the sacrifice of life for different and conflicting ideas of fatherland (Frederic, 2008:17). Therefore, I also want to stress here that this specific understanding of politics in the Seventies must have provided both the members of regular Army and the militarized civilians of armed organizations with the same political tools to make sense of that experience of violence and politics. This is a crucial point to make before looking at narratives of everyday life in the Seventies and observing the consequences of this past in the present.

1.2 A phenomenology of violence: the cultural specifics of the Argentine case

Several studies approached the military of the last dictatorship as a political actor, inserting within the scholarship on the military regimes of the 20th century (Cantón, 1971; De Imaz, 1964; De Riz, 2000; Fayt, 1996; Forte, 2003; Fraga, 1988; Lewis, 1993; Mazzei, 2000; O’Donnell, 1988; Potash, 1994; Rouquié, 1981a, 1981b; Zanatta, 1996, 1999). Some of
these studies looked at the interaction of the military of the *Proceso* with the ecclesiastic, political and economic elites (Hunter, 1997, 1998; Mignone, 1986; Novaro and Palermo, 2003; Pion-Berlín, 1985; Pucciarelli, 2004, 2006; Quiroga, 1994; Vezzetti, 2002; Yannuzzi, 1996), and more in general at its institutional behaviour and its internal cleavages (Canelo, 2008a, 2008b). O’Donnell (1988) defined the features of the bureaucratic-authoritarian State in Latin America, connecting the Argentine case with the dictatorial experience of other countries in the region. Others have focused instead on specific aspects and decisions of the regime, its “legacies” (Canelo, 2008a:26), like the repressive policy (Calveiro, 1998; Di Tella, 1999; Duhalde, 1999; Izaguirre, 1994; Izaguirre and Aguiar, 1998; Malamud Goti, 2000; Vezzetti, 2002), the economic policy (Azpiazu, Basualdo and Khavisse, 1987; Canitrot, 1980, 1981; Schvarzer, 1984) and the Malvinas war (Guber, 2001b, 2015; Lorenz, 2006; Palermo, 2007).

I want to focus here on some crucial aspects of State violence after 1976, in order better to put into context the figure of the subaltern officer of that age. The young men who undertook the military career in that historical moment in Argentina, ended up delivering violence first in a highly instable context of political conflict in the streets, and after under an authoritarian state ruled by a military government. The implementation of State violence after the establishment of the *Proceso* presented ideological and cultural elements concerning its planning, justification and delivery that are embedded in the socio-political process started in 1955, analysed in the previous section, which made the experience of violence in Argentina extreme, and the participation of the military in it highly controversial.

Excellent studies have explored the goals, the characteristics and the aftermath of political and State violence in Argentina from different disciplinary perspectives. In particular, the
work of anthropologist Antonius Robben represented an inspirational source that fuelled my interest in the Argentine case. He conducted extensive fieldwork-based research in Argentina since the late 1980s, addressing multiple actors involved in the bloody facts of the Seventies: former guerrilla and Armed Forces members, survivors of State terrorism, relatives of the disappeared victims, activists of the human rights organizations. He also conducted thorough archival research. His work, masterfully exposed in the book *Political Violence and Trauma in Argentina* (2005a), allowed the identification of the main traits of the Argentine State violence: its clandestine and disproportional character, on the one hand; its cultural nature on the other. Robben’s argument is that the violence of the Seventies should not be interpreted as an isolated phenomenon imposed by external forces, somehow disentangled from the Argentine cultural and social fabric; it is rather a cyclic phenomenon charged with opposed cultural and political elements, which alternated extreme violence and devastating collective trauma in a spiral whose origins date back in the 1950s.

Robben’s analysis furthered the understanding of not only the events, contributing to the historical knowledge of that period, but especially of the complex relationships within society that have been created and destroyed by the violence, with an emphasis on the traumatization process and its impact on contemporary Argentina (Robben, 2005b). To the ends of this study, Robben’s contribution was essential to understand the responsibilities of the Army in the orchestration of violence and the extent to which the subaltern ranks were involved in its exercise, not only on the practical but also on the psychological and spiritual level.

Robben (2005a:190-212) gives a detailed account of the nationwide repression of the years immediately before and during the dictatorship. If the *Operativo Independencia* had been
launched in February 1975 in the province of Tucumán, by Decree 2772 the anti-subversive campaign was extended to the rest of the country in the same year, with the first battle plan officially approved on 15 October 1975. The Army was responsible for the overall intelligence and combat operations, and counted on the support of the Navy, the Air Force, the police, and the security forces. According to Robben (2005a:194), the documents defining the methodology to be implemented in the campaign never explicitly mentioned practices such as abductions, tortures and disappearances, or the structure of the special task forces (grupos de tarea especiales) entitled to carry out such operations, which were formed by specialized military intelligence and police personnel. In fact, while regular troops were trained to face a conventional combat and were implemented to fight rural guerrillas, the special task forces were employed in the raids, searching for suspect subversives to kidnap and escort to the clandestine detention camps. The double face of the repression was only visible in the combined operations where both regular troops and task forces acted. This structure was maintained after the switch to the military rule in 1976, but improved in effectiveness thanks to shortening of the chain of command and the bureaucracy.

Despite the adoption of emergency legislation, with almost unlimited powers and the possession of a large arsenal and logistic apparatus, the military junta led most of its repressive action clandestinely, a character that distinguishes the Argentine experience from the rest of the Latin American dictatorships, and from the American and French counterinsurgent doctrines. Mignone (1981) defines the framework of the repressive plan as “global parallelism” to describe the Armed Forces’ implementation of an underground and comprehensive anti-subversive action, parallel but subordinate to the military-political direction of the State. The National Counter-subversive Strategy (Estrategia Nacional Contrasubversiva) adopted in March 1976 was based on operations directed to hit not only
the guerrillas but also crucial sectors of the society; it was articulated in different levels of intervention including combat, intelligence and psychological actions (Robben, 2005a). In this way, the target of the repression extended from the armed combatants to their ideologues and sympathizers – ascertained or potential – and anyone the military considered “subversive”, a threat to the values and the interests of the Nation. The territory was divided into five defence zones, four of which were under the control of the four Army corps General Commanders who also coordinated the action of police and security forces within their own jurisdiction; the fifth zone within the city of Buenos Aires was under the jurisdiction of the Military Institutes at the Campo de Mayo military base. The zones were in turn divided into 19 subzones and 117 areas, where the special task forces acted under the command of a Colonel (high command rank in the Argentine army hierarchy), a Lt Colonel or a Major (middle ranks) (Robben, 2005a).

Regarding the action of regular troops on the visible side of the repression, Waisbord (1991:163) argues the high commanders coordinated the counterinsurgent war in the zones so that it would “imprint” the mentality and the lives of the middle and lower rank officers. This was especially evident in the 1975 Operativo Independencia, when the repression was first rehearsed in the mountain areas of Tucumán. In this large operation the units of the Army were rotated every 30-45 days so that the highest possible number of officers participated in the campaign; however, no close contact with the guerrilla was favoured, since senior Army command thought the terrorists’ “ideological work could subvert officers’ virgin minds” (Waisbord, 1991:163). The author also states that, in the years of the dictatorship and State terrorism, even though the strategies for repression had been set by the chief commanders, these did not give precise orders to their subordinates who were quite autonomous in the management of their assigned area. Waisbord argues that this
aspect contributed to produce a fracture between higher and middle/lower ranks during and especially after the dictatorship, with the first attempts of judicial prosecution (1991:165).

The special task forces, instead, had a more flexible structure and an extensive operational freedom, apt to face unconventional forces; however, Robben (2005a:194) stresses it was the mission rather than the structure of these groups that brought its members to perpetrate the abuses. Based on the declarations and the studies of Mittlebach (1986) and Fraga (1988), Robben says “several thousand task forces members” were involved in the clandestine repression, but not necessarily the “sixty thousand conscript soldiers and twenty thousand officers and NCOs” in position during the dictatorship. So not the entire Argentine Armed Forces personnel would have participated into clandestine killing, torture and disappearances (Robben, 2005a:194), but predominantly the intelligence and police personnel of the special task forces. These studies seem to suggest that only a smaller number – although still relatively high number – of subaltern officers would have performed everyday practices of State terrorism, although they were inserted within a system that was dedicated to systematic brutal repression, and operated on two sides, a visible and a clandestine one.

It must be noticed that even the officers presumably not directly involved in the clandestine operations still participated in a confrontation that was perceivable. From their position in the front line, and giving the events they witnessed before and during their training in the Military Academy between the 1960s and 70s, Argentina was living a war embedded in the social and cultural fabric of the Nation, which went far beyond the operations in the field. The military potential of the armed organizations had been strongly reduced by the end of 1975; however, the repressive action went on after the establishment of the military rule.
Consequently, several scholars agree that the reasons behind the military intervention and the repressive program were cultural rather than military.

About this second aspect of violence, Robben (2005a:171-189) uses the term “war of cultures” or “cultural war” to describe the military and the guerrilla’s conception of the revolutionary war and its counterrevolutionary repression, a clash between two irreconcilable cultural systems. In the eyes of the juntas, who aimed to redesign expression in Argentine society by imposing a new social, political and institutional framework, the revolutionary enemy risked subverting the natural order expressed in the word of God and the national Constitution. As Robben (2005a:172) explains, “this armed conflict was not a war in strict legal terms, but the conduct, perception, and stakes gave the confrontation the unmistakable characteristics of war, (...) a cultural war”. The cultural nature of the confrontation had the effect of expanding the category of enemy, blurring the spatial and temporal boundaries of the conflict and widening the range of tools implemented in the struggle. Romero (2007:24) points out that the Armed Forces participated in the construction of a “culture of violence” since before the Proceso: if before Perón’s overthrow the use of violence was present but occasional, in the following years the combination of Nationalism with extremist Catholicism enabled the military to portray their repressive action as a “crusade”. This is a much more pervasive way of conceiving the confrontation against the enemies of the fatherland, that could only be defeated through the use of exceptional tools. Such tools were normalized after 1976, and implemented on a large scale. It is then necessary to clarify the cultural, professional and ideological background of the young officers of the Seventies.

Considering that the officers who participated in this study entered the Military Academy between 1964 and 1977, Rouquié’s study, which was finalized in 1973, is a good reference
to reconstruct their background. Historically, the Armed Forces’ interventions were based on their super partes vocation, and the belief that they were the moral reserve of the Nation, protectors of its superior interests (Rouquié, 1981b; McSherry, 1997). While the military were devoted to institutions, their feeling of superiority fuelled an aversion towards the conflicting pluralist politics of parties, considered to be vulgar and inefficient splitters of society (Rouquié, 1981b:344). The military had to intervene whenever politicians were incapable of governing, but they were (theoretically) aware that military regimes are per se transitional and that an army which stays in power and governs directly ceases to be an army (Rouquié, 1986:111). This is another key element to understand the relation among former subalterns and their superiors during and after the counterinsurgent war.

Rouquié notices an army involved in multiple military coups, and with a high internal politicization, would be expected to release an excessive number of promotions; he explains instead that the Argentine Army of the late 1960s was characterized by a rather low percentage of officers compared to the number of conscript soldiers. From one officer every thirteen soldiers the difference increased until one every nineteen in 1967\(^2\) (Rouquié, 1981b:312). Moreover, the promotion to higher ranks, particularly the passage between the ranks of Captain and Major, was extremely selective with high levels of desertion.

Rouquié also highlights a progressive change in the formation of young officers since 1930, who were exponentially employed in public political and economic functions. This had to do mainly with the prolonged absence of international conflicts. Thus the programme of the Military Academy saw the increase of technical and general culture-related subjects, in spite of those traditionally military. Since 1944 subjects such as

\(^2\) As a term of comparison, during Algerian war (1954-1962) the relation in the French army was of one officer every twelve soldiers (Rouquié, 1981b: 312).
geopolitics, economy and sociology, as well as international and public law were included in the programme; since 1963, it extended to history of political institutions, while electronics and mathematics acquired larger importance in spite of purely military subjects such as tactics and strategy (Rouquié 1981b:319). In sum, the separation between military and “civilian” studies was every year weaker. In 1969, the institution aimed to form young Argentine officers who would possess a broad culture in humanities and sciences, high technical skills and the ability “to follow step by step the political developments without the need of getting into politics” (Colonel Elía, 1958 cited in Rouquié, 1981b:320). Rouquié mentions an interesting document released by the Army Personnel Direction at the end of 1969; in line with the role of the military in society at the time, the document defines modern war as characterized by a crucial ideological dimension and a high technologic level, which demanded an adequate intellectual preparation. Therefore, the text goes on saying that the officer of the 1970s and 1980s should have been capable of “combining his ability to analyse the socio-political situation with a solid scientific and technical preparation, in order to comply with his responsibilities of perceiving, assuming and directing social change” (Estado Mayor General del Ejército, 1969 cited in Rouquié, 1981b:320).

According to Robben (2006:357) the officers who led the Proceso had “intense convictions about the integrity of Argentinian culture, territory and nation, a strong sense of martial honour, and an exaggerated belief in its historical mission”. He explains how the commanders of the regime wished to emulate the feats of the glorious 19th century Army who led to the independence of the country, forged the Republic and founded its democratic institutions, all illustrious achievements embodied by the uncontested figure of the Libertador General José de San Martín, el padre de la patria. According to Rouquié (1981a:73), the image of the Army and its relevance in the society (before the last
dictatorship) was also the result of this ancient historical function. He affirms the majority of Argentines did believe in the early Seventies that the country itself was a creation of the generals who gained its independence from Spain in 1816 and protected it from external and internal threats in the war against Paraguay (1865-70), and in the “Campaign of the Desert” against the indigenous tribes (1878-1885).

McGee Deutsch (1993) explains the efforts of the Argentine Army in forging and securing the Republic were claimed by nationalist and counter-revolutionary sectors of society in the 20th century. The spirit of *argentinidad* was infused in the members of the Armed Forces (McGee Deutsch, 1993; Delaney, 2002), but was also fomented by civilian nationalist organizations. In the 1920s the *Liga Patriótica Argentina* and the *Liga Republicana* defended fatherland and order against “anarchic elements foreign3 to the Argentine nationality”, for the “conformity to the political and social status quo” (that excluded the popular sectors); by “foreign” the nationalists meant “anarchists, union members, socialists and other dissidents that did not fit the Liga’s vision of an idyllic past blessed with social peace” (McGee Deutsch, 1993:40).

It is then important to notice how the idea of an Army guardian of the Argentine hierarchy and order was a civil-military construction, and was embedded in the cultural background of the officers of the 20th century Army. Despite their undisputed heroic origin, within the Armed Forces existed relevant divisions, which in many cases were related to networks of reciprocal loyalty (Rouquié, 1981b:346). However, it is possible to identify three main political-ideological tendencies that influenced the Armed Forces since 1930: the liberal, the nationalist or authoritarian-corporatist, and the industrialist-technocrat. Although this last tendency was popular in the Navy, the nationalists were the majority in the Army and

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3My emphasis.
the Air Force; moreover, the fight against subversion in the early Seventies brought this trend new life (Rouquié, 1981b:348-349).

The Catholic element was crucial in the nationalists’ ideology. Osiel (2001:128) affirms the Neo-medieval Theology\(^4\) was still present in the 1970s within the military ranks. The name of this doctrine, an intolerant version of Catholicism inherited from Spain and Italy in the 1920s, suggests the centrality of the religious element whose alliance with the military pillar constituted the national essence itself in the eyes of the officers. This ideology is also quite anti-modern as it claims for a return to the traditional values of Fatherland, family, Christianity, natural order and hierarchy, promoting a crusade that aligns with the programme of social and especially moral renovation carried out by the military juntas of the *Proceso*.

To sum up, we can affirm that in the eyes of cadets and young officers the subversion did constitute an existential threat that needed to be annihilated through a repressive action. Regardless this (clandestine) action was part of their training and activities in the Seventies and during the dictatorship, it was an action they understood and assumed within a cultural universe where the Argentine officer was seen as alien to the game of politics, morally and professionally superior and adapt to understand and to contrast an enemy that was definitely internal, alien and familiar at the same time.

\(^4\) Leading thinkers among the ultra-catholic environments were Alejandro Bunge, Manuel Gálvez, Carlos and Federico Ibarguren, Leopoldo Lugones, Ernesto Palacio, Matías Sánchez Sorondo and Patricio Randle (cited in Osiel, 2001).
1.3 The military in democratic Argentina: limits and controversies of transitional justice

After seven years in power, the last military junta resigned in 1983 and opened space for democratic elections. The internal divisions, the defeat in the Malvinas war and the increasing national and international pressures sealed the end of the “military age”.

The democratic transition pursued the *de-politicization of the military* and the *demilitarization of politics*, the inverse process to that explained at the beginning of this chapter. The objectives were the creation of a new democratic order that excluded the military, and the civilian rejection of any militarized political activity. The necessity of permanently subjecting the Armed Forces to civilian control, after their last and bloodiest exercise of power, led to a process of democratization/de-politicization of this actor that translated into the reduction of its competencies and its removal from the political sphere (Frederic, 2008). On the other hand, the symbolic value acquired by life, human rights, and the respect for democratic institutions, contrasted the universe of values traditionally associated to the militarization of politics that had dominated the past, and the superiority of collective causes and sacrifices (Frederic, 2008:18).

A crucial aspect to consider here is transitional justice, a priority point in the first democratic government’s agenda, and a non-linear process full of controversies. Several authors analysed transitional justice and the first attempts of sanctioning the military in the 1980s (Acuña and Smulovitz, 1995; Andreozzi, 2011; Brysk, 1994; González Bombal, 1995; Lefranc, 2004; Lessa, 2013; Nino, 1997; Roherig, 2009; Sancinetti, 1988; Sikkink, 2011; Vecchioli, 2013; Vezzetti, 2002). With the end of the regime and straight after the democratic elections, president Alfonsín created in 1983 a commission to ascertain the truth about the fate of the disappeared victims, the CONADEP (*Comisión Nacional sobre
la Desaparición de Personas). The exact number of the victims is still a matter of debate in Argentina: the CONADEP (1984:16) reported 8,960 cases of missing people, while the president of the Centre for Legal and Social Studies (CELS) declared in 1990 that the victims reached the number of 20,000 (Knudson, 1997:93). The Madres de Plaza de Mayo and other human rights organizations instead claim the total number of the victims reaches 30,000, a figure that became uncontested symbol of the extent of State terrorism but impedes more precise discussions around the topic from developing (Romero, 2007:97).

The information collected by the CONADEP immediately provided rich evidence to build the case against the military leaders. In 1985 the three juntas of the Proceso were prosecuted and convicted in an eight-month trial based on 496 hours of testimony from more than 800 witnesses (Dahl and Garro, 1987:325). Alfonsín also declared his intention of prosecuting a number of guerrilla heads. The trial of the juntas and the condemnation of most of its members to life sentence was the first of its kind in the history of Latin America; however, the attempt to extend prosecution to the lower ranks provoked agitation in the Armed Forces, leading a group of subaltern officers to rebel in a series of mutinies known as Carapintadas (1987-1990). The rebellions, aiming to push the leadership of the Army to take a position before the trials, generated high tension in the newborn democracy and were strongly opposed by large sections of the society worried for the threat of a new coup.

Under great political pressure, president Alfonsín promulgated the infamous “laws of impunity” of Punto Final and Obediencia Debida that limited the agency of the trials and impeded the prosecution of the officers under the grade of Colonel on the principle of due obedience (Hunter, 1998). Succeeding Alfonsin in 1989, president Menem marked a turnaround in the quest for justice by pardoning the convicted military, the leaders of the
guerrillas and the Carapintadas officers, as a measure intended to reconcile society. This decision was rejected by the 90% of Argentines (Crenzel, 2017:236). O’Donnell and Schmitter point out that the temptation of burying the past and looking at the future is always strong in situations where victims and victimizers are still alive, their memories still fresh; however, they also stress how the decision of ignoring the issue can have even more destabilizing effects on transitional democracies (O’Donnell and Schmitter, 1986:30). Menem anchored his discourse on reconciliation and pacification, supporting his decision of pardoning the juntas; in this context the trials were seen as a threat to political peace, memory and justice as a risk for social coexistence; the recovered truth was not followed by a just punishment (Crenzel, 2017:237).

The state of immunity of the military seemed to be irreversible in the 1990s. The only dissonant voices against the general forgetting induced by the pardons came from the human rights movement, whose incessant work continued safeguarding the memory of the desaparecidos despite decreased popular interest (Lorenz, 2002). In 1995 the front was joined by H.I.J.O.S. (Children for Identity and Justice against Forgetting and Silence), an organization – whose acronym in Spanish means “children” – made by the sons and daughters of the disappeared victims. This group was formed by a younger generation that had no vivid memory of the dictatorship, but was just as affected by the violence as the generation of the parents of the desaparecidos. H.I.J.O.S. made a great contribution to the struggle for memory and justice, as they publicly denounced the residence of the criminals of the dictatorship all over Argentina by alerting the neighbours, and fought impunity while condemning the perpetrators to social isolation (Kaiser, 2002). Their action (escraches) increased after Navy Captain Adolfo Scilingo confessed in March 1995 his participation in the death flights (Verbitsky, 1996), the clandestine weekly flights managed
by the Argentine Navy during which about 2,000 desaparecidos were thrown in the ocean alive.

Following Scilingo’s and some other officers’ declarations, Army Chief of Staff Balza (1991-1999) pronounced a historical speech on television in April 1995. In his Message to the Nation, General Balza distanced himself from the denials issued by the leadership of the Armed Forces since the years of the dictatorship, and started what was perceived as self-criticism of the military’s conduct in the Seventies. Balza aimed to enhance the image of the Army: on the one hand, he admitted officers had perpetrated tortures and killings during the internal “war among Argentines”, specifying “the end does not justify the means”; on the other, he defined such facts as the “excesses” of subordinates and pointed at the ex-commanders for the responsibility of giving “immoral orders” (Salvi, 2009).

Balza’s attitude provoked wide rejection among the officers of the Seventies. However, by defining the conduct of the military as “criminal”, he managed to captivate the public opinion and transmit the image of an Army subjugated to the Constitution and civilian powers.

The laws of impunity of the late 1980s had established the obligation for the military not only to obey the democratic institutions, but also to abandon any public claim that they had been fighting a war against subversion (Salvi, 2009:104). Nevertheless, within the Army the desire of keeping the memory of the Seventies alive was unbroken; according to them, the fight against subversion had been a sound military victory, a professional achievement and the reason of the social legitimization of the regime (Canelo, 2008a:217). However, with General Brinzoni as Chief of Staff (1999-2003) the Army publicly dismissed the image of “victors of the guerrillas”, proposed by the military juntas of the Proceso, in favour of that of “victims of the subversion” (Salvi, 2011). Moreover, by remembering the
officers killed by the guerrillas, Brinzoni put forward the watchwords “Complete Memory” to denounce the partiality of the societal attitude towards the past, and to appeal to a memory of the Seventies that took into accounts all forms of violence perpetrated, and the victims caused on both sides. Such effort was interpreted by some academics and part of the society as an attempt to dispute the right to remember to the human rights organizations and the relatives of the victims, in a competing (and fundamentally illegitimate) victimization discourse (Salvi, 2012a). Brinzoni’s call was embraced by former and active officers as well as a group of civilians, who had founded associations to organize masses and commemorative acts for the victims of terrorism of the 1970s, the so called “groups for Complete Memory” (Salvi, 2010b).

Things were meant to change radically for the military in the 2000s. The authorities proclaimed the 24th of March, day of the 1976 coup, a public holiday, while several memorials for the victims of the dictatorship were inaugurated. However, it was president Nestor Kirchner (2003-2007) who decisively boosted the politics of memory in Argentina, and made the enforcement of human rights the basis for a new democratic Argentina. His commitment to the cause of the human rights movement triggered a series of deep changes in the society’s attitude towards the legacy of the dictatorship, which generally embraced the politics of memory promoted by Kirchner and then his wife Cristina, positively responding to their initiatives. The ex-centres for secret detentions were progressively transformed into spaces for public memory. Concurrently, under Army Chief of Staff General Bendini (2003-2008) the commemorations of the officers’ sacrifice in the fight against subversion lost its centrality in the Armed Forces’ memory of the Seventies (Badaró, 2009).
Some emblematic institutions of the Armed Forces came at the centre of resounding episodes where the human rights policies hit the pride of the military. In 2004 the prestigious Naval School of Mechanics (ESMA), that had concurrently hosted the biggest clandestine detention camp during the dictatorship, was taken from the Argentine Navy, cleared of its original occupiers by 2007, and converted into the main site of memory of the country (Espacio Memoria, 2011). The complex nowadays hosts the headquarters of several human rights organizations and attracts thousands of visitors every year. Furthermore, on the 28th anniversary of the military coup in 2004 president Kirchner visited the National Military Academy and ordered General Bendini to remove the portraits of Jorge Rafael Videla, former director of the institute and president of the first junta of the Proceso, and of Reynaldo Bignone, last de facto president of the regime (Gallo, 2004). According to the Argentine Constitution, the President of the Nation is also Chief Commander of the Armed Forces, therefore Kirchner could have removed the portrait himself; however, the fact he ordered Bendini to do that for him, was interpreted by the military community as a clear intent of humiliation in an emblematic space of formation and tradition for the Army.

The final blow for the military was given by the revocation of their state of immunity. From the very beginning of his campaign, Kirchner had made the will of prosecuting the criminals of the dictatorship one of the main points in his agenda. In 2003, he had pushed for the abrogation of the laws of impunity and the pardons, proclaimed illegal by the Supreme Court in 2005. Before the decision that would lead to the reopening of the trials for crime against humanity in 2006, General Bendini took a clear position:
We believe the consequences of the 1970s need to be processed by Justice. This decision has clearly been longed for [...] Starting from now, Justice will operate and, according to its judgement, the guilty parties will be condemned³.

At this point there was no doubt: the Armed Forces were accepting their strict subordination to Kirchner’s politics for human rights, whose main point was the opening of judicial causes in the whole country (Salvi, 2011). Data published by the CELS (2017) show the 85% of the accused are (former) members of the armed and security forces. The last report issued by the Argentine Attorney General’s Office (Ministerio Público Fiscal, 2017:11) counted 2,780 Argentine citizens under investigation for crimes against humanity at some point since 2003. By March 2017, 750 had been condemned and 77 acquitted; 1,232 were being accused, tried or under investigation; 209 had been dismissed, 467 had deceased, while 45 had escaped to elude justice. The 48% of the 1,044 people imprisoned for crimes against humanity in Argentina had obtained house arrest, the rest were detained in federal prisons (Ministerio Público Fiscal, 2017:12).

Nestor Kirchner’s initiatives for human rights were perpetuated and strengthened by the following government of his wife Cristina (2007-2015), whose legislation ended at the beginning of the fieldwork-based research for this thesis. Emilio Crenzel (2017) made an interesting analysis of the evolution in transitional justice in Argentina, bringing out its merits and its limits. According to Crenzel (2017:234) in the 1980s Alfonsín aimed to give an exemplary punishment to the three juntas and the seven guerrilla leaders; the sanction would have act as a deterrent, strengthening the democratic order and subjecting the main actors of violence to the law. His initiative was functional to a political objective: it had to comply with the requests of the human rights movement and at the same time avoid

contrast with the powerful military collective, which would have been depurated of the elements responsible for the violations (Crenzel, 2017:234). In a precedent study, however, Crenzel (2008:105-111) had stressed the limits of the 1984 CONADEP’s report, which did not explain the political and historical reasons of State violence, it did not take into account the repression perpetrated under constitutional government, and had emphasized the civilian profile of the victims omitting any link they had with political militancy and armed organizations. This view also tended to hide the political and civilian responsibilities of other sectors of society in the system of forced disappearance, reinforcing the opposition democracy/dictatorship and the dichotomy civilians/military.

Reviewing the work of Malamud Goti (2000), who revised the judicial strategy he proposed for the 1985 trials, Crenzel (2017:238) explains that the popularity of the trial of the juntas is due not so much to a mature spirit of citizenship, or to the shared recognition of the superiority of law and human rights. It would rather be the signal of the perpetuation of the “culture of culpability” installed with State terror: the climate of persecution for political reasons installed the idea by which the “guilty” were those who had embraced militancy and had become targets of repression, while the “innocents” had nothing to fear. Moreover, Alfonsin’s strategy failed. The trials and the sentences were rejected by the main actors involved: the military saw the trials as a vengeance; the human rights front considered the sanctions too soft and the number of the accused insufficient. In this sense the trials did not pacify the society, but became an independent source of permanent conflict, polarizing the society and creating factions (Crenzel, 2017:239).

About the new wave of trials promoted by Kirchner in the 2000s, Crenzel appreciates it emphasized the local dimension of the repression, since there are currently causes in all the provinces of the country; this united the peripheral communities and the big cities in the
culture of human rights. Several initiatives involved the generations born after the end of the dictatorship, promoting human rights and the “pedagogy of memory” in schools as a way of constructing citizenship (Crenzel, 2017:241). In some cases the investigation was extended to the years before the dictatorship, and it prosecuted subjects other than armed and security forces, such as priests, physicians, businessmen, judges and lawyers who took part into the process of forced disappearance, although only in some cases the trials mentioned the past of militancy of the victims (Crenzel, 2017:242). However, Crenzel stresses the trials are still being rejected by the military and their families, who denounced the political nature of the initiative and the lack of trials of the guerrillas, whose crimes stay unpunished.

In sum, the conclusion that Crenzel draws from his observations is that the predominance of the juridical framework in the way Argentines look at their recent past had a double effect in the last 35 years: on the one hand, it helped in recovering information about the system of forced disappearances, its practices and actors, making the victims subjects of rights, and their testimonies juridical “truth”; on the other, it supplanted different processes of historical, sociological and political reconstruction of that “truth” that are still found wanting (Crenzel, 2017:244). I agree with Crenzel when he says the universe of the military, the “perpetrators”, represents perhaps the most unknown aspect of this recent past. Their life-stories, their social and class profiles, their ideas and values remained unexplored. From this point of view, the centrality of the juridical discussion on the social benefit of punishment had the effect of discouraging academic research on the reasons that led military of different ranks to deliver violence, and the questioning of what real possibility they had to disobey orders without incurring in retaliation (Crenzel, 2017:244).
1.4 Beyond the perpetration of violence: construction of a different research object

Further remarkable studies have been conducted both in Argentina and abroad on the culture of terror generated by the military regime (Feitlowitz, 1998), and its practices of torture and forced disappearance (Águila, 2008; Crossland, 2000; Mignone, 1981; Viñar and Viñar, 2001). The research produced since the end of the dictatorship on the politics of memory6 (Crenzel, 2008, 2009; Jelin, 1994, 1998, 2001, 2007, 2011), the transitional justice (see section 1.3) and the emergence, strategies and objectives of the human rights movement (Bejarano, 2002; Bosco, 2004; Burchianti, 2004; Kaiser, 2002) represent instead a conspicuous body of knowledge essential to understand the consequences of violence on the victims and their relatives, and the impact of such processes on a culture of human rights that became the basis for new democratic Argentina.

Every transition process presupposes a re-elaboration of the past, which is often difficult because it involves multiple actors and multifaceted experiences and memories, often conflicting (Vezzetti, 2007, 2009). In the Argentine case, the perspective of the military on the Seventies and its aftermath is only marginally addressed by the majority of the studies cited above, and it is still a definitely less researched autonomous object in social sciences. Another merit of Robben (1999, 2005a, 2005b, 2006, 2011) is he addressed the military’s involvement in the violence directly, through in-depth interviews with several representatives of the regime, and the development of a critical stance on these actors.

Without never neglecting the global picture, Robben explores some specific characteristics of the military contemporary of the Proceso, such as the officers’ combat motivations and

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6Jelin (1994) uses the notion of the “politics of memory” to describe the emerging field of human rights organisations and social actors since the 1970s in Argentina that pursued truth and justice on behalf of the disappeared and other victims of state terrorism in the public arena (Serpente, 2013). This term is also more broadly used to define the State politics for “memory, truth and justice” for the crimes of the dictatorship.
anxieties, the system of meanings they put behind the perpetration of violence, the strategies they adopted in recounting, silencing and representing their actions after the return to democracy, and the adaptation of these strategies to a changing social context. He stresses how these mechanisms generally tended to protect the military as a community and an institution, highlighting the complicity of the officers in performing violent discourses and practices even after the end of the dictatorship, that perpetuated the meanings and dynamics that were in place under the State of terror (Robben, 2011). On the other hand, he provides precious contributions to the method, reflecting on the difficulties of addressing such controversial testimonies of violence (Robben, 1996, 2012b).

Together with other cases of post-conflict societies, Payne (1999, 2004, 2007) also addresses the testimonies of military personnel involved in the Argentine repression. However, her research is a study on transitional justice, and therefore she analyses such experiences as “confessions”, and her treatment is articulated using categories such as “justice”, “remorse”, “reparation”, “reconciliation”, a framework in which the military actor is ultimately conceived as perpetrator in its juridical and moral meaning of “criminal”, “torturer”, “executioner”. Moreover, Payne’s interpretation locates the figure of the military/perpetrator in opposition to the universal paradigm of the experience of violence, the victim.

This presumption that the military can only be analysed as perpetrators is dominant in studies on violence in Argentina (Aguila, 2008; Feierstein, 2006, 2009; Feld, 2009; Jelin, 1994, 1998, 2001, 2007, 2011; Mignone, 1981). The prevalence of this conception is perhaps not surprising, given the crimes perpetrated by the regime. It also aligns, to an extent, with other studies on memory and violence, particularly those written about the Holocaust (Bauman, 1989; Friedlander, 1993; Goldhagen and Wohlgelehrter, 1997;
LaCapra, 1998; Staub, 1989), in which the distinct division between “perpetrators” and “victims” has been reinforced. In a thoughtful essay, Susannah Radstone (2001) points out that audiences receiving experiences and narratives of violence and trauma feel a natural identification with “innocent victimhood” as a direct result of a dichotomy that operates a net distinction between good and evil. This tendency, dominant in memory studies, tends to simplify and therefore deprive the experiences of committing violence and, as Radstone (2001:61) suggests in her essay, “the task of witnessing and remembering the sufferings of others ought not to be separated from the difficult acknowledgement of testimonial witnessing’s darker side”. This dichotomous attitude has shaped the work produced about the Seventies in Argentina; and it is prevalent in current studies of memory, reconciliation, and the constructions of meanings and feelings around the violence. However, if we move away from this dichotomy, and investigate also the attitudes of those responsible for, or complicit in, the violence, we can extend the field to see violence as a multifaceted social phenomenon that involves a plurality of actors, and that has a huge impact on politics and societies.

Assuming that the testimony of the perpetrators of violence is as essential as the victims’ one, what kind of approach should social scientists adopt when addressing these subjects in order to generate new understanding, and leaving aside any misleading pre-constructed vision? To what extent do the stereotypes present in the society influence the scientific knowledge of the military in Argentina? There are relevant studies conducted by Argentine scholars that focus on the military of the Proceso that, despite some undeniable contribution, still adopt an approach that does not consider the military’s own understanding of the Seventies and the position they held during and after that age.
Valentina Salvi’s work (2009; 2010a; 2010b; 2011; 2012b; 2014) and in particular her book *De vencedores a víctimas: memorias militares sobre el pasado reciente en la Argentina* (2012a) address the military memories of the Seventies since the end of the dictatorship until the reopening of the trials in the early 2000s, when her study was realized. In particular, it explores the memory promoted by the institution, the narratives created by its retired officers contemporary to the regime, and those of younger officers in active service at the time of the study. Based on the observation of public acts, interviews and archival work, Salvi retraces the evolution of the Army’s traditional narrative on the Seventies and recognizes elements of continuity and rupture in it.

Like many scholars who research perpetrators of violence, Salvi aims to construct how military actors justify and therefore evade blame for violence, denying their culpability. She outlines the process of construction of an institutional memory that gradually presents the military as victims of the violence of the 1970s, emphasizing the crimes committed by the guerrilla and the casualties it inflicted to the military community and the whole civil society, a framework where the figure of the relative legitimises the military’s claim. She shows how heterogeneous the actors that compose the military world are, how different processes of commemoration and forgetting, silence and reclaim coexist, and how diverse is the range of objectives and interlocutors behind different kinds of memories. Nevertheless, her research leaves unanswered some questions and leaves space for an alternative approach to the military of the *Proceso*. There is space, therefore, to attempt to view the testimony of military actors differently: to reconstruct not just how they avoid culpability, but how they saw the world. Doing so does not take their side, but seeks – as per Browning’s work on violence during the Holocaust cited in the Introduction – to understand how they understood the violence, and the regime they were part of, and thus potentially significantly deepen our understanding of the ways that the military, and the
violence it conducted, came out of Argentine society and politics in the 1970s; and how, potentially, it offers ways to think about post-conflict justice.

1.5 The Argentine military family of the 1970s: unexplored territory

This chapter attempted to give a review as thorough as possible of the studies on the Argentine military, and the military of the Seventies in particular, highlighting fundamental contributions and aspects that need to be further analysed. German Soprano (2010:14) recognizes the relevance of this body of literature, but also points out that the majority of these studies represent a form of knowledge somehow “external” to the military, a repertoire that many scholars access to study this group indirectly. They tend to privilege the apparently monolithic political, ideological, and philosophical doctrines that determined the behaviour of the military in the twentieth century rather than considering the categories that orientate their daily life and that are product of the contact with other groups within society.

The limit brought out by Soprano can be explained by drawing on Frederic (2008)’s reflections on the conflict-ridden relationship between the social sciences and the military world in Argentina in the last thirty-five years. Progressive political sectors always tended to look at the social sciences as their natural breeding ground opposed to the military circles, usually more conservative and often reactionary. In Argentina, social sciences had a supporting role in the revolutionary struggles aiming to subvert the established social order since the early 20th century, generating suspicion in the Armed Forces (and the elites whose interests they protected) that shared a rightist counterrevolutionary ideology. The disproportionate repression perpetrated by the military during the Seventies exacerbated
this clash, especially considering that several faculties in social sciences had been closed or reformed by previous military regimes, and that the whole academic world has been strongly persecuted during the last dictatorship. This dichotomy finely outlined by Frederic (2008) crystallised in the democratic era, provoking reciprocal mistrust and determining an inevitable ideological positioning whenever one side attempted to address the other.

I believe this perception contributed to establish the dominant a-priori conception towards the military within the social sciences that Soprano identifies, that see this actor as exclusively governed by formal rules and normative principles that determine its almost complete autonomy, especially when acting as a repressive device against or on the top of the civil society. Despite some exceptions (Guber, 2015), such perspective discouraged more empirical approaches to this subject that might instead focus on other elements and categories able to explain the complexity and the specificity of the military as a social group. Soprano (2010:14) suggests that, in order to develop a novel approach to the military especially in disciplines such as ethnography, social history and sociology, it is necessary to consider the mediation and the impact played by identities and social intercourses acquired before the military’s incorporation to the institution, or shared with external groups. Soprano suggests to deepen, broaden and diversify the future studies on the military by addressing these actors not only as members of the Armed Forces or professionals of war, but also as husbands, fathers, sons, Catholics, Argentines. To do so, it is essential to look at them while producing gender relations, intergenerational ties, ethnic and class dynamics, both accomplishing their military tasks and daily interacting with the members of the military community and with civilians. In my view, adopting a focus on the family dimension represents then a good turn in this direction.
The majority of the studies on military families worldwide usually aim to help those working in the sector to improve the functioning of military institutions (Burland and Lundquist, 2013; McCubbin, Dahl and Hunter, 1976; Pincus et al., 2001; Wadsworth and Southwell, 2011). Such studies are often produced by military experts or military personnel, and often adopt quantitative methods to conduct analysis on specific situations faced by military families to improve the knowledge on issues such as the impact of moves and missions abroad on the family, the negotiation between family life and work, the entrance of women in the military and the impact on family balances, the alterations in the structure of the family and its effects on the military performance. These studies usually address current military families rather than veterans or former military families. The ultimate objective is to help the military bodies and the interested civilian sectors in developing policies that improve the military families’ conditions, in order to directly benefit the military’s performance of their functions. On the other hand, there are important studies especially in medical sciences and psychology that also address these kind of problems, and are more oriented in exploring the hardship especially felt by wives and children belonging to military families (Davis, Ward and Storm, 2011; Dekel and Monson, 2010; Faber et al., 2008; Finkel, Kelley and Ashby, 2003; Kaslow, 1993).

It is very rare then to find studies on the military where family and kinship constitute the central object of analysis, or at least are considered as elements or categories that enable the understanding of the military condition itself, a constitutive component of the military world and culture. Qualitative – and even less frequently empirical – studies with military families are extremely uncommon to find especially in disciplines such as politics or history. More contributions come from the field of anthropology, or in any case from empirical studies that adopt the methods of oral history and ethnography. Some studies in particular have been conducted in the United States (Simons, 1997; Hawkins, 2001; Frese
and Harrell, 2003) and Israel (Ben-Ari, 1998) from ethnographers who belong to the military environment, being military personnel or members of military families themselves, and problematize their native perspective in their analysis.

Other seminal studies have instead focussed on military wives and female members of the institution and women’s bodies in the military world, developing an interesting gender perspective (Boldry, Wood and Kashy, 2001; Carreiras, 2006; Enloe, 2000; Izraeli, 1997; Kronsell and Svedberg, 2011; Sasson-Levy, 2003; Segal, 2006). Narrowing down the field to Latin America, it is possible to include some excellent examples of studies from Brazil (Leirner, 2009; Adão, 2010; Silva, 2016) and Argentina (Badaró, 2006, 2010; Guber, 2015; Frederic, 2013) that privilege the social dimension of the military, in a research trend that promotes a wider and alternative approach to the military in Latin America, present the features identified by Soprano (2010), and look at kinship as a valuable research focus to trigger new understanding on such a complex social reality. However, I could not find any study that focus directly on the military families of the last Argentine military dictatorship, except for some studies that mention them in relation to the practice of illegal adoption of children and babies of desaparecidos during the regime (Catela, 2016; Villalta, 2009, 2010). Therefore I decided to make it my object of study.

Before undertaking fieldwork, I believed the informal system of social and affective relationships that sustains the military could reveal new insights into these actors, particularly regarding their understanding of the Seventies. My intuition, still at an embryonic stage at the time, was that this web of relationships contributes to the construction of identity and memory in the military at least as much as the institution does through its symbols and official declarations. As I will explain in the next chapter, the ethnographic method and its holistic perspective did enable the exploration of the informal,
non-institutional social dimension of one of the most demonised and in itself deeply problematic actors in Argentina.
Chapter Two. THE ETHNOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVE AND THE SPECIFICS OF THE FIELD

Since the end of the dictatorship the Argentine military became a sort of “beyond-the-pale” actor; the stereotyped visions and the strong social feelings against this group had the effect of limiting understanding of it. In the previous chapter I explained why a research focus on the non-institutional aspects of this actor might help in overcoming such limits, by addressing the sphere of the family and filling important gaps in the existing literature. This second chapter clarifies instead the methodological choice for ethnography and its techniques of participant observation and in-depth interviews; it explains the reasons behind the non-institutional approach to the military; it provides the categories that sustain the analysis of the data so gathered; and it gives an account of the advances and challenges that happened in the field.

2.1 Ethnography as a perspective: applying a non-institutional approach

This study is, in every aspect, an ethnography. I opted for this methodological choice because in its triple dimension of perspective, method and text (Guber, 2001c) ethnography gives the possibility to challenge the stereotyped representations that affect the social sciences’ generalizations on the military intended as a social and cultural Other, and which neglect any manifestation of diversity within it (Soprano, 2010:16). Most importantly, ethnography is perhaps the only method that allows the empirical observation of a group
and the description of this micro-world from the point of view of its members (Malinowski, 1922:25).

In line with the objectives of the ethnographic approach to social subjects (Guber, 2001b), and following the suggestions of Soprano (2010:16) to develop an alternative perspective in the study of the Argentine military, this thesis advocates for the rejection of any a priori social understanding about this actor. By adopting the ethnographic method I could look at the different elements and subjectivities that characterize this group in a holistic perspective, producing a knowledge that is local and historically specific. This allowed the generalization of hypotheses and research problems, but not of results on what the military are or should be in other contexts.

What basic principles of ethnography informed my research design? The first aspect concerns the approach to the subject. The memory of the Seventies of the Armed Forces has been addressed before; however, this has been done mainly in its institutional dimension, addressing the discourse and the objectives of the Armed Forces and its adaptation to a changing political conjuncture. Far too little attention has been paid to the everyday life private narratives of former officers of that period, and to a series of actors that cannot be defined “military” per se, but still belong to the military social world, namely wives and children. This is even more striking if we consider that a huge body of literature has been developed instead on the families of the victims of the regime, by looking at the same kind of “material” I wished to gather in my research on the military, the experience, discourse and political action led by their relatives.

In order to address this gap, I adopted a non-institutional approach to my object of study, that is a holistic ethnographic approach (Bott, 1971; Fonseca, 1999; Mintz, 1974; Velho, 1989) to the non-institutional dimension of the military world. The reason behind this
choice is that an approach allowing the cross-analysis of a wider spectrum of elements (professionalism, social class, education, forms of family organization, political and religious views, channels and spaces of sociability), paying particular attention to the human factors in relation to the institutional ones, would produce new knowledge about the military of the 1970s. Furthermore, such approach would disentangle this actor from its representation as an eternal, a-historic subject crystallized in the exercise of violence.

There are also some practical reasons why I decided to follow my intuition and adopt a non-institutional approach; I needed to avoid any bureaucratic restriction the Army would have put on my way that might slow my work down, especially considering the limited time I had on disposal for fieldwork. But more importantly, this choice entailed decisions on how to address participants in the first place. First, the officers who took part into the counterinsurgent operations in the Seventies are not in active service anymore, nor directly part of the institution’s inner workings; they are still part of its social environment, as well as many of their family members, but this aspect would have been better observable by abandoning the barracks, and stepping inside the households. Secondly, I sensed the institutional mediation might represent a limit in exploring the military in its informal social practices, contaminating the observation of a social network whose functioning do not entirely derive from the Army’s structure and rules. Lastly, the Armed Forces comply with political directives to a certain extent and, considering my interest in the aftermath of political violence, an institutional interference in my study would have perhaps been more detrimental than useful for its success. I wanted to avoid being perceived by military families as a representative of the institution and its interests.

Therefore, I excluded a vertical approach to the field, mediated by the institution and likely to reproduce its hierarchical dynamics, in favour of a more horizontal one to develop
through the same informal social and affective paths I wished to observe, the “interstices” of complex societies (Wolf, 1966). After all, my interest was in the military and their families, whereas the Army is an institution that, despite its considerable intervention in the familiar life of its subordinates, puts the officer at the centre of its world view. An analysis conducted through the lenses of the institution would imply the strengthening of the commonplace view that depicts the military as uniquely men in arms. This limited perspective would have aligned in turn with the approach adopted by most academic literature on the topic so far, frustrating any attempt to develop new understanding on the military of the Seventies. I aimed, instead, to access a sphere that officers share with comrades, but also with their children and wives, subjects connected to the civilian world, external to (but not detached from) the military institution, and still vital for its survival.

Another important aspect in which ethnography suited my objectives is related to the conduct of fieldwork. Ethnography allows the researcher to address specific groups that the rest of society perceive as distant and exotic due to ethnic, economic but also historical and political reasons (Guber, 2004a:20). When dealing with the Argentine military, especially in relation to State terrorism, it is difficult for Argentines (but not only for them) to step out of the connection between “military” and “perpetrator”. In anthropological terms, the socially internalized criminalization and demonization of the military turned out into an “exoticization” of this group: due to their responsibilities in unprecedented violence, the military are perceived as a group distant, intrinsically different and ultimately “evil”. And that makes them a more than eligible object of ethnographic studies, always projected towards the understanding of social and cultural distances among groups. In the next sections, I will refer to some crucial aspects of my research process ascribable to some exponents of the British school (Leach, 1954, 1961; Malinowski, 1922, 1926, 1967;
Strathern, 1987) and to the interpretive perspective in anthropology (Geertz, 1973, 1983)⁷. In particular, I will focus on fieldwork as an experience able to produce and organize new knowledge; the subjectivity of the researcher as a legitimate tool of investigation; the centrality of participation; the access to the field and the construction of the rapport with participants.

In order to undertake the research trajectory I aimed for, it was necessary to identify in the practice the family sphere of the military; gain access to it; spend enough time with its people to obtain their trust, in order then to ask questions from a different position; and gather significant data to be analysed. These variables and their infinite combinations make the complex and fascinating world of fieldwork, the privileged dimension of ethnography.

In the Introduction to his volume edited with Sluka Ethnographic fieldwork: an anthropological reader (2007), Robben identifies Joseph-Marie Degérando as the precursor of the modern ethnographic method. In 1800 Degérando wrote a manual of principles for the observation of native people directed to the members of scientific expeditions to Australia and South Asia. Robben (2007:30) synthesizes Degérando’s main points on the conduct of ethnographers as following:

Ethnographers must study all facets of a society in a contextualized way [...], make first-hand observations, obtain representative samples [...] in a systematic, unbiased, and holistic way, and confirmed by informants. [...] Conclusions must be based on thorough data collection and drawn inductively, not through deduction or analogy. [...] Ethnographic accounts must approximate local meanings and understandings as closely as possible instead of being presented in Western cultural terms. [...] Ethnographers should not rely on first impressions.

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⁷ After Geertz and Schneider (1980), a “new” interpretive school developed in the United States in the 1980s; its members were J. Clifford, P. Rabinow, G. Marcus, S. Tyler, V. Crapanzano, R. Rosaldo among others (Gaillard, 2004:327).
but should immerse themselves in the host society [...] and see society from the native's point of view.

Degérando’s recommendations converged in the manual *The Observation of Savage Peoples* (1969), and would become the basis of the conduct of ethnographic research as prescribed a century later by its forefathers, Franz Boas (1920) and especially Bronislaw Malinowski (1922), whose most important contribution was to link the dimensions of fieldwork and writing, thanks to the clarification of the process through which fieldwork is conducted directly in the text (Malinowski, 1967).

In *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, Malinowski asserts this method is based on a prolonged, intense fieldwork experience where certain conditions have to be satisfied in order “to grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realise his vision of his world” (Malinowski, 1922:25). According to his set of principles, the achievement of such an ambitious objective is only possible if the ethnographer succeeds in establishing a close relationship with the population object of study to observe their behaviour, participate in their daily routine and verbally interact with them. Only this experience enables the researcher to gather information about the participants’ beliefs and social practices, to learn the local cognitive processes that inform their actions and decisions, and catch the local meanings underlying these manifestations. By adopting local analytic categories it is possible to construct a new epistemology where the native world is actually contemplated, and overcome ethnocentrism, the tendency to interpret the informants’ world according to the researchers’ cultural criteria. This constant risk indeed leads to sterile pre-conceived conclusions (Runciman, 1983) and exotic representations.

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8 First edition originally published in French, *Considerations sur les methodes a suivre dans l'observation des Peuples Sauvages* (1800).

9 Although the use of the word “native” is widely employed in ethnography and anthropology to indicate the member of the social group or culture that is object of study, I will make a limited use of this term in the thesis, opting for “participant” and in some cases “informant”.

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One important merit of Malinowski, as noted by Kuper (1983:16), was that he established the field as the dimension where the ethnographer can perceive the “systematic divergence between what people say about what they do, what they actually do and what they think”, diversifying the observation on several levels. The face-to-face fieldwork has to be conducted through proper techniques; Malinowski proposed participant observation as the crucial method to get this firsthand inside perspective (Robben, 2007:32). I will explain later in this chapter how participant observation is a research technique, a way of understanding a culture, but also a form of social interaction (Berreman, 2012:147). In order to stress this aspect, I opted for the term “participant” to refer to my interlocutors, only occasionally replacing this word with “informant”. This choice does not only lie in the fact my interlocutors did participate in the study; it aims to emphasize the importance of the practice of participant observation as established by Malinowski: therefore I use the term “participant” as the one who informs by participating, a word more appropriate than “informant” in this sense, because it better qualifies the essence of the ethnographic fieldwork itself, and the valuable data that can be collected by applying this method.

Understanding the experience of the military family in the Seventies, familiarizing with their own categories and language, and grasping the native meanings behind these, also required working with oral sources produced in interviews. In his article The peculiarities of oral history (1981:99-100) Alessandro Portelli recognizes a “special power” to oral sources because

the unique and precious element which no other sources possess in equal measure is the speaker's subjectivity: and therefore [...] a cross section of the subjectivity of a social group or class. They tell us not just what people did, but
what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, what they now think they did.

By focusing on the participants’ individual narratives, and approaching them as a collective made of different subjectivities, I attempted to comprehend how they feel part of a community, and in which terms that community interacts with other groups that are members of the same society. Adopting Portelli’s perspective, I decided to focus on the military’s domestic role, to contribute to understanding on the one hand how military power operated in this period of time; on the other how the military have reacted to the processes and the politics of memory, and how they see their own position in the Seventies and in the judicial prosecution.

I used oral sources in an ethnographic perspective, to the extent to which I did not only analyze the data, but went further in analysing the situation in which such data were produced. Indeed, narratives are the product of an interaction, in this case between researcher and informant, who both participate in the social setting given by the interview. Understanding the relationship between the terms of an interaction – and how the respective roles have been defined in the context that produced that relationship – is a necessary step in order to comprehend the relation between past and present in a narrative, and the reasons why a specific narrative has been constructed in a certain way – how people “compose” their memories (Abrams, 2016; Summerfield, 1998, 2004; Thomson, 1996).

Rather than information, I aim here to produce understanding of the Argentine military and their families, who might be considered not only participants but also “co-authors” in this ethnography (Clifford, 1986:7), to the extent to which my interpretation is constructed “with” informants and “out of” them (Guber 2001c:41). Across the decades, ethnography
has developed greatly, giving life to different ethnographic genres (Mantzoukas, 2010). Although I agree with classical ethnography on the centrality of fieldwork and participant observation in ethnographic research, I would take distance from its claim to be a “representational act” (Alexander, 2003), able to provide a full, objective and “true” description of a culture. Similarly, I appreciate the effort of critical ethnography in revealing oppressive structures in societies, but I would be careful in embracing its goals of social transformation and participants’ empowerment, which might make it an “openly ideological research” (Lather, 1986 cited in Anderson, 1989). I tend to align instead with more interpretive positioning in ethnography. Following the 1970s postmodern questioning of objectivity and reality itself in social sciences, anthropologists challenged the crisis of representation in their discipline (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Fisher and Marcus, 1986; Watson, 1987). Clifford and Marcus in particular highlighted the “constructed, artificial nature of cultural accounts”. By criticising the traditional anthropological claim of representing cultures\textsuperscript{10}, they praise “the wider practice of writing about, against and among cultures” as a form of interpreting them (Clifford and Marcus, 1986:2-3). Clifford describes indeed ethnographic texts – even the best ones – as “true fictions” or “partial truths”, not to discredit the contribution of ethnographic enquiry itself, but rather to underline the “partiality of cultural and historical truths, […] systematic and exclusive” (Clifford, 1986:6). In the decades following this seminal work, anthropologists responded with experimental, “messy” ethnographies that aimed to re-think not only the canons of ethnographic research, but also the future of the discipline (Marcus, 2007).

Ethnographic monographs are also artful products (Atkinson, 2014:2). Rather than truthful accounts, “interpretivists” write versions of the truth “in the form of a story” (Goodall,

\textsuperscript{10} As a way to make up for the absence of essays from female and feminist ethnographers in Clifford and Marcus’ seminal \textit{Writing Culture}, Behar and Gordon contributed to the interpretivist debate publishing the edited volume \textit{Women Writing Culture} in 1995.
2003), a “tale of the fieldwork” (Van Maanen, 1988), or even a “mystory” (Denzin, 1997; Ulmer, 1989). These and other forms of ethnographic writing, such as performance ethnographies (Denzin, 1997:93), poetry, fictions, memoirs, autobiographies (Ellis and Bochner, 1996; Bochner and Ellis, 2002) and autoethnographies (Anderson, 2006; Chang, 2016; Ellis, 2004) represent the rich set of texts found in ethnography. In this thesis I conduct a critical self-reflection by revealing my own methods, reflecting on my own bias and limits, and engaging with work from other disciplines. I also focus on reflexivity issues, learning from ethno-methodologist contributions to the matter (Garfinkel, 1967; Coulon 1987), and I privilege topics emerged from fieldwork that I considered relevant, creating an original telling of the participants’ accounts of their past and present (Denzin 2000, Faubion 2001, Plummer 2001).

With my ethnography, I do not aim to give a theoretical contribution to anthropology, or to what a good ethnography in postmodern times should be (Sangren, 1992). I would rather insert my study within war/military studies and Latin American studies – particularly among ethnographies on Latin American Armed Forces – confirming Marcus’ statement that contemporary ethnographers often step into other disciplines to acquire their objects, knowledge and styles, increasing ethnography’s interdisciplinary character (Marcus, 2002:197). Anyhow, I aim here to provide a powerful interpretation – as honest and elaborated as possible – of how Argentine military families conceive themselves in a specific time and context, rather than a faithful explanation of what they are or should be.

2.2 Military family, kinship and reciprocity

The literature on the military worldwide can count on excellent ethnographic studies on this social group in different contexts (Badaró, 2009; Frederic, 2013; Frese and Harrell,
2003; Guber, 2015; Hockey, 1986; Kirke, 2010; Leirner, 1997, 2009; Lutz, 2002). As anticipated in Chapter One, we also have exemplary ethnographies conducted by anthropologists who are natives to the military environment, such as military spouses (Simons, 1997), children (Castro, 1990) or members of the institution themselves (Ben Ari, 1998; Hawkins, 2001). Native or not, whenever social scientists explore the ways in which the members of a social group construct and intend reality, they enter in contact with a series of local bodies, objects and subjectivities, but also with local forms of knowledge.

In the analytic phase of this study, I have been inspired in particular by Eyal Ben Ari’s work. In his ethnography on an Israeli infantry battalion Mastering Soldiers (1998), Ben Ari acknowledges the different sources he drew on to reconstruct his participants’ “military knowledge” in order to understand its nature, its location and its applications. Like Ben Ari, I believe it is important to clarify the sort of “things” researchers look at in the field to learn and understand the informants’ culture; in my case I refer to the sometimes unexpected sources that Argentine military actors – not exclusively officers – use to construct their “local knowledge”, the beliefs and behaviours that emerge from the observation and participation in the social practices of a certain group throughout its history (Geertz, 1983).

On the one hand, there are military doctrines that cadets and officers receive in training and transmit subsequently in the almost never ending formation process that leads them towards the upper-reaches of the institution. Doctrines learnt in training provide the principles of “soldiering and commanding” together with handbooks and guides published by different institutional bodies; to a certain extent this knowledge is also present in the accounts of “training and combat” (Ben Ari, 1998) diffused by former officers among younger generations. Such local sources of military knowledge are generally highly
normative and constitute the know-how of the military conduct. Another source of knowledge comes instead from the extensive literature produced by social scientists and military experts, especially in psychology and military history and biographies. The knowledge contained within these writings provides examples that officers and soldiers apply to make sense of the “routine and extraordinary events of military life” (Ben Ari, 1998: 2).

Such sources are definitely useful to envision the cultural and normative background the military belong to, but are often quite distant from their everyday life, and even more so if by military actors we also intend subjects not directly linked to the universe of the barracks, such as civilian members of military families. Moreover, the world view that the military construct and share with fellow members of their community always needs to be put into a wider context: not only it is influenced by the working and the situations proper of the strictly military sphere; it is also shaped by events and circumstances of the world outside the military bubble, in ways often not contemplated by doctrines, manuals and literature. In other words, military knowledge is also made of a set of mundane or commonsense elements (Ben Ari, 1998:3) that are more likely to be grasped through participant observation and retraced in oral sources, and that need to be analysed in a complementary way with more normative information. In fact, the everyday life military knowledge made of practices, meanings and narratives, is better placed to explain the specifics of military actors and culture in relation with the socio-political context in which the researcher enters in contact with the object of study.

As I ventured into the field, I often experienced a sense of slight bewilderment in facing expressions and behaviours that I did not expect. I interpreted my own sense of surprise as a side effect of bumping into native aspects that deserved attention, and could contribute to
extend knowledge about the group I was studying. As DeWalt, DeWalt and Wayland (1998:267) notice, if compared to more structured techniques participant observation puts the researcher in situations from which it is possible to acquire information in an “open-ended fashion”. Being open to be surprised is a vehicle for the researcher to detect the research paths provided, but not explicated, by participants; and thus establishing the axis of the analysis. Whether correctly applied, this strategy can reveal peculiar elements of the world of the participants in relation to the research focus, and therefore unknown to the researcher: as his/her own background clashes with the participants’ one, the astonishment, and even the confusion sometimes experienced, symbolize the perception of something other than what is known or familiar to the researcher.

In order to observe, decode and interpret the military’s family sphere I had to resort to literature, and borrow some concepts that belong to the anthropology of kinship, a concept I will discuss in more detail below. In particular, the notions of lineage and alliance have been unavoidable in the study of the Argentine military family; these two concepts describe two kinds of kin ties observable in human cultures, based respectively on vertical relationships of consanguinity and horizontal ties tightened through marriage. Historically, the anthropological study of these expressions of kinship led to the establishment of two theories, the lineage (or descent) theory and the alliance theory, which also correspond to two different approaches in the discipline, the Anglophone empiricist (Rivers, 1968a, 1968b) and the Francophone structuralist (Levi-Strauss, 1949), and two different positions in the debate on kinship, which was particularly intense especially between the 1960s and 1970s (Seymour-Smith, 1986:158).

Since the beginnings of anthropology, kinship has been a privileged subject of investigation (Morgan, 1871), and has been seen as a bond that connects individuals on the
basis of a blood or marriage relation (Bordieau, 1977; Borneman, 1992; Levi-Strauss, 1949; Malinowski, 1930, 2013) or inheritance (Leach, 1961), and as a crucial element at the centre of further developments and critiques which contributed to significant twists in the discipline. Since the 1970s, indeed, classic theories of kinship have been criticised for the intrinsic polysemy of their categories and the ethnocentric projections of their results (Barnes, 1980; Needham, 1971; Schneider, 1980, 1984; Sperber, 1985). Needham criticised classic models, finding their analytic conceptual frameworks rather poor; Schneider instead pointed out that in America relationships are built out of nature and law, two orders embodied in blood relatives (Carsten, 2011:21). His critique against biological explanations of social behaviour dismissed the subfield of kinship studies, whose theories would reflect the ideas of family and genealogy of Western societies and confer biological kinship a sort of privileged status. Feminist anthropology recovered Schneider’s argument in its study of kinship, stressing the socially constructed nature of gender notions and the consequent sexual inequalities (Collier and Yanagisako, 1987). Kinship lost its central position in anthropology until the 1990s, when it gained renewed attention and generated a proliferation of ethnographic studies on Euro-American forms of kinship. Such studies focused on the democratic changes happening in Western societies, and phenomena such as homoparental families, reproductive technologies and adoptions; they enquired alternative ways of forming relationships still based on common bodily substance and a diffused sense of reciprocal obligation and solidarity (Baumann, 1995; Bouquet, 1993; Carsten, 2000, 2004, 2011; Decimo and Gribaldo, 2017; Edwards, 2000, 2015; Jacob, 2012; Modell, 1994; Pichardo Galan, 2009; Strathern, 1992a, 1992b, 2005; Weston, 1991). Some anthropologists extended fresh reflection on kinship to Africa, Asia and Melanesia (Busby, 1997; Ellison, 2009; Holy, 1989; Marriott, 1976; Marriott and Inden, 1977; Strathern, 1988). Folk concepts outlined by classic theories of kinship are still present in
more contemporary studies, and the idea of kinship is not completely rejected; however, while anthropologists recognise these categories’ link with Western culture and the biologically based framework, they also show how they possess a multiplicity of historical, national and class variations (González Echevarría, 2010:98). These developments in the anthropology of kinship tend to see culture as “a better way of understanding indigenous notions of kinship or ‘relatedness’, than the more analytical schools of the past” (Parkin and Stone, 2004:ix). They contributed to deconstruct the idea of kinship as a natural fact, proposing the central concept of “relatedness” besides more classical conceptions of kinship (Bouquet, 1993; Carsten, 1995, 1997, 2000). This term refers in fact to alternative models of strong and durable relationships, forged not only among people with biological ties, but also among individuals bounded by ties of friendship, neighbourhood and godfatherhood, for instance.

“Nonconventional” forms of kinship have also been defined by anthropologists as fictive kinship (Adams, 1970; Al Haj, 1995; Ebaugh and Curry, 2000; Jacob, 2009; Johnson, 2000; Kim, 2009; Lee, 2013; Nelson, 2014; Sahlins, 2011a, 2011b, 2013; Taylor et al., 2013, Tierney and Venegas, 2006). The term refers to a widespread phenomenon in human cultures that includes forms of “non-kin who (…) conduct their social relations within the idiom of kinship” (Stack, 1974:40), and relationships based on the “mutuality of being” (Sahlins, 2011a, 2011b) implicated in each other’s existence. I found this concept useful to describe forms of relatedness in the military environment that are not given biological ties, but are instead created and consensually established in time; bonds such as comradeship and relations among different family nucleuses in the Argentine military community are indeed interpreted in this thesis as forms of fictive kinship.
Despite the considerable amount of research on what kinship is exactly – which stayed marginal in this work – most anthropologists agree nowadays that all kin ties are constructed, regardless of whether they are built on biological evidence such as a blood relation. In recent times specialists have come to agree on the empirical plurality of kinship systems in the world, observed in most diverse contexts where its native meaning and construction vary greatly (Seymour-Smith 1986:9). The interpretation that sustains this work has been possible by incorporating some distinctive elements that emerged from the field; in fact, within the analytic and writing process I used a combination of categorical and narrative analyses (Ben Ari, 2014). In other words, I anchored my “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of the Argentine military families of the 1970s on some central categories – both native and analyst-constructed – and some narrative indicators stemmed from fieldwork. Most categories will be revealed and explored in the thesis, and opportunely identified as native or analyst-constructed, but others need to be anticipated for clarity issues.

By conducting participant observation and in-depth interviews, I came to identify some recurring native categories that I considered crucial for the interpretation of the reality as the military families describe it. These elements in turn compose what Ben Ari calls “lay theories” or “folk models”, and what Furnham (1987) defines as “belief systems”, implicit theories, everyday or common-sense conceptions. In other words, the indigenous categories are used by participants to build the taken for granted models of reality that the members of their social group use to interact, describe and make sense of their world. Borrowing Ben Ari’s words (1998:4), these native categories are therefore important points of reference within a community to understand “what we are and what we are trying to do”.
Back to the categories of kinship, the central concept to the aims of this work is “military family” in its double dimension, nuclear and large. The “nuclear military family” is the family nucleus made of the officer, his wife and children, which represented somehow the basic unit of my research sample. By interviewing former members of the Argentine military, their wives and children, I glimpsed the mechanisms through which this small sample constructed their kin ties, such as the marital bond, the relationships between parents and children, and bonds among siblings.

In my conversations with participants, I realised – with little surprise – that they generally understood these fundamental kin ties as I did: relationships among individuals built out of blood and law. Argentines indeed tend to share, represent and reproduce concepts of family and kin that are to a great extent the product of a Catholic, monogamous, patriarchal culture, just like most Western societies, including Italy. So in this sense the researcher’s and the participants’ discourses on kin relationships generally articulated around a common model of family ties and a same system of conventions; Schneider’s concern about the imposition of the researcher’s kinship categories over the native system would not hold in this case. However, in the thesis I focus on kinship not only as a set of facts and materials discovered in the field (-emic categories), but also as a vehicle for the researcher to understand and represent specific characters of military actors (-etic categories) that participants do not necessarily express as forms of kinship. I aim then to deconstruct and reinterpret those bonds other than “conventional” kinship that participants defined or described as kinship; what participants made of what I understood as kinship; and what they actually meant when they talked about things such as siblinghood, fathers and children, blood ties, and so on.
For example, by interacting with participants that belonged to different nuclear families, I observed the informal social structures that bound these military family units together at a macro-level. This connects in several dynamics of interdependence individuals from different family units who felt connected as part of the same “large military family”. This dimension of the military social sphere was unforeseen, but it was crucial to interpret the participants’ construction and representation of kinship and relatedness, and is a culturally specific character of this group that became central in my analysis. When the Argentine military and their relatives – in our case particularly those of the Army\textsuperscript{11} - talk about the *gran familia militar* (the large military family), they refer to what I also call in the thesis the “military community”. This native expression indeed indicates the population and the tight network of relationships made of the officers of the Argentine Army and their families, a community that is sustained by ties of kinship (that participants generally understood and described in terms I also recognized as kinship) and comradeship (which I interpreted as a form of fictive kinship, but they did not necessarily describe as kinship). There is then a combination of -emic and -etic categories of kinship in my analysis of social structures in the Argentine military, which might help non-military audiences to understand this group a bit more in depth.

The complex structure of the large military family extends and reinforces not only in time, through descending generations, but also in a specific moment, among generations of peers. This particular character is given by the highly endogamous tendency within this social group, because subalterns tended (and still tend) to marry daughters of superior officers within the same branch and even within the same specialty, as well as sisters of fellow comrades, since many officers in turn come from military families. This is an

\textsuperscript{11} Evidence suggest that also the large military families of the Navy and the Air Force exist, and many characters would probably be found common to the three. However, the community I refer to in this thesis is the family of the Argentine Army.
essential premise to understand how the mechanisms within this group work and to catch the importance and the particularity of kinship ties within such environment. In this sense the native expression large military family is not just a metaphor: in many cases it refers to a web of strong, durable, perpetuated kin ties within this social group – at least as perceived or articulated by participants – which are both vertical and horizontal. Furthermore, the military family is a native category because military actors use this expression to describe their knowledge and experience of being military: as data from my interviews will show, participants often adopt the language and the forms that stem from the sphere of the family to explain their relationship to the Army, to their comrades, superiors and subalterns, as well as their obligations and duties towards the group, the institution and their own families. The implications of this dynamic within a context where some members of the network are being imprisoned for their role in the Seventies are perhaps predictable, but studying them helps better to understand the place of the military in past and contemporary Argentine society. The emphasis on this native category led the analytic process to make explicit a series of native ideas and objects, including some apparently purely military concepts such as comradeship, discipline and responsibility within a world where not only officers are included, but also families, superiors, subordinates as well as enemies, allies, institutional bodies and so on. The features of the ‘large military family’ can probably be found in militaries everywhere, but in Argentina they take on particular significance because of the crimes and brutality of the dictatorship.

Some cultures and groups use lineage as their main organizational principle, while others resort to alliance, or even to a combination of the two. Thus, in line with the use of kinship made in anthropology, I adopted this concept – beyond its exclusively biological manifestations – as a grid to understand how the Argentine military society works. Keeping in mind the endogamous character of the military community in Argentina, within
my thesis I considered lineage-based kin ties the relationship of consanguinity between former officers and their adult children; and the relationship of military wives with their own fathers, since in turn these women were often daughters of superior officers who ended up marrying younger subalterns. Within alliance ties, instead, I included the relationship between husband and wife within the nuclear military family; but also the consanguineous relationship among siblings, on the one hand; and the extended bond of loyalty among comrades and among members of different nuclear families, on the other, which I also interpreted as forms of fictive kinship. In sum, by adopting understandings of kinship not only in biological but also in interactive terms, I managed to explore relationships within what participants defined as “family” (the nuclear family) and what they saw as the “large military family” (the extended community of different military nuclear families).

In the literature, alliance theory is often linked to the theory of reciprocity and exchange (Gouldner, 1960; Levi-Strauss, 1949; Malinowski, 1922, 1926; Mauss, 1923), another important concept that supports my analysis and interpretation. Among others who explored and theorized the complex web of mechanisms of gifts and obligations that are at the basis of the organization of social life, I found Mauss’ work particularly pertinent. By exploring the dynamics of gift as a vehicle of multiple social meanings and goals, Mauss contributed to the understanding of some of the basic structures of society, and questioned both social conventions and economic systems. Going back to the object of my study, Mauss describes the family as “a group of people who share the same blood either naturally or artificially, and who are united by a series of mutual and reciprocal rights and duties deriving from this belief in consanguinity” (Mauss, 2007:121). In the Argentine military community this is certainly a fact, although my analysis will show that consanguinity is not the only principle that regulates the network of solidarity that precedes
and in current times supports the military convicted; and even when participants perform practices and discourses that emphasize their belief in consanguinity, it is still a concept that is constructed and intended in a very peculiar way.

Reciprocity as the principle that regulates the relationships within and among the nuclear military families, and their relationship with the institution and the society, is indeed a central concept in this thesis. It was helpful to understand the cycle of reciprocal expectations between husband and wife, parents and children, comrades of a same generation, soldiers and commanders in the battlefield, military families and military authorities, and so on; I used reciprocity as a lens to decipher the general rules of social functioning in the military community. Together with other elements explained in this section, reciprocity aligned with my intuitions about the inner working of the military community, and combined with some native categories exposed above. In between intuition and realisation, though, an unexpected succession of events took place in the field. In the next section follows an account of the distance between my expectations and the reality of fieldwork, to better appreciate the whole research process and its results, since it also mirrors the current state of civil-military relations in Argentina and the difficulty for both sides in confronting their own past.

2.3 The ethnographer’s “tribulations”

Malinowski expresses the need for the ethnographer to clarify in the text his/her research methods, gradually improved through a constant – and often frustrating – direct experience in the field. He describes this aspect of fieldwork as the ethnographer’s “tribulations”, a progressive adjustment to the same reality s/he wishes to know in depth (Malinowski,
1922:4). An account of this process helps the reader in better assimilating the nonlinear development of every ethnographic research, and appreciating its scientific results.

As my research started in Buenos Aires in November 2015, I witnessed a crucial twist in the socio-political scenario that affected the environment within which I conducted fieldwork. The previous twelve years had seen the presidents Néstor and Cristina Kirchner sealing an alliance with progressive and human rights groups, building their popular consent around a renewed struggle for justice for the victims of the dictatorship, with the objective of rallying the Argentines under a same national cause, the “memory cause” (Vezzetti, 2009:53). According to Vezzetti, this construction is articulated on an ideological fabric that connects the defence of human rights in the present to the restoration of the motivations behind the revolutionary cause of the armed left in the Seventies: under the Kirchners, the revolutionary militancy seemed to be replaced by the militancy for human rights. As explained in Chapter One, Néstor and Cristina Kirchner’s political action led to significant achievements in the field of human rights (Levitsky and Murillo, 2008). However, since 2006 the reopened trials for crimes against humanity monopolized the media for more than twelve years, and their resonance was amplified by a strong anti-military invective. The Kirchners’ era allowed the coming forward of evidence about the violence perpetrated by the military, and in so doing worsened the political dispute around the Seventies; and therefore the circumstances within which I started fieldwork were tense.

Two weeks after my arrival in Buenos Aires the liberal conservative Mauricio Macri, whose political views are different to the Kirchners’ ones and who never took a clear position on the Seventies during his campaign, was elected at president of the Nation. This drastic change has been perceived as the end of the Kirchners’ era. Besides the uncertainties about Macri’s imminent political and economic actions, wide sectors of the
society were expressing their concerns about an interruption in the repressors’ prosecution and the fate of the progress reached in the field of human rights so far. During his campaign Macri had reiterated his commitment in defending fundamental liberties in a conversation with *La Nación*, but also announced his intention of ending with what he called “the human rights business”, presumed financial abuses regularly committed by organizations working in the politics of memory in the name of justice for the *desaparecidos*. His declarations provoked the rejection of human rights activists, kirchnerist factions and left wing sectors in general (Rosenberg, 2014). One year later, a provocative article was published on that same popular newspaper on the day after Macri’s election; the author invoked the end of the “faulty” trials and publicly denounced the Kirchners’ installation of a partial memory of the Seventies and the critic situation experienced by the military prosecuted, not subjected to justice but to “revenge” (*La Nación*, 2015). The article immediately provoked a national outcry about the future of the judicial causes. Nevertheless, it also symbolically inaugurated a new moment for older generations within the military to claim for spaces to express their voice after twelve years of almost total eclipse.

As Macri officially assumed the presidency in December 2015, the leader of Mothers of Plaza de Mayo Hebe de Bonafini launched a resistance march against the new president, openly labelled as “the enemy” (*Página12*, 2015). In the following months, the media emphasized the attitude of the new government and their representatives towards the trials and the politics for human rights. Facts such as unprecedented meetings between the new Secretary for Human Rights Claudio Avruj and relatives of victims of the 1970s’ guerrilla were perceived by the public opinion as unequivocal signs of a new posture towards the Seventies and its aftermath (*La Nación*, 2016). Moreover, the president’s use of obsolete terms such as “dirty war” to describe mass political violence in the Seventies recalled the
“two demons theory”, a discourse current after the return to democracy that attempted to equalize State repression with the guerrilla’s terrorist action. Since the very first months of his mandate, Macri’s disinterest in taking a clear position on the whole question, up to the point of expressing doubts about the emblematic number of the 30,000 victims of the dictatorship, has been largely interpreted as a sort of connivance with the perpetrators, and a regression to the age of impunity and silence (Rosenberg, 2016). On the other hand, these facts encouraged the military and their social circles to break the isolation of the Kirchners’ era, gradually exposing and claiming for visibility in the defence of their cause.

In retrospect, I would say that Macri’s position and the former military’s perception that they might have an audience for their narratives, in some ways made it easier for me to gain access to them. However, despite this more favourable situation I was still trying to access the field as a researcher who never addressed the military before, within a context pervaded by a deeply rooted tension about the whole topic. I had no contacts in the Armed Forces or in any military circle as I first arrived in Buenos Aires. I was a foreigner and it was my first time in Argentina. Therefore, I decided to move my first step in the territory I was more familiar with, the academic world, in order to obtain some suggestions (and hopefully some contacts). Surprisingly enough for me at the time, little help came from that front; the same situation happened as I approached people working in archives and associations close to human rights groups: the object of my research did not really encourage them to help me in setting a network with the former repressors.

As I gradually settled in Buenos Aires I socialized with local inhabitants. Inevitably, my interest as I met new people was to ascertain whether they had any military acquaintances in active service roughly between 1970 and 1983, a circumstance that turned out to be more frequent than expected. As a result, my initial approaches to military families were
random, based on my still precarious Argentine contacts. In most cases, these first approaches did not develop any further; even when my networking activity worked out and I could meet potential participants, it was not easy at all to convince them to take part into my study. I could easily read on their faces glimpses of mistrust, suspicion and a general disinterest; they seemed to have no real interest in talking to me, and did not understand my reasons to ask them about the Seventies, probably misperceiving being the object of some voyeuristic interest towards the “bad guys”.

The research relationship I tried to build ended up in a unilateral act where I was the only part with an actual interest in establishing a contact. In the rare occasion they accepted to release an interview, those initial, isolated incursions within military families were empty, confusing and out of place, as it was impossible for me to establish a connection with the participants in which they could see a point in speaking to me. Moreover, in these first contacts I only managed to speak to children and wives. I believed I was genuinely attempting to approach them as freely as I possibly could from prejudice; however, I was not able to rid myself easily of preconceptions I still held, as I was not properly aware of those preconceptions, which often led to involuntary pre-interpretations and even previsions of my participants’ answers. This attitude not only was deleterious as I approached them, but also prevented me from properly “seeing” the data they were actually providing in the interviews; I rather labelled them as bad or irrelevant informants.

Such distortion happened because, as a European academic with a specialization in human rights, I had learned to look at the Argentine history and its protagonists through the lenses of that discipline, reproducing that system of knowledge and adopting the language of the experts in that field. I was approaching “perpetrators”, and ended up establishing the same dynamic with officers, wives and children alike, all ultimately related to the label of
“criminals”. This attitude inevitably reflected on my way of communicating with my potential participants, compromising the trust-building process and putting an unbridgeable distance between me and them. In sum, I was being affected by a particular kind of ethnocentrism I define “moral-centrism”: I was impeded by the cultural and cognitive mechanisms I brought to the field from the realm of politics and human rights – where the Argentine military are almost exclusively approached as perpetrators of mass violence – and detained by the same logics I wished I could challenge with my work. This moral-centrism also corresponds to a supposed moral superiority leading to an explicit judgement of their interlocutors that is expected from social scientists that wish to address the study of authoritarianism Argentina, and the actors of State violence in particular.

According to one of the principles of ethnography, researchers do not test their hypothesis in the field; by contrast, they modify and even construct a new one starting from their observation (Fonseca, 1999:60): the object of study is not defined a priori, but from the fieldwork experience. Moreover, constructing a research object implies its questioning: the researcher raises questions around an actor that is apparently well known, transforming a habitual fact – in my case the interiorized equation military = perpetrator – into a research problem, and inserting it within a broader research topic – the social aftermath of political violence (Guber, 2004a:33). Questions generated by the observation of the reality in front of them lead researchers to reposition in the field and analyse their object under a different perspective by asking new questions and interpreting observations freshly; the theory so generated is therefore anchored on the specifics of the fieldwork experience and practice, rather than on the application of any preconceived concept (Cohen, 1978).

In the first stage of my research I had a research objective in mind and an object of study partially available; however, the relation did not make sense whenever I put those elements
together. I constantly ended up at a failed meeting point between my research objectives and my participants, and my goals did not meet any matching part in the reality I was observing. My initial research questions, unconsciously formulated on the assumption that I was addressing military/perpetrators, were in contrast with my original objective and put me in a position from which it was impossible to catch anything different from what I already knew. I needed to rethink my own position.

The impasse I was at first experiencing was actually a normal (and possibly necessary) stage of the ethnographic process. Researchers tend to consider their presence in the field as somehow disentangled from it, neglecting a series of conditions that have a direct impact on their interaction with the informants; at the same time, they struggle to recognize that participants necessarily act and speak from their own position in that same field, and that only. In the previously cited handbook of ethnographic fieldwork, Robben defines reflexivity as “the conscious self-examination of the ethnographer’s interpretive presuppositions” (Robben and Sluka, 2007:443). This aspect of anthropological research has been definitely prioritised by the postmodern turn in the 1970s, driving the attention to the role of the ethnographer as a main research tool, the interactional process through which s/he accesses the information, and the narrative styles aiming to transmit that specific dimension of fieldwork to the reader (Clifford, 1988; Favret- Saada, 1980; Rabinow, 1977). Salzman (2002:806) describes reflexivity instead as “the constant awareness, assessment, and reassessment by the researcher of the researcher’s own contribution/influence/shaping of intersubjective research and the consequent research finding”. Both these authoritative definitions focus on the ethnographer’s self-reflection on his/her own impact on the research process. My own experience in the field, however, would push me to stress how the reflexive nature of every ethnographic work, its intrinsic intersubjective quality, is fuelled by the reflexivity of both the researcher and the
“researched”, as they constantly interact in the field and influence the development of the ethnographic investigation.

Regarding this point, among others I found Guber’s methodological reflections very useful. She warns in her already cited monograph on the method *El salvaje metropolitano* researchers have to be aware of their own reflexivity both as members of the community and as scientists, which means being conscious of their own grounding, made of commonsense and theoretical concepts, images and logics. Nevertheless, Guber (2004a:49) also claims the researcher has to be aware of the informant’s reflexivity, an aspect which is much more difficult to grasp. She recommends researchers carry on their background as they enter the field, rather than leaving it behind, because this same “baggage” has the power of leading, distorting and improving their own observation. The researcher’s identity and subjectivity do not disappear; they are re-interpreted and re-orientated in the particular context delimited by the field, through the contact and active dialogue developed with the informants. This interaction is full of frictions, breaking points and encounters, and in that tension relies the key to interpret the social reality the researcher aims to understand. Therefore, the ethnographer must be able to conduct a deep, conscious reflection on how these two subjectivities (his/her own and the informants’ one) interact in the field, how they generate a social situation that is framework and at the same time object of the ethnographic study.

Admitting and understanding the existence of the informants’ reflexivity, though, does not happen as a consequence of an act of will, nor is the result of an a priori decision-making. As Guber (2004a:50) argues, in the first stage of fieldwork researchers can only think, question and address their interlocutors taking their own cognitive schemes as a starting

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point. As long as the fieldwork develops, researcher and informant construct a relationship in which the former can learn and consider new frameworks and cognitive dynamics produced by the latter, identifying other differences with the participants, at first invisible. For this reason ethnography is considered to be a learning and a knowledge-making process at the same time.

After almost five months since the beginning of fieldwork, I felt I needed help in relocating myself in the field. I searched for advice within the Argentine academic world again, and this time I witnessed an interesting exception to the general mistrust between academic and military world. One of the foremost specialists in the Argentine military, an experienced anthropologist I revealed my “tribulations” to, understood my aim of questioning the same ground from which the military of the dictatorship had been researched so far; however, the academic also realized I was not able yet to ask new questions from a different position. Therefore the anthropologist decided to put me in contact with Luis, a former Captain from the Army. The closeness and reciprocal esteem between the academic and the officer, and the fact that the former was recommending me to the latter, might give me some chance to gain access to the field. This dynamic still fell under the non-institutional approach, as in fact I was avoiding the Army and its institutional devices once again, following the thread of a contact that let me skip a long series of preliminary evaluations.

After a brief email exchange, the Captain agreed to meet. During that first chat, I perceived that a negotiation was going to take place; I was also conscious I had to abandon my moral-centric vision, but had no idea of how to do it and feared to be rejected again. Somehow I felt I needed to trust this person and put my cards on the table: after all, my reason for meeting him was to be advised by someone who knew my research topic more than I did. Admitting my ignorance and slight confusion with Luis was definitely the first
step in the correct direction; somehow my frankness was appreciated by the Captain and had an impact on his openness. It is not uncommon for participants to be keener to collaborate and show their “expertise” as they detect the researcher’s inability to explore their world due to their inexperience in the field (Tonkin, 1984:221). Assuming that researchers have a “portfolio of identities” to draw on as they interact with different participants (Navarro, 2012:91), I decided ultimately to discard the mask of the researcher in control of the situation who wants to obtain something from an informant she selected. In fact, I finally understood what was happening was exactly the opposite: I had to trust Luis and ask for his expertise to be re-orientated in the field.

Researchers working with people tend to think the trust-building process works in one direction only: the unbreakable confidence in their own academic virtues sometimes makes researchers think they can convince informants to collaborate, to like their own person and project, therefore they play in the field as reassuring, benevolent and all-knowing entities who know the informants’ world even better than them, because they devoted their career to that. This attitude is most times unconscious, it is part of our being social scientists, it belongs to our subjectivity as researchers and members of our community. But in the field sometimes our informants are far more powerful than we are happy to admit. This was the case in my fieldwork experience, where for the first time I was living a different dynamic with the Captain. I was making my ignorance manifest, trusting my informant as he was scanning my interests, virtually taking me by the hand and letting me step into his field. We made a sort of not uttered deal that day, whose terms were not clear to me until I eventually left the field after the end of my research.

During our first meeting, Luis and I implicitly agreed to the construction of a relation eventually reciprocal, defined and negotiated from both parts. Usually this process happens
gradually, through several steps, a series of repeated contacts and reassessments that both
the researcher and the participant undertake. Both parts study each other, and as they
interact there are specific interests at stake: it is what Charles Briggs (1986:41) calls
“interactional goals”, “the motivation for each of the participants for engaging in the
interview”. If it is true that the researcher’s objectives are usually explicit, the informant’s
ones are often covert, but this does not deprive participants with decisional and contractual
power in the constant transaction of the ethnographic process. As I introduced myself to
participants I explained my academic interest, and this was in part the reason why Luis
accepted to meet me, but I had not previously considered the possibility that my
participants too could have had their own objectives in participating.

As she analyses the complex decision-making process that led her to access the field,
Alejandra Navarro (2012:90) accounts how, during her first meeting with a key informant,
she literally came to terms to discuss her research interests with those of the group she
aimed to study. Being interested in interviewing young cadets within two Argentine
military educational institutes, Navarro had to consider the institution’s own interests
before defining the trajectory of her work. Given the impossibility to access her
participants otherwise, Navarro had no other option than calibrating her initial research
objectives to her participants’ ones, and reformulate them after the interaction in the field.
This strategy does not correspond to a lack of objectivity, not either it implies ending up
doing what our participants want. Recognizing the power of our informants in outlining
their interest and consequently redefine the themes of our research is fundamental to
reposition in the field and, above all, re-learn the importance of our work within the social
context we aim to understand (Navarro, 2012:91).
I believe Navarro’s strategy represented an answer to my own perplexities in the field too. In my case, though, I was looking at the non-institutional dimension of the military, so my research themes could not be defined according to an institutional agenda. I had to become open to understand what was really important to my informants, what the former officers were craving for, what their families were concerned about. This aspect started to acquire centrality as I met the Captain and other members of the military community after him. Being a military whose comrades are being prosecuted for crimes committed in the Seventies, back from twelve years of public demonization, and fearing to be object of a judicial cause himself, Luis found the possibility of sharing his version of the story with a non-Argentine researcher quite appealing. My external, scientific (and non-journalistic) interest was worthy to be considered to the Captain who lately became my key informant. Furthermore, my relationship with the anthropologist who put us in contact made me reliable, a relatively safe channel for Luis and his comrades to express their voice.

Eventually realizing the interactional goal of my participants was part of the broader process of recognizing the native’s reflexivity and putting it in relation with mine. This further step in the field let me abandon the ethnocentric perspective that had provoked a paralysis in my work so far. However, this longed for turning point happened four months after I first thought I was accessing the field and made my first interview.

2.4 Drawing the research viability

The relationship between researcher and informants is a central element in ethnography. Indeed, the establishment of a rapport, the channel between the researcher and the
interlocutor leading to the disclosure of information, is a tool and at the same time a goal of participant observation (De Walt, DeWalt and Wailand, 1998:267).

After my first meeting with Luis, I gradually realized that the participant’s power goes further than accepting or rejecting an offer of collaboration with a project. Not only Luis was considering whether my research could be functional to his own group’s interests; he was also conducting a personal evaluation on me, not as a researcher but as a human being. This is understandable being the object of my study his relatives and comrades, asked about the most exceptional events they ever experienced and they are currently paying a high cost for. If my intention was to investigate the Seventies, exploring the military’s network of human relationships in search for answers, then I had to be eligible for the position I was claiming for. Only participants were entitled to make that decision, adopting criteria that belong to a universe I was still unaware of. When Luis decided I was trustworthy, for reasons I will explain later in this chapter, I could finally go on with my research and gradually consolidate my position as a new player in the field. In turn, the Captain decided to put me in contact with two of his comrades, Miguel and César, respectively former Lieutenant and Colonel, who in turn introduced me to more people within the military community.

This move generated an unexpected snowball effect that provided a conspicuous research sample; however, this process also tends to generate a sample of like-minded participants, because the snowball rolls in a particular direction. Understanding the reasons why this happens and by which dynamics participants pool together was one of the goals of my research, and I made these aspects explicit in the thesis so that the relevance of my sample would stand out. The Argentine Armed Forces are a historically divided institution, with structural internal tensions, ideological divisions, and changing political alliances; taking
my sample as representative of the whole military population in Argentina would lead to a rendition of the military discourse and experience of the 1970s that is too homogeneous. While interpreting ethnographically the bonds among and within generations of officers as fictive kinship, we also need to keep in mind that different factions have always existed in the Argentine military, factions that in turn impact on the internal alliances in the community and therefore on its social fabric. Therefore, it is important to clarify that these bonds have been only partially examined – as my sample could not possibly include the totality of the officers of the 1970s and their families – and only in a specific moment, and they are also the product of processes that are subject to change in time according to the political climate. In addition, it was difficult to characterise the group of participants I accessed in terms of ideological sympathies and relationships with political power, these topics did not arise naturally. Nevertheless, although my access to participants was circumstantial and my sample is relatively limited, its non-probability nature (Honigmann, 2003) still provided precious evidence for an interpretation of the cultural universe shared by a specific group of officers and their relatives, a universe determined by the involvement in the repression during the last dictatorship and the consequent legal prosecution affecting these individuals.

The final unit of my study ended up being quite heterogeneous. My interest was not towards a certain branch of the Army, nor in a specific cohort of soldiers; it was not even related to men in arms only, nor to a war event in particular. In his reflections on ethnographic sampling, Honigmann (2003:131) affirms “a degree of heterogeneity is universal” since “in any community, regardless of whether it is large or small in scale, individuals embody or enact culture differently, and so do families”. If some of the characteristics of my sample were already fixed as I started my research, some other have been determined in the field, where my interest attuned to those of my participants. These
features make my sample an opportunistic sample that, according to Honigmann (2003:125), is typical of most ethnographic researches. As he explains, this classification is due to the fact that researchers opportunistically catch any piece of information suiting their objectives, using any relationship relevant to their interests as an opportunity to select participants. Consequently, this sampling stands out for its flexible, apparently illogical structure, which is difficult to foresee because it depends on the social situations in the field. Being these dynamics often invisible in the written ethnography, studies based on opportunistic samples are very difficult to be reproduced.

I knew since the very beginning this study would have been conducted with individuals based in Buenos Aires, for historical and political reasons. The capital city has always been the centre of Argentina’s political life, hosting its main institutions; it is also one of the most politicized realities in the country, where the repression has been particularly strong in the Seventies. I also knew my sample would have been formed by officers of a certain generation and their relatives, wives and adult children; thus I imagined it constituted by people of different age, gender, profession, political views, born before and after the return to democracy but all at some point members of the military environment.

What I could not imagine before I faced the field was the criteria that hold the network of my participants together, criteria that ended up being one of my main research paths. Even less I could have imagined the complex nature of the relationship between one informant and the other, and the impact of this aspect on my research focus. Also, I would have never thought that my participants would have introduced me to more informants, operating a selection themselves, or that some of them would have spontaneously offered to be interviewed\(^\text{13}\), defying my initial assumptions towards the military as a hermetic.

\(^{13}\) Guber (2004a:75) observes the auto-selection of some members of the population as active participants is a typical feature of opportunistic samples.
impenetrable social group. What surprised me the most was the fact that, whereas I expected the officers of the Proceso to stay silent or at least to be reluctant to talk, not even mentioning their elusive wives and children, afterwards I encountered people open to discussion and even proactive in participating in the study. Understanding their reasons became one of the main paths of my research process.

As Guber (2004a:76) highlights, non-probability samples may not answer to the question “how often?”, but successfully respond to other interrogatives such as “what kind of relationships hold the social system together?”, “what do they imply?”, “which cognitive scheme supports the activities developed in the group?”. Indeed, opportunistic samples are as representative as any probability sample: their significance is given by the ability to enlighten a particular aspect or event within the population studied, rather than its repetition in numbers (Ellen, 1984).

My sample corresponds to a significant sector of the generation of former officers from the Proceso within the broader system of the large military family. The thread of contacts I could put up together in the field and deconstruct in my analysis, gradually revealed a social world whose existence I conjectured since the very beginning, but had no substantial evidence of, and no idea of how to circumscribe in the practice. The role of my participants in this aspect was pivotal. The very nature of this social world has been observable thanks to the opportunistic nature of the sample I accessed. The solidarity network that comrades, wives and adult children weave around the prosecuted military I managed to access, the values at the core of this complex system of support, and the way it works in peace and war times are all elements that constitute the dorsal spine of my interpretation, themes that only emerged from the field thanks to the rapport with the informants. As I could observe in my study and I will further argue in the thesis, this system is based on comradeship and
kinship relations, and is detached from the institutional dimension of the Armed Forces. This means it would have been impossible for me to access this universe unless its members played an active role in making sense of my presence in the field, shaping in turn my sample of study. Gradually, the relationship researcher – researched acquired a new meaning that, as my failing initial approach demonstrates, whether isolated from this specific context would make no sense, losing its potential in terms of creating new knowledge.

The interviews I conducted before witnessing this shift still constitute relevant information for my interpretation, as long as analysed taking into account the change of position I reached in the second stage of my research and the connection between my research interest and those of my group of study. The link that led me to my participants and vice versa, also answers the question “why them and no others?”. In other words, I can see now why the military families not directly affected by the trials or by the violence perpetrated by the guerrilla in the Seventies, had no particular reason for talking to me, showing their elusiveness and resisting my initial approaches; the issue of the Seventies was not so urgent to them apparently, no research path seemed to emerge in my contacts with them and my research had no reason to exist within such a different sample. However, those first disappointing contacts and the information they entail acquired a new precious meaning in the light of my main research path developed since I met Luis and the people he put me in touch with.

At this point it is worth to better explain why Luis and the rest of my informants decided I was trustworthy enough to interview them. The combination between the researcher’s and the participants’ interests is a decisive but not sufficient element to explain the satisfactory construction of a rapport and the consequent redefinition of the research themes. It is
necessary to understand which of the researchers’ qualities determine the natives’ acceptance of their transitory presence in their world. What is really important to the researcher is to understand how participants see his/her person and why, because it reveals relevant information about the interaction between the group and the researcher – and in some cases the rest of the society – in relation to the themes emerging in the field. As anthropology tends to conceive the researcher as the method himself, therefore the whole persona of the ethnographer is relevant in defining the findings (Tonkin, 1984:221). Some factors were crucial in developing a rapport with the participants, and I refer especially to my nationality, age and gender. The combination of these elements made the access possible.

Several authors have published their field diaries and biographies in order to deconstruct the image of researchers as detached, asexual and invisible entities present in the field, recovering instead their native specificities (Berreman, 1962; Devereux, 1967; Golde, 1986; Malinowski, 1967; Powdermaker, 1966; Wax, 1972). Questioning an aspect such as nationality is part of the wider reflection on the naturalization of the researcher as an extraneous subject. Nationality intended as the belonging to a certain State-Nation, in fact, is one of the classification criteria participants often apply to determine what falls within and outside their own community. The meaning lent to a certain nationality always depends on the context: being a European national researching the most divisive issue in Argentina’s recent history put me in a position of extraneousness. Despite the disagreements among academics and social factions around the exact definition of Argentina’s political violence, the Seventies may be described as an internal war by those who lived it. In fact, many Argentines (especially in big cities) share this feeling with some
of my participants who defined the Seventies as a “fratricidal war”\textsuperscript{14}: the Seventies were a dark chapter of their history that affected almost every family. As my repeated contacts with locals revealed, it is not uncommon for people in Buenos Aires to have at least a friend or a relative somehow involved in the violence, on one side or the other; and considering the centrality the dispute recovered since 2003, being impartial towards the Seventies is almost impossible for a local nowadays.

Despite the challenges posed by researching such topic, there are native social scientists and anthropologists in particular that have dealt with the 1970s military, such as Guber, Frederic, Salvi and Badaró. However, military actors may well assume that an Argentine would always take a more or less explicit position on the subject, and therefore be biased because of the emotional and ideological charge of the violence and its aftermath. If I were Argentine but still keeping my professional, gender and age characteristics, my participants could detected me as a likely unfriendly compatriot: a social scientist born after the dictatorship, probably ideologically affiliated with left wing sectors giving her background in human rights, who could not represent the Seventies but drawing on the anti-military discourse promoted by the Kirchners in the last twelve of her thirty years of life. That is definitely not the portrait of unbiased interlocutor a former officer would share his story with, unless he wanted deliberately to try to change her mind about how to see things.

It is important to recognize I was clearly a non-native in terms of nationality, and always bear in mind that besides being military family members, my informants were Argentines, meaning they had been exposed to events, a media/education system, a sense of national history, a language and an identity I was extraneous to. In this sense, my nationality but also my age favoured my access to the field; these immediately evident characteristics of my persona positioned me in a space and a time that made me (and just as important, my

\textsuperscript{14} Interview with Miguel (16/06/2016).
family) a subject extraneous to the spiral of violence of the Argentine past. Being a European born after the 1970s, I was conceded the benefit of the doubt. I was somehow exempt from catching the “exotic” dynamics of the Latin American societies; my initial mistakes in addressing my interlocutors, asking inappropriate questions, using certain terms rather than others (“dictatorship” instead of “military government”, “guerrillas” instead of “subversive terrorists”, and so on) were not immediately attributed to native biases but to my extraneousness to the Seventies and the consequent lack of first-hand information. That was precisely the gap I meant to fill in with my research, my reason for being in the field, and my participants were quite willing to supply that knowledge.

Once Luis verified my extraneousness, he could test the waters for the research itself, that is, he tested the academic ground from which I was aiming to question his people, and he understood the results of the study would include their point of view. This level of interaction was possible thanks to the open mind of the officer, to the decisive intermediation of the trustworthy anthropologist whose intellectual skills and autonomy are appreciated within the Argentine military environment, and to my initial admission of incompetence in a world I was open to explore according to the rules of its members.

This successful formula was confirmed by posterior conversations with Luis almost two years after the conclusion of fieldwork. If my academic interest, combined with my age and nationality were crucial to be admitted in the field, this was not the case for my gender, to which at first I had attributed an equally central role. I still believe being a woman had its advantages in fieldwork, because according to my experience military officers tend to feel more relaxed and even flattered by the presence of female researchers; because they tend to see women as inoffensive creatures, naturally inexperienced in subjects such as war and military life, so they take more time carefully to explain details, concepts and
situations; because women (especially young and foreigner) can be shown as a trophy to a certain extent, especially in patriarchal environments like the military, and even more in a place like the prison. However, when asked about our relationship and without ever mentioning my hypotheses on the gender dimension of it, Luis and other officers always stated in the presence of third parties that the main reason why they decided to participate in the study was because I was willing and able to show their point of view about the Seventies and the trials. And this possibility was given by my nationality, age and academic objectives. By reflecting on these specific issues, I identified how participants perceived my presence among them. This alternative path of reciprocal recognition made a dialogue as free as possible from prejudice exist, and emphasized my participants’ experience of the frictions on the past with their compatriots as a main research theme.

2.5 Learning to know

Ethnography is a learning process. Its most evident manifestation in this sense is probably the interview15, “a mechanism through which we learn to talk, and thus to think and understand, within the idioms of the people we study” (Cohen, 1984:227). In fact, through this process researchers acquire knowledge of the field at the same time they are allowed to participate in it and improve their abilities to search it, developing a series of joint activities with the informants. If in the preliminary stages of ethnographic work researchers tune their interests into those of the informants, then they also tune their listening into the local discourse, improving the chances of asking pertinent and meaningful questions according to the informants’ terms (Cohen, 1984:225). By verbally interacting with participants and then analysing such situations putting them into context, the researcher

can examine not only the native lexicon, but also its deeper, non-proffered meanings. This learning process, however, happens in the field at the cost of repeated accidents, tensions and constant renegotiations in the rapport with participants. This research made no exemption in this sense.

*Learning how to ask* is the spot-on title of Charles Briggs’s monograph, a re-examination of the use and misuse of interviews in social sciences. He conceives the interview as a communicative event that is often oversimplified and even mystified by researchers. According to the author, interviews are speech events that provide examples of *metacommunication*, as “all communities possess repertoires of metacommunicative events that they use in generating shared understandings with respect to themselves and their experiences” (Briggs, 1986:2). However, as they interact with informants, researchers tend to rely on their own communicative schemes and practices, without gaining proficiency in the native ones. Acquiring metacommunicative competence in the participants’ repertoire, instead, would helpfully lead to a fair understanding not only of the information they provide, but especially of how this information inserts within a broader system of reasoning, feeling and communication mechanisms (Briggs, 1986). The detrimental result of this attitude – that could be interpreted as communicative ethnocentrism – is once again the distortion in the interpretation of the informant’s world. Briggs also explains how easily the interviewer steps outside the context of the interview to analyse exclusively its content. This shift in the observation point causes a misinterpretation of the interview, conceived as an exact reading of what happens “outside” rather than a representation of what is mutually produced by the researcher and the informant “inside” the field. The gap between their communicative repertoires represents a limit in investigation that is often difficult to overcome.
Acquiring metacommunicative competence is the only way for the researcher to confront with the participants’ repertoire the assumptions affecting his/her ability to see what is produced in the interview, by whom and why. The most beneficial outcome of this process is the acknowledgement of the distinction between indexical and referential meaning in a speech act (Briggs, 1986:42). By referential function of language, Briggs alludes to any reference in a discourse to the real world, such as people, objects and facts, in one word the content of a speech act; by indexical function, instead, he points out how the meaning of this content highly depends on the context in which it is produced. Interviews are speech acts that are highly indexical, because the meaning of our informants’ answers (and silences) depend on our questions, the social situation, the location of the interview, the topic addressed, the relationship interviewer-interviewee, all factors that fit into a broader social situation that needs to be taken into account in the analysis. Moreover, researchers have to let the native communicative norms find expression in the interview situation, giving up any attempt to impose their own communicative framework, exerting what Briggs (1986:121) calls “communicative hegemony”.

Participant observation, the second, main practice of the ethnographic method, has a crucial importance in the learning process. Besides the verbal interaction in the interview, participants produce their repertoire in the activities of their daily lives; for this reason the ethnographic interview – interaction and confrontation between reflexivities – is part of a wider research process that includes participant observation, a practice that allows the involvement and registration of such repertoire. DeWalt, DeWalt and Wayland (1998:260) define participant observation as “a method in which an observer takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of the people being studied as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their culture”. According to them, participant observation is advantageous to the researcher since, on the one hand, it provides data and,
on the other, it enhances its interpretation. In this *tacit understanding* that enables the researcher to read non-verbal communication, interact with the natives and fairly to interpret what he observes (DeWalt, DeWalt and Wayland, 1998:264) relies the key to acquire the metacommunicative competence Briggs (1986) enunciates in his work.

According to Guber (1994), the acquisition of metacommunicative competence, or the “internalization of the microcosm” of the informants, as Navarro (2012:92) names it, is an objective to be reached not through the accumulation of information but thanks to consecutive readings of situations in the field. The learning and knowledge process is produced as the researcher’s and the native repertoires get in contact, contrasting, negotiating and opposing one to another in the field (Strathern, 1987). Senses and sensibilities are the researcher’s main instruments, conveniently combined with theoretical assumptions. Guber (2001c:61-65) suggests that, in order to comply with the criterion of significance, researchers need to gather information through a necessary dose of participation, impacting on the native’s behaviour that in turn reflects on the researchers’ conduct; therefore they must take into account the reciprocity between researcher and informants, and the meaning the event acquires for both parts. Researchers can apply different combinations of observation and participation (Spradley, 1980:58:60) thanks to the flexible nature of the method, depending on the group studied and their position in it. Ellen (1984:215) underlines how observation is not supposed to be independent or detached from the actual gathering of data; contrariwise, it often precedes interviews and provides the meanings to follow them up, allowing for example the comparison between verbal statement and practical exercise of ideals, and revealing the gap between the prescription of social norms and their application.
I conducted a profitable participant observation since day one of fieldwork, taking any opportunity to spend time and converse with my participants privately or as they gathered together. I could observe, learn and sometimes reproduce how participants communicate, their histrionic way of representing anecdotes, their mixture of slang and refined language. I silently participated into their chats even when they seemed to forget about my presence; I witnessed the special bond military wives develop among them; I glimpsed how siblings carry the military identity of their fathers in a deep and undeletable way. I was invited to the cafes and the circles where they meet up in their spare time; I was with them as they commemorated their dead comrades, listened to their stories and tried to imagine them in the years of youth. By observing and participating in all these situations, I acquired competence in my participants’ repertoire and gradually learnt how to ask about it.

Participant observation – this multiform, apparently unsystematic technique – facilitates, backs up and makes sense of the interviewing process. Ethnography as a text is built on an incredibly wide spectrum of activities undertaken in the field just as manifold as the social reality the researcher aims to study. The information I gathered in the field comes from face-to-face meetings and meetings with two or more participants; from formal recorded interviews and public events and speeches; from religious and secular commemorative acts as well as weekly meetings of associations that defend the military convicted; from informal social events and visits to emblematic native sites. The situations I was involved in were quite diverse. I participated in ceremonies in the Military Academy, commemorative acts for the victims of the guerrillas and commemorations of the 34th anniversary of the Malvinas war; I joined the multitude of Argentines looking at former and active military officers parading in the streets of the capital city for the celebrations of Independence; I visited State prisons and talked to the military accused. Within all these activities I was involved in the first person, I observed and participated, and I was in turn
observed by my participants, which strengthened the rapport and added complexity to the fieldwork dimension, providing a wider spectrum of data. During those activities I also took field notes and went back on them dozens of times, I saw my sample progressively take a shape, and glimpsed a main research path emerging, connecting the military family with the issue of the trials. Benefitting from a profitable participant observation, and slimming down the list to relevant informants, I managed to interview in depth twenty-one participants: six former officers from the Army, seven military wives, eight adult children.

Tonkin (1984:222) points out that the fortunate practice of participant observation “enables, as it demands, serious and scrupulous cross-checking” since the risk of being amateurish, providing inappropriate evidence or over-generalizing is constant. Also Ben-Ari (2014:33) is quite rigorous on this point, specifying the need for systematically triangulating the researcher’s individual insights against other sources of data, as these first impressions, despite their value in recognizing research paths, do not constitute knowledge about the participants in and of themselves. For these reasons, I analysed data gathered through the ethnographic approach always in light of the existing literature in military studies, anthropological theories on kinship, historical evidence on the military’s interventions in political life in the twentieth century, and historical, psychological and anthropological analysis on the use and the nature of political violence in the Seventies. Such seminal sources have been properly identified in Chapter One. Moreover, by following the newspapers’ coverage of the trials, and the military’s statements and actions on the Seventies, as well as tracking the public opinion’s reactions to these issues, I obtained further data for a triangulation with my field notes and interview records, in order to support or balance any argument coming up from these primary sources of evidence. By drawing on these multiform, supplementary sources of knowledge available in the field, ethnography becomes “a flexible and opportunistic strategy for diversifying and making
more complex our understanding of various places, people and predicaments” (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997:37).

Although my research methodology included both interviews and participant observation, the thesis foregrounds the former. Given the preponderance of interviews as a mode of generating data, particularly evident in Chapters Three, Four and Five, some might define this thesis an ‘ethnography by appointment’ (Rajak, 2011). The participants’ narratives occupy indeed a central position in the thesis, and are reconstructed almost exclusively from interviews. However, the process through which I render aspects such as family life, social gatherings and the participants’ political mobilisation around the issue of the trials is also based on participant observation and data elaborated from field notes and research diaries.

2.6 Condemnation: a limit and a path in researching the military

In my analysis I aimed to classify the communicative elements listed by Briggs (1986:39-60) within every interview I conducted in Argentina. I also identified the problems occurred, the “communicative blunders” in Briggs’ (1986) own words, aiming to gain additional knowledge about my informants from those “fieldwork accidents” (Guber, 1996) that result from the clash between the participant’s and the researcher’s subjectivities.

Language is definitely one of the minefields where most fieldwork accidents happen. Behind words there are hidden meanings, systems of values, implications that regularly need to be deconstructed in order not to just repeat in the text what our informants tell us. Language often reflects some general, commonsense level understanding of issues that in
the interaction with participants are out of place, or can even create conflict. Depending on how the researcher defines the facts that participants narrate, then the relationship with them can change accordingly, sometimes drastically.

The extract that follows is taken from my first interview with César, a former Colonel I was introduced to by Luis. The conversation had gone on for more than one hour, and the Colonel had unravelled a thorough argument to justify the violence exercised by the military during the dictatorship, depicted in the terms of an “unconventional war”, where the Army was facing an irregular combatant. In this frame, any “excess” claimed by the families of the dead had been committed by single individuals within the institution, and according to the Colonel no premeditated repressive action had been conducted against civilians. Across the interview, I was instead timidly trying to put forward the hypothesis that there had been political intentionality behind the actions of the military during the regime, and that more than some “collateral casualty” had been deliberately caused. However, the Colonel constantly managed to frustrate my attempts with clever arguments. Since I was feeling confident about the rapport established so far with my participant, at some point I asked the Colonel directly:

E.: Yes, but what about the systematic plan of extermination?

C.: (He raises his voice in anger) Extermination?!? That’s the elimination of a race, an ethnic group, a culture. What sort of extermination are you talking about, when we have ex-terrorists\textsuperscript{16} who are now deputies, journalists and so on, and they are still alive and happy?

E.: Well, wait. I’m not boosting one view or the other -

\textsuperscript{16} The Colonel mentioned names and surnames of ex-members of ERP and Montoneros who today are in politics or have public roles.
C.: No, no, no, no. Hang on: I’m the one who’s telling the story, okay? It was no extermination. It was a war. It was orders to annihilate the enemy through military operations.

E.: But, during the trial of the juntas -

C.: (Indignant) No, no, no! (In appeased but decisive tone) Look, one thing is butchering meat for a barbecue, another thing is a surgery with a scalpel. The terminology is distorted. It was a war: we had to go, fight, and win, destroy the enemy for the sake of a free and sovereign Argentina as it was always supposed to be.

(C. vigorously taps his fingers on the table).

(Silence).

What happened with the Colonel was a fieldwork accident potentially fatal to my ability to access the participants and secure my presence in the field, but was contained thanks to my decision not to reply and change topic. The Colonel, however, could have abandoned the conversation and rejected any further contact, compromising my further presence in the field by mentioning the episode with other members of the military community. When I suddenly used a very strong term, the systematic plan of extermination, which is regularly used by the media and the human rights front to accuse the military of genocide, my informant reacted by changing attitude, tone of voice, facial expression: the term I used gave the Colonel a hint that he might have made a mistake in trusting me. Therefore, he first stepped into my own field and gave a definition of what genocide/extermination is in politics and human rights, the elimination of a race, an ethnic group, a culture, to stress the difference with what he thought had happened instead in the Seventies, a war, orders.
Then he put forward evidence that such genocide did not happen in Argentina, since ex-guerrillas have now political roles and developed high public profiles. Once I realized I had made a mistake I attempted a retreat trying to get back to the safe position of the objective researcher, external to the accident I contributed to create. But it was pointless. The Colonel made clear he was the expert in the subject – I’m the one who’s telling the story – to mark the distance between us. Back to his vision, he made a third argument, consistent with everything he had said during the interview (and that I seemed to understand until I asked inappropriate questions), using a metaphor and benevolently explaining once again the reason of the misinterpretations around the Seventies. I was defeated at that point, as also the body language of the Colonel showed, and had to surrender, ask a different question and try to recover my professional and emotional composure.

The interview dynamic before the accident was that of a lecture: the Colonel was “teaching” me what happened in the Seventies; however, since he was a military officer, the relationship disciple-master, which is not uncommon in ethnography, was enriched with many more elements proper of the military world. In the interaction where at first I was acting as a disciple (and perhaps a cadet in his view) I was being trained, but suddenly acted more like a traitor.

This accident revealed important insights into the military mentality, and let me acquire elements of what Briggs calls the metacommunicative repertoire of my participants. Of course they were not immediately evident, but became clearer as time passed and I learned more about my participants’ world, the way they interact, their system of meanings, values and expressions, disclosing crucial elements such as comradeship, hierarchy, discipline and loyalty. The military mentality is articulated in terms of oppositions and strong
dichotomies: war and peace, victory and defeat, enemy and ally. In no way this aims to suggest military men are simple or unable to glimpse subtleties; it rather stresses how in their world there are no grey areas when it is about taking a position, and they regard retreats and turncoats with shame. So when the Colonel saw me vacillating, he had to understand in which sector I was falling in our interaction: was I an enemy, or an ally? Could he talk to me or should he rather leave?

Every time there is an interaction, both parts tend to impose their own narrative and view of the problem, interacting and communicating from their own position; the information that is disclosed depends therefore on these positions. The researcher, however, needs to transform the tension that results from such situation into a research problem. Fieldwork accidents are risky because they can compromise the rapport established with the informant, but also revelatory: they provide data even when they seem to preclude the possibility actually to disclose information, but above all they reveal barriers in the development of the research process. Talking as I was, using words such as extermination, systematic plan, in other words “crimes”, I was implicitly accusing the Colonel of being a perpetrator, I was applying the same societal attitude he was contrasting with his narrative. In this case, the accident revealed a specific limit that existed in the social reality I aimed to understand, and reflected on the fieldwork situation and the interaction with participants, shedding new light on the relationship between military actors and the rest of the society.

It is generally the context, the topic addressed and the characteristics of the informants that define this limit. In the case of the military of the Proceso, the limit was given by their main concern, which is their possible or actual involvement in the trials, and the consequent discredit and condemnation for the whole family. As this thesis will show, most conversations and interactions with participants addressed more or less directly the
issue of the trials. Condemnation is not simply the consequence of a judicial trial, though; it is something much broader and deeper that affects all the military of the generation of the *Proceso*, as well as their families, regardless of whether the officers had died decades ago or are currently involved in a judicial cause. Data revealed condemnation is a limit military families cannot easily overcome in their relational life; it establishes boundaries as they construct their identity, their sociability, and their memories. The fear of being condemned constantly defies the participants’ openness and trust towards civilians, especially the media and the human rights organizations, but also academics.

“Being a military” is enough for being punished in Argentina nowadays, and military families of the *Proceso* are aware of this stigma. There are many levels of condemnation I will better analyse later in the thesis: judicial, political, cultural, moral. No military family is exempt from it. This awareness makes the military and their families generally quite reluctant to share their intimate perception of such a thorny question with the rest of the society. The limit also revealed a clear tendency within the military world in general, in relation to this issue: the more the officer is condemned on several levels – the most problematic, the judicial one – the more he and his family are keen to be committed to the defence of the cause of the Seventies and the related trials. Conversely, especially in the case of wives and children, the further the outrage (or the shame?) of being accused is from their daily life – even if it constantly represents a spectre – the more they struggle to deal with their bond with the military world. The level of exposition due to the supposed or proved responsibility in the State terrorism determines a proportional openness to the debate, the diffusion and the claim for participants’ involvement in it. However, as it will be evident in the next chapters, the silence and omissions about the Seventies from participants who are not directly implicated in the trials do not necessarily mean the issue is of no importance to them.
This tendency highlighted a research path that I followed in the field to look at how kinship plays in these dynamics. Identity is not a fixed set of features, but rather changing, situated and depending on the context and the interlocutor. In post-authoritarian Argentina, when the military do not occupy that dominant position anymore but have been rather ostracized, the fear of being condemned affects the military families’ involvement with civilians, especially the media, the academic world, the victims of the regime and the human rights organizations. Therefore the traits of their (military) identity are constantly negotiated, hidden and manifested, depending on the context.

The relationship with the researcher, and the development of fieldwork interactions fall within this set of dynamics. Limits that shape the boundaries of fieldwork also determine who is a good informant and who is not, what is an appropriate question and what is not; they influence on both sides the language adopted in the conversations and the behaviours performed in the interactions. Condemnation put limits in the field not only to my respondents’ answers, but also to my possibility to ask, my agency as an interviewer and a participant observer, my freedom to ask questions about violence, my own desire to know too many details about actions that are object of judicial prosecution and criminal investigation. It also shaped the channels of communication: my gradual questioning of an implicitly condemning attitude – a necessary premise for the interaction with participants – determined the opening and the stretching of the field. In this thesis, condemnation will constitute a constant parameter to interpret the native world, to understand officers’, children’s and wives’ experience of being a military family member in current Argentina. This first level of interpretation in turn will reveal an alternative insight into the social dynamics and cognitive patterns that regulate the functioning of the large military family in peace and war times, and shed some new light on current civil-military relations.
It is important to clarify two things about what my participants do and do not tell. First, not every omission in the participants’ stories have to do with the Seventies and the trials. There are things they do not tell at all, or just mention, or marginally comment, because they do not want to, and not necessarily because they are afraid of being condemned. Sometimes silences are related to events in their life they are worried or ashamed of, or issues they consider self-evident – such as the officers’ faith in Catholicism or in the Fatherland – or irrelevant to the objectives of the research – like military wives’ views about political phenomena. Other times omissions are functional to participants’ own objectives in the situation of conversation happening in the field, while some topics that would cause too much distress, or affect the interlocutors’ relationship with their relatives, are carefully avoided in the interviews, especially by children. Secondly, just like categorical statements, omissions also allow to set hypotheses about aspects of the participants’ world that are important for the overarching objective of recovering their point of view. They provide hints about the structures within which the actions and discourses of participants insert, and about their complex belief-systems, things that are not strictly related to the issue of condemnation, but are still essential to understand its impact on the locals’ world.

As the accident with the Colonel show, the importance of the acquisition of positionality rather than information is at the basis of this work. The volume edited by Gupta and Ferguson (1997), *Anthropological locations*, sparked a further reflection in this sense about my fieldwork experience. The authors express a need for rethinking the field, questioning the researcher’s location and the production of situated knowledge through the acquisition of situation-dependant information. Gupta and Ferguson suggest researchers undertake an active “location-work” as they conduct fieldwork, focusing their attentiveness not only on the locals but also on the social, cultural and political locations researchers consciously
have to be open to realign and confront with, constructing new political and epistemological strategies (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997:5).

As I started fieldwork my participants and I occupied two opposite sides of the line that firmly marks the Argentine society since 1983: the border between the perpetrators and everyone else, and more recently, between those entitled to judge and those being judged. Our belonging respectively to the academic and the military world automatically placed us in the position to be legitimately judgemental or inevitably condemned in relation to the violence of the Seventies. Nevertheless, the field clearly signalled how, in order to develop some new insight into the military, I had to walk that line that was on the one hand a specific of the context I was studying, on the other a result of my cultural and epistemological background. As the “tribulations” in the field showed, a conscious shift of location was required once I obtained the participants’ approval: even if I had gained access to their world, and they gradually came to accept my presence and my questioning, they were being wary about it: they had to come to trust that I sufficiently understood what they were trying to convey to me. As we saw in this section, such process was never lineal or free of tensions.

Thanks also to the accident in the field that contributed to change my attitude, I can now affirm my attempt to ask questions from a different position was successful; it contributed to the acquisition of situated information that allowed the production of a knowledge that is still fieldwork-based in a Malinowskian sense, but also location-cognizant, as Gupta and Ferguson would define it, reflecting the arduousness for military families, and for Argentines in general, to deal with the aftermath of the dictatorship.
Chapter Three. THE BATTLEFIELD: MILITARY FAMILIES IN THE AGE OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE

This first analytic chapter provides an insight into the generation of officers and military wives who participated in this study, and the daily life of the military families in the Seventies. It first explains how former officers signify the violence and their role in the Army and in society, also describing the relation with what they saw as the subversive enemy; then it focuses on their identity-making processes, outlining the practices and values that officers shared, emphasizing the importance of social bonds in their world. The chapter also looks at the processes leading to the formation of the nuclear military family, pointing out the role of wives, and their perception of the Seventies. As a conclusion, it explores how solidarity mechanisms worked – and still work – within the large military family, drawing a parallel between life in the barracks and life in the households.

3.1 The Seventies: former officers remember the anti-subversive war

Within the interview situation it was usually the officers’ priority to clarify the events that led to the escalation of violence in the Seventies, the role of the Armed Forces in those events and, above all, their position as young subalterns. In fact, they tended to lead the conversation towards those themes quite straightforwardly, as if enlightening the foreign researcher on the “complete history” of the conflict in the Seventies was a matter of urgency for them. On one occasion, during a preliminary informal chat with the former Colonel, my informant mentioned a set of questions I should have asked him later in the
interview that would have helped to recover the missing fragments of the history of the Seventies. Several former officers – often also military history enthusiasts – used to hold a sort of short history class as we started the interview, even bringing supporting material such as books, newspapers and articles. In so doing, they proposed themselves as “experts” in the subject whereas my role of researcher was reconfigured as “apprentice”. This dynamic between researcher and informant is no news in ethnography, but regardless whether I acquiesced to follow the participants’ instructions or not, it is interesting to notice how often my relationship with them shifted from the level interviewer-interviewee to the level disciple-master. Only as the interviews progressed, and my participants made sure some key concepts and elements of the Argentine recent history were clear, was it possible to disentangle from that frame to lead the conversation on more personal and specific issues.

Despite the evolution on the societal and academic level in defining the violence that broke out in the Seventies, the former officers still see their involvement in the political repression as a war. As César often pointed out:

A war happened here, where the political power ruled in favour of the Armed Forces’ intervention to defeat terrorism in the military field.

(Cesár)

This short statement expresses the essential concept at the core of the narrative of César and his comrades. With minor variations on the topic, all the officers who participated in my study agree with this interpretation. Below is a fragment from Francisco, former Lieutenant Colonel:

Look, it’s been a war for us, and it wasn’t us, it was them (the subversives) who said they waged a revolutionary war, cruel and prolonged. This is how
they defined it. Well, what we did was the counter-revolutionary war, to prevent them from achieving their objectives.

(Francisco)

Needless to say this narration echoes the two demons theory mentioned in Chapter Two, in an attempt of equalizing State violence and the action of the guerrilla in a cause-effect dynamic. In the last thirty years the “two demons theory” that at first described the events of the Seventies, and then the term “State terrorism” introduced by the human rights organizations, have been dismissed in favour of the expression “genocide” that isolates the actions carried out by State actors with the precise intention of emphasizing their gravity. The term “genocide” would be the only perspective enabling the ultimate rupture with the dualistic comparison between the insurgent action of the armed left-wing organizations and the counterinsurgent reaction of the State, since the problem with the “two demons theory” in particular, relies not in the demonization of violence from both sides, but in its binary representation (Feierstein, 2017:33). I agree with Feierstein (2017:34) to the extent to which he affirms that rejecting the “two demons theory” does not necessarily imply the neglect of the responsibilities of the guerrilla; it rather means avoiding any discussion on the revolutionary fight jointly with the State repression, as the latter might end up being relativized in the comparison.

Nevertheless, I still spot a certain consistency in my participants’ arguments as they put these two kinds of violence in relation, an attitude that would be too simple to define as denial or in favour of genocide. According to my analysis, in fact, the significance of the data disclosed by the officers relies more on their formation and position of young subalterns in the late 1960s - early 1970s, than on an uncritical backing of the dictatorship and its crimes. Although many could understandably see the former officers’ description of State terrorism as a war like an abrupt denial and a morally unacceptable claim, evidence
from my study provides some space for a complementary interpretation based on the soldier’s mind-set of the Seventies, aiming to understand – rather than justify – their conduct within the wider objectives of the regime.

The alleged lack of reflection on the Seventies emphasized by participants, and the political consequences the military have been facing, justifies the urgency for them to “teach” and inform people who show interest in the topic. During our conversations in particular, they repeatedly mentioned the existence of a subversive threat that needed to be contrasted for the survival of the Nation, stressing the necessity for the counter-insurgent reaction of the State and often omitting the persecution of civilian opponents. As he referred to the threat posed by the guerrilla, Luis declared:

The truth is [...] we contrasted a subversive movement against the Nation, against the legitimately constituted power. It was the subversion of the State and its values, the armed fight to take power against the Constitution. It was a movement that was… subversive. Truly. This is the term. Even if now they say they were all young idealists, or whatever bullshit they say now, the truth is they were trying to take power through the armed fight. They never set a political party to win the elections against Perón or anyone else.

(Luis)

Acknowledging this position may sound provocative; however, making a distinction between State terrorism and counter-insurgent warfare, two different forms of military force that coincided in part in Argentina (Robben, 2006), constitutes a premise for the ethnographic fieldwork and interpretation, that is the acceptance of the participants’ conception of violence, and their tendency to focus on the latter and avoid the former. Across my experience in the field, officers showed awareness of the differences between
the years before and after the military coup, they hardly denied the risks posed by an authoritarian State overruling a democratic one, and never declared to prefer authoritarianism over democracy. Rather than the opposition democracy-dictatorship, their timeframe is built on an alternative basis that is the armed confrontation and the evolution of the balance of forces between the Army and the guerrillas. This attitude explains the centrality of the battlefield as a native space for questioning and interpreting the military about the Seventies. In this sense, in fact, the battlefield is both a physical space that includes rural and urban settings where the direct confrontation with the guerrillas took place, and a state of living given by those turbulent years.

Rather than the period under the military government 1976-1983, by “war” the officers refer to a precedent period, approximately the years between 1972 and 1978, which is what they commonly call “the Seventies”, a category I have also adopted and largely used in this work. Even if the officers focused mostly on the non-clandestine operations led by the military, they consider the time of the “war” to be the years before the installation of the regime, 1972-1974, when the political climate was febrile; 1975 when the Operativo Independencia was launched – as César said, “the whole Army went through it”17; and the first years of the Proceso, 1976 and 1977, when the military’s counteraction against the subversives was efficiently implemented. According to my participants, by 1978 the enemy had been successfully subdued18.

This peculiar timeframe projects the researcher, and consequently the reader of this work, into a different temporal conception based on the informants’ perceptions. The official discourse and the dominant narrative take the civil-military coup, 24 March 1976, as a

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17 Interview with César (18/05/2016).
18 This is also confirmed by literature. Robben (2006:367) says “the ERP admitted defeat in mid-1977 after the death of its principal military commanders in 1976 and the flight abroad of others thereafter. (…) The Montoneros split between February 1979 and April 1980”.

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temporal break corresponding to the shift from a democratic to an authoritarian government, and the consequent impact on civil and political liberties. Officers – and to a certain extent their families – have a different perspective. This is how César remembers the turning point in the confrontation with the guerrilla as he was Second Lieutenant in Buenos Aires:

(In 1975) the police, the gendarmerie and the prefecture\(^\text{19}\) had been overcome. They were killed like flies. So the government had to resort to the armed branch of the Nation, the military. […] The president (Isabel Perón) had been informed the intervention could be implemented on several degrees of intensity. I talked about this with Lt General Videla when I visited him in prison\(^\text{20}\) – God rest his soul. Since she chose the most… I wouldn’t say violent, but the most complete, the General had explained to her what the Armed Forces meant by “annihilate”. “Annihilate” means “reduce to nothing”, there’s not that much to interpret. And the president, advised by other politicians as usual, they all agreed this was the only way. This is how the Operativo Independencia was launched […] And after that, it was extended to the whole country because terrorism was acting ruthlessly, not only in the mountains of Tucumán, but also in the cities.

(César)

The officers never mention what the literature in human rights defines as a secret systematic plan of repression against political and armed opposition; rather, they anchor their narrative on the non-clandestine, official operations led by the military in the

\(^{19}\) According to the Argentine Constitution, Argentina disposes of two Security Forces besides the Armed Forces: the National Gendarmerie and the Naval Prefecture, in charge of controlling respectively territorial borders and river/maritime territories.

\(^{20}\) César refers to the third time Videla was detained between 2008 and 2013, when he died in the prison of Marcos Paz where he was serving a life sentence.
counteroffensive, established by decree, and which employs the term “annihilation” in its literal meaning. They see a temporal continuity between the first attempts of contrasting the violence in the early 70s, carried out by police and security forces, the large scale intervention of the Army in 1975, and the successful outcome of the counter-subversive war in the subsequent years. As men in arms, they see themselves as protagonists of what they conceive as war facts, regardless the turnover happened in the political scenario and the massive violations of human rights.

As they developed a sort of military analysis during the interviews, accessible to a non-expert like I was, it became evident that the temporal break for them was the Operativo Independencia, rather than the military coup. Being young subalterns at the time, the pivotal event that assumes the importance of a break in their experience is the official intervention of the Armed Forces that overturned the fate of the confrontation in the theatre of operations, firstly in the Tucumán region and progressively in the rest of the country. More importantly, this operation also corresponded for many of them to their first mission as they graduated, therefore it played an emblematic role in their identity-making process and in their narrative of life in the military.

The officers seem to refuse any academic or civilian interpretation of the Seventies in favour of what they see as a more strategic reading, this suggesting they still think in military terms after forty years. This explains why they divide time into segments set by the advances of the counterinsurgent campaign they were involved in. Luis was serving in Rosario in 1975, first destination after his graduation:

The most difficult year was 1975... Rosario has always been a... complicated place from a social point of view, and the urban terrorism was really active there at that time. I was involved in combat in the streets as I was doing route
control. Montoneros had planted a bomb in a famous restaurant which went off, there were dead, injured… a disaster. And I was two or three blocks away, so I had to intervene. It ended up with five dead, on their side. None from ours, but we had uniforms, helmets, rifles, perfectly identified and supported by the police: we were fighting in the city […]. We didn’t know what could happen, or where, and besides that we had to go on with our training. Our professional preparation had to go on, this was something more we had to take on. So we were a bit under pressure, because we had to do many things.

(Luis)

According to Luis, already in 1975 they were living a general state of warfare, not only in Tucumán but also in several cities. Officers do not recall any particular change in their daily life before and after the establishment of the dictatorship: they were asked to fight terrorism under a democratic government and kept obeying orders under the military rule. The change was perceived only once the subversive threat was finally overcome in 1978. I believe this perception of continuity despite the coup is due to the fact that, being subalterns at the time, they understood their agency in the field of operations as limited by the due obedience to their superiors, during the dictatorship as in democratic times. It is nonetheless true the military as a group benefitted from a general state of power and impunity guaranteed by the authoritarian State; however, it is difficult to establish how extensively the subaltern officers could actually exert that immunity in their daily life. Evidence from my interviews suggests their narrative definitely has to do with their position at the time rather than their condition of military: in the institution as subaltern officers, in the society as men in arms, and in the Nation as defendants of the Constitution. This is evident in the Colonel’s response as I asked him why the regime stayed in power until 1983 if he argued the guerrilla had been already defeated by 1978:
Well, the political leadership made some mistakes. Of course I remind you I was just a Lieutenant at the time [...]. Some factors were just out of my reach. This wasn’t our decision: we were combatants, the cannon fodder for our hierarchy, we were sergeants, second lieutenants, lieutenants, all young people [...] and of course mistakes happened. But if you ask me, they (the junta) should have resigned power in 1978, the sooner the better, because this is a matter for politicians! In case of a crisis, that’s why we have the Congress, you know? The thing is in this country we have a little book called “Constitution” which is locked in a shelf and never used. And that’s the most valuable political tool we’ve got.

(César)

In line again with their position in the lower ranks during the Seventies, former officers have been quite keen in acknowledging the misconduct of the regime, the decisions made by the superior officers and the methods applied. Although participants never gave details of the clandestine actions undertaken to annihilate subversion, as clearly established by the limit I once trespassed with the Colonel, my participants – especially the youngest – did condemn some decisions made by the juntas, although they did not see such decisions as immoral per se and they always compared them to the guerrillas’ conduct. I report fragments from my interviews with Miguel, the youngest of the officers I interviewed, who had had a knee problem and joined the Military Academy only in 1977:

When Alfonsín arrested the military juntas, none of us within the youth of the Army batted an eyelid. We understood they were responsible. We also understood the Peronist government had to be judged – although it wasn’t being judged – and the guerrilla heads too […]. Even if in the Seventies it was
common to solve political disagreements by gunshots, making a person’s body disappear is terrible […]. It’s far too serious a matter that the State (the Armed Forces) did not take proper charge of prisoners, to judge and convict them and at least apply rigorous laws, under military rule. It’s too serious. However, approaching a man and shooting him in his head for political reasons, or placing a bomb into a house with kids, for example, it’s just as serious.

(Miguel)

Most participants said that they believed that the Armed Forces too often interfered in the political life of the country, although they also believed that the extreme socio-political circumstances had required their intervention. They underlined the complicity of the political and economic elites in the installation of military regimes throughout the twentieth century; an emblematic case my informants often cited is the military coup in 1930 which overthrew the government of president Irigoyen, an action legitimised by an order of the Supreme Court of Justice, the maximum judicial authority in Argentina (Cayuso and Gelli, 1988). However, according to my participants these actions are considered unnatural, almost unbecoming for a military institution, and I believe the subaltern officers are those who criticize this attitude the most within the Army because at the time they were combatants, the “cannon fodder” far from the political games, as César said. Luis is one of the most critical participants towards the conduct of the junta; in one interview he even applied the same logic of subversion to his own institution:

In 1976 Argentina was living a difficult time: there was violence everywhere in the streets, social upset, inflation, the economy was a disaster, the armed organizations were attacking the police, the government, the Army, everything, and there was uncontrolled generalized terror. That’s why in 1975 president
Perón ordered the Armed Forces to fight terrorism and launched the *Operativo Independencia* by decree. But an elected president did it! Instead in 1976 the Armed Forces overthrew the democratic government through a *subversive* move, because what the Army did was to violate the Constitution once again. Fine, the society asked for it, it was a civil-military coup. They all agreed on that, the people applauded, and they were all happy with Videla’s government. But this doesn’t change the fact it was a coup which abused the Constitution, and I personally think the Armed Forces failed there. Because they did have the legal instruments to fight the subversion, within the rule of law: the *Operativo Independencia* is the proof of it.

(Luis)

The involvement of the Armed Forces in politics is generally considered not only undesirable among these officers but even unnatural, although its clandestine methods during the dictatorship are condemned only by the most open-minded participants, and not because they were seen as illegal and inhuman, but because it was not appropriate for regular Army personnel to conduct such activities. Despite some exceptions like Miguel, former officers hardly ever made reference to the military’s most extreme conduct: words like “disappeared”, “torture” or “execution” were rarely spoken in my records. However, the allusion is clear. Miguel’s words suggested he never took part in any repressive action (and the fact he graduated in 1981 may confirm his statements); but he said once:

I often ask my fellow graduates from the Military Academy how we would have acted if we were our (older) comrades (who participated in the repression). Would we let the Army do things it wasn’t supposed to do? With my beliefs, I think I would have said “Hang on, my Colonel, are you ordering
me to do this thing with this person? Well, take charge of it, put it on paper and sign it”. It’s easy to say it now, but I feel indignation because I cannot accept a soldier from the Army of San Martín shooting in his head a handcuffed person.

(Miguel)

Even though my participants saw politics and its dirty business as a field the military should never be involved in, they believed the Armed Forces’ struggle is legitimate as long as it is considered within the strictly military sphere. Therefore, they privileged the counterinsurgent warfare against the guerrilla in the interviews, and only rarely mentioned the clandestine, normalized practices of disappearance and torture. They saw their repressive action as legitimate because it depended on the existence of a threat that needed to be stopped. As mentioned by the theories on the state of emergency in international relations, this is a recurring pattern in contexts of counterinsurgent war: extraordinary measures need to be implemented to annihilate a threat to the survival itself of the Nation, civil liberties are suspended, and extreme legal and practical measures are adopted in the name of national security. In fact, like César, all the officers denounced the virulence of the subversive terrorism as the reason for the measures implemented:

These people were highly trained. They had ranks, hierarchies, uniforms. They achieved the creation of a liberated zone in Tucumán. They demanded international recognition as an independent state, a new state eating a piece of our Argentine Republic, using their own flag.

(César)

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21 This phenomenon is typical in what is commonly known as “dirty war”, and can be retraced in the French experience of the Algerian war (Carlson, 2000) and in the teaching on counter-revolutionary war of the US School of the Americas (Gill, 2004; Selser, 1982). Both contributions have been used as examples by the Argentine superior officers in the masterminding of the counterinsurgent campaign, and are still visible in the current War on Terror (Natale, 2017; Smith and Roberts, 2008).
Within my research, however, further justifications behind the military’s use of force emerged that are essential to understand the former subalterns’ current attitude towards their public condemnation.

3.2 War of Cultures: the military’s universe of the Seventies

Former officers tended to talk about themselves as they highlighted the differences with their alter ego, the subversive enemy. Interestingly, the figure of the subversive provides images and a language that are still used in the present by young cadets of the Military Academy as they think about themselves and construct concepts of identity and alterity (Badaró, 2010:120). This practice is also a result of how former officers speak of the Seventies and their former enemies within the institution, as Badaró notices, an important signal of how significant this past continues to be in the Argentine Army. As I suggest below, on the one hand former officers made explicit the cultural and even spiritual distance between them and the terrorists, confirming the point made by experts on the cultural construction of the enemy in the Argentine case (Osiel, 2001); on the other hand, they stressed the legal nature of the institution they belong to in contrast with the irregular forces and their revolutionary purpose, since defining the subversive enemy implicitly means defining the Argentine officer.

As mentioned in Chapter One, as they were in the Military Academy the subaltern officers had absorbed a cultural model imbued with positive examples set by the glorious past of the Army, which provided them with solid conviction of not only military excellence but also moral superiority. Furthermore, they were formed in a tumultuous period, in a context of increasing political mobilization since Perón was forced into exile in 1955. This
radicalization affected not only the political parties and movements, whose most intransigent representatives joined the guerrillas in the mid Seventies, but also the Army cadets who graduated in those same years, who were not exempt from a certain ideological mobilization. The already mentioned Neo-medieval Theology was imparted in the military academies of the country at the time; moreover, some of my participants declared their families had close relations of kinship and friendship with some Argentine intellectuals affiliated to the ideology\textsuperscript{22}, such as Jordán Bruno Genta and Carlos Alberto Saccheri, who were both assassinated by the ERP in 1974. Therefore it is no surprise they ended up joining the Army where their nationalist and conservative ideals could find expression.

Many young officers had become familiar with right wing and nationalist environments far before joining the institution, even though the political polarization was not yet articulated in terms of armed confrontation. It is not uncommon that cadets who opted for a career within an institution that was traditionally quite conservative especially at that time, had already been involved in some form of political activism. Francisco was the first of my participants in joining the Army, as he entered the Military Academy in 1964; this is how he remembers his years in the high school in Buenos Aires, before the explosion of political violence:

In the high school there was the Federation of Young Communists, and then us, the Nationalist Union of Secondary School Students. We beat each other up! We fought each other, but with kicks and punches, it wasn’t the armed violence yet. The armed violence was growing in parallel. Some organizations started actions that no one paid attention to, at first… And then it ended up being the disaster we had with ERP, Montoneros and twenty more groups. So, when we

\textsuperscript{22}Interview with Miguel (16/06/2016). The contacts between military families and ultra-catholic intellectuals are also mentioned by Osiel (2001:128).
were kids it was something like street fights, nothing to do with what happened later. But that’s when the fuse was lit.

(Francisco)

Sometimes their ideological position was the only factor that made cadets opt for the military career. It is the case of Miguel, who said the fight against subversion was the reason that pushed him to join the Army, otherwise he would have never opted for a career in such a rigid environment. In fact, Miguel always had a rebellious temperament, and in the interviews he repeatedly mentioned his frequent contrasts with the superiors who officially branded him as “a subaltern difficult to lead”23. He also participated in the Carapintadas mutinies in 198724, reason for which he spent a period in prison, and was forced to retire in 1993. He said:

At the time my generation was completely involved in a climate of political violence that you could see, you could hear in the streets, in the media, and you could touch it every day. And I joined the Army, as many others at that time, because I saw those things … After all, in an internal conflict - with gunshots and everything - which 18 years-old man doesn’t want to take side for one faction or the other?

(Miguel)

Participants recount at the time there was a strict selection of cadets within the Military Academy. Unlike current times, when “being a military is just a job”25, the admission to the Military Academy in the 1960s – 1970s was subject to tuition fees and there was a

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23 Interview with Miguel (16/06/2016).
24 Although the mutiny was perceived by the society and is often depicted by the academic literature as an attempt of military coup, the rebel officers revolted against the heads of the Armed Forces, asking for new authorities in the institution, and the end of the trials against the subaltern comrades (Frederic, 2008:11,12).
25 Interview with Francisco and Emilia (05/07/2016).
limited system of scholarships based on merit, whereas only in their last year the cadets received a salary. Therefore, not only the aspirant officers came from a middle-upper class, interestingly enough the same social class most guerrillas belonged to, but they also needed to be strongly motivated to join the Army and sustain the economic cost of it. In sum, robust ideals, motivation and social background are all factors that seem to associate the former guerrillas and the officers, rather than putting an unbridgeable distance between the two sides.

The central role the young subaltern officers played in the political confrontation does not just respond to the fact they were military at the time, according to a deterministic logic by which officers were simply accomplishing their duty. The political dimension of the clash in the years before the military coup, which led to institutional and non-institutional forms of violence, was inescapable and it was a background in which young people were playing an essential role: politics and violence were a generational fact in 1970s Argentina. Political orientation was the factor that used to define people, and in the harshest phase of the confrontation this orientation was limited to two factions only for the military: patriotic or subversive (Arditti, 1999; Bouvard, 1994; Fisher, 1989 cited in Moshman, 2007:120; Osiel, 2001). The ideological dimension of the conflict was relevant for the officers too, not only for the guerrillas, and participants insist in recovering and stressing this aspect in the interviews. We will see in the next chapter this ideological/cultural element will serve as a background to understand the officers’ position in the present before the trials. In the past, instead, we saw this cultural component influenced the officers’ perception of the subversive enemy. It was instilled in the Military Academy, but it was also pre-existent in many cases, and sometimes it even supported their decision to join the Army, not only to fight the subversion directly, but more in general to join an institution where their own vision of the world was reflected. This interpretation frames the conflict of the Seventies
not only as a legitimate war but also as a cultural war, like Robben (2005a) sustains, and therefore a fratricidal war, sometimes depicted by participants as almost inevitable after years of political tensions. As Miguel states:

The disaster was that we weren’t fighting against Sergeant Johnny Piper from Scotland, like in Malvinas. It was Pablito Córdoba, my rugby coach. On the other side there were friends, neighbours, relatives. Because it was an internal conflict, among Argentines.

(Miguel)

On the other hand, adopting a perspective different to but not detached from the political and cultural dimension of the confrontation, I looked at the participants not only as representatives of a generation but also as professionals of violence. The dynamic *us* – *them* (Moshman, 2007) by which the group identity is performed is evident as the military talk about their enemy not only in ideological but also in strictly military and strategic terms. The commitment of the officers in the struggle against subversion was reinforced by the institution in the years of their formation. As Luis remembered his years in the Military Academy he said:

I attended the Military Academy between ’71 and ’74… quite complicated years because the guerrillas were already active […] And being in there it was like a kind of a bubble. I was isolated, but not completely, because I used to go out on weekends, and I had civilian friends, family. I had television, newspapers, and I heard things happening. And of course within the armed institution there was a constant, permanent sermon against the subversive enemy.

(Luis)
Within the Military Academy the enemy was represented as subversive not only in the mentality and system of beliefs, but also in the tactics: they performed a dishonourable conduct in combat, hiding among civilians and fighting in the streets, and striking random objectives, showing no pity even for children. The subversive enemies were well prepared, and gave the military some hard times; however, they rejected the rules of conventional war and refused to employ fair methods. The officers often stressed some practices adopted by the guerrillas such as killing companions willing to abandon the cause, or farmers who did not collaborate with the troops in the rural areas, highlighting their inhuman behaviour. Conversely, they narrated anecdotes of gallantry and distinction in combat performed by their own comrades, implementing principles acquired in years of training within a more than respectable institution, historically prestigious, defending values the officers considered superior to the life of the individual. The “enemy” and the “soldier” were in opposition to each other, and it seemed for my participants that the worse the enemy, the more honourable the soldier. Miguel remembered nostalgically his time in the Army:

I miss the values we shared in the Army: loyalty, honesty, spirit of sacrifice, respect. All these things that are components of heroism… well, I was so close to these things because I saw examples in the Army. I met people who died heroically, fighting besides their troops, caring about their comrades, setting example in combat, and this made me love the Army.

(Miguel)

Interestingly, the officers also emphasized the negative and shameful characteristics of the guerrillas as they compared them to the other antagonist – this time conventional and respectable – many of them had to face in the battlefield, the British. In the Malvinas war (1982) some of the officers I interviewed were held prisoners by the British as hostilities
ceased, and stressed the enemy’s fair conduct in a situation in which they were particularly vulnerable; this is how Luis remembers his thirty days with the British:

After a while we became friends with our captors, we played poker, I mean, the war was over. That is a normal situation between two contenders who respect the rules. Which wasn’t the case with the subversives, who had no respect for the rules. The Brits did nothing weird, […] now, if you’re a prisoner of a subversive element, God help you! Because you know they won’t respect any rule at all.

(Luis)

Other officers more emphasized the difficulties of adapting to an unconventional type of war in the Seventies, whose rules were far away from the idea of war for which they might have been prepared. César spoke with pride about their ability to adapt to an unconventional kind of war and face an insidious enemy, whose conduct he despised:

One improves professionally, you know, because this wasn’t a classic war like Malvinas, it was a (counter)revolutionary war: the enemy chose the method of combat and one had to… quickly and violently react. I mean, it wasn’t a training, it was a fact of war, where one killed and got killed. The cadet doesn’t train in the Military Academy for this type of war, the war I understood is the conventional war: you are standing there with a uniform, I’m standing here with another, different flags, and we look each other in the eye, uh? There are other rules playing. Instead the revolutionary war implied getting dirty into this people’s mud.

(César)
So, the guerrilla was an unpredictable enemy the officers had not expected to fight (with the exception of Miguel, who joined the Army after the Operativo Independencia had started, the enemy had already been identified and the combat launched). Even so, the subversive ended up being the comparative term against which the officers could build their own identities (Badaró, 2010). I believe this has to do with the cultural and moral characteristics of the confrontation; we saw how it was a dichotomization process, in which people morally delimitated the circle in which “they” resided, and shared a common understanding of the “others”, who remained outside of it (Brewer, 2001; Staub, 2001; Woolf & Hulsizer, 2005 cited in Moshman, 2007:123). This dual confrontation, which is still in force, was forged in the battlefield. However, this does not impede the officers to acknowledge also some similarities with their alter ego. In fact, an interesting relationship with the enemy was revealed by the officers, a link that will be recovered and alternatively signified by their adult children in the present. I will go more in depth into this aspect in the next chapters; at this stage, following the military logics explored so far, I report a significant fragment that depicts a different image of the enemy. As I asked César about the feeling towards his former enemies he answered:

They were my enemies. It was me or them. Now I don’t feel hate, they fought as I did. The real terrorists were wrong, but they fought, and they know who these recycled terrorists (now Kirchners’ political officials) are, who are speculating with the sacred cause of the war that we carried out decades ago. I did it for my homeland, for my flag, for the stability of my country and the protection of democracy, and they (the real terrorists) did it because they believed in the armed fight to create an independent socialist state. [...] Now they (the Kirchners) call the real terrorists “young idealists”, but they are defaming them! Because they (the real terrorists) were not idealists, they were
combatants, and lost their companions fighting against us [...]. We have had
several contacts in the last few years with the real terrorists, now old, fat and
bald. We speak the same language, they know it’s been a war and the
politicians are speculating on their comrades’ blood. And on ours too.

(César)

César made a distinction between real and recycled terrorists. According to the Colonel, the
Kirchners – who sympathized with the revolutionary cause in the Seventies – retook the
leftist ideology and the reasons of the armed fight to build the politics of memory around it;
they politically exploited the sacred cause the guerrillas and the military had fought for in
the Seventies, to build their political consensus. In the following decades, the “real”
terrorists stayed incorruptible in their ideological beliefs, wrong but respectable, while
others accepted political posts offered by the Kirchner’s government, joining the
institutional power they swore to dismantle decades ago. This makes them “recycled”
terrorists, because they betrayed the cause they fought for when active in the guerrillas, to
sell out to a governmental elite that flattens the political dimension of the conflict (the
Kirchnerists call the ex-guerrillas “young idealists”), dishonouring the former enemy and,
consequently, the war the military were also involved in.

Some former military openly denounced the system of compensation payments to the
victims of the dictatorship as a financial fraud orchestrated by the Kirchners to benefit
imposters and human rights militants (D’Angelo, 2015), a version also supported by many
of my participants. Former officers of the Seventies clearly feel a particular resentment
against the Kirchners but, as explained in Chapter One, this attitude aligns with the
traditional dislike towards politicians deeply-rooted within the Argentine military, which
consider them inept, unable to hold stability and above all, corrupted. This is what César
refers to as the speculation made on the blood of combatants who fought on both sides, a shameful operation for which both former officers and the real terrorists share the same indignation for. Miguel, for instance, expressed the same position as he talks about Luis Labraña, ex Montonero who does not agree with the line promoted by the Kirchners:

Labraña himself says he could never accept any compensation from the bourgeois State he wanted to destroy. And he also admits the military were just young idealists as were the guerrillas, but these held a cause, the international Marxism, that collapsed everywhere else in the world. They defied the State, and the State responded with weapons much more powerful than theirs, so they lost the war: how could they then complain and get compensation for that?

(Miguel)

So the officers have an ambivalent attitude towards the former enemy that depends on what the term of comparison is, whether the glorious Army of San Martín or the corrupted politicians of the twenty-first century. In the second case, against a current, lying enemy that is the Argentine State represented by the Kirchners, and its judicial power, the officers are able to find a common ground to work on with the former enemy. Ex-guerrillas are considered as a “worthy enemy”, borrowing a definition from Osiel (2001:131) who explained the same process in reverse, illustrating the respect some former guerrillas illegally detained under the regime still show for the intense, robust convictions of some officers in their struggle against international communism.

To conclude, the officers remember the Seventies and their position in the events as both young Argentines and professionals of violence, making ideological and strategic evaluation of the former guerrillas, and showing one aspect is not separable from the other. They explain how it was a professional and moral duty to deliver a violence they were
legally prepared for and that they considered necessary to a superior cultural purpose; thus they centre their narrative on the years before 1976 and stay largely silent on those after. The participants tend not to refer to the scale and the forms of the repressive action especially in the years of the dictatorship, to offer a respectable image of the military within a contemporary context of public condemnation. This is understandable considering that there are huge consequences at stake, such as the judicial conviction for crimes they still view as facts of war.

3.3 “Soldiership” and comradeship: the human factor in the military

Training, cohesion and combat are pillars of the military experience that have been object of thorough studies on soldiers, military cultures and specific aspects of military life and institutions in different contexts. What defines a soldier, also defines what a civilian is not. The dichotomy between what is inherent to the military world and what is inevitably alien to it represents the main distinction on which the whole military worldview is based (Castro, 2009 cited in Silva, 2016). My interpretation of the officers’ perception of the Seventies outlines two spheres that are fundamental components of the military identity. On the one hand, the principles constituting the essence itself of the soldier as member of a group, belonging to a respectable institution, and serving a just cause that legitimates the delivery of violence; on the other, the practices that shape their daily activities and conduct, based on the relation with the enemy, the comrades and the superiors, and the preparation to war and its outcomes. These spheres contain values and practices of military life, and converge in “soldiership”, an analyst-constructed category and an uncommon

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term in English, by which I mean *the state of being a soldier*. “Soldiership” does not only correspond to a set of features and skills the military develop during their career, but a complex mindset, a strong feeling of identity that goes beyond compliance in active duty and is fuelled by the social relations within the military.

To understand the military mentality behind the implementation of violence, I drew on both codified practices and principles reported in military handbooks adopted by the Army (Ejército Argentino, 1990) and the Air Force (Fuerza Aérea Argentina, 2013), and on the data gathered in the field with former officers. Although the handbooks I cite have been published after the end of the dictatorship, by comparing these to the editions in use in the 1960s and 1970s I could verify the contents remained basically unchanged. The Army handbook on the exercise of command (Ejército Argentino, 1990) in particular is an exact copy of the handbook Luis used as he was a cadet in the Military Academy, and it still forms part of the compulsory bibliography for the module on “Ethics, command and leadership” currently imparted at the Military Academy.

In line with my non-institutional approach, I looked particularly at the human factor within “soldiership”, embodied by the bonds among comrades, and those between them and their superiors, subalterns and families. I argue this dimension represents the core of *being military*, and is just as essential as its prescriptions and structured procedures.

Individuals who join the Army need to go through a process of transformation that converts them from citizens into soldiers. The transformative character of the training implies that once cadets become soldiers they are supposed to be able to face a war, an environment that is exclusive domain of the military (Bridson, 1989; Hockey, 1986; Parr, 2018). More than combat itself, however, the daily life of a soldier consists of an intense preparation for combat, not only as cadets in the Military Academy but also as they grow
into officers, since constant professional development is an ongoing process for the military. According to the Army’s prescriptions, the ultimate objective of the soldier and the whole institution is to obtain victory in war. Handbooks are filled with extreme scenarios the soldier can face especially in combat, from lack of logistic support, to neurosis and defeat. However, one feeling was particularly emphasized by my informants: fear. As the possibility of a war becomes concrete, in fact, the soldier inevitably feels terrified. The handbook consulted by the Army’s officers to learn the exercise of command, the *Manual del ejercicio del mando*, defines fear as “a real factor among the phenomenology of war, able to hinder reasoning, agency and initiative, and annihilate discipline, honour and decency” (Ejército Argentino, 1990:108). It also adds: “It is curious, however, how most soldiers think they won’t be affected by the fear of dying”. This last observation was confirmed by Luis as I asked him to describe the worst scenario a soldier can imagine:

Going to war, eventually. Being in the military is quite a complicated job, because [...] it implies the risk of a war. This is the reason why the Armed Forces exist. Now, the soldier knows war is death, intrinsically. So it’s contradictory in a way because, even though you know that preparing for war actually means preparing for death, the vocational spirit makes you feel happy when you eventually go to war. Why? Because you can finally put into practice what you learned, you can honour your pledge of allegiance to the flag, you can defend your homeland. But it’s irrational, because deep down you know war is death. Now, if you’re a civilian or a military in peacetimes, and you’re young, death is such a remote perspective… that you feel immortal. You don’t have death on your mind, you are young, and [...] this is how I felt when I went to Malvinas: half immortal. But when I entered combat I didn’t feel immortal.
anymore. Death was here on my shoulder, every day, all the time. And you
don’t feel comfortable, although you get used to it. In Rosario, we were aware
of this, so we had to live with threat, and death, and the weird things that
happened in the Seventies. But we got used to it. Just like in Malvinas we got
used to sleep during the bombings, [...] because you had to. You have to adapt
to the environment to survive, so I adapted in Rosario to one thing, and I
adapted in Malvinas to the other.

(Luis)

Among the characteristics of “soldiership”, it is the ability to adapt to the circumstances of
war and to react to fear that distinguishes the soldier from the civilian (Bourke, 1999,
2005; Moran, 2007; Parr, 2018). The brave soldier only can break the barrier of fear ad
react to it thanks to his formation. However, military training is not enough without solid
military morals, a set of principles systematized in the three pillars of motivation,
discipline and *esprit de corps* that constitute the essence of service (Ejército Argentino,
1990). Military morals inform the soldier’s mental and spiritual state in every critical
moment of military life, above all combat. However, the *Manual* explicitly says that
coercive actions or reasoning are not effective tools to boost soldiers’ military morals
(Ejército Argentino, 1990:10): *emotion* is the privileged field where “soldiership” is
constructed, put into practice and strengthened, confirming my initial assumption by which
human bonds are essential even in an institution like the Armed Forces that looks highly
impersonal, rigid and standardized. Military morals are collectively felt by the unit soldiers
belong to, and are reinforced as they share and experience them in the battlefield; this
pushes comrades to work tirelessly even in the most adverse scenario, when the mission
seems impossible to accomplish.
A third fundamental component of “soldiership” is the *esprit de corps*, “the mental and emotional state of the organization, achievable when all its members identify with the values, the interests and the objectives of the Army, feeling satisfaction for its successes and dejection for its fails” (Ejército Argentino, 1990:V). This feeling takes root again in the emotional and social fabric of the Army because the *esprit de corps* is a strong sense of belonging that is complemented by team spirit: every member is conscious of being a whole with his comrades, subordinates and superiors. The group is at the basis of the institution and needs the reciprocal understanding of ideals and responsibilities to achieve its goals avoiding waste of energies or efforts (Fuerza Aérea Argentina, 2013:4). Heartfelt team spirit and *esprit de corps* produce pride in soldiers, founded in examples of sacrifice and heroism in the battlefield. As César explained, the deep faith in the justness of his cause makes the soldier confident of the integrity of his conduct:

> Today I feel intimately proud of my professional experience, because I lived the whole period, every fact of war since I graduated in 1972 until I retired in 2004. Everything I did, I did it for my country, for my homeland, holding my head high. I sleep peacefully at night, I have no nightmares, and if I was to be born again I would join the Military Academy and fight for my country as I did, serving from the position I have been trained for.

*(César)*

Loyalty and pride infuse a unique feeling of comradeship that is the strongest and most durable social bond soldiers forge during their time in the military. Men in arms, in fact, are loyal not only to the Nation and the Army, but especially to the comrades with whom they share the same commitment. Comradeship plays a crucial role in the perpetuation of military identity. In order to give a sense of this very distinct bond, I will describe it as a
form of fictive kinship using terms and concepts from this realm. Although participants do not adopt terms such as “brother” when talking about comradeship, I found this interpretive key quite effective in explaining a tie that is not “conventional” kinship but is not assimilable to friendship either, and is exclusive to the relationship among trained soldiers. This bond is not exclusive of the Argentine military, though. It is forged in training (Parr, 2018:58-81) and it is a characteristic of armies worldwide, in the 1970s as well as today, when women are allowed to join the ranks and willing to bond with female and male comrades alike, by virtue of the experience these people share while recruited, trained and transformed into professional soldiers.

When young cadets leave their homes and families and enter the Military Academy usually aged 17 or 18, they live in a boarding school during four years, developing a lifestyle that is similar to that of the barracks. Despite the fact this experience represents a sort of fiction of military life, as several officers described it, the camaraderie experienced in these first four years is the most authentic feeling they can then take into battlefield. Badaró (2006:64) borrows the classic concept of “civil death” from Goffman (2007) to describe the process cadets go through in the Military Academy when they learn to identify civilian habits and behaviours, and to contrast them with norms and forms of the military condition. This passage happens within a socialization process that seals the embrace of a new identity, a rebirth experienced by each cadet who tightens a special tie with their fellow comrades, a feeling of communion similar to brotherhood, re-signified by the military baptism. Novices learn several rules to implement in combat that regulate their behaviour towards comrades, subordinates and superiors. In fact, one of the basic rules and pillar of military life is “never abandon an injured companion”27; like loyalty, soldiers should feel a unconditional sense of protection not only towards the Nation and its

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27 Interview with Miguel (16/06/2016).
institutions, as prescribed by the codes, but especially towards comrades, an attitude that needs to be forged in the practice.

Belonging to this very decent institution means a lot to these men, it shapes their identity as individuals, members of a group and a Nation. The Army is a great mother in this sense, a benevolent entity that provides objectives, training and moral principles to its offspring. The meaning of the officers’ existence and their position in the world as they know it depends on the prescriptions of the Army that prepares them for war and its outcomes. Comrades are equals in front of the maternal institution that raises them in the art of war. This means that the officers belonging to a same promoción, the group of cadets graduating in a same year, are brothers in arms, as if the consanguineous relation amongst siblings is transposed to the quarters and replaced by a relation amongst equals. Therefore, this connection acquires even more strength as it is baptized in combat: at war, a comrade is the only one a soldier can always rely on, and this is particularly true for military of the Army who fight in small units in the field²⁸.

Even though all my participants are now retired, they still consider themselves officers and military; this is why they still use their ranks when talking to each other or referring to other officers in presence of civilians, for example. Once the young citizen joins the Army he chooses a new family and the constructed kinship he builds within the barracks survives the completion of active duty²⁹. Comrades hold a link that is unbreakable, as long as it is not betrayed; it is indeed important to notice that, besides the intrinsic frictions between forces, branches and specialties that can be found in most military institutions, the Argentine Armed Forces have always been deeply politically and ideologically divided.

²⁸ Guber (2007, 2015) shows how fighter pilots, for instance, have a different perception of combat, much more individualistic as they “fly solo” and feel like one creature with their aircraft.
²⁹ For further references on comradeship among the Argentine military see Badaró (2009), Guber (2007, 2015), Soprano (2013).
Historical conflicts within the military since the time of Independence – Unitarians and Federalists, azules y colorados, nationalists and conservatives, peronists and antiperonists – have systematically produced mutinies, imprisonments, forced retirements, desertions, coups, purges and even disappearances during the last dictatorship (Canelo 2008a, 2008b, 2015; Scenna, 1980; Rouquié 1981a, 1981b, 1986). In fact, although the Army’s counterrevolutionary tendencies of the 1960s and 1970s in a way overcame other divisions within the military, which joined the ranks against a common subversive enemy, there were still episodes of strong dissent against the coupist generals and small groups who openly condemned their actions, such as the member of the Centre of Military for Argentina’s Democracy - CEMIDA (Lacoste and Kozel, 1993). Therefore, even a sentiment like comradeship, that most trained military would agree it represents the nature itself of being soldier, needs to be contextualised in the conflicting reality of the Argentine Armed Forces and balanced with its intestine struggles.

Even when the military are forced to retire, they still preserve their military identity, and when they re-join the civilian world, they still do it as former officers, keeping their military grade. The state of being a soldier, namely the military identity, is amplified and perpetuated as it is experienced collectively by every member of the institution. Being a human group, the Army possesses a spiritual force: discipline, esprit de corps and motivation infuse and amplify this force in so far as they are shared by the group. Handbooks cite this spiritual force that irradiates and in turns generates “affective contagion” among comrades, creating bonds of safety, trust, hope and protection (Ejército Argentino, 1990:19). Comradeship, in fact, is ultimately based on the identification of one comrade with the other, and of them all with the principles of the Army to which they are devoted. In the next sections I will illustrate how this identification and solidarity process extends from the bonds soldiers secure in the barracks, to those the members of military
families established in the households, and how these same bonds are fortified through adversities that wives and children have to face besides officers.

3.4 Cadets and military wives-to-be: genesis of the nuclear military family

The position of military wives is embedded within the military system; understanding their role and their life besides the officers means understanding the military world to a quite important extent. This point is supported by literature on the topic (Enloe, 2000; Guber, 2015; Jessup, 2000; Silva, 2016; Simons, 1997), and is further confirmed by my study.

Interviews with military wives revealed aspects of their experience in the Seventies that, in some respects, align with their husbands’ stories and perceptions. I see the reason for this attitude, that some may consider predictable, in their position of peers and contemporaries, rather than exclusively in their condition of wives. The relationship between military officers and wives should not be conceived as purely deterministic, like a sort of osmosis between the two producing a reflection of the men’s experience on their wives’ life. The husbands’ involvement in violence and their consequent position about it does not automatically transfer to the wives by virtue of the marital bond; however, the position of these women within the military community does inform their narrative of violence. The special tie of these women with their fully uniformed husbands does not rely exclusively on the marital relation in a strict sense, but especially on broader dynamics proper of the military world and deeper generational elements that configure the relationship husband – wife as an alliance among peers within the specific military environment, in the Argentine case fortified by the vicissitudes they faced as partners in the last four decades. The wives’ accounts of the Seventies can be assimilated to the officers’ ones not only in terms of
contents and ideological assonance, but especially because of the vividness of their memories, proper of those who lived the facts and stood “in the middle of the clash”\textsuperscript{30} as one of the women I interviewed said.

Giving the approach most social scientists apply when they study the Argentine military as essentially members of a repressive institution responsible for atrocities, or more generally “perpetrators”, it is legitimate to foresee that studies on their wives would consider these women as mere perpetrators’ supporters, similarly denying responsibility for violence, rather than complex agents of history. I believe their point of view is usually ignored by the academic world, whereas it is criticized by the media because on the one hand they are not members of the military institution and did not directly deliver the violence, so they cannot fit in the category of perpetrator; on the other, their narrative is pre-emptively interpreted as reactionary and divergent from the dominant discourse on State violence in Argentina, due to their closeness to the repressors. I do not systematically deny the rightness of such assumptions, but I find them misleading or in any case limiting.

First of all, it is important to understand who these women are. The wives who participated in the study were born between 1948 and 1960; the majority of them are not originally from Buenos Aires but ended up there because of their husbands’ career. In fact, not only aspiring officers of the Army start their career in Buenos Aires, where they attend the Military Academy, but also in the highest steps of their career they are transferred to the capital city once again, to carry out tasks as Joint Chiefs of Staff in the base of Campo de Mayo. As subalterns in their early twenties, officers received their first posting which was often in very remote provinces, where many of them met their wives-to-be, who were locals. This explains why many of my wives-participants are from far provinces in the

\textsuperscript{30} Interview with Fernanda (02/06/2016).
extreme northern periphery of the country, such as Salta and Jujuy, or from Patagonian and Andean regions like Chubut and San Juan.

Rouquié (1981a:73) explains in the second half of the 19th century, through a double operation of “pacification” and frontier consolidation the Army had extended the territory of the Republic beyond its original nucleus, the province of Buenos Aires. Since 1860, the Army established a belt of forts to protect cultivated lands from indigenous tribes; in this way, the military created the frontier and the frontier in turn needed permanent military control (Rouquié, 1981a:74). Due to this system, many villages and cities of the remote provinces – the same villages the women I interviewed hailed from – rose after the military base was placed, therefore their population was quite familiar with the significant presence of the military, and presumably developed their own activities around and in function of the quarters and their occupiers. In these locations, the social events also took place in strict contact with the Army, and civilian celebrations and parties were often hosted in the quarters, where the locals tended to mix with the military. During these special occasions, young officers met girls from the villages and towns. Victoria, originally from the northern province of Jujuy, remembered her first meeting with her husband:

I was 14. I went to a party in the officers’ club, in the military quarters. The daughter of the second-in-command was my best friend, so we went to the party, a group of girlfriends... and I saw him. He was 22, he was Second Lieutenant. We got married when I was 17, and I was so young that I feel like I was born in a military family. The continuous change (of location) was something natural to me. When we got married we moved to El Chaco and I discovered what the military life was like, how they lived and how they always moved from one place to another. Well, the military always tried to show a
sophistication that wasn’t real, because it was the parents that supported it (*laughter*). The military family always looks well dressed and everything, but it doesn’t come from the husbands’ salary, the military never had good salaries. Their prestige comes from vocation, not from money.

(Victoria)

Vocation is a complex element within the military life, and a kind of a myth not to be taken for granted. What Victoria said about her husband’s vocation to join the Army has also been confirmed by other officers I interviewed, not mentioning the desire of fighting on the right side expressed by some of them, as the political confrontation flew into a war. However, other officers had different reasons to join the institution, often personal. For some of them it was a secure job within a long-life institution. Others were curious and wanted to try themselves. For Francisco, it was a question of principle: when he was a lively teenager he once mentioned the possibility of joining the Army, but his family laughed at him and bet he would not resist a week, as they all considered him a loafer. Interestingly, he recounts how the vocational feeling manifested itself only once he graduated and accomplished his first tasks as an officer:

When I graduated I was sent to el Chaco, and there I met the military vocation. Because the Military Academy is a fiction, isn’t it? You can’t taste the military life there. Well, someone like me can’t, because others had the vocation, they came from military families, they knew how it was, but I didn’t. The Military Academy was a torture for me, I almost quit. I didn’t because of her (his wife) and for self-respect... Well, when I get there (el Chaco) they send me to my first unit of conscripts, very humble, mostly illiterate, some of them didn’t even wear shoes, you know. They were not people who had a hot shower or four
meals per day, uh? So, carrying on the military training, teaching them how to handle a cannon, going out in the field, shooting, this intense life you share with people from other social classes, everything was dazzling! So, well, that’s where I got really engaged.

(Francisco)

As I interviewed his wife Emilia, she confirmed the revelling nature of Francisco. Like some of my wives-participants from Buenos Aires, she met her husband in the capital city before he entered the Military Academy. In several cases, like Emilia’s, I noticed how women often had a pivotal role in making the man opt for the military career:

I supported him because I knew it would have been a good way out for him. My family were quite worried when we got engaged, because we were both very young, and he was lazy. He liked playing guitar, going out at night, and my parents didn’t approve. So I thought he would have learned some discipline in there, they would have set him back on track (laughter).

(Emilia)

Whatever the officers’ motivation for the military career was, it is striking how often this decision was shared and even negotiated with their girlfriends and wives-to-be. Paula, 32 years old daughter of a former officer, remembers how her mother used to describe her early years beside her father as they were engaged:

My dad joined the Army as he was 16 or 17, I think, and they married when they were 20. My grandfather had died, and my dad is the eldest of four children. I think he felt lost, he even left the school as he had to work and take care of his mum and siblings. But my mum, she asked him firmly like “Look, if you don’t get a life, it’s over”. So I think it was a good option for him, the
military career, he probably thought “Fine, I’ll finish school, I get a job for life and get some money”. Like… They give you a job… forever! You spend all your life in there and you’re fine. So it was a good option for him really, he got back on track, he found his way and my mum didn’t leave him, in the end *(laughter).*

(Paula)

Paula and Emilia’s testimonies explain how the decision for a military career was not always an individual matter, but a decision for the family, or with an eye to an upcoming family. Even those officers who took the military career as a job, like Paula’s father, thought about it as a career and a choice that would affect other people, their partners in the first place. In the 1960s and 1970s cadets were not allowed to get married before graduating, so marriage used to happen at the end of the training for the young subalterns who were engaged at the time of the Military Academy. For people who formed a couple before the officers’ graduation, somehow the path through the Military Academy was heartfelt by both men and women, because its completion enabled marriage and the start of the military family that, indeed, is military from its very origin. If we look at the original, traditional nucleus of the matrimonial family, man and woman, at the time there was no family that “became” military, but only families that “built up around” a military. Military wives-to-be were engaged either to officers or to aspiring officers. Therefore in the case of cadets who got engaged with a partner previously to their decision of joining the Army, their choice was not only in favour of a certain job rather than another, but in favour of a certain lifestyle and a certain identity, not only for the cadet but for the couple, and for the family they would have started together.
Officers and military wives tend to repeat that “being a military is more than just a job”. This sentence has been proffered in so many different situations it can be interpreted in many ways. In this case, being a military is more than just a job because it involves and affects more people than who actually gets the job: it is a family path, it is far beyond affecting only the single officer. This decision of choosing “more than just a job” is not only consciously made by the aspiring officer, but is often pondered within the couple, proving women have a more active role than what it seems at first within the nuclear military family, even prior to its genesis.

In other cases, many military wives were already daughters of the institution, as they came from military families themselves. In the Argentine military jargon they are called polleras verdes31, “green skirts” and, as it often happened among my participants, they tend to meet their husbands-to-be through their fathers, grandfathers or uncles, carrying on the tradition and marrying a young officer. Therefore, when this happened they were quite prepared to the challenges of military life, maybe not as wives but at least as members of a military family: they already knew they would undertake a life made of changes, and they were prepared to the same difficulties they experienced in their childhood. They were born in a military family and then they were called to form a new one.

If it is true women who marry a soldier are prepared from the beginning to what military life is going to be, it is also true that officers are well aware that the role of military wife is not for any woman. The main characteristics of a good military wife (flexibility, adaptation, respect and respectability) are more likely to be found in women who already belong to the environment; in the Seventies women were not allowed to join the Armed Forces, so the closest to a military woman an officer could go for, was a woman who was born in a military family, a “green skirt”. These women were considered by the institution

31 Interview with Luis (23/06/2016).
as the perfect match for young officers, as they had experience of the environment, they had been educated and somehow trained to a life in the military world, with its practices and values.

The “green skirts” were indeed the only wives-to-be who were not subject to what in the Seventies was known in the military world as the informe ambiental\textsuperscript{32}, the “environmental report”. Whenever a young officer expressed the intention of getting married, he had to obtain the permission of the institution first. The authorisation was allowed only after the successful outcome of an investigation conducted into the family environment of the wife-to-be. A senior officer from the unit of the subaltern who was asking for permission, had to conduct an interview with the wife-to-be and her family in their house; he had to assess the cultural, social and moral background of the aspiring military wife and produce a final report, the informe ambiental. Elements to be considered in the analysis were the neighbourhood, the house, the clothing of the family members, their financial situation, their religious practices, the music they listened to, their oral expression and their costumes in general. Only after a satisfactory result the interviewer would personally guarantee the woman was adapt to become a member of the large military family, suitable to accompany the officer in his professional and vocational path. Giving the protected and necessarily pre-assessed environment the “green skirts” were raised in, it is understandable there was no need to conduct an environmental report in the house of a senior officer.

The informes ambientales were not only addressed to wives-to-be, but also to officers-to-be, that is the applicants willing to join the Military Academy. This control practice for the selection of cadets was known in the 1950s as encuesta domiciliaria, “home inquiry” (Rouquié, 1981b:337). Instructors were sent to check the environment the aspiring cadets came from, to judge whether they met the requirements to become a worthy member of the

\textsuperscript{32} Interview with Luis (23/06/2016).
institution. The same elements of the report on wives-to-be were observed before releasing the authorisation to aspiring officers. Luis, my gatekeeper, was required to accomplish this task himself as he was Captain Instructor in the Military Academy, so I asked him about the criteria he had to apply in the evaluation, the parameters to be considered. My informant replied:

This may sound discriminatory, but it was a process aiming to maintain a certain... socio-economic and cultural level of the officers and their families. There was no established parameter to conduct the evaluation, it was the officer’s opinion. The instructors of the Military Academy, we are supposed to be selected because we are the best, since we have to educate officers, but it’s still a very subjective thing. There was a form to fill in, and the last question was “In your opinion, is the interviewee a suitable candidate to enter the Military Academy? Yes – No. Tick the appropriate answer”. If I put “No”, the guy wasn’t accepted. This sort of arbitrariness did exist. There was a General, who was director of the Military Academy as I was instructor, who once told us before doing the evaluation: “Officers, before you answer the last question, instead of being officers be fathers, and imagine the aspiring cadet coming to you with a marriage proposal of your daughter. If you agree with the marriage tick ‘Yes’, otherwise, tick ‘No’”. That was the parameter. I’m not sure it was the best, but it was a parameter.

(Luis)

Luis’ words describe how discretion the decision of the senior officer was to accept or reject the request of the aspiring cadets and military wives depending on his personal concept of appropriateness. This example is emblematic of the control mechanisms within the military institution, and shows how relevant the family dimension is, compared to the institutional one especially in the past, since both aspiring officers and wives were subject
to the same evaluation process. As per the “green skirts”, I found no evidence that sons of senior officers willing to join the Academy were object of any environmental report, which further supports this point. The Armed Forces implemented a very efficient system to assess the qualities of every potential member external to the institution, and to regulate the access based on a qualitative analysis of the individuals who would attend the military circles, fully uniformed or not. Thinking of the evaluation process I went through myself as I started fieldwork (ironically enough conducted just by Luis), this example explains why my access to the non-institutional sphere of the military was secured as I obtained the approval of a senior officer. Luis, indeed, acted in that occasion once again as an instructor, treating me like an aspiring cadet desiring to participate in the military world, but also as a father, since I asked explicitly to interact with wives, sons and daughters of the Army. Once he agreed, no further evaluations were conducted on me: I was in, and the positive opinion of one single officer was enough guarantee of suitability for my admission in the large military family.

3.5 Commitment in the shadows: military wives recount the Seventies

Commonly, as they got married military wives thought the military career was a monetarily safe job for their husbands, and consequently for the whole family; moreover, the possibilities of a war intended as an international conflict between states sounded quite unlikely at the time. Military wives had developed their life as young adults in the civilian world, studying or working in different sectors, many as teachers, and the turbulences of the 1960s and 1970s represented the effervescent background of their transformation into young women. However, even if some of them were quite aware of the radicalization of the political clash affecting Argentina in those years, especially those who lived in big
urban centres or in the province of Tucumán, they barely imagined the virulence of the violence they would have witnessed in the mid Seventies, nor the pressure they would have been subject to as members of military families.

Despite being extraneous to the battlefield in literal terms, many military wives experienced the Seventies and the violence very closely, and the consequences of the conflict the officers lived in rural and urban settings was transferred at home. Not only officers faced the armed organizations in campaigns like the *Operativo Independencia*, but the military, like police personnel and members of the Argentine economic and political elite, were targets of the guerrilla movement in the cities. Victoria’s husband participated in the *Operativo Independencia* as it was launched, and was involved in the first battle of the campaign where he lost a superior. She remembered the anguish of those days:

> Yes, I did live the war, I lived it intensely. I went to Tucumán, which was a powder keg. [...] When we were engaged I went there with my family, and while he (her fiancé) participated in the *Operativo* he came to see me whenever he could [...]. They used to be in the field for 60 days, then they came back for 30 days and had a break because, really, when my husband came back from Tucumán, he was a human wreck. He was rubbish, he was skinny, frail, haggard. Because they sent them to the mountains and… whatever happened, happened.

(Victoria)

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33 Data about the exact number of the casualties imputable to armed organizations in the 1970s are discordant. Relevant literature on the topic claims the guerrillas were composed by about 12 revolutionary organizations which carried out more than 1,500 armed actions between 1969 and 1972 (Robben, 2006). The guerrillas were formed by about 5,000 combatants among different organizations by 1975 (Robben, 2012), which provoked 480 victims (Moyano, 1995 cited in Robben, 2012:307). Sources close to the Armed Forces, instead, count 1,501 killings perpetrated by the guerrillas between 1969 and 1979; they also affirm between 1973 and 1976 a 53% of the casualties were members of the police, a 5% members of the Armed Forces and a 42% civilians (Unión de Promociones, 2018).
Life in big cities was not easier. Unlike Victoria, other women decided or had to be less involved in their husbands’ activities, especially outside the official campaigns like the Operativo Independencia. Despite their proximity to the “theatre of war”, within a context of urban guerrilla war it was even more difficult for these women to realise what was going on exactly. Patricia, whose husband passed away and was never subject to any judicial prosecution, remembered the disorientation she felt in not understanding the gravity of the situation until her husband got shot in an armed confrontation with the ERP:

The women, we use to live more with our kids, we didn’t really know anything of our husbands… What they did, how they were, or where… When my daughter was born, in December, I saw my husband that day and then I didn’t see him for twenty days until I was told he was in the hospital, because he got shot by the guerrillas. The ERP had attacked an arsenal to steal weapons, here in Buenos Aires. The subversives even threatened them in the hospital, they said they would have killed them all, to end the job.

(Patricia)

Other women were much more aware of the seriousness of the situation from the very beginning as they were directly threatened by the armed organizations. Some of them recounted being object of attempts of execution and kidnapping. Emilia, whose daughter risked kidnap by the guerrillas as she was at school, describes how she received continuous alerts from the guerrillas that were monitoring her moves:

This is what my husband used to tell me - “You better watch your back when you go to work, because if they (the guerrillas) take you, you’re on your own: I won’t trade you, not even for a rifle”. So I kept going to work, I wanted my

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34The episode is known as the attack to the Battalion of Monte Chingolo, on 23-24 December 1975. It ended with 70 casualties among ERP members, 40 civilian deaths and 10 among the military (Télam, 2015).
family to go on normally, but they (the guerrillas) used to follow me to my house. They rang the intercom to say - “Are you sure your children are at school?” During a month at some point the same car appeared and followed me to my workplace and they did this (she makes the gesture of slitting her throat). If they wanted to kill me, or kidnap me, they would have gone for it... I think they wanted me to tell Francisco I was being followed, but I never said anything. Because it’s him they wanted, not me. [...] It was really hard. His comrades’ wives, my friends, many of them used to carry a gun in their bag, but I never wanted to, because if you take a gun and there are kids - four, five - around you, they can be killed too. What’s my experience in guns? None. If they want to take me, they take me.

(Emilia)

The threat was perceived to be diffuse, even by those families who were not directly intimidated. Patricia remembered she felt she could not trust anyone, because the tactics used by the enemy were aiming to produce a feeling of general unease. Therefore the military world, traditionally secluded in its social practices from the rest of the society, became even more hermetic because of the risks perceived by the military families attacked:

Somehow you didn’t trust anyone, you didn’t know who the enemy was. When my second child was born I had to quit my job. I used to work in the public administration and there were no nurseries, so I’d have had to choose who to put into my own house to look after my children. We were living a difficult time, they (the guerrillas) used to put bombs in the houses of the military. So, well, the solution was to quit my job.
Regarding their feelings about the Seventies, and in particular the impact of political violence on their daily life, the data reveal a mix of acceptance, discomfort and anguish in women’s memories, perceptions that I will gradually unfold in the thesis. Military wives tend to share their husbands’ awareness of the generational cut of the confrontation in the Seventies, as they talk passionately about those years and its challenges. Fernanda, one of the oldest women I interviewed, whose husband is currently accused of crimes against humanity, remembers the mid-Seventies:

> Life in Buenos Aires was terrible: buildings were patrolled, our husbands had to go to work in turns, they took guns with them even when they were off duty. It wasn’t easy but we were young, we took it as a normal thing. We were there, in the middle of the clash and one tells the story depending on the place he lived it from. But sadly this is how it was: our generation got to live these things, I mean, my father-in-law was a military too, he spent his whole life in an office and I think he never had to use a gun! *(laughter)* But I lived in 1972, and I swear the city was blowing up in the air.

*(Fernanda)*

In some cases, wives-participants are just as conscious of the political dimension of the conflict as their husbands are. Some of them had studied at university before getting married, in an environment that many officers did not know since they attended the Military Academy straight after high school or a short period of preparation to the entry test. In the vibrant academic world of the 1960s and early 1970s, instead, these women’s path often crossed with leftist sympathizers and even future members of the guerrilla: they were faculty mates, and the political engagement of many young people in the universities
was evident since manifestations, debates and ideological fervour were part of the daily scenario in most faculties across the country. Fernanda studied sociology in a Catholic private university in 1967, as the faculty of the state University of Buenos Aires had been shut down by Onganía’s military regime (1966-1970). This is how she describes her university mates who opted for militancy:

Faculties were very hot centres, especially the School of Sociology. Students handled a lot of ideology there, they wanted to change the world. I believe each one of us chose his way. I had mates at the faculty who got desaparecidos, you know, but I always respected their choice. They were highly committed. They though (the armed fight) was the solution, so it’s a shame that now it’s all just a speculation about those years, because these people deserve their story to be told entirely. It was a confrontation where many ideological principles were right, they all risked their lives and died because of this confrontation. Wrong or right, they believed and fought for a cause. And I respect them because they knew they could get killed. As I knew my husband could return in a coffin one day, you know? Many soldiers, his comrades, died, so, well, I guess on the other side they must feel the same.

(Fernanda)

Again, the high political mobilization of the Seventies that especially affected the upper and middle class, was witnessed and even acknowledged not only by the subaltern officers, but also by their wives. Fernanda’s case shows that the direct contact with contemporaries that had opted for a life of political and armed militancy, made these women particularly aware of the conflict they came to live immediately after. Like their husbands, but within a trajectory developed independently from them, some military wives showed respect for the
political activists’ convictions, which they disagreed with but still admired for their strength. By praising those who became their husbands’ opponents, military wives activated a mechanism that dignified a whole confrontation they feel somehow part of. Emphasising that the guerrillas were serious combatants keeps intact the notion that the military were ordered to combat the enemy, initially at least by a political authority. To that extent, they were doing their duty and their wives construct narratives that support this view, especially considering the current context of condemnation of the military. However, if on the one hand this attitude tends to justify and defend their husbands’ position, on the other it reflects these women’s awareness of the transversal political dimension of the violence, in some cases witnessed in contexts that have nothing to do with their military identity.

As I will argue in depth later, military wives felt involved just as their husbands in a conflict that equally marked their lives. Fernanda said some of her university mates “got desaparecidos”. Again, the feeling of inevitability of the clash, the fratricidal war depicted by the former officers, is confirmed by their wives too, contributing to a normalization of violence. In this attitude, women seem to be closer to the general position towards the victims of the dictatorship adopted by the rest of civilians. In fact, the conclusion many people who lived under the regime draw from the horrors of the Seventies was “por algo será”, meaning “there was always a reason” if someone was made disappeared by the regime. Jelin (2007:51) explains the justification “por algo será” as the commonsense argument proposed by a part of the society during and after the dictatorship to understand the logic behind the arbitrary detentions. It was the suspicion that those who had been kidnapped and detained by the military, had done something to be persecuted, as well as those who had survived the clandestine detention centres had done something to be spared.
This despicable attitude is part of what Crenzel (2017) calls the “culture of culpability\textsuperscript{35},” and imputes an implicit responsibility to the victim of State terrorism for his/her terrible fate; I would add it also allows the society to take distance from the violence, and from the collective responsibility in endorsing a regime that made thousands of victims. However, several military wives – who, like the majority of civilians, were not directly engaged in violence – came up in the interviews with a standpoint that looks similar to “por algo será”, but it actually has an opposite aim. Instead of declaring their extraneousness to the violence of the Seventies, these women claim their involvement and their first-line position in the same events to which many Argentines preferred to close their eyes. If military wives said “each one of us chose his way”, it is because they saw their classmates becoming militants, ready to fight (and even disappear) just like their military husbands knew they could return in a coffin one day.

3.6 Demand and protect: the large military family and the role of women

In order to put the women’s testimonies into context, in this last section I focus on the participants’ perceptions of the daily (military) family life. This dimension is especially apparent in wives’ discourse and experiences, and observable in their behaviours and practices. I extrapolate and explain some typical situations faced by military families that enabled and required the weaving of a supporting social structure, the large military family. As I explained in Chapter Two, this is a native category that participants use to refer to their own community made of an imagined totality of nuclear military families, among many of whom a network of support arises across their life in the military, bonds that are not given but are every time created. This dynamic is indeed essential to the

\textsuperscript{35} See Chapter 1.3 on transitional justice.
survival of the military institution and the performance of its functions; however, I aim to stress here how the main creators of this network are women, and describe how the Argentine military families reconstruct the past looking at their narratives and experiences of political violence. Therefore, I will describe how both the nuclear and the large military family functioned in the past, particularly in exceptional situations in the Seventies, ordinary activities such as manoeuvres and training, and deployment of military force like the Malvinas war or the crisis of the Beagle channel\(^{36}\); and I will show how the relationships among military families can be interpreted as forms of fictive kinship. These data will also provide tools to understand why military families react today in a certain way before the issue of the trials, explaining how such dynamics are interpretable in the framework of group identity in terms of kinship.

I recruited military wives mainly through a snowball effect, as they used to introduce me one to another by virtue of the reciprocal trust implied by what they described as “friendship”. On the officers’ side, instead, I often encountered a sort of initial veiled resistance in letting me recruit their wives, in an attitude I interpreted as a mix of overprotection and caution toward the private sphere of the family against an external intrusion. After all, I was investigating the trials and the Seventies, both quite distressing topics for them to deal with. Despite these delicate issues, I had the opportunity to interview officers and their wives in some double interview situations; sometimes it happened on the officer’s own initiative, other times it was a coincidence in the field. I report in particular two episodes, one happened in the house of a military couple, and the other in the prison of Ezeiza. In both cases, these situations offered a cross section of family life that I found extremely precious in terms of participant observation. At first,

\(^{36}\) The dispute involved Argentina and Chile claiming for the sovereignty over the islands of the Beagle Channel, in the extreme south of the continent. The tension reached its climax in December 1978 when the Argentines prepared to take the islands. The intervention of Pope John Paul II as a mediator prevented the war and led to the Peace Treaty of 1984 which solved the dispute after almost 100 years (Romero, 2006).
everything reminded me of my perception of an ordinary family of their generation, run by a couple who spent more than fifty years together, travelled across the country, and had a number of children and grandchildren they repeatedly mentioned. I must admit that everything I saw and listened was at first filtered by my expectation of dealing with quite traditionalist, most probably Catholic and definitely patriarchal families, in line with my idea of ordinary military family. However, at a deeper level of analysis the participants’ discourses and behaviours have been disentangled from this background, without rejecting it, and read in the light of some native mechanisms I will explain in the next few pages, even subverting at some point certain stereotypes about military families and military wives in particular.

In the first case Francisco spontaneously decided to introduce me to his wife Emilia and to open the doors of their house: they invited me for a mate, the social ritual in Argentina par excellence, and Emilia had prepared homemade pastries for the occasion. In the second occasion, instead, the scenario was completely different but equally revealing, as I met another couple, Esteban and Teresa, in the prison of Ezeiza, an exceptional environment for a military family. Teresa went to the penitentiary every Wednesday to visit her husband, whose list of visitors hosted my name too, that day. Therefore, I had the opportunity to talk to both of them, in a space that became immensely significant to the military families involved in the trials. In fact, even if my first objective was to interview imprisoned officers, I ended up observing also daily (or I should probably say weekly, giving the frequency of visiting times) practices of family life. I would have felt awkward to “steal” Esteban from his wife during the visiting hours to interview him separately, so that was a kind of fortunate but unavoidable situation for me, as well as for Teresa: her husband had agreed to meet me through the intermediation of César, who had asked him on the phone if he was available to be interviewed in the next visiting hours slot, but
Teresa did not expect the presence of a third person that day. However, as she would probably do with an unexpected visit in her house, she politely tolerated my presence among them, and listened to the reasons of my visit sitting next to her husband.

During my interviews with officers and spouses, I often witnessed a slight tension within the couple about who should lead the conversation, especially when my questions addressed the family life, a sphere they both shared. Thanks to the ethnographic practice of participant observation (Spradley, 1980; Tonkin, 1984; DeWalt, DeWalt and Wayland, 1998; Guber, 2001c) phenomena like this, which cannot be simply seen as tiffs between husband and wife, deserved special attention in my analysis. As I asked questions about the Seventies, the trials, and the military in general, Esteban, whose way of talking was quite vigorous, immediately monopolized the conversation; Teresa repeatedly tried to intervene until she openly interrupted her husband to make some clarifications. Slightly annoyed, Esteban looked at his wife showing some irritation for her unasked interference: after all, the researcher had entered the prison to talk to the prisoners, not to the visitors. Teresa’s reply to Esteban’s glare was more than eloquent to make him retreat: “pero si esta chica es civil, no entiende lo que dices!” (this girl is a civilian, she cannot understand what you’re saying!). Teresa’s argument was incontrovertible: being a civilian before a military wife she was more “qualified” than her husband to talk to me in that specific situation, intervening and supporting Esteban’s statements with further explanation where necessary. She was entitled to act as an interpreter and a mediator in that unusual conversation between a Lieutenant Colonel of the Army and an ethnographer sitting in the common room of a State prison.

The situation has been illuminating under several aspects: both Esteban and Teresa wanted me to grasp the specifics of military life, and both of them were showing their respective
area of expertise, the war theatre and the house and the family. In fact, if during double
interviews wives usually made way for their husbands to talk about the violent facts of the
Seventies, and their political implications, they clearly refused to step back as I asked how
those facts affected the family: that was their own realm.

The situation at Francisco and Emilia’s house was similar in this sense: any protest of the
man whenever his wife was leading the conversation was immediately dismissed as Emilia
made clear her condition of civilian, military wife, mother and woman, performing
different identities and social roles depending on the object of my questions. The military
wife, this hybrid creature in balance between military and civilian worlds, whose expertise
is just as vast as her husband’s, is the figure in my study symbolizing the non-institutional
dimension of the military in all its complexity. The unique features these women possess
entitle them to talk about a sphere they dominate not only because wives and mothers: it is
their position on the edge that makes military wives privileged interlocutors of an
extraneous person – woman and civilian herself, in this case – aiming to understand how
the military world works outside the barracks. I am going to explain on the one hand the
conditions that enable military wives to occupy this crucial position in the map of the
military world, and to develop the ability to interpret and respond to any extraneous
differently to their husbands; on the other, I will show how military life provides spaces
and circumstances to develop a solidarity network whose guardians are women, due to
their particular role in the military environment.

The double area of competence disclosed by the duet officers and wives often performed in
their interlocution with me provided a fertile terrain to ground my approach to the non-
institutional dimension of the military. The data I will present shortly confirm the centrality
of the family in the military institution and the implementation of the activities involving
the fully uniformed personnel: households and barracks are not separated realms, subject
one to the other, but interdependent and equally essential spheres of the military universe.

The military family and its civilian members are not directly contemplated by the Armed
Forces. The man in arms, in its multiple acceptations of officer, subaltern, soldier and
chief, is the irremovable centre of the universe contemplated in the institution; his code of
practice and values are established in volumes and handbooks which represent the constant
point of reference for officers during their career. The behaviour and the role of the
military family and the wife in particular, instead, are not formally recognized or regulated.
In fact, during my studies in the field I could not find any specific regulation about its
activities or the conduct of its members, apart from some generic reference to the
obligation for the military to uniform their life, appearance and practices accordingly to the
decency and rectitude prescribed by the Army, specifying this conduct has to be equally
applied to their private life (Fuerza Aérea Argentina, 2013). However, if private life is just
as important as institutional life, the family, supreme private sphere in Argentina,
constitutes an unavoidable element of the military.

With an area almost 12 times bigger than the United Kingdom, reaching both the Tropic of
Capricorn and the Antarctic Ocean, temperatures between 45° and -20°, and 3,183 miles
between its northern and southern borders, Argentina is definitely a geographically
distinctive country that makes the military profession equally distinctive. One of the main
traits of the military’s lifestyle is their high territorial mobility: in a country this size, this
characteristic is definitely amplified, as well as the challenges it poses. Officers and wives,
like their adult children, often emphasized their nomadic lifestyle in both negative and
positive terms. Teresa felt grateful because her husband was assigned to only four different
provinces until they definitely settled in Buenos Aires; as I mentally compared their family
tour to a thirteen-years return journey from Morocco to Germany, stopping three years in Austria and four more in Spain, I expressed my doubts to Teresa. She replied, seraphic: “Not at all. I have people who moved 17 times”37. Patricia, for example, was born in a military family herself so she knew from the very beginning how nomadic can be the life alongside an officer. She explained when she got married the perspective of keeping moving around the country looked “normal” to her, and picked up some very positive aspects of her experience as she described it:

It’s a way of knowing new places and people. It’s a life of deprivation, in a way, because the military spend their life within regiments and barracks, while the family is left alone. Women are alone with their children, their (biological) family is far away. So you start meeting more and more people, especially women. That’s nice, you become sympathetic with the other, with other families who are in the same situation, so it’s a life of deprivation but also beautiful.

(Patricia)

Similarly to Teresa and Esteban, Emilia and Francisco moved relatively few times from Buenos Aires to the extreme north of the country, from the southern Patagonia to the Brazilian border, and from the Atlantic coast again to the capital city. They have quite happy memories of their route and seem to confirm Patricia’s point of view as she expresses the importance of sharing their situation with “others” who are experiencing the same. Francisco loved one destination in particular:

37 Interview with Teresa (28/06/2016).
Sarmiento, Chubut, in the middle of Patagonia: -20 degrees in winter, four thousands inhabitants. There was nothing there. Nothing. There were more military than locals, and we had a great time!

(Francisco)

Emilia also remembered their first days in Patagonia with their newborn daughter:

In a destination like Sarmiento, you are cut off from the country, from your folks. You arrive alone, with some suitcases, a baby or two little kids, and have no family there, no parents, no siblings. So you need to get close to the others, “Today I look after the children, tomorrow you’ll do it” and this is how great friendships began. Sometimes you meet the same people in the next post, some others never again. But every destination was like a different story to me, and I liked them all.

(Emilia)

The identification with other military families, as Patricia and Emilia stressed, became stronger as the fresh nuclear family started its journey across the country and began sharing daily activities with other families. This dynamic was in a way a necessity and a lack of alternatives in many military posts, and saw the active participation of women who had to face the absence of their husbands on a regular basis. Officers were often involved in training and operations in the field with soldiers, which brought them away for weeks. In case of a war, or mobilization of troops, men were in mission for an indefinite period of time, which put women in the position of having to look after family and home by themselves. In fact, the majority of military wives went through the same process of adaptation, developing skills and elaborating collective strategies to deal with daily problematic situations, creating a sort of “feminine comradeship” similar to that men
established in the barracks. Therefore the identification with the other clearly did not affect only officers, but it extended to their families, and fuelled a feeling of union throughout the whole military community, which was especially intense in remote locations.

This perception of sharing was enhanced by the institution as it organized common activities involving children and women alike, and promoted the inclusion within common spaces such as military circles in leisure time. However, the most immediate reification of this sense of community was the *barrio militar*\(^\text{38}\), the military quarter, a conglomerate of military residencies that physically and socially centralized the human capital of the institution, the officers and their families. Especially for those assigned to posts in the interior regions of Argentina, living within military quarters was the norm, as the institution tended to provide housing for the military families who had no alternative for renting, giving the small size of these urban centres, in exchange of an exiguous rent for maintenance costs. As I mentioned before, in many destinations like Sarmiento the urban centre developed around the military quarter, and often lacked of affordable houses for the families who moved there; consequently, the institution compensated this necessity with a logistic support that had the effect of improving the sense of union among military families, reflecting the community dynamics internal to the barracks\(^\text{39}\).

In big urban centres, instead, like Buenos Aires or Mar del Plata, the large military family tended to scatter, and even if it is still frequent to find the so called *torres*, huge buildings hosting dozens of military families especially near headquarters, military schools and regiments, it is also very common for the military to mix up with civilians and share less spaces with *their own people*. But the large military family is a very flexible creature that expands and retracts depending on the movement of its members; its longevity is also

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\(^\text{38}\) Interviews with Victoria (19/05/2016), Patricia (21/06/2016), Emilia and Francisco (05/07/2016).

\(^\text{39}\) Interview with Emilia and Francisco (05/07/2016).
striking, and its threads persist strong as its members re-join whenever their ways overlap again in new posts. My participants returned to Buenos Aires in the last years of their military career, and declared they would make a constant effort to keep alive the bond with other military families they met on their way across the country, “to preserve the lovely memories we share”\textsuperscript{40}, Emilia says.

The expression Teresa used, “I have people”, is therefore not a coincidence: the feeling of being interconnected in time and space, despite the size of the country and the decades between old and new posts, corresponds to a feeling of identity, union and belonging that often translates into possession. The military and their families were aware they had a human capital at disposal they could rely on, an articulated system that proved its efficiency in many challenging circumstances in the past. In fact, in isolated places like the subtropical North or the austral South, any issue could actually become problematic and sometimes even dramatic. Without any specific question from my side, women often disclosed painful and intimate memories of loss and sorrow. Emilia, for instance, had a traumatic experience in Sarmiento:

Well, I lost a baby in the South, in the middle of nowhere. There was no hospital, only the quarters with a village beside, and a sort of dispensary. And I paid dearly, I had three surgeries after that and never again a pregnancy. That’s why we only have two children. However, I feel great affection for this place because I felt a lot of support from the others there.

(Emilia)

Although in the interviews they seem to be loyal and supportive to each other, it is worth stressing that rivalries and jealousies among women were frequent, often reflecting those

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.
among the respective husbands\textsuperscript{41}. Still, data show that military wives said – if not always solidarity – at least there was a strong empathy among them because, despite the differences in ranks and branches, sooner or later they all faced the hardship of family life in the military environment.

Most times, more than the place itself it was the absence of the husband that complicated the daily life of the family, as the care of the house and the children was entirely the responsibility of women. Teresa spent some years in Buenos Aires being originally from San Juan, and said she found it difficult living in the capital city when her husband was away: on the one hand she could not rely on the large military family, as bonds are weaker in Buenos Aires due to the lower concentration of military personnel compared to the overall population; on the other hand she could not benefit from the help of her own biological family, who were 750 miles away:

When I was in Buenos Aires it was particularly difficult. I had a child every year, so when my second child was born I had to leave my job to take care of them. And I didn’t know anyone who could help me with that. Things always happen when they (the men) are away, doing manoeuvres or at war. The children get sick, they fracture a leg or something, the washing machine breaks down… Any troubles you don’t want to happen normally happen when your husband is away. And you have to bear them, and fix them! That’s why our community is important, this large military family, because if something happens there is always someone there to help, and usually they are women (laughter).

(Teresa)

\textsuperscript{41} Interview with Berta (11/02/2016).
The husbands’ absence was probably the circumstance that made women identify and even come together with each other the most, as Teresa ironically noticed in the fragment above. Families shared not only duties and obligations, but also causes and purposes just like officers did in the battlefield. Teresa remembered her family had been involved in “interesting situations”, referring in particular to the participation of her husband in the first of the Carapintadas mutinies, which happened in Easter 1987. At that time Teresa and her children were living in the barrio militar in San Javier, in the northern province of Misiones, where Esteban was serving in the Regiment of Infantry under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Aldo Rico. Rico and his immediate subordinates, including Esteban, decided to rebel against the heads of the Army in Buenos Aires, but they first had to secretly abandon the quarters in the jungle of Misiones and join the rest of the rebel officers in Campo de Mayo. The official version was Esteban and his family were on holiday, but Teresa told me how she had to follow the precise instructions of her husband and his comrades to cover the mission, actively and consciously participating in a mutiny that could be punished by civil and military justice, thing which actually happened some months later. She reported this anecdote to explain how the military family see themselves “dragged into military life, so they have to participate greatly in every aspects of it”42, including the most stressful episodes.

An interesting point of reference for this work can be found in studies on the military family in Brazil, another huge Latin American country where the military tend to change location every two or three years. In particular Adão (2010) stresses the ability and the obligation of military wives to adhere to their husbands’ professional project through different levels of inclusion in the large military family. I agree with Adão as she finds among the characteristic of the prototype of the devoted military wife the attitude of

42 Interview with Teresa (28/06/2016).
“accompanying” the husband in the nomadic spirit of the profession, a practice that is essential for the operational modality of the national military machine. Like in the Brazilian military family, Argentine military wives also feel an obligation to adapt to this circumstance, for the advantage of the institution which relies on the spouses’ ability to enable the officers to carry on their duties.

Silva (2016) conducted ethnography with military families in the Brazilian Amazon. She describes the region as a “distant and isolated” territory that “simultaneously represents an institutional idea of sacrifice (because of efforts to conduct a civilizing project to bring the State to the region) and the daily sacrifices that military and their families face with the difficulties during their stay in the area” (Silva, 2016:157-158). The geographical, climatic and cultural specificities of the Amazon make it a quite arduous habitat for the military to settle in, a complex setting that intensifies the sense of community among the families, Silva argues. Similarly, some of the most remote destinations the Argentine military are usually assigned to, present quite challenging conditions such as extreme climatic change, costumes quite different to the highly populated metropolitan regions, and a general discomfort caused by the high geographical mobility and the distance from the biological family. Like in the Brazilian case exposed by Silva, my research claims the large Argentine family is definitely reinforced in these contexts. Adverse conditions fuel the sense of union among military families and trigger the solidarity mechanisms within the community, creating forms of fictive kinship in which women play an essential role:

Well, this is the career they (the officers) chose, and if you (the wife) don’t adapt then they should turn down, or ask for retirement, while you are supposed to accompany them for life, even if it doesn’t always go this way. I mean, we’re not the only ones living like this, you get used to it. Because it’s you, the one
living in front of you, the one next door: we support each other, and when things are normal we have a very good time. Of course you can’t get on well with everyone, but we have people, friends, and very satisfactory experiences of love. And I guess the others must think the same, in this life we share.

(Teresa)

Although military wives often depict life in the military community especially in the past as a positive experience, I suspect that there might be more bitterness than what they openly express. Despite reference to the episodes of violence of the Seventies, women tended to focus on domestic matters. It would seem likely that this attitude is also the result of a life-long unofficial training that governed not only what they did and did not say, but even what they could legitimately know and not know. This must have been particularly true in the Seventies, because many women said their husbands never told them about the operations they were involved in, being this fact confirmed by officers too. This increased the feeling of anguish of many women. Data from the interviews with wives suggest the pressure and the uncertainty that resulted from being deliberately kept in the dark about the risks their husbands were taking, and the extent to which those risks extended to the family, made the experience of the Seventies in particular quite heavy for these women. Therefore not only solitude, but also silence was an ingredient of the everyday hardship of life besides an officer. In a way opposed to their husbands, military wives seemed to be adept at obscuring their experiences rather than sharing them, because in their life in the military they had been trained by their husbands not to get involved into business that was not their own, especially in a context of an urban guerrilla movement, covert operations and war of intelligence. Somehow, as part of the adaptation process, military wives learnt not to ask and not to tell, and therefore applied those skills also when disclosing information to third
parts, like the researcher. It is part of the mechanisms of the alliance relationships that are so central in the military environment.

By reading military manuals (Ejército Argentino, 1990; Fuerza Aérea, 2013), it seems the identification intended by the military institution as the individual’s full dedication and devotion to the purposes of the group was not only a result of discipline and motivation inculcated during training, but also a perpetual objective to be achieved by its members. I suspect this aspect also includes the families since, within the military environment, identification is synonymous with adaptation and military wives master this skill just like their husbands. According to the Manual (Ejército Argentino, 1990:17), the individual who joins the Army or changes his post, leaves an environment he successfully managed to adapt to and enters an unknown territory that requires a new accommodation of his objectives and aspirations; a successful physical, mental and emotional adaptation will be achieved when the new member feels his needs are satisfied within the new environment. Inclusion will generate solidarity among original and new members in a group dynamic that will assimilate the multiform personalities of its components.

As the Manual also stresses, “integration is not static, it is challenged by changing circumstances, and any lack of adaptation may generate emotional tension and frustration in the group, responsible for abnormalities in the conduct of some members that affect in turn the morals and the efficiency of the organization” (Ejército Argentino, 1990:17). Considering the prescriptions and the vicissitudes of military life, and the pressure military families and wives in particular were subject to, it seems that family members needed to follow the same logics of adaptation and integration the officers were subject to when they were cadets or had to move from one post to the other. The difficulties faced by military families strengthened the relationship among its members. The network so established was
generated by identification and the need for adaptation, it was forged and strengthened through adversity, and constantly renewed in different times and places.

At this point it is worth rethinking of the military “ordinary family” as I intended it before I actually met some of them. Reconstructing the Argentine officers’ belief system is quite difficult if we want to avoid sterile generalizations and unhealthy assumptions. Part of the challenge is due to the fact participants do not talk openly about this aspect, perhaps because they do not consider it relevant to the ends of the study, or because they tend to take it for granted and self-evident. However, it is still possible to construct some hypotheses in this sense, especially regarding the relationship between husband and wife in the military family.

The presence of women within the military world is source of ambiguities and tensions that rely partly in the quite shared perception of deeply embedded differences between masculinity and femininity, and the “secular association of women with femininity and peace, and men with masculinity and war” (Carreiras, 2004 cited in Silva, 2016:154). This common feeling clearly existed within the Argentine military, and I did not expect anything different from that, especially considering my informant officers belong to an older generation of Argentines. However, these prescriptions and expectations about women’s position do not exclude a quite active role of the latter, shaped through a training they must undertake just like men do across their preparation in the Military Academy. They are tempered by adversities, in situations parallel to and associated with the experience of the men in the battlefield.

From this angle masculinity and femininity seem to meet and combine in the non-institutional sphere of the military world, consecrated by the family space. A demonstration of this, and a peculiarity of the Argentine case in this sense, is the reciprocal
acknowledgement of this phenomenon from both officers and military wives. Surprisingly enough, in my interviews with the officers they sometimes openly declared and often tacitly admitted the essential role and agency of their wives. Officers recognize their wives’ and their own adaptation process as a team work, and praise their women’s abilities to cope with the challenges of military life. Two former officers in the prison of Ezeiza declared:

Nicolás: Everybody knows the spouse of the soldier is more soldier than the soldier.

Esteban: Of course, they have to be stronger than us. Our wives must endure even more things than we do.

The institution may not depict the military wives as strong and enduring, but its members do. Interestingly enough, my participants applied to their women qualities that normally define the officer, like strength. Nicolás’ sentence is striking because by “more soldier” he meant strong in a spiritual way, in terms of temperament. “Strong” in this case does not refer to physical resistance but it means determined, steady, patient, as if the military wives’ character, and their “natural” feminine docile nature, toughens up while living beside an officer because of the challenges posed by the life they share.

Conversations with officers and wives also showed that men tend to assign the family and the household as the legitimate place to be occupied by the woman. However, I would not interpret this state of things exclusively as a “natural” subordination of the latter, based on biological differences established by a divine order. Indeed, this view is part of the patriarchal order accepted and promoted by a masculine and conservative organization like the Armed Forces, especially in a time when women were excluded from undertaking the military career (and discouraged from opting for other typically “manly” civilian
professions); but data suggest officers identify the household as the territory and the
dominion of their wives, rather than a place of confinement. The administration of the
house and the family was a women’s business in which they as men had no responsibility,
competence or even knowledge. And this is why in our interviews the husband usually let
the wife speak when the conversation was about what happened in the family, especially in
the times when the husband was not there. A common saying among the Argentine
military is indeed “the military wife has a rank superior to her husband, because she
commands at home”43. Understanding the agency of women in this is critical, just as the
importance for military families of keeping this status quo, because without it, the military
would be much weakened.

So the qualities of the officer, acquired during training and combat, must be acquired by
their women too. And this is also a reason why women felt equally committed as they
described the vicissitudes experienced in the Seventies. Adversities, wars and, as we will
see in the next chapter, exceptional situations like imprisonment and condemnation, tend to
morally strengthen the military, their wives and the relationship among the two, with a
direct repercussion on the large military family that in some occasions can also deploy a
political role.

Military wives hold the threads of the network among families. Like cadets who become
brothers in arms in the Military Academy, the strong relationship amongst the members of
the large military family replaces the ties of the single individual with his/her biological
family, a kinship that gradually disappears from the military’s daily sociability because of
the basically nomadic life the military family conduct with others who share the same
difficulties and challenges. They gradually acquire the status of relative to each other; it is
not a coincidence, for example, that children within the military family call tío and tía

43 Interview with Luis (23/06/2016).
(uncle and auntie) officers close to their fathers and their wives, as a signal of the extension of the familial bonds to other military couples with their children. This interpretation is in line with definitions of fictive kinship as a bond that is created “to substitute for the lack of close family ties” (Lucco, 1987) and “to enlarge the number of individuals from whom one might hope to obtain social support” (Nelson, 2014:205).

Since the officers must give priority to their career, wives represent the axis of their nuclear family and the guardians of the large military family. Like in the battlefield, identification creates unity, adversities trigger solidarity, which works on two levels: on the one hand it enhances union (based on commitment) within the couple and within the nuclear military family, hinged on the resilience of the military wife; on the other, it enhances union within the large military family (based on comradeship among men and sympathy among wives), relying on the sense identification among women.

The interpretation portrayed in this chapter does not represent a unique case in the behaviour of military families, as showed by some similarities with the Brazilian case, neither a model of interpretation for the military family worldwide. This work does not have the pretension of being an exhaustive study on the Argentine military family either, as many aspects such as its control mechanisms, the expectations of the institution in terms of family members’ formal conduct, the education of children, the gendered dimension of the involvement of civilian women in the institution, need to be further investigated by research still to be developed. However, the traits outlined so far are those which help to explain how military families behave today in relation to the judicial prosecution and the memory of the Seventies, object of the next chapter.
In the previous chapter I explained how “soldiership” is a state of being that involves the emotional sphere and shapes the social structure of the military world, extending from the barracks to the households. During his ethnographic study with the Brazilian military, Leirner (2009:70) argued that in their perspective war is a state of mind and a constantly potential scenario; it is a social relationship rather than a fact, which goes beyond the limits of the battlefield to become the interpretive key to understand reality and the actors that play in it. This perspective explains the importance of kinship in studying the military, and is confirmed by my analysis on the Argentine military family. I will now illustrate how this state goes beyond the completion of active duty; evidence suggests in fact that former officers of the Proceso perceive a state of “perpetual war”, which is in line with the persistence of some of the elements and practices of military identity I previously outlined. The participants consider themselves permanent belligerents, and this is particularly heartfelt since the conflict on the Seventies remains somehow unfinished in their view, and the relationships within the military family, as well as with superiors and civilians, are partly shaped by those events.

Aiming to shed light on this standpoint, this chapter analyses how the features of military identity persist in time and transcend the circumstance of war, bridging the participants’ experience of the Seventies with the way they feel and make sense of their current condemnation. The central argument of this fourth chapter, in fact, is that the factors that fuel the social dimension of the military help us to understand the behaviour of these actors
not only in the past when violence was exercised, but also in the present when it is processed, memorialized and condemned. In this context kinship is once again the key to understand these dynamics. I will explain how military actors relocate themselves within a different scenario adopting and re-signifying the logic and understandings that informed their sociability in the past. Above all, the sense of adaptation and reaction to the circumstance of war is one of the features that distinguish the soldier from the civilian, a necessary requirement to cope with military life not only for officers but also for their families. After proving the importance of adaptation to the battlefield, metaphor of the warfare in the Seventies, we will now make sense of the adaptation to the prison, metaphor (and reality) of the condemnation experienced by the accused, their families and comrades. By avoiding any praise, victimization or demonization of the actors involved, I wish to reflect on this sensitive issue without reproducing its current politicization, giving instead some tangibility to the experience of the military families.

4.1 Prisoners of war in times of peace

One indication of the rapport established with participants, was extending my sample to former officers facing the lesa, a Spanish term the military use to refer to the prosecution for crimes against humanity (crímenes de lesa humanidad). My access to the prison was not gained through formal channels; in line with the non-institutional approach adopted to conduct my research, I accessed the penitentiary on the invitation of some of my participants. This social practice connected me with the people concerned and was conveyed through the informal relationships that form the object of this study.
After some months in the field, both Cesár and Miguel spontaneously offered me the chance to join them in their regular visits to their convicted comrades. They invited me to go with them respectively to the prisons commonly known as Ezeiza and Marcos Paz.\(^44\)

For questions of time, only the first invitation could be put into effect. During our journey by car in a cold morning of June, Cesár told me about the prison. The Unidad 31 (U-31) is a medium security penitentiary at about 25 miles from Buenos Aires. It is formed by two sectors A and B, in turn organized into wings, each one hosting about twelve inmates in cells of 3.75 m². This structure was originally designed to host ordinary female inmates, some of whom carry out their pregnancy and serve part of their time with their infants. In May 2014 a decision of the Federal Penitentiary Service ordered the transfer of half the women hosted in the U-31, in order to make room to the lesa prisoners. The A Sector of the female prison was then evacuated to be occupied by a large group of almost totally ex-military and police personnel. Today the U-31 counts 109 men over a total population of 186 inmates (Procuración Penitenciaria de la Nación, 2017).

I had the opportunity to observe and interact with a small percentage of this group, whose age is far higher than the average Argentine inmate population, their stories and social background quite different. After I accepted the Colonel’s invitation to visit the prison, in turn he conducted negotiations with some of his former comrades currently detained in Ezeiza, who agreed to meet me; in fact, unlike some years ago, it is not possible to visit an inmate accused of crimes against humanity unless he first gives his consent.\(^45\) Once our documents were examined and our clothes searched, I walked into the visiting room with the Colonel. He walked towards a couple of men who just entered the room; they hugged

\(^{44}\) I refer respectively to the Unidad 31 (Centro Federal de detención de mujeres “Nuestra Señora del Rosario de San Nicolás”) and the CPF2 (Complejo Penitenciario Federal II “Marcos Paz”), both located in the suburbs of Buenos Aires.

\(^{45}\) According to some participants, before the establishment of this rule some ex-desaparecidos and relatives of victims unilaterally decided to visit lesa inmates in the past, and verbally attacked ex-military and police personnel, producing quite tense situations within the prison.
each other warmly, then the Colonel introduced me to my participants, Esteban and Nicolás, using their military grades. The two men smiled at me and invited me to take a seat, pouring *mate* for the four of us; Teresa, Esteban’s wife, joined our group as she arrived, and unfolded a tray with homemade pastries sent by one of their daughters. After a while, Cesár left us and moved to another table to chat with other inmates.

Esteban and Nicolás immediately showed curiosity on how I had conducted my work so far, and started asking questions about my stay in Argentina; they looked particularly interested in the reception of my research “out there”. After the difficulties encountered in the trust-building process with my participants, I expected even more reticence to talk from convicted military. Surprisingly enough, instead, they were the most relaxed participants I ever met in the field, showing calm openness to my questions. On their side, the majority of the questions they asked me had not much to do with my objectives and reasons to carry out the study. That part had already been “validated” by their fellow comrades who acted as intermediaries and let me access the prison. Therefore they were not conducting the typical evaluation process I had been subject to many times: they wanted me to share my views about the trials and the world outside the prison. As other times in the field, while they were participating in my study I was also responding to their own objectives.

Accused officers I interviewed in Ezeiza felt everyday more detached from the society they used to belong to. From their point of view, visitors acted as a channel through which they could communicate with the external world, a vehicle for impressions and rumours, an amplifier of moods and voices. In this situation the researcher acted as a messenger between the outside and the inside of the prison. For example, Nicolás asked how old were the military I had interviewed so far, and whether I had the opportunity to talk to young officers in service. I understood he wanted to know if I thought the new generations in the
Army would stand in solidarity with their former superiors, now imprisoned; my opinion was probably interesting to them since it came from someone non-Argentine, extraneous to the military world and therefore perhaps in their perspective more “objective”. I answered that, according to some informal conversations I shared with young officers from the Air Force, I had the impression they tended to contextualize the military’s conduct in the Seventies, although they did not justify the Proceso, and showed some distance in a quite critical approach to the Armed Forces’ involvement in the repression. Moreover, even if Esteban and Nicolás wished to conduct an assessment on me, perhaps there was not time enough for that: time acquires a different meaning in such a place like prison and must be optimized, because the windows on the real world are extremely precious, that is why the conversation kept a steady rhythm for the whole three hours at our disposal.

The accused officers reintroduced themselves specifying spontaneously their names, ranks, years of service and time spent in captivity. Esteban is a former Colonel who entered the Army in 1964; at the time of our conversation he had already spent two years and a half in pre-trial prison, his sentence not yet having being formulated. Nicolás, instead, is a 75 years old former Lt Colonel; he served the Army for 23 years, and was arrested in 2010. As I found out conducting research later, Esteban is accused of illegal deprivation of liberty and infliction of torture and gross injuries against 192 victims, within an ongoing case involving 22 accused; Nicolás, instead, was serving life sentence for the same class of crimes against 65 victims, after five years of pre-trial detention.

Knowing the majority position on the Seventies among former officers, the reactions to the related accusations of genocide, and the limit I personally experienced in exploring these topics in the field, I never asked Esteban or Nicolás what they had done forty years before to end up in prison. I did not ask either if they felt any guilt or regret for their actions. We
talked instead about the trials, their political implications and the consequences for the families. Esteban started putting into context the events of the Seventies, in what at first looked like the umpteenth history class similar to those held by the officers I had interviewed outside the prison. However, if the informants I had interviewed so far pushed to make me understand their view that intervention against the guerrillas in the Seventies was legitimate, Esteban and Nicolás focused on illustrating their belief that the punishment for that intervention was unfair.

Showing an attitude consistent with that of their comrades outside, the imprisoned officers refused any judicial, political and moral charge of the condemnation, as they refused to admit responsibility for crimes they see as war actions, which would make them felons before the country they swore to defend. They know they will never be able to walk in the streets of their city again, since the society would never accept it; they also know the most realistic desirable outcome of their prosecution would be house arrest, usually allowed to inmates into old age or with serious health conditions, but not automatically guaranteed to human rights abusers. The whole lesa represents a concern for both comrades who have been imprisoned and those who remain at large: accused military are considered to be “political prisoners” by their fellow comrades and the military-friendly circles that fight to restore their name. The reasons behind this label are both juridical and cultural.

As for the former, I mention below some elements that, according to most of my participants and to information shared on social networks close to the military, would determine the alleged unconstitutionality of the prosecution. In particular, they refer to the derogation of the law of Due Obedience (n°. 23521, 1987) promulgated by Alfonsín that originally guaranteed immunity to subaltern officers by virtue of their lower position in the ranks, and their consequent reduced responsibility in the counterinsurgency. They also
mention the suspension of the military justice code happened after the end of the dictatorship, especially given the prosecution of what they consider to be facts of war; and the illegal retroactive application of international law (specifically the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, ratified by Argentina in 2001) that allowed the prosecution of acts committed decades before the establishment of the law. Another argument is based on the violation of several constitutional guarantees of the prisoners, such as the abuse of pre-trial preventive prison, the refusal to provide adequate medical attention, and the denial of home arrests to prisoners more than 70 years old\textsuperscript{46}.

Despite the attempts of several associations close to the military to bring the issue to the attention of superior judicial bodies, and the denunciation made by some international press (O’Grady, 2017), these alleged violations remain ignored by the Argentine State, contributing to the former military’s sense of their own isolation. As Cesár explained in one of our interviews:

How could I possibly imagine 45 years ago that I would go today from prison to prison to see my comrades? I feel persecuted, just like they do. The difference between me and them is that I still walk free. But we’re all liable to prosecution. They (Kirchners’ supporters, judges and human rights organizations) construct cases against us in two seconds, because the burden of proof is inverted, here. The law says all suspects are innocent until proven guilty; here instead they just assume we’re all guilty while we have to prove our innocence.

(César)

\textsuperscript{46} Anonymous sources from the Argentine judicial environment confirmed in informal conversations the existence of a clear political intentionality and a certain arbitrariness in the conduct of the trials, which supposedly neglects these juridical frameworks established for the protection of the individual, in the name of the superior quest for justice and punishment against a whole group responsible of the abuses of the Seventies.
I will not go in depth into the legal aspects of this matter, since I have no expertise or aim to ascertain the rightness of these claims; I will rather focus on how the accused legitimise their alleged past actions and how they perceive their subsequent treatment, constructing their claim as political prisoners in Argentina.

Former officers openly denounce the political intentionality behind the orchestration of the trials; they believe they should be tried in a military court, their natural judge, since civilian justice inevitably distorts the interpretation of what they see as facts of war, and would not be able to take into account the functioning, the role and the characteristics of the Army when judging the actions of its members. Considering that the military interpret the Seventies as a war, this denunciation is not surprising and besides being a strategy to elude some responsibilities, it is also consistent with their military mind-set. From my informants’ point of view, the suspension of the military justice code in particular is emblematic of a political manipulation that made the military the only guilty party in the spiral of violence that affected Argentina in the Seventies, while the enemy they were fighting were exonerated from the judgement of both the Court and history. In sum, I never found evidence of military personnel of the Seventies in favour of the trials; I would state that they think they should be tried by no court at all, neither civilian nor military.

However, the emphasis officers put in their narrative on the need and the justness of being tried according to the military code of justice confirm once again the native separation between civil and military world. My participants believe in no way civil judges can understand the circumstances in which the violence was delivered, as they cannot possibly understand the military mentality and its mechanisms, first of all the pillar of due obedience. On top of this, the society’s indifference towards the crimes committed by the guerrilla in the Seventies, and the reluctance of the State in judging these acts of terrorism
are at the basis of the military’s statement according to which the trials and the politics of memory are moved by vengeance instead of a real quest for justice.

This awareness increases a deep sense of frustration and resentment among the military and their families, who would never acknowledge a condemnation produced by a system that refuses to take into account what they see as the very nature of the facts and that of the actors involved, just like they reject its judicial charge and its moral implications. The officers never considered imprisonment and trial as an exclusively judicial matter, just like they never considered war as a personal issue. They are aware of the condemnation they experience not as individuals, but especially as a group; their emotions towards the lesa are filtered by the belonging to the Armed Forces. They lived the Seventies and its events as members of a collective, and according to the position they occupied within the same; they adapted to the circumstance of war implementing tools provided by the institution; they inflected their experiences through feelings reinforced within the group; and, ultimately, they feel judged because of the commitment they shared and by virtue of an oath they sealed when they joined the military and left their civilian self behind.

The accused officers and their families often talk about being prosecuted and persecuted “for being military” 47: they all say that there are no specific events reconstructed in the trials, no witnesses who recognized the officers – forty years later – perpetrating abuses against them or third people. Participants argue witnesses are prepared and the trials set up. The causes for crimes against humanity would be a fiction, in their words. In order to find out more, after fieldwork I looked for professional advice and spoke to an Argentine judicial defender 48 that works on cases of lesa humanidad, fifteen since the reopening of the trials. According to the lawyer, the judicial causes are usually opened not by initiative

47 Interviews with Clara (11/05/2016), Gabriela (15/06/2016), Esteban, Teresa and Nicolás (22/06/2016).
of a victim accusing a specific person of a specific crime, but by initiative of a judge, a public prosecutor or a human rights organization. The lawsuit is usually launched on the evidence provided by the CONADEP (1984) and it sues the whole military personnel that were serving within a certain regiment, in a specific place when at some point during the dictatorship some citizens disappeared or were illegally detained. Tribunals then base the charges on the concept of \textit{perpetration by means of an organization} formulated by Claus Roxin (1963)\textsuperscript{49}. By applying this theory, the Argentine judges usually decide that the accused, due to their \textit{position} within a hierarchical organization would have been in the power of impeding the perpetration of the crime; however, because they did not act so, they must be found guilty as if they had committed the crime themselves.

The lawyer stated that the application of Roxin’s theory would not suit the Argentine case. The reason why in some cases subaltern officers or even NCOs were acquitted after being tried, was precisely because the judge considered the concept of perpetration by means inapplicable, but it seems to be a minority position in the prosecution of human rights offenders in Argentina. Only this construction allows the Court to judge and convict the subalterns, and apply the maximum sentence in these cases. It is not uncommon to find former lieutenants serving life sentence, that is the same sentence the members of the juntas received in the 1985 trial. Once again, the concept of \textit{position} is an essential interpretive key to understand the present experience of condemnation of former subalterns, as it was essential to understand their experience of military life in the past. And indeed it seems then that people are being detained, accused and tried for \textit{being military} in a certain place and time, like their wives and children say, that is for belonging to the organization by which violence has been perpetrated on a large scale.

\textsuperscript{49} Roxin’s theories have been adopted in 1994 by the German Federal Court of Appeals to judge human rights violations perpetrated under the border regime installed by the leadership of the German Democratic Republic; in international criminal law they provided solid bases for the condemnation of Congolese war criminals in the cases \textit{Lubanga} (2007) and \textit{Katanga and Chui} (2008) (Weigend, 2010).
In our conversation, Esteban and Nicolás underlined the dimension of punishment besides condemnation; they explained vehemently how the judicial prosecution would be part of a broader plan of castigation inflicted to the military since 1983. According to my participants, the trials represent only the last and harshest measure undertaken by democratic governments against the Armed Forces personnel since the end of the dictatorship, together with the annulment of compulsory military service (1994), the suspension of the military justice code, the heavy cuts to the funds to the institution and those to the personnel’s income (Esteban affirmed how he only received a 34% of the pension due to him as a former Colonel after 34 years of service). Frederic (2008) explains how especially the reduction of the financial agency of the Argentine Armed Forces responds to a wider policy undertaken during the transition to reduce their operational functioning exclusively to the military field, within the process of de-politicization of the military. The superior objective was to finally and permanently submit the military power to civilian rule. In the officers’ perspective these mortifying policies and the following accusation of genocide represent the breaking point in the harmony with the civil society. Although human rights supporters and Argentines in general acknowledge this limit has been largely crossed during the last dictatorship, the military consider instead the lesa as the tipping point in the deterioration of the civil-military relations.

Unsurprisingly, prisoners’ solid statement of innocence is usually accompanied by a sense of subtle frustration for the impossibility to install in the society their own version of the events. Nevertheless, the main unexpected feeling I spotted among convicted participants is a calm acceptation of this fate that at first looked incompatible with their strong criticism against the lesa. In fact, when I asked how they felt as the lesa started, marking a neat change in their lives, Nicolás answered very calmly:
We’ve been trained for this. At war you know you can be taken, you can end up being prisoner of war. And here it’s just the same: we accept it.

(Nicolás)

I expected convicted military to be angry, showing sound resentment against the society and the government, reclaiming their actions during the dictatorship, inveighing against the Kirchners and the former enemy. This happened in part, and it is certainly a behaviour I witnessed out in the military circles, but the preponderant attitude I could observe in prison, instead, was definitely a firm acceptance I interpreted as the compliance of the soldier who is trained to combat and knows that one of the possible results of going at war is ending up as a prisoner. Going back to the dimension of the battlefield explored in Chapter Three, the condition of the prisoner of war can only be shared and fully understood by men who found themselves in the situation of combat, direct consequence of their choice for the military identity. They all received certain instructions and knowledge, and are now experiencing a fate which is unexpected and at the same time familiar. Although detestable to them, this fate can be confronted thanks to a combination of what the already cited Argentine Army’s handbook on the exercise of command calls “composure and resistance”. By “composure” it means the quality of any officer who dominates his emotions to overcome adverse and unusual circumstances; by “resistance”, instead, the handbook refers to the mental and physical strength that allows the officer to tolerate pain, exertion, anguish and any hard situation (Ejército Argentino, 1990). Considering imprisonment one of the outcomes of war, a well-trained officer must keep a resilient attitude in front of such a fate; adaptation, acceptation and resistance are three steps of the same tactic former officers have been trained to for years. Remembering his time held prisoner by the British during the Malvinas war, Luis said once:
At war you know you can fall in an ambush, you can get killed or be taken prisoner. And if in the end they take you (as a prisoner), you know you can still make it, they can treat you fairly. However, the first thought of a prisoner is always to escape. But if you can’t do it, you just try to make the most of it.

(Luis)

Keeping control over unexpected but contemplated scenarios is one of the necessary steps to stay alive without surrender to panic, fear and despair; we saw how preparation to war is the essence of the military job, including the preparation to war’s possible forms and outcomes: accepting and resisting in the condition of prisoner of war is part of that training. Moreover, being taken by the enemy is a war scenario many officers involved in the lesa already lived in Malvinas, as shown by Luis’ testimony; thus, besides theory many informants also gained direct experience of imprisonment. However, despite their substantiated self-control, being judicially prosecuted by the same State they served, forty years later, for doing what they think was their job is not exactly what officers of a regular force would expect. This situation clearly generates distress and certain reluctance. Nevertheless, within a perpetual, not conventional conflict as the Seventies is still perceived to be by officers, being caught as prisoner of war is an outcome which any soldier has been prepared for. By recovering that knowledge, and combining it with their solid skills of adaptation, former officers manage to accept their destiny and make sense of it.

However, this attitude does not exclude the urgency for them to denounce the unfairness of this destiny. In many ways, the participants’ disclosure of such emotions recalls the same feeling officers have towards Malvinas: although they may accept the defeat, ex-combatants feel the urgency to communicate how worthily they fought despite the outcome.
of the war. This attitude helps in explaining how convicted officers tend to accept their fate in the *lesa*, like in any other war. But there is a particularity in the aftermath of the Seventies: the inconvenience of their current position is explicable because in the soldier’s mentality the state of prisoner of war is incompatible with military victory. Once there is a capitulation – as it happened for example in Malvinas when the Argentines were sieged by the British forces in Puerto Argentino (Port Stanley) at the end of the war – the parts negotiate the rendition, and the defeated troops automatically become prisoner of the adversary. Former officers consider their performance in the counterinsurgent war of the Seventies a sound military victory, because the subversive threat had been neutralized by 1978, therefore these men cannot passively surrender to their destiny of prisoners today, which is in contradiction with the outcome of the armed confrontation. They can accept the extreme consequences of the war, as part of their training, since acceptance is part of adaptation; but acceptance does not imply resignation; to the contrary, resistance is one of the military abilities developed in the training and implemented in the battlefield and, like other features of “soldiership”, it appears to be central in the exceptional circumstance of the trials.

4.2 *Romper el cerco*: loyalty among comrades

Participants acknowledged the fight against the guerrilla moved from a military to a political and judicial battlefield, being the existence of prisoners of war a proof of this renewed hostility; they feel at war again, because the enemy persist in attacking, although they implement strategies that do not belong to the warfare anymore. Consequently, officers – both imprisoned and still at large – must respond to the aggression from their new combat position, determined by their current location in the field. In the actual
scenario, their possible position is reduced to two options only: inside or outside the prison. During fieldwork I ascertained that, despite some evident difficulties, members of these two portions of former military succeed in keeping contact and cooperate with a common aim, reflecting in their action some established social practices within and among generations of trained soldiers.

A group of former military strenuously work to support the comrades who get caught by the judicial system every year, taking care of their needs and fuelling their limited sociability; their action is important to the imprisoned officers and their families in order to go through the adversities of the lesa, that is, to adapt to the new situation they have to face. I observed these practices in the field and discussed them with the participants: the lesa actually gives the opportunity to observe how strong and long-lasting comradeship can be in the military world. The most effective organization that assumes the task of assisting the lesa prisoners is the Unión de Promociones (UP), an association formed by retired military personnel that carries out several activities in support of the comrades prosecuted. The name of this group brings together one of the characteristics of military life, unity, with its personification, the promoción, the aforementioned cohort of officers from the same regiment who graduate in a certain year.

The promoción follows the cadet from the very beginning of his military birth and is a symbol of belonging and loyalty; therefore, it plays as an essential conceptual tool that facilitates the understanding of the military mentality. Military personnel of a same generation recognize each other and communicate via the system of promociones, a native network that survives the end of the career and actually acquires a special meaning with retirement. Every promoción has an assigned number that accompanies the aspiring officer throughout his career in the military, and an elected president who acts as spokesperson
and transmits information to the comrades from his own cohort. This information has to do mainly with the members’ life milestones, such as deaths, marriages, births, so it sometimes involves also the comrades’ families. The promociones organize regular meetings and social events to renew their bond, often at the same time of important events for the Armed Forces, such as anniversaries, celebrations and commemorations. The promociones even celebrate their most significant “birthdays”, organizing events for the 10th, 25th and 50th anniversary of graduation. And, since the lesa started, through the system initiated by the UP every time one of its members gets involved in a trial his promoción gets in touch with the family to offer support, starting a joint action of resistance. In sum, the promoción is the way that the special relationship among comrades is kept alive across decades, also transcending the strictly tactical and operational sphere to embrace the social and familial dimension. During fieldwork I was involved in informal meetings among former officers members of the UP, and I had the opportunity to observe how they use, recover and even strengthen the bonds of comradeship forged in training. I realised how, in order to last in time and function as a network of support, comradeship needs to be mutually agreed and maintained, and this requires a constant effort. The fictive nature of this bond – in anthropological terms – consists indeed of its mutuality of being (Sahlins, 2011a; 2011b) and the consensus among individuals. As Nelson (2014:206) explains, “unlike biological or legal kinship where someone else’s decision suddenly supplies you with a brother-in-law or a grandmother, fictive kinship relies on mutual actions and mutual agreements”.

Cesár is one of the founders of the Unión de Promociones. The association was created in 2005 on the initiative of a small group of former officers of the Army worried for the increasing threat of a judicial prosecution to be launched against the military; the network progressively extended to the Navy and the Air Force, as well as the security forces. The
organization has a central headquarter in Buenos Aires and provincial delegations across
the whole country. Its members contribute with their presence and small donations to
support accused comrades in several ways: they pay weekly visits to the prisons, providing
logistic support for the relatives who often have to cross the country to see their loved ones
(many military wives said they regularly use the UP vans to travel to the penitentiaries to
visit their husbands); they provide counselling service assisting the accused and their
families in the preparation of the defence, putting them in contact with lawyers; and act as
a channel the prisoners can communicate through, publishing their declarations and letters
online. Moreover, the UP participates in a radio programme, De eso no se habla\(^{50}\), and
periodically organizes debates, public acts and commemorations of what they see as
crucial facts of the Seventies, in order to gain visibility and raise consciousness around the
matter. It is also very common that, within some of the activities carried out by the UP,
many officers get in touch with comrades they would never have the opportunity to meet
again otherwise, especially considering the size of the promociones in the Seventies
(Cesár’s promoción was made of 235 graduates, for instance). Therefore, the social space
recovered and perpetuated by the UP becomes just as important to its members as its
political aims. Using the familiar and well-established system of the promociones, the UP
develops a comprehensive strategy acting on several fronts, reaching every corner of the
country, and reproduces in the exceptional scenario of the trials the same practices of
mutual support that characterize military life.

It is important, though, to highlight that the activities of the UP are financially supported
by donations made by the associates. The UP, indeed, is not an institutional network
authorized by the Armed Forces; on the contrary, it is a spontaneous, informal answer to

\(^{50}\) In English “We won’t talk about this”. This is a famous sentence usually attributed to the military in their
attempt to keep silence around the modalities and the consequences of State terror during and after the
dictatorship; the military re-use these same words against their detractors and their reluctance to address the
irregular conduct of the trials.
the lack of support of the institution in relation to the trials. Although the Army’s leadership in the last few years have shown some concern about the matter, when the lesa started almost fifteen years ago the heads of the current institution refused to support its subalterns in any aspect of the question. This rejection provoked bewilderment among former officers who felt abandoned as they started being prosecuted for orders they fulfilled during the dictatorship. The officers expected the Chief Commanders to protect them, and to assume responsibilities as representative of the institution that sent them to fight in the counterinsurgent war; the generals, instead, decided to ignore the critical situation faced by former subalterns. As Cesár denounced:

When our people started being arrested one by one, those who reported to the General Staff asking for help were advised to get a good lawyer: they were told it was their own problem, a judicial matter. This is what happened under General Bendini51: one left the headquarters feeling like all this time he joined a gang of partisans! We served in a regular army, a legal force that acted against terrorism by a constitutional order. And now, the institution which is supposed to give us shelter just abandons us. This is the truth: we’ve been drifting all this time because they never considered the lesa an institutional matter, when it is more than institutional, it is a national matter. We didn’t wake up one day and came up with the idea of the counterinsurgent war. So this is why we put the UP together and, well, we’re fighting back.

(César)

The UP inserts then within a dramatic gap in the unfulfilled expectations of a whole generation of officers. In 2003, the Armed Forces did not follow through what many saw

51 General Roberto Bendini was nominated Army’s Commander in Chief by President Kirchner in 2003, and held his post until 2008.
as its duty to protect and support its subordinates; rather, it abandoned them as the civil-military relations deteriorated due to political tensions. The officers used to orient themselves within their own world through a pyramidal system that suffered an important transformation not in its structure but in its members’ perception. When the horizontal, peer relation based on comradeship boosted by the UP started to replace the vertical, hierarchical relation between the base and the vertexes of the institution, the promoción gradually became priority in spite of the chain of command, and the vertical axis disappeared while the horizontal axis strengthened, shaping the way the subalterns share and make sense of their past and present-day experiences.

Through the solidarity mechanisms triggered by comradeship and conveyed by the UP, many former comrades decided to join this collective action in sustain for their oppressed companions. Cesár fought as a volunteer in Operativo Independencia in Tucumán together with several companions who died in combat, or are now accused; Francisco witnessed the loyalty of his fellows as he got shot by the guerrilla, and shows now the same solidarity he received to those who are being convicted. Denying help to his comrades in the judicial transposition of the Seventies should not be an option for an officer, just like in the battlefield. Francisco, who strongly supports the UP, pointed out:

This isn’t an institutional decision, it’s personal. We are a group of comrades who cannot forget our fellows in need, we stand behind them to help them in everything we can. Because now the fallen (in the battlefield) are our accused comrades, how could we abandon them? All we have to do is going to the prison, to bring them some pastries and remind this society what we fought for. And still not all of us are capable of this.

(Francisco)
Talking to the convicted officers in Ezeiza, it became evident that not only the solidarity showed by their comrades is fundamental from a human point of view, but it also represents their last connection to the world they used to belong to. The action of the UP and the commitment of its members is a demonstration of the horizontal *esprit de corps* of the Army like something deeper than a principle formulated in handbooks. If it is true that the convicted military perceive the state of perpetual war just as their free comrades do, it is also true that they feel frustrated and powerless, especially now they are dispossessed of their equipment and their military capability; moreover, in the eyes of the society, they are not military anymore, but criminals. In this circumstance, the action undertaken by the comrades outside the prison is even more heart-felt; the imprisoned officers in Ezeiza said about their fellow comrades:

Esteban: We need to know they are there for us

E.: What can they do?

Nicolás: Well, they *break the siege* for us *(emphasis)*! They do what we can’t do from here.

Esteban: Indeed they do. A soldier is a soldier, no matter what.

The expression “break the siege”, in Spanish *romper el cerco*, belongs to the military argot and describes the action the troops undertake in the battlefield to rescue the comrades besieged by the enemy. Both the besieged and the rest of the troops try to break the enemy lines by focusing on their weak points, the former inside and the latter outside the siege. The already cited handbook on the exercise of command (Ejército Argentino, 1990) dedicates a chapter to the ‘support of troops cut off by enemy action’. Among the steps to undertake in this situation, the text specifies as a priority preventing the troops from
thinking they have been abandoned by the rest of the unit; secondly, promptly providing them with all the necessary (fire) support, re-establishing contact; and, thirdly, keeping the besieged troops constantly informed about the actions undertaken to their aid. With an eye to the emergency some former troops are experiencing nowadays in the judicial arena, this list of actions summarizes exactly what the UP is doing in support of the prisoners of war cut off by the siege of the lesa, trying to rescue them from public condemnation in a joint, unanimous act of resistance.

As also mentioned in Chapter Three, this feeling of supportive comradeship needs to be put into context into the divisive history of the Argentine Army. The Argentine military have a history of conflict and division during times of peace, and a joining of ranks when under siege by outside forces, whether these are guerrilla insurgents or politicians like the Presidents Alfonsín and Kirchner. The current situation of the trials for crimes against humanity proves once more the existence of these mechanisms, and reads its working from the point of view of comradeship, which I interpret here as fictive kinship. The tension between the vertical and horizontal ties of comradeship enlightened by the imprisonment of former subalterns and the support for these from the comrades still at large is therefore a structural characteristic of the Argentine Armed Forces which also affects its social sphere.

4.3 Insubordinados: frustrated expectations increase resentment

The Army is a very prescriptive institution: every procedure exists to comply with a specific order, and provides a result whose consequences are cautiously calculated. One of the central elements of military life explored in Chapter Three was the preparation in view of combat. It is exactly to face the unpredictable nature of this situation that the institution
is organized in a highly hierarchical way. This system is based on the assumption that each part of the engine has a specific function, and once successfully trained to a set of rules and action-reaction mechanisms, the soldier develops the ability promptly to adapt to the unexpected dynamics of the battlefield and survive, thus accomplishing the mission. Beyond the specific setting of combat, officers develop a generally quite mechanistic mentality in the Army, based on cause-effect reasoning: every situation requires certain actions to be carried out, which if performed well will generate an expected outcome. Similarly, in terms of career promotions, officers undertake pre-established paths to take steps within the pyramidal structure of the Army, which they can successfully take over the top finally to occupy the highest positions in the ranks, provided that they keep an excellent conduct throughout the performance of their duties.

We saw how vocation was only one of the reasons why men joined the Army and motivated their action in the Seventies. However, some of the participants did feel this strong will when they decided to opt for the military career, and the desire to serve their country was the driving force that pushed them through the compliance of their duties. This was Luis’ case, for instance, who embraced the military life earlier than his comrades and attended the Liceo Militar before enrolling in the Military Academy. This kind of military high schools (in the Seventies eleven in the whole Argentina) answer to the Ministry of Defence and is meant to form reserve officers. When the military service was still compulsory in Argentina, attendees who entered the Liceo aged 11 were exonerated from its compliance once they completed the cycle of studies. Therefore, Luis left home when he was a young boy, and once he became a grown-up man all he knew was the Army and how to make the best of its logic and working:
I’ve been interested in the military world since I was in primary school. I don’t come from a military family, it was my own inclination. I joined the Liceo because I wanted to become a military. We were about 200 people there, and only ten or twelve of us made it to the Military Academy; which worked very well for me, because I was really enthusiastic about it. And I always did my best in the Academy: I got the scholarship during the four years of my training, so I wasn’t even a burden for my mum anymore. But I didn’t do it for that reason, I did it because I wanted to make things right, so they went right… After about ten years since graduation, I attended the Escuela Superior de Guerra, which is compulsory if you want to be promoted to the grade of General in the years to come. Some people want to become officers and see where they get to. Others choose the career under the influence of their families. Others just want to get a job, and they know that – unless they screw it up on the way – they can get married, have a family, a medical insurance and then retire, that’s all. There’s everything. I wanted to become a General. And the truth is I always tried to be my best in everything I did. So I used to be the best of my promoción, and I thought “If I keep making things right, and I keep being the first, I’ll become a General. And if I become General, I’ll be able to do even more things for the Army”. Very naïve, but that was my thinking.

(Luis)

Luis’ testimony shows how the alleged linear course of military life was deeply embedded in his mind-set of the young officer of the 1970s. He attended the Superior War College in the 1980s with the clear objective of becoming a General, following the prescribed path towards the upper-reaches of the institution he decided to devote his life to. His tenacity and commitment were sustained by the conviction that efforts pay back. The military world
is based on constant preparation to a series of events and developments in military life that, whether faced and carried out according to the prescriptions of the Army, have outcomes predictable and even enjoyable to its members. For its own nature and survival, the military is an institution that aims to foresee almost every possible scenario its affiliates may be involved in: accidents are minimized thanks to standardized practices, in the battlefield like in the professional climbing to the top of the institution.

However, the dramatic swings in the recent political history of Argentina, and some definitely unexpected scenarios in the eyes of the military like the current accusations of genocide, proved this general rule wrong. Although the military of the Proceso have been almost untouchable for thirty years after the end of the dictatorship thanks to the impunity laws promulgated by Alfonsín and the pardons proclaimed by Menem, discontentment affected especially the lower ranks of the institution for reasons that were sown in the Seventies. With the end of the dictatorship, society’s demands for justice, the general repudiation of the military, the political failure of the junta, and the military defeat in the Malvinas war generated internal dissent which compromised the hierarchical order in the institution (Romero, 2006: 261; Waisbord 1991:165). This dissatisfaction among subaltern officers rested on repeated deficiencies of the superiors’ conduct in several contexts, and in my opinion represents an important antecedent in the experience of betrayal many participants live since the reopening of the trials in 2006.

The most evident manifestation of this prolonged sense of frustration is the Carapintadas mutinies, when the sense of betrayal in the barracks resulted in episodes of open rebellion against the generals who replaced the juntas in the leadership of the institution and let the lower ranks being prosecuted by civilian justice. These military rebellions saw the participation of some of the officers that nowadays are fighting to rehabilitate the image of
the military against a new attempt of judicial prosecution. Among these there is the youngest of my participants, Miguel:

I spent three years in a post in the Andes, so remote there was no sign of subversion at all. Then in 1987-88 I participated in the Carapintadas mutinies. The objective was to demand our superiors to stand before the political power and say “Stop this now, because if you judge Lt Pirúlo and Sgt Pérez, then sue also Juanita Montonera, Pepito from ERP and Isabel Perón”. If you, government, really want to judge the lower ranks then you need to extend this to the whole society: the military are not the only responsible for the mess of the Seventies. And I went to prison for that, I knew it could happen. After a year and a half I was sent to house arrests, but in 1989 the terrorists attacked the Tablada$^{52}$. So, I volunteered to rescue the quarter and I ended up in combat with the elite group of the Army, the Company of Commands (Compañía de Comandos). And then someone finally decided to recognize my effort, so I was promoted and put back into active service after two years and a half of prison. But again, after a while I was forced into retirement. The last note I got from my superiors described me as an “utterly confrontational individual who does not fit in the parameters required by the Force, lacking in discipline and subordination, and permanently critical against his superiors”. But, what can I say? I’m hard on myself to be a commander, and I expect to have good commanders too. Whenever I had to deal with braggarts and incompetents I just

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$^{52}$ On the 23th of January 1989, 42 combatants of the armed group MTP (Movement All for the Fatherland) took the Third Mechanized Infantry Regiment in La Tablada, Buenos Aires. In an operation of 3,600 men, The Army and the police recovered the regiment that same day, losing 11 men and killing 27 members of MTP. President Alfonsín commented the fact emphasizing “the effort of the Argentine Army in the fight against subversion” (Frederic, 2008:17).
didn’t accept it, and I got in trouble. So my career has been short but very intense.

(Miguel)

The emotions felt by young officers in the Eighties, after the end of the dictatorship, are emblematic and help us to understand how they make sense of a similar bewilderment and betrayal they feel today with the trials. However, to this aim it is necessary to focus on the figure of the superior first.

The element that allows the military machine to work is discipline. *The Facts on File Dictionary of Military Science* gives a detailed overview of the terminology used by English-speaking armies since the age of Napoleon to the present. According to the vocabulary, discipline is “the unified obedience of a military unit, responsive to orders and adherence to military regulations; without discipline, an army is no more than a mob” (Shafritz, Robertson and Shafritz, 1989:144). In Chapter Three we saw how the Argentine handbook on the exercise of command (Ejército Argentino, 1990) cites discipline among the essential components of military morals together with motivation and *esprit de corps*, three main indicators of the efficiency of “soldiership”. A strong motivation among soldiers assures the volitional dedication of their energies to reach the objective, encouraging their commitment. Discipline, instead, implies the adaption and conformity to a set of norms that allows acting properly and effectively within the military environment, both in wartimes and peacetimes. In fact, only standardized procedures allow large scale organizations like the Armed forces to function despite the variety of its components and the complexity of its tasks (Ben Ari, 1998). The military dictionary also states standardization is “the process of developing concepts, doctrines, procedures, and designs to achieve and maintain the most effective levels of compatibility, interoperability,
interchangeability, and commonality in the field of operations, administration and materiel” (Shafritz, Robertson and Shafritz, 1989:431). This due obedience guarantees the appropriate collective response to face the contingency of war, reducing improvisation, limiting risks and ultimately saving lives. In order to achieve reciprocal understanding and unity among comrades, it is necessary to adopt a common ethical code and develop a uniform conduct. This is how Luis remembered his direct superior during the conflict in the South Atlantic:

In Malvinas we had examples of despicable cowardice and sublime heroism. I had an excellent commander there, Balza. He was professionally very solid and constantly concerned with my own and my people’s wellbeing during the seventy days we spent in Malvinas. Whenever he visited my position he criticized things he expected from me, and I fixed accordingly. But he also did things I expected from him, like talking to soldiers, giving them his own gloves, bringing chocolate, gin or cigarettes, eating the same ration soldiers ate. And from a professional point of view, he knew what had to be done. So I think he was an excellent chief.

(Luis)

From my conversations with the officers, it sounds like although they describe discipline as the military handbooks do – as one of the pillars of the military world – the very key that allows the engine to work is actually the expectations that the subjection to this discipline generates in the men. In other words, superiors impart a discipline that requires obedience and in turn generates expectations in the troops, which the institution need to satisfy in order to fuel the soldiers’ motivation and assure not only the accomplishment of the mission, but also the control over the subordinates. And the soldier’s expectation which
can never be disappointed – like his trust in the commander during combat – is the certainty that he would always find shelter in the institution that made him what he is, just like a mother would never neglect its offspring.

The existence of an organization like the Unión de Promociones proves that something wrong happened in the renovation of this pact among former senior and junior officers. The unconcerned attitude showed by the generals regarding the responsibilities for the State violence of the Seventies, both in 1985 with Alfonsin’s attempt to prosecute lower ranks after the sentence on the juntas – that led to the Carapintadas mutinies – and in 2003 when Kirchner reopened the trials, generated a strong sense of resentment among the subalterns towards the highest ranks. The conditions the leadership of the Army accepted as a compromise with the politicians on duty in the decades between these two crucial moments were unacceptable to the subordinates, who saw a far more important pact disappointed, precisely the one between the vertex of the institution and the bottom.

Cesár manifested his disappointment reflecting on how often the idealized conduct portrayed by the Army is not pursued by its members by referring to the attitude of two different General Commanders of the Army, Videla (1975 - 1977) during the Proceso, and Balza about fifteen years later (1991-1999). In many subalterns’ view, while the former faced a life sentence and declared in 2010 his subordinates followed his orders, assuming total “responsibility as the highest military authority during the internal war” (BBC, 2010), the latter was perceived as a traitor since he admitted the criminal responsibility of the Army for the carrying out of the repressive plan in the Seventies53.

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53 As explained in the Introduction, in an attempt of rehabilitating the image of the military Gen Balza pronounced on television the historical speech Mensaje a la Nación in 1995. By breaking with the traditional justificatory discourse so far sustained by the institution about the crimes perpetrated in the 1970s, Balza took distance from the Army of the Proceso presenting the officers who were then in position at the time as delincuentes, “criminals” (Salvi, 2012).
I was utterly disappointed, but I love the Army like my first day. I’ll never criticize the Army, that’s the institution. Other thing is the men that lead it. I really appreciated General Videla, for example. Although those who hear me now think I’m crazy, or guilty of genocide, the truth is General Videla was a great soldier, very religious, a family guy and a humble person. And since he was the head, and the head is responsible, he always assumed full responsibility for what happened in the Seventies. Instead Balza, everyone in the Army think he is a traitor, a hypocrite. He was Commander in Chief of the Army and we knew he was going to appear on television, so the people in his staff advised him conveniently. The commander can be advised but he’s the one who ultimately makes the decision: so we said “a”, he did “b”. And what he said caused a very positive reaction in the political environment, so he asked for forgiveness eight times after that speech, unilaterally and without consultation. He should have thought of us, we took part into the counterrevolution as he did. Instead he was denigrating his own people, the same Army which gave him shelter! In the Seventies he was commander (emphasis) of an artillery group: he knew what was going on! His direct superior in Corrientes was a General who went to jail himself, how could Balza not know? He cannot talk as he does because when he talks, he talks on behalf of all of us in the Army. And I’ve been a decent, honest soldier all my life: I don’t see why I should be affected by the opinion of this man.

(César)

As officers are trained in the art of command, they have it very clear in mind the role and the duties of a superior: participants declared a good commander (jefe) must be morally upright, professionally qualified and know his subordinates quite closely. In fact, the
handbook on the exercise of good command (Ejército Argentino, 1990:3,4,51) says “by capitalizing his positive command skills and neutralising his human weaknesses, the *jefe* lives up to his *responsibilities*\(^{34}\). Despite their number, variety and complexity, the *jefe*’s responsibilities can be reduced to two major ones: the accomplishment of the mission and the wellbeing of his men”.

The element that makes the biggest difference between the commander and the soldier is the responsibility of the former for the actions of the latter. Although the most common meaning of “responsibility” reminds us the dimension of justice and accountability, in the military environment responsibility is almost a synonymous of “commitment”, another element that we saw to be central in the military mentality. By observing that engagement with the principles of the Army, but above all with its men, the *jefe* steps into the front line with the soldiers, sharing the same fatigue and hardship and facing the same risks. A commander who fails his own responsibilities towards his men is literally abandoning them on the battlefield and acting like a deserter. The handbook also says “there is no authority without responsibility: although a *jefe* may delegate authority and impose responsibility to his subordinates, in order to increase mutual respect and trust, he cannot do so in respect of a superior authority because the *jefe*, no matter which position he occupies in the ranks, will always be the only responsible for anything done by his unit, in terms of both results and consequences” (Ejército Argentino, 1990:51).

The main activity of a chief is *command*, the “authority and responsibility of a superior officer to issue orders to subordinates” (Shafritz, Robertson and Shafritz, 1989:201). The Argentine handbook explains in an intuitive table how the *jefe* applies his personal attitude to issue orders and produce actions according to the principles and procedures of command; doing so he projects his own personality and influence on the subordinates,

\(^{34}\) My emphasis.
boosting the military morals and increasing the efficiency of the organization, to achieve the supreme objective of accomplishing the mission (Ejército Argentino, 1990:4).

Interestingly, both the handbooks and the conversations with former officers confirm that the concept of command can be fragmented in at least two elements in the Argentine military tradition. This term assumes indeed in Spanish the double meaning of *mando* and *comando* which implies an essential difference in the commander’s behaviour. The term *comando* refers to the authority a military is entrusted with when he is put in command of a unit. This first meaning describes command mainly as a legal attribution and emphasizes the jefe’s entitlement to exercise power, which is in turn the product of his position in the ranks, his grade and his functions as prescribed and limited by military regulations. The term *mando*, instead, represents the leader’s very spirit, the ability to command the troops by giving the example. This second meaning stresses the dimension of action delimited by command, based on the personal qualities of the jefe who has to “direct, persuade and have an impact on his subordinates in order to obtain their voluntary obedience, trust and loyal cooperation” (Ejército Argentino, 1990:4). This substantial difference within the same concept of command is important to make explicit, because not only it emphasizes two distinct ways of interaction between the jefe and his subordinates, but it also enables to distinguish a different attitude of the subordinates towards their jefe’s command. In fact, if it is true subaltern officers must accept, adapt and submit to the *comando*, being *due obedience* the established framework the whole Army is built on, it is also true they are trained just like their chiefs in the art of command, and in time they develop tools and knowledge enough to judge whether their superiors are able to lead them and deserve their loyalty and voluntary obedience. Luis stated remembering his days as an instructor in the Military Academy:
I used to say to my cadets that the easiest way to command is actually the hardest, which is by setting the example. If you want to command, you just need to be entrusted with responsibility by a superior authority; but if you want to lead, then you have to do it by example. It’s like family: if you give a bad example to your children, first of all you hurt them, and second you have no moral authority to demand them anything. In combat a jefe commands by example: he doesn’t need to shout. He needs to show, he needs to do, and his soldiers will follow him even if he gives the most detestable order. The jefe who commands just replacing example with authority is going to be killed, shot in his nape by his own soldiers for being an idiot. Which is something many officers didn’t understand in Malvinas and in the Seventies.

(Luis)

Recognizing in the mando the true nature of any great commander, young officers need to see the ideals cultivated in the Academy incarnated in a man – their jefe – who incites them to follow him giving the example; this way of commanding is highly seductive and gives its fruits in the battlefield, when the jefe can demand his subordinates the same example he sets. Interestingly, Luis uses a metaphor gleaned from the language of kinship, assimilating the figure of the commander to the father, and the impact of his example on the subordinates/children. His narrative provides further proof of the centrality of the (patriarchal) family in the military mind-set, and the use that military actors make of it in describing concepts of the military sphere especially when facing civilians. In this view, where the leadership of the Army is the supreme pater familias, and going back to the trials, when this patriarch that should give shelter to his children suddenly disappears, how should react his children, the whole offspring of the Army before such abandon?
The commander’s life speaks on his behalf: he will have to give the good example in and out service, because any inconsistency between his words and his actions will be noticed by his subordinates and will have a bad repercussion on his influence. Similarly, bad examples give silent license to incorrectness and affect the boosting of military morals and motivation among the troops. Francisco explained quite well this feeling of disappointment and the consequent lack of motivation in the Army since the end of the dictatorship, projecting this deficiency onto the younger generations of officers that currently form the basis of the institution:

This is why there is so much desertion nowadays, so many military that abandon the Armed Forces to look for opportunities in the civilian world. It works like the carrot and stick, you know, but there’s no more carrot in the Army now. There’s nothing that pushes you to go on and make your best, nothing to be excited about. Considering all what happened in the past, the commitment that pushed our generation to defend the fatherland in the Seventies, today there’s nothing like that anymore: the fatherland turned its back to us. So the officers who came after, they want no commitment at all with the Armed Forces, it’s just an office job for them. They saw what happened, and now they say “You know what? We won’t get involved that much, we won’t save the fatherland”. Because the example they have is the accused military, our 2,000 political prisoners.

(Francisco)

The commitment Francisco refers to is more than a simple ideological belief, an anti-communist feeling legacy of the Cold War. As pointed out in Chapter One, the militarization of politics typical of 1970s Argentina (Frederic, 2008) supposed a particular
way of intending and doing politics, made of sacrifice and commitment; this was in turn
strictly connected with the politicization of the military, who were called to conduct the
Nation, serve the fatherland and give their life for it. Francisco and his comrades were
made officers in this context. The process of democratization of the Armed Forces started
in 1983 implied instead a progressive demilitarization of politics, and the dilution of the
ideal of sacrifice, not only in civilian environments, but even in an organization like the
military, whose members should be the only really entitled to give their life for a superior
cause (Frederic, 2008:19). Being a military became then an office job, and the sacrifice the
profession implied in the past lost any moral and political connotation, in the eyes of a
former officer like Francisco.

Besides, a whole generation of former subalterns, who should represent a model to
emulate by young cadets and officers, precisely for their commitment in the past, are
directly paying for their superiors’ mistakes and faults during and after the Seventies and
the Malvinas war. According to Francisco, no one can be motivated by looking at such a
paradigm of blatantly unmet expectations. And this is why the imprisoned officers are in
turn concerned about what the youngest think of them nowadays, remembering Nicolás’
questions in the prison of Ezeiza. The officers who served under the Proceso were
disappointed in their expectations after the compliance of their duty in the Seventies, their
commitment did not even provide that recognition many of them longed for; to the
contrary, despite the victory obtained against the guerrilla movement, a sound social
discredit hit the Army. And in the former subalterns’ view, the main accountable part for
this definitely undesirable end is the senior officers in the higher ranks. If expectations are
not met, the mechanism discipline-loyalty-reward jams – the carrot and the stick, as
Francisco calls it – and strong discontentment in the ranks is the result even in a disciplined
and farseeing system like the Armed Forces.
This circumstance was not at all uncommon in the Argentine military since the return to democracy. Not only the disowning of the orders imparted in the Seventies, but also the strategic and tactic mistakes in the conduct of the Malvinas war; the reluctance to deal with the outcome of the 1982 conflict; the restrictive policies towards the Army imposed by the democratic governments and tolerated by the higher command of the institution; and, finally, the trials for crimes against humanity – all these episodes in the post-Proceso Armed Forces revealed the faults of the leadership in protecting the lower ranks, and in betraying the pact of obedience that regulates military life.

In sum, whenever the Army as an institutional body or personified in the single jefe neglect the subalterns’ expectations, the normal cycle within the military life jams, and the most unexpected outcomes happen: mutinies, rebellions, voluntary retirements, diffused resentment, informal bottom-up reactions from the body against a deficient head. It is the weakening of the vertical axis replaced by the horizontal one, the loyalty to the peer that comes before the obedience to the superior. And sometimes the disappointment breaks down even the strongest vocation, like Luis’:

I didn’t join the Carapintadas mutinies. It was a just cause, [...] but I didn’t believe a rebellion was the solution because it would just fuel the anti-military hate – which did in fact occur. [...] On the other, I didn’t find it fair that the military were first applauded by the society for fighting the subversives, and then condemned. It was a bad situation. Moreover, [...] I was a student in the Superior War College in those years, so I wasn’t appointed to any post and my wage just wasn’t enough, having five children already. So I got a (civilian) job in the afternoon. At that time, it was forbidden for the military to work but I told my direct superior anyway. I said “I come to tell you I needed to find a job
because I can’t afford being a student, my wage is not enough to maintain my family. I want you to know before you find out from someone else”. He answered “It’s your problem”. No! This is not an answer from a superior, from an institution, because that means he doesn’t care about my life! If I tell him “My wage is not enough” he should have asked me “Fine, son, work. But why isn’t your wage enough? Is that because it’s too little money, or because you gamble, or because you have another woman? Why isn’t it enough?” [...] The guy can’t just tell me “It’s your problem, fix it”, because if I have to fix it myself, then don’t bother me, don’t ask for anything. Because if you don’t assist me, then you cannot demand. So I fell into a state of mental insubordination. On top of it, I was coming from Malvinas, where many bad things happened with the commanders, who clearly didn’t do what they had learned in the Superior War College. This caused me antipathy and rejection. I felt bad, I wasn’t happy. I had no money to live with; I didn’t understand why they taught what they taught in the War College; my superior said “your problem”; and those who were dissatisfied were revolting. It was a mess! And I had to study. What for? [...] I didn’t want to become the superior who ignores the subaltern, I didn’t want to become a mutineer, I didn’t want to be the Captain who couldn’t maintain his family, I didn’t want to learn and not do what I was supposed to do! I quit.

(Luis)

In 1989 Luis asked for voluntary retirement. After returning from Malvinas with the last group of prisoners in July 1982, and attending two out of three years at the Superior War College, he quit his career with 18 years of active service (plus 7 years spent in the Liceo
Militar) when the minimum service time required to get a pension wage was 25 years. Aged 33 he started to work in the civilian environment.

4.4 Military wives in the public arena

In Chapter Three we saw military wives generally kept a position quite extraneous to what was going on in the “battlefield” during the Seventies, being more concerned about its projection onto the household rather than about political violence itself; most women declared, in fact, that during the dictatorship they knew relatively little about the anti-subversive operations their husbands took part in. In present times, instead, the majority of the women I interviewed showed to be very concerned and well informed about the consequences of the Seventies that are now affecting the military, and most of them know quite in detail the judicial prosecution conducted against their own people.

Particularly women whose husbands have been on trial at some point show to be greatly involved in the aftermath of the Seventies, definitely more than those whose husbands are now deceased or are still at large. The commitment towards the large military family these wives took decades ago is now explicit and sometimes even publicly reclaimed, dragging many women far beyond the common duties of a military wife. As we will see shortly, wives of convicted military can play quite an active role in the lesa, a scenario which entails a hardship they were not prepared to face but they manage to adapt to, developing a quite surprising reaction to the issue. Before analysing the behaviour of military wives in this specific circumstance, we should understand what actually happened in the military family when the lesa insinuated into the lives and questioned the certainties of its members.
According to the families I interviewed, although they knew the precarious situation of their peers, none of them expected to be involved in the trials. Hardly any of them received a warning warrant from the judicial authorities as the investigation started, and in general family members were taken by surprise by this sudden change which they often describe as dramatic. Some of the former officers I interviewed were arrested as soon as the trials reopened between 2003 and 2006, so in these cases it is more understandable they were caught relatively unprepared. However, even the families who only recently got involved in the trials confirm they felt a sound astonishment when it occurred. Although convicted officers recount the existence of a sort of intelligence-like network by which former military try to alert each other about the possibility of being under judicial investigation, apparently none of them perceived a hint of the imminent imprisonment. For many wives and children I interviewed, the first feeling about the *lesa* was a total shock. Sometimes the family found out about the investigation as they were about to travel abroad for holidays and the local authorities stopped them from leaving the country at the frontier; other times, the police just swooped in on the house and arrested the suspect when in many cases wives or children were also around. Many informants shared their vivid memories of the first moments of the *lesa*. Teresa, for instance, was at home when the Federal Police came to arrest Esteban in 2013:

>We didn’t expect it. [...] When they came for Esteban, that day my son was going to get married – although he didn’t in the end – so the house was full of people. I felt horrible because I just didn’t expect it, it’s like a bomb falling on your house and you don’t know how to react at first. And when it happened, the police came after him, with big guns and everything. It was just crazy. As soon as they took him my house was full of military friends, and lawyers. One comrade who just got out of prison came immediately as he found out. They
were all there, trying to understand what the case was about, where they would take him. Because you think “Fine, by the time I figure out what the hell is going on, he will be back”. But it’s been two years and seven months since he’s gone, now, for a case that was built up during ten years. And no one is going to give this time back to my husband, nor to any of us. So, well, it’s like a bomb but you know what? The human being is a creature of habit: sometimes there are things you cannot change, so you have to accept them. Even though we did everything in our power, we have to accept it and try to make the most of what happened to us until – we hope – it will get sorted.

(Teresa)

Despite the initial bewilderment recounted by many wives, they had to react quite promptly after their husbands were taken. Like Teresa, the majority of women I interviewed could rely on some of their husbands’ comrades to get assistance in arranging a defensive strategy and to sort out practical issues, since the arrest of their husband not only constituted an emergency per se, but also altered the composition itself of the family and its everyday routine and internal balances. With the trials and the consequent imprisonment, the absence of the husband is a bad old feeling that women remember too well: unexpectedly they have to get used to it again, reactivating solidarity mechanisms through which they can face the related difficulties. As we will see in the next chapter, this aid tends to come from their own children once they develop their own way to react to the lesa, but the most immediate source of help is usually provided by the husband’s comrades, often efficaciously conveyed through the Unión de Promociones.

After twelve years since its foundation, the intervention of this association is now common practice among families affected by the trials, and its mechanisms automatically activate
every time a new cause is initiated against one of their people. Wives of convicted military
are contacted straight away by the husband’s promoción, and tend to follow and face the
development of the trials side by side with the members of the UP; women carry out a joint
action against the lesa with their husbands’ former comrades, and many of them stood in
the front row of the struggle especially in the first years after the reopening of the trials.
Adaptation and resistance is the peculiar way the soldier breaks fear and reacts to war and
its “miseries” but, as I stated in Chapter Three, these skills in military life are found to be
not exclusive prerogative of men at arms, they need to be acquired by their wives too. We
will see how in the judicial transposition of the 1970s’ confrontation, military wives prove
once again how the transformative character of the military identity had an impact also on
the spouses, and after decades enables them to develop their own particular way of reacting
to the lesa.

With the man’s detention one of the pillars of the family collapses, therefore wives and
adult children need to re-organize and find alternative points of reference that might fill the
gap in the leadership left by their husband and father. The nuclear military family, that
shows its patriarchal nature in this, sees its head lopped off and looks for the aid of the
man’s comrades as a form of at least temporary support. Although participants do not
describe it in terms of kinship, this dynamic can still be interpreted using some elements
from the foundational lineage theory elaborated by the British School of Anthropology
whose overview is offered in the excellent work by Kuper (1982). Giving the examples of
extended ties of kinship within the large military family observed in the field, I believe this
social group can be considered a “corporation”, as an aggregation of families following the
patriarchal system “held together by the authority and the protection of the eldest valid
male ascendant” (Maine, 1861 cited in Kuper, 1982:73). According to Maine, the extended
family persists in time even when its patriarchs die, and so does the large military family
when its men “leave” following the reasons of war. In fact, another of the fathers of British anthropology cited by Kuper argues that in order to guarantee “continuity, stability and definiteness (…) every society requires the organization of corporations which transcend individual persons” (Radcliffe-Brown, 1935 cited in Kuper, 1982:77). Considering some specific characteristics of the military corporation such as the “interchangeability” of all engines within the big military machine (Ben Ari, 1998), I suggest this last concept transcends the operational dimension of missions and functions, like many other characteristics of the military culture, to extend to the family sphere, and the “replacement” of the imprisoned officer with the supportive action offered by his comrades represents a reflection of interchangeability on the typical schemes of corporations, as classified by Maine and Radcliffe-Brown.

The solidarity showed by former comrades recalls some wives’ anecdotes back in time, when they used to face the daily challenges related to their husbands’ absence during active service. According to many women I interviewed, when the majority of officers and soldiers of a unit were involved in drills and manoeuvres, those who were left in the barrio militar used to check on the families of their comrades, being at disposal in case of need. Forty years later, that kind of vigilant attitude seems to be still in place; Esteban himself explained to me how after his detention he definitely expected his comrades to watch over his family: he might accept the fact some of them would choose not to visit him in jail, as a form of precaution before the possibility to get caught in turn, but he would never forgive those who never contacted or assisted his wife and children. The social practices that make sense of the interchangeability of the members of the large military family may sound at first as pure formalities, but are of the greatest importance in this world: those who fail

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55 I would add that perhaps this practice also aimed to “keep an eye” on wives while their husbands were away and make sure they were behaving accordingly to their role. Therefore this attitude might actually have reinforced even more the loyalty towards the comrades rather than provided the support to the wives.
these practices actually neglect the nature of their own world and deliberately ignore the norms that regulate it, refusing once again to pay off the expectations of its members.

In some cases, wives’ adaptation and reaction mechanisms go beyond the private sphere of the family and their inner social circle, to reclaim a political role. Many women in fact joined together in an organization that emerged spontaneously as the trials were reopened, in a process similar to the creation of the UP in 2005. In our interview, Victoria talked about her participation into AFyAPPA (Association of Relatives and Friends of Political Prisoners in Argentina), founded in 2007. This group which aims to draw public attention to the situation of the Argentine “political prisoners”, sees a strong participation of women, mainly spouses but also sisters of convicted military and police personnel. Especially in the first years since its establishment, AFyAPPA set a tight schedule of public acts, declarations, protests and marches, all activities often co-organised with the UP but scarcely covered by the media. AFyAPPA attempts to intercede with the authorities, quite an arduous task particularly during the Kirchners’ administrations, and aims to acquire a place in the public discourse around the Seventies, often exposing its members to direct public condemnation. Victoria described one of the most striking protests led by AFyAPPA’s activists in 2010, when a group of about twelve women chained themselves to railings in the building of the Ministry of Defence asking for a meeting with the at the time minister Nilda Garré, a Kirchner’s sympathizer and former Montoneros militant:

Everything we organised had to be top secret at first, so we moved undercover. We had to be careful, we couldn’t talk openly because they started to intercept our calls. So we started speaking in code: every time we talked about jewellery we were actually preparing things to chain ourselves up. So we decided to call it “Operation Bijoux”. For the chains, you know (laughter). We talked about
necklaces but we meant chains and locks to chain up, because we had to meet up to measure the chains and see how we could do it, and where exactly. In the end we did it, and it worked out. My husband had no idea of what we were orchestrating, because he was on trial, otherwise he would have told me not to do it. When he saw me on TV he almost died! The media covered our act for one hour or so but then they obscured it. We were forced to leave. They told us they would arrest us, they wouldn’t let us see our husbands. They threatened us, and of course Garré (the minister) didn’t show up. So after that we decided to stage a sit-in outside the Casa Rosada and we stayed in turns for 28 days, camping night and day. We used to give information to passers-by, we put posters, white crosses and candles for the officers who had died under detention. And every morning we put beautiful military marches on, and employees who crossed the square walked to their workplace in lockstep.

(Victoria)

Unexpectedly, these women became activists. Their militancy recalls military practices in several aspects, from the secrecy of their operations to the symbolism they chose to give visibility to their cause. However, the actions they decided to undertake are not normally included in the traditional duties in the daily life of a military wife. Despite the tone they often used in many of their public declarations, somehow infused by the Army’s highfalutin rhetoric and aiming to catch the public’s attention, these women tend to use more subdued terms in informal conversations when talking about their activism. They never depict themselves or their fellows as heroines or militants; in fact, as she went on about her activity in AFyAPPA, Victoria admitted:
It’s been a tremendous challenge for me because, you know, I don’t look like a social activist or anything. I dedicated my life to raising my children and to work. I had no experience in politics or anything like that so, well, I had to learn the hard way. And today I’m capable of anything, I would do anything for this cause. But fewer and fewer women join AFyAPPA because the new ones affected are older every time. When I started I was forty-seven, but some of these wives are now in their seventies or so: what sort of vigour can they put into the struggle? I believe our social class is not ready to fight, to rebel. It’s been a huge effort for me. I wasn’t prepared for this. Of all things in the world, I never imagined one day I would step into a prison to see my husband.

(Victoria)

If we consider military families first of all as members of the Argentine middle class before than affiliates of the Armed Forces, Victoria’s statements can be contextualized by looking at the political feelings and behaviour of the middle class in the early Seventies. According to the studies conducted by Carassai (2012, 2014) the Argentine middle class kept its traditional aversion towards the leftist and Peronist positions during the turbulent years between the end of the Sixties and the beginning of the Seventies, the gestation of the dictatorship. Carassai (2012) criticizes previous studies on the ideological affiliation and the electoral behaviour of Argentine people in the 1973 elections that led to the return of Perón. He argues that the impact of Peronist and leftist radicalized movements, some of which joined the guerrilla movement, provoked no sympathy or change of orientation in the middle and lower classes, respectively attracted by centrist/conservative and moderate Peronist orientations. Carassai’s revision minimises the popular consent for these radicalized political minorities, stressing their supporters were mostly intellectuals and university students belonging to the higher and middle classes, quantitatively less relevant.
although highly mobilized. Denying the supposed fascination played by revolutionary ideals on large portions of the society in the early Seventies sustained in recent studies (Adamowsky, 2009), Carassai explains how Perón himself was aware of the threat to stability posed by these extreme fringes within and outside his movement, and while preparing his political return, he tried to gain support among the usually anti-Peronist middle class showing a firm repudiation against the actions of these radicalized sectors. According to Carassai, this explains in turn how in 1974 the middle classes may have not voted for Perón but at least legitimised his third presidency. Doing so, it overcame the traditional antinomy Peronism/anti-Peronism that had characterized the Argentine society since the mid-1940s, in the attempt of reaching a wider agreement on the dispute about revolutionary – anti-revolutionary claims, which dominated the political conjuncture in the early 1970s.

The military, and particularly the families of subaltern officers, were members of this middle class, therefore it is not surprising that military wives do not feel reflected in the leftist/Peronist ideals of militancy and rebellion that found space in the guerrilla movement. Victoria stressed in the interview she does not “look like a social activist”, distancing herself and her kind (military middle class families) from those radicalized sectors. Considering on the one hand the majority ideological orientation within the middle class, and on the other these women’s personal experience of political violence as an extreme consequence of militancy, it is understandable that military wives tend to (negatively) portray expressions of radicalized activism as a behaviour intrinsically alien to their native environment, more conservative or perhaps even apolitical. Moreover, as representatives of the military world these women have always been conscious about their position in the society, as members of not wealthy – as Victoria herself stated – but decent and respectable families, more specifically affiliates of a group that traditionally gravitated
around and protected the interests of the ruling classes. Their life standard was automatically assured by their husbands’ career, and historically there has never been need for them to subvert any order or status quo to reclaim their rights. This is why their activism today in relation to the trials is even more striking: in the current scenario, exponents of the former subaltern military class find themselves in the position to fight for a recognition and a dignity that used to be implicit in their identity of military families, by virtue of the vocation shared by their men.

As it happened for the analyses on the action of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, this work stresses the process through which these women, who were usually devoted to the private sphere of the household and the family, came to step into the public space to conduct political action. However, in the case of military wives, I believe there are ways and spaces within the military world, rather than outside, that saw these women constructing their activism in situations that preceded the trials. It is indeed well known – although I did not investigate it directly – that military wives, not only in the Argentine context (Silva, 2016), are often involved in collective actions such as women’s club, charities, and associations connected to the Church. It is possible to conjecture at this stage that such spaces and experiences had provided Argentine military wives with the instruments and the language that aided in organizing their activism, a public action this time in defence of their men in a wider and more exposed scenario.

By joining the military’s protests against the trials and becoming activists, wives not only decided to abandon the private sphere of the family, their own traditional realm, proving how urgent the lesa issue is for them, but they also confirmed to be a pillar of the military environment, playing a definitely active role within the large military family, and carrying out actions they would never expect to undertake otherwise. Although it would be inexact
to affirm these women are even empowered by their position in the military world, evidence suggests they are pretty conscious of the agency they can legitimately exercise within that same environment that used to expect their devotion and submission to the husband’s superior mission. They know their already cited hybrid characteristics make them more suitable interlocutors for civilians, and entitle them to take a position before a controversial issue like the trials from a relatively protected position. The reluctance of some military sectors to accept condemnation is heartfelt not only by men at arms, as we saw with the Carapintadas mutinies and other situations of factual and mental insubordination, but also by their wives.

Moreover, if it is true that officers sometimes openly admit the spouse of the soldier is more soldier than the soldier, like Nicolás said in Ezeiza, they are also ready to acknowledge these women’s commitment to the resistance against the trials, as AFyAPPA’s joint action with the UP shows. In 2005 a former Major of the Army was forced to retirement by General Commander Bendini after his wife (who then became AFyAPPA’s president) expressed open criticism against Nestor Kirchner. Five years later, the Major commented on Facebook the protest led by AFyAPPA in the Ministry of Defence, praising how “these women managed to keep in check the Argentine generals”, and how “their dignity exposed the pusillanimity of the current military leadership” (Veiras, 2010).

In what might be interpreted as a renewal of the “teamwork” between officers and their female counterparts, the UP and AFyAPPA tend to cooperate in the current contingencies. On the one hand, AFyAPPA’s members (but also many other wives not directly involved in activism) rely on the help of former officers jointly to support their husbands in their practical needs, and to respond to the judicial process; on the other, former officers of the
UP know how important the presence of wives is for the convicted comrades, so they in turn make sure that women manage to visit the penitentiaries taking charge of logistics, for example; and finally, both organisations claim for some space in the public arena.

Despite their distinct genesis and specific strategies, AFyAPPA and the UP develop a joined action with the same personal and political objectives, a reaction built on their direct experience of the Seventies and legitimated by their respective position within the large military family. In both cases, their discourse is quite belligerent, anchored to the logic and the rhetoric of the two demons theory; their action is emblematic of the still alive perception of the (permanent) war of the Seventies, fuelled by the military’s narratives on threat, violence, commitment, honour, and the rest of the elements that characterizes their cultural universe. Former officers and military wives, respectively affiliated to the UP and AFyAPPA, are in constant contact, they share information and plan their public acts. Thus, data gathered through interviews and participant observation suggest the large military family members tend to react in the same way they used to deal with the daily challenges of military life: they put up a unified front, in this case against their detractors.

Showing their proficiency in adapting and reacting to the environment, former officers and military wives develop a complex behaviour that is often labelled by the media as denial, pro-military discourse, or apology of genocide. According to the ethnographic method, instead, these people’s practices of reciprocal support and protection need to be interpreted in the light of their training, their sociability, their experience of the political confrontations of the Seventies, an age that presented challenging situations that in many cases bounded the military families tightly together. This chapter shows how these dynamics can be interpreted, and are sometimes expressed by participants, in terms of kinship. The behaviour and narratives of participants in the presence of condemnation are
also sparked by the abandonment of them by their superiors, something they tend to
describe and understand using the idiom of kinship and especially the relationship between
father and children. In sum, evidence suggests that in order to understand the military
family’s way of legitimizing their action in the Seventies and reacting to condemnation, we
need to focus on the dynamics of kinship as it is perceived and re-signified in the military
world.

4.5 The final post

Despite certain linearity outlined in the previous section about the officers’ and the wives’
reaction to the lesa, the active resistance of the latter against condemnation and the trials
cannot be taken for granted, neither it can be classified as a result of their submissiveness
to the husband’s career or the automatic transference of the officers’ vision onto the
family. Although this analysis proves the existence of a solidarity action within the military
family that finds a cornerstone in the figure of the woman, the wives’ attitude towards the
trials and the legacy of the Seventies is not homogeneous. Certain reactions and statements
detected among other participants, this time not involved in AFyAPPA’s activism, pushed
me to further investigate what at first might be misinterpreted as deep marital devotion.
And if despite some dissonant voices women are supportive, we need to ask ourselves why
they behave so.

Regardless of their direct involvement in the trials, most military wives within my sample
feel the rightness of unmasking and rebelling against an unfair system and an ungrateful
society that condemns their husbands for their service to the fatherland. Needless to
remember this is the main reason why participants agreed to participate in this study. Like
their husbands, to a certain extent these women feel betrayed and deceived by their own country; those who had to face the imprisonment of their spouses were not prepared, but like their husbands showed to adapt to the new circumstance. And far beyond that, AFyAPPA’s members even made their husbands’ cause their own. However, although it may sound a natural consequence of their marital life, the commitment of this generation of military wives needs to be deconstructed and reinterpreted because, unlike officers, their narrative and perceptions cannot be directly ascribed to the well-defined (although stereotyped) cultural universe of the military profession, so they need a different level of analysis.

The feature that led me to further exploration of the wives’ attitude was a fracture in the reception of this commitment by the women whose husbands are not yet accused. We saw how former officers actively support their convicted comrades; and how most wives keep accompanying their men in what they see as an extension of their responsibility towards the mission and the vocation. But it is worth noticing that this acceptance is not passive, or free from aversion, and not every wife shares her husband’s commitment in the same way. In an attitude of definite solidarity, women generally justify and sympathize with what their men almost consider a mission, but quite rarely they make it their own. They also tend to complain and show their disappointment in acknowledging that, despite their advanced age, the military world is still asking for their commitment to the cause of a war that should be over. So even though they are supportive with their husbands, they also understand those military families (which are indeed the majority) that decided to definitely close the chapter of the Seventies by getting out of the picture. For instance, while Francisco expressed resentment against the former military who do not show the same support to the convicted comrades, failing the duty of comradeship and loyalty, Emilia had a position quite different to her husband’s:
Francisco wants to help his people, I know him. He always felt this engagement he feels today, and as usual he takes me by the hand in this. But I can’t blame those who don’t do the same. I mean, look what this war against terrorism did to us! Now we are old, and we should finally enjoy this life that God gave to us. But this threat is constantly hanging on our families. Enough with commitment! The women, we lived the Seventies with anguish, that period branded us for life. It’s like we’re stuck in that age. And I don’t want to live that period anymore. There are people who fought, who struggled, who lost friends and had enough with that. And I can’t blame them if they don’t want to deal with it anymore.

(Emilia)

Some women, like AFyAPPA’s members, show commitment as a reaction to an attack that is just consistent with their husbands’ and their own position in the Seventies; their loyalty to the military family is renewed and strengthened in the critical moment the military of the Proceso are living, according to the rule outlined in the previous chapter: adversity triggers solidarity. But the fact their husbands are directly affected by the trials, condemned and punished, makes them much more proactive in taking a position in the present and fight back. Other participants, instead, like Emilia and the women whose husbands are still free, feel this commitment now unbearably overwhelming in their lives, the symptom of a threat that is still perceived despite the end of the military career of their husbands. Several women among my participants described in clear terms the feeling of being threatened as one of the most pervasive sensations in the Seventies. Many of them were direct object of guerrilla intimidation, or lost military friends by hand of the enemy; others recount the constant worry about their husbands’ safety. But this feeling of
uncertainty transcended the circumstances of the Seventies, and extends to their present;

Emilia said later in the interview:

The Seventies were a terrible time. Then it was Malvinas: as the war was over they called me to tell me Francisco had died in the islands. It was a mistake, but that was such a fright! When we thought it was all over, then the terrorists reappeared in 1989, and I heard on the radio he had been killed in La Tablada. I mean, I went there for his remains and I realized he was under surgery. And while I was in the hospital, the terrorists called me to tell me they were going to kill both of us in there. That’s why sometimes I wish I could just put all this behind me. It wasn’t easy, as it’s not easy this moment we’re living now, in the constant worry the police will come for him sooner or later. This anguish I feel when I go to bed and think: “Will it be tonight?” Because they can tell me he’s lost, he got shot, he got killed… But they can’t tell me he will end up in prison and leave his bones there forever. That’s not fair.

(Emilia)

The military and their families experienced several kinds of threats across the decades, posed by enemies often different but always dangerous. The prison for crimes against humanity not only is unfair in the eyes of these women; it also represents the last frontier of a constant sense of danger, uncertainty and abandon that wives experienced during their life besides the officers. The difference is this time this feeling reawakens an anguish that is even more acute due to its senselessness: their husbands are now retired, miles and years away from the battlefield. They actually adapted for decades in order for their men to accomplish their professional and vocational project; and they know what the price for that project was, the possible outcomes of military life itself: their husbands may get lost,
injured or even killed during the compliance of their service. Sometimes, when their men left, deep down wives were aware they might not come back, and still they accepted it as part of the life they chose. So, if according to the officers’ mentality the prison, symbol of condemnation, is incompatible with military victory, for their wives it is just as incompatible with the social recognition that should come with the compliance of their husbands’ service to the fatherland.

Military wives still experience today a deep anguish for the threat of being the next in being unfairly deprived of their husbands, not by an armed enemy this time, but by the same country they were sent to defend. The hypothesis of their man’s absence should not be plausible anymore, certainly not in a scenario made of trials, sentences and prisons. The lesa puts the military family in a place that is unusual and unfair in the social world as they know it. If their husbands feel still involved in a permanent war, their wives feel the permanent threat coming from this restored confrontation hanging in the air, in a sort of obsession with the issue of the Seventies in their inner circle, the military family. The more the officer is involved in the trials, the more the commitment is perceived by their wives and, as we will see, by their adult children, because that oath is in a way renewed in the military social world and does not affect only the combatants. Ten months after my last interview with Emilia in Buenos Aires, her husband Francisco was arrested and he is currently imprisoned 300 miles away, waiting for a sentence for his involvement in the repression.

As Emilia’s words suggest, many women feel this endless commitment as an exacerbation of their duties of military wives, rather than a spontaneous manifestation of their loyalty to the military cause. It is only another of the expectations the military world nurtured about the women who joined the large family of the Army. However, as far as I could observe
and ask, they all still comply with that commitment. What are their motivations, then? If we apply to women and families the same mechanisms that bind soldiers to the institution, what is that women expect from the military world, and if they feel betrayed like their husbands do, where does the wives’ resentment come from?

Interestingly enough, some wives share their husbands’ commitment almost reluctantly or, at least, they admit they would prefer not to be in this situation anymore: after all, their husbands are now retired and the fatherland should stop demanding for their service. However, it looks like once again men are called to fight, while wives are called to adapt. Their response might possibly come from a sense of commitment among the women who experienced the confrontation against the guerrilla side by side with the officers, and therefore developed a sense of loyalty to the principles behind the counter-insurgent action carried out by the Armed Forces in those years, or a sort of responsibility towards their husbands’ mission. But I believe this alignment is more likely to be determined by the wives’ position in the military world, and their precise identification with a model proposed by and observed in that specific environment, rather than by blind ideological affiliation. What is the reason behind their sometimes passionate, sometimes obligated, supportive role of accompaniers in this last stage of their husbands’ path in the Army?

According to the logics and the prescriptions of the 1970s military world, the conduct of the officer defines his life also outside the barracks, and this research in turn proves how military life has a direct impact on the family, and the other way round. Besides gaining the possibility to ascend to the most prestigious positions in the pyramid, an officer that makes the most of his time in the Army, and gives an exemplar service to the fatherland, will also provide respectability and admiration to his family, and recognition by the rest of the society. As Victoria said, the prestige of the military family does not depend on its
wealth but on its vocation, in other words, its spirit: military families used to be respectable and respected for being military. However, besides these unquantifiable rewards, the military career would provide the family which opted for it with a series of material compensations too: advantages like an assigned residence, medical insurance in a private hospital, sports and leisure activities for the families, children summer camps, and so on, are benefits that many Argentine families can only dream of; and they were conditions that military wives-to-be must have taken into consideration when pondering the idea of marrying an officer, together with its disadvantages such as the nomadic lifestyle, the modest income and the risks of the profession. Therefore, the expectations matured by the military families strengthened their bond to the institution, and in turn linked their wellbeing to the officer’s career (and thus to his military identity), which in theory should provide the man and his family material benefits and a certain status and respectability.

Being a military wife in the 1970s Argentina meant consciously to become part of a system that gave protection to its members but also asked for tributes; opting for the military career at those times meant choosing a path for the whole family, obtaining a condition that provided a social status but also precise rules to follow. Despite its own flexibilities, we saw how the military world is in its nature highly prescriptive. Military norms and functionalisms require certain conducts that in turn generate expectations which need to be satisfied. It’s the general rule behind the working of the military machine, and it is vital because the military organization asks its members for sacrifice and the employment of all their energies. This trait is not only true for everything that regulates life in the barracks and the battlefield, but also for the family’s behaviour. Being a military was more than just a job, as we saw in the previous chapter. Looking back at the genesis of the nuclear military family, the institutional intrusions military wives had to tolerate, the difficulties they had to face and, in sum, the sacrifice that not only the officers, but they also had to
make all the years they dedicated to the military clan – all this hardship make a military wife something different to just a partner and a mother. Regardless their experience of political violence, and regardless of their level of ideological commitment, military wives made sacrifices their whole life to allow their husbands to develop a good career for the sake of their own family.

In Chapter Three I presented examples of how military wives described the recurring difficulties experienced in their life alongside their husbands, the critical moments they had to go through and the general hardship military families have to deal with. The sense of solitude in particular is a constant in the wives’ account, which clashes with the stress on solidarity and the collective; many of them cited anecdotes of not only the exceptional circumstance of a war like Malvinas, but also in the Seventies and on a more regular basis during manoeuvres and deployment of troops in sensitive border areas. Victoria, who showed how supportive her role was, especially as she accompanied her husband-to-be in Tucumán, often stressed the hardship the family have to go through as the man develops his career in the military:

When we were in the North, the troubles with Chile started, for the dispute over the Beagle, so the troops were immediately mobilized, and sent to the Chilean border in the South. I remember it as if it was yesterday: they jumped on the train, the whole artillery regiment with cannons and everything, and left. I remember the chief in command came to me – I was only 19, my first daughter was five months old – and said: “My greetings to the first war widow” (laughter)... Then the war didn’t happen, thankfully, but they stayed in the South several months. It’s a sacrifice, for all of us, the family is sacrificed. You are constantly worried, children have no roots, they change school all the time,
and lose their friends every time. It’s complicated, especially when they are teenagers.

(Victoria)

Victoria indirectly associates her own ‘sacrifice’ to her husband’s one. In fact, the privation military families suffer is never portrayed by women in terms of victimization, but rather as a duty that transcends the domestic walls to become greater: it is a service to the Nation the military family accomplish actively, joining and serving the country as a whole entity. Interestingly, the whole sense of respectability for these women comes from creating a patriarchal family, that in turn becomes part of the large military family; but then, the family is also sacrificed by the same institution that wished its formation.

Then we have to ask what these women probably ask themselves: was this sacrifice worth it? Apparently, their commitment turned to be a bad investment for military wives. The sacrifice made since their husbands were cadets did not pay off. The discredit they are experiencing since the end of the dictatorship, and during the Kirchners’ administrations in particular, is an unexpected and unpleasant outcome for these women. Now that their men are being prosecuted, was the service to the Nation worth it? And ultimately, since by choosing to accompany their men in their career they also made a choice for their whole family, was this choice the right one for their children? What is going to happen to the (military) family now the patriarch is sent to prison instead of being consecrated as a patriot?

In the wives’ perspective, they devoted to their husbands’ mission in order to let them develop their career for the family’s sake, a career that cannot end up with a sentence of guilt for who should be appraised, dragging into discredit the whole family with him. It is just unacceptable, that’s not fair, Emilia said. The change in society’s attitude has meant
that the transactions military wives entered into did not lead to the expected outcomes: being the partner of a convicted felon is an unbecoming outcome for an officer’s wife. Any post, even the most remote, is preferable to the prison; any fate, no matter how tragic as long as suitable for a soldier, is preferable to condemnation. Therefore, women keep resisting as they always did beside their men and follow them, sometimes to their regret, in their ultimate, unbecoming final post, the unpredictable result of a professional project that risks to fail.
This thesis has so far looked at the articulations of kinship within the military world that could be termed horizontal, namely the marital bond between officer and wife, the fictive kin of comradeship, and more widely the supportive relations among the members of the military community belonging to a same generation. While these manifestations of kinship can be assimilated to what in anthropology is defined in terms of “alliance” (Levi-Strauss, 1949), this third analytic chapter looks instead at lineage or descent, the vertical kinship based on the “consanguinity” tie between parents and children (Rivers, 1968a, 1968b; Fortes, 1953, 1959a, 1959b, 2013). By focusing on the filial bond, the chapter explains how children from military families of the Seventies describe and make sense of their relationships with the military community in the age of the trials for crimes against humanity, and how this aspect of their identity affects their interaction with the rest of the society.

Unlike the previous analytic chapters, this section is not organized thematically or chronologically but rather on a case by case basis. This is because children represent the most heterogeneous part of the research sample; their stories are indeed extremely various, and so are their reactions to the trials and the public stigma experienced by the military post-1983. However, such structure will present emblematic cases that stand out, contributing to a better understanding of how lineage is constructed in the military world, particularly in the present context.

I recruited adult daughters and sons to interview in Buenos Aires, following the same non-institutional channels that led to approach officers and wives. However, they did not
always belong to the network generated by my encounter with Luis, former Captain and gatekeeper; in some cases they were product of those initial contacts with locals that led to isolated encounters with military wives and children, that had happened at the beginning of fieldwork. As with officers and military wives, I interviewed children mainly in public spaces, but also at their houses and work places. Having been subject to the nomadic lifestyle of their military families, they were often born in different corners of the country and had lived in several provinces before settling in the capital city. In terms of age, most of them were born towards the end or immediately after the dictatorship, and were in their thirties and forties when I interviewed them; these children had no direct experience of the Seventies. A smaller number of children, instead, were teenagers in the Seventies, and therefore remember those years quite vividly.

At the time the fieldwork was conducted, not all the children I interviewed were directly affected by the trials, because in some cases their fathers were not in prison. While these informants seem indeed relatively indifferent to the issue of condemnation, others have seen their fathers publicly accused and convicted, and are today their strongest defenders across their judicial troubles. Still others have quite traumatic family stories since their fathers died as they confronted the guerrilla movement in the Seventies, and deal not only with the condemnation that affects the military in general, but also with a peculiar experience of loss and grief. Some children from military families feel a solid connection with the military world and even joined the military career themselves, whilst others tend to reject or at least take distance from this legacy. In sum, not only the characteristics of these participants are very different, but also their lived experiences and their narratives. Again this sample does not represent the totality of children whose fathers served under the dictatorship, but it still reveals interesting traits and different implications of being born in a military family of the 1970s.
5.1 Children of *milicos*

Paula was the first child I interviewed during fieldwork. She was a 32 years old daughter of a former subaltern officer. Her father had opted for a career in the Army because he had wanted a secure job, and who graduated in 1981. Paula was a professional actress and a teacher at the Argentine National Theatre Institute.

At the time of the interview, Paula’s father was not involved in the trials for crimes against humanity and was living abroad with her mother and her younger brother. When Paula was 18, her family emigrated after the catastrophic financial crisis that upset Argentina in 2001, but she decided to stay in Buenos Aires to pursue her artistic career. I first met Paula through a civilian friend we had in common; she looked open about the possibility of participating in the study, but also quite sceptical about the relevance of her story to any of my research goals: “I can just tell you what I’ve been listening at home, I don’t really know that much about my father’s career, he never told me too much” she said during our first chat\(^\text{56}\).

Despite her reservations, I interviewed Paula in the colourful apartment she shared with her boyfriend and colleague Gustavo. Interestingly enough, and although they both described themselves as creatures of the vibrant world of art, Gustavo was also a son of a former air commodore who had occupied a high position in the Air Force during the Seventies. The two affirmed they do not have any contact with the military world anymore and that, even

\(^{56}\) Interview with Paula (01/02/2016).
when they still lived with their parents, they were not those “typical military families that gather with others and do their military things together”\textsuperscript{57}.

Paula’s parents were from the province of Santa Fe, 300 miles from the capital city; since her parents got married after his father’s graduation her mother never worked, although she was a qualified accountant. When her parents were living in Rosario, where her father was first assigned after graduation, he was suddenly deployed in the South when the Malvinas campaign started in 1982, just while her mother was expecting her. She was born in Rosario at the beginning of the last year of the dictatorship, and then the family moved to Buenos Aires.

When Paula was three years old, her mother temporarily left her husband in Buenos Aires to move with her daughter at her parents’ house in Santa Fe, to give birth to her second child. Paula’s mother looked for the support of her biological family because in Buenos Aires she found herself in the position of being relatively isolated and pregnant, with a small child and a husband often away. As explained in Chapter Three, and according to several wives’ testimonies, the large military family was indeed more dispersed in Buenos Aires, and it was more difficult to make solid connections as military families from other provinces were assigned to a post there. Moreover, Paula’s father was waiting for a confirmation from the Army to obtain an assigned residence that never arrived, so that the family never lived in a \textit{barrio militar}. They managed to buy their own house in the suburbs of Buenos Aires after some years, and Paula always looked at the military quarter as a “sad boring place”\textsuperscript{58} she would visit to her regret only to see her friends. In fact, although she never lived in a \textit{barrio militar}, her childhood friends still belonged to military families

\textsuperscript{57} Conversation with Paula and Gustavo (December 2015).
\textsuperscript{58} Interview with Paula (01/02/2016).
because the schools she and her brother attended had a high presence of children from the military.

Therefore, although Paula’s family was not fully integrated in the military community, part of her mother’s and her own social circle was initially based on military acquaintances made at school. About her father, Paula described him as a very sociable man, who was slightly nonconformist:

He used to invite over his military friends and even his students. During a long time my father has been teaching his specialty, munitions and explosives, and his students adored him. They used to have dinner all together at home. I didn’t understand what they talked about during these gatherings, after a while I got bored, but I do remember the young men listening to him and looking at him with much love and respect. My father wasn’t the typical military instructor, he could relax any situation. I mean, he used to have beers with his students, that’s not too normal, is it?

(Paula)

Although Paula affirmed she did not remember too much about her father’s life in the military, her main memories about it are related to his involvement in peacekeeping missions under the command of the United Nations, which took him away from the family for even a year in three different occasions when she was 9, 13 and 15. According to Paula, this situation caused deep distress in the family, especially in her mother who was upset and projected her frustration on the children in an often aggressive attitude. Apart from the missions abroad and some reference to his activity as an instructor, Paula said she knew nothing about her father’s experience in the military. Of all the years he spent in the Army,
the most obscure seem to be those of the dictatorship. In fact, when I asked her if she ever talked with her parents about that period she answered:

No, it wasn’t a topic of interest at home. I only remember my mum saying that she didn’t really feel the dictatorship, she said she had no clue about what was going on. And I also remember my dad watching TV and cursing the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo. He used to insult them a lot like “what jerks are these old women, they’re all liars”, and so on… But I never asked him his opinion, what he lived or what happened exactly. I never got to ask my dad these questions. There are many things about my father’s career I only realized when I grew up, because my mother started talking to me like an adult, and many little things suddenly made sense. But about the dictatorship, no, never a word in the family.

(Paula)

So far, it looked like the reason why Paula ignored much not only about the Seventies, but also about her family’s experience in the military, was because according to what she recounts there was really nothing to know about: apparently she did not belong to the typical military family, they never did those “military things” with other families, her father was not the “typical military instructor” and he carried out his main military activity abroad in peacekeeping missions. In this broader picture, Paula refers to the dictatorship as a remote, obscure time, a distant age not only she did not live, but even those who did – like her mother – affirm it passed almost unnoticed, as if it never happened. However, these few sentences were actually the prelude to a more complicated story. Despite this quite neglectful attitude towards the years of the regime – much greater than any conversation I had with officers – Paula revealed in fact a detail that changed the course of
the interview: the memory of her father watching TV and cursing the human rights movements. Interestingly, when I asked why she never inquired about it, even though her father showed to be somehow affected by the dictatorship and the narrations around it, she changed attitude. Even if at the beginning of the interview she said she never found her father’s past interesting, and that the dictatorship was no topic of discussion at home, she actually admitted that she voluntarily decided not to ask about it:

It’s funny now that you ask me this, because during many years I actually felt like my father has been in some weird position. All my childhood, I’ve been listening to him saying that the stories around the dictatorship were all lies [...]. But when I started high school, my mates used to say instead that the military are all sons of bitches because of the dictatorship. It was a situation... I mean, my dad is no son of a bitch! And when I was younger I didn’t even question it, I never tried to find out more about what happened in those years, because having my father saying one thing and my friends saying something completely different, it just paralysed me. So I did nothing. I took no side, no questions, no talking.

(Paula)

Paula started high school in the mid1990s, after president Alfonsín had promulgated the laws of impunity, and his successor Menem had proclaimed the pardons. In those years she grew into teenage and gradually detached from the protected sphere of family and highly military-populated schools, to open up to the external non-military world. In 1995 the appalling revelations on the repression released by some former military reawakened the popular disdain, and revived the human rights activists’ claim for justice. At the time Paula was making ties with civilian boys and girls, and for the first time she was confronted by
narratives that directly attacked one of the pillars of her identity, her father: people external to her comfort zone provided descriptions of her father’s kind that she was not ready to assimilate and did not even suspect could exist until that moment. She admitted this clash provoked a “paralysis” and generated an internal conflict that she momentarily solved by ignoring those narratives that, despite her efforts to escape, yet put forward the idea that her father could have been in some “weird position” in the past. Her strategy to protect herself from this uncomfortable reality when she was a teenager was to stay still, closing her eyes and ears on a whole chapter of her father’s story.

Once she completed the high school cycle, Paula entered adulthood, her father left Argentina with the family, and Nestor Kirchner was elected president in 2003. In a very different attitude to his predecessors, Kirchner established and promoted the politics of memory. Paula’s generation in particular was highly influenced by the official narrative on the dictatorship whose tones were pervasively anti-military. I asked her directly about the trials: according to Paula, her father never mentioned the judicial prosecution affecting the military, and less the possibility for him to be accused. I asked her how she felt about this, if she ever reflected on the fact that her father’s colleagues and comrades were being sent to prison at the time of our conversation. She answered:

I don’t quite see those people as my father’s colleagues. That’s an issue, I guess, because my father is the exception to the rule for me, I never considered him a military man, so I can just separate him from all this... Yet, I know that many weird things happened in the past. So we didn’t talk too much at home, but when one grows up, and realizes that there are situations that cannot be shared, that the family don’t know about... that must be because there are some
murky things. So I wouldn’t be surprised if there was some even… murkier thing that made happen what happened during the dictatorship.

(Paula)

Paula revealed a contradictory, ambiguous attitude towards her father’s possible involvement in the dictatorship. When she said he was the “exception to the rule”, she was not just using a figure of speech: the rule she referred to is the official narrative consolidated by the Kirchners, the equation military-perpetrator that Paula, like the majority of Argentines born after the dictatorship, recognized as a matter of fact, the certainty on which the new post-authoritarian Argentina respectful of human rights is founded. Her statement suggests how deeply the moral condemnation of the military is a necessary truth in her generation’s eyes. At the same time, though, she was aware her father belonged to the group that needed to be stigmatized, and this is an opposed truth she tried to neglect for many years. Therefore she needed to remove her father from that group, stating he was the exception to the rule, for the sake of not only her relationship with him but especially her own interactions in society. However, in the interview she could not help but saying that she did realize that her father had been involved in a dark age, and that somehow that shadow fell over her family too.

In Paula’s case, the twelve years under the Kirchners and the watchwords “memory, truth and justice” influenced her view of the military, the society and probably even her own family, more than what she would realize and admit. She needed to take some distance from her father’s being military, a conceptual distance that chronologically coincided with a physical distance from him, because in 2001 Paula’s family left the country. Since then she had been on her own, with sporadic contacts with her family and no social ties with the
military, willing to undertake her own art career. However, in this second stage of her adult life she had to confront the fact that her father had been in the military once again:

At work I met people who had experiences different to mine, friends and relatives of the victims (of the dictatorship). If you don’t know anyone who lived those facts directly, well, you just take it as a story which could have happened or not. After all, who writes history? Who lies? Things are too abstract. But when I met people who were there, on the other side, and I already had in my head the idea that maybe some murky thing had happened on this side, then I started connecting the dots. Where I work there is a whole generation of artists who lived the dictatorship. Even my younger colleagues sometimes start talking about their parents who lived the dictatorship, that they couldn’t listen to rock music, or that their neighbour or classmate disappeared. And then they look at me, like “What about you? What happened to your parents?” And I’m like “Well. Uhm… My dad is a milico”. And they open their eyes wide.

(Paula)

Paula timidly shared the discomfort she felt when she had to face people even closer to a whole part of the story that her father denied and that she refused to question for most part of her life. She kept an ambivalent attitude revealed by the way she defined her father: she used a pivotal term that is “milico”, a South American Spanish pejorative for “soldier”. In the Argentine post-authoritarian context this word became a synonym of (at least) “perpetrator”, and its widespread use not only further marks the separation between the military and the rest of the people, confirming the segregation of the former within an ideologically and behaviourally homogeneous block, but it also lends to this social group
an equally homogeneous moral condemnation for the crimes of the Seventies. In fact, the word is often used to point at civilians too, who are compliant with the military of the Proceso, politicians in the first place. However, considering the indexical meaning (Briggs, 1986) of the word “milico” in the context of my conversation with Paula, which is the meaning given by her tone of voice, her gaze and postural attitudes, I understood she was not condemning her father like most civilians would do by calling him “milico”, but she was rather accepting that implicit condemnation, recognizing it to her regret as a part of her own identity.

When she said “my dad is a milico” first of all Paula used the present tense although her father was retired, suggesting an idea of military that is not anymore a job, as she described it in the initial part of the interview, but is more likely to be assimilated to the condition of “perpetrator”, which remains immutable in time despite the infliction of violence has actually ceased. Secondly, by using the word “milico” instead of “military” or “officer”, she was actually stressing the ominous part of being a military in Argentina, leaving behind a whole series of attributes that, as we will see in other cases, military children do consider when referring to their fathers, far from being related to the implicit condemnation that is legacy of the dictatorship.

So on the one hand Paula joined the official narratives and took distance from the military world, using a pejorative term to refer to her father that, although inappropriate for a member of a military family, is absolutely typical of her generation, born and raised in democracy. She was indeed the only participant in the study who ever mentioned the word “milico”. On the other hand, she put in place a strategy to distance her father (and herself)

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59 The Ministry of Defence Directorate for Human Rights, responsible for systematizing the military archives of the dictatorship that constitute evidence for the trials, is being currently affected by severe cuts to budget and personnel. The Minister of Defence who made the decision is Carlos Aguad, who earned the nickname “El Milico” for his closeness to General Luciano Benjamin Menéndez, convicted to life sentence in 2008 (Hayon, 2017).
from the implications of being a “milico”, by giving a description of him that was way different from what people would expect:

I don’t hide it (her father’s identity) but I don’t share it all the time either, because it’s a bit shocking, you know. It’s something that just comes out as I talk to people, and well, yes, my dad is a milico, what can I do? Nothing… With time I noticed that there is a way to separate this thing from me. When people find out, they suddenly become wary, they build a wall like “Uh, your dad is a milico!”: tuc-tuc-tuc-tuc (she mimes putting bricks one on top of another). There is always someone asking how I hold up with that, like if I had a burden on my shoulders. Then, if they give me some space to explain, I tell them I don’t see my dad as a military, I put together an image of my dad that is different to what they think, I tell them he’s kind of a hippie, that he used to listen to rock music and smoke weed when he was young. Indeed, the milicos should have gone after him! So, sometimes people even meet my father, and their little wall just falls apart. They forget he’s a milico, they say “If you didn’t tell me your father is a milico I would never notice”… I’m aware this is something I’ll have to deal with forever. It’ll always be like this, I accepted it.

(Paula)

Paula had to take distance from the military world, spending a long period of her life refusing to confront with this aspect of her family and her own identity. I argue this rejection is exogenous, meaning it finds its causes in the relationship with the rest of the society, gradually constructed first at school and then at work. The challenges of being a military daughter interacting with a society that sees in the category of the milico an enemy to stigmatize for the sake of a durable democracy, one of the pillars of the new Argentine
citizenship, forced Paula to implement a strategy of self-defence that led her to distance herself from the same environment to which her father belonged.

5.2 Children of “monsters”: “normal” kids?

Argentine military children elaborate different strategies to cope with the ways the society tends to see the military in Argentina. However, their interactions in the society can lead to different outcomes; if Paula’s self-defence is fundamentally a rejection of the military lineage that guarantees her relative extraneousness to the condemnation, other children develop opposite behaviours, ending up highly and sometimes even excessively involved in the military cause. This is especially the case of a group of children I interviewed whose fathers were under arrest at the time of the study.

Clara’s father was a former Lieutenant Colonel whose trial started in 2010, serving a sentence for events that happened in Tucumán while he was assigned there as Captain in 1977. In her father’s cause were involved 41 people, of which four have been condemned to life sentence, four ended up acquitted, and the rest received sentences between 2 and 20 years of prison; the accusations included illegal house search, illegal detention, torture, indecency, aggravated violations and aggravated homicide against 208 victims (Centro de Información Judicial, 2018). Clara was 32 when I first met her; she had a younger sister and her parents were both in their early seventies. After three years of incarceration, her father obtained house arrests due to his precarious health conditions for a terminal illness he was diagnosed two months after his detention.

I had several meetings with Clara and two long recorded interviews; she was introduced to me by one of the former officers, Miguel. Clara was highly affected by her father’s judicial
prosecution, and she believed that, as a foreigner, I could show a bit more detachment than Argentines (mainly journalists and academics) who were just as interested in her story. Therefore Clara’s interest in sharing her experience with me could be assimilated to the objectives of the officers and wives more directly affected by the trials. Despite her openness, though, her initial attitude was quite cautious, and she implemented a preventive strategy aiming to deconstruct any possible preconception about the military that I might put forward in our conversations. In a way similar to Paula, Clara held a quite defensive attitude at the beginning of our meetings as she talked about herself, defining her family as “normal” and not too involved in the “military thing”. In her words, the “military thing” suggests a concept of the military community that is preconceived, negatively determined and fuelled by the stereotypes shared by most Argentines, boosted by the academic world, the left wing, the human rights movements and the media. Since I had been inevitably exposed to such narrative, Clara feared my own prejudice and attempted to prevent it by cutting some space between one question and the other to explain how far she has always been from a certain way of living the military world:

We’ve never been too involved in the (large) military family, if that’s how you want to call it. We never lived in a barrio militar, we never had the military health insurance because we already had my mum’s one, who was working at the time, so... we never really fitted in. But not because we rejected the idea, or there was something wrong with it. It just didn’t happen because in our case there was no need for that. We’ve been quite extraneous to the whole military thing [...] I think that was also because my parents wanted us to do our own life, as it came, attending normal schools, normal clubs. I mean, not “normal” but “non-military” [...] And my parents have always been strict with us, but not strict in a military way: we received a normal education. The fact my dad was
in the military never bothered or overwhelmed me. I mean, it was his job, that’s all. He could have been... a baker (laughter). Anything! He’s my dad.

(Clara)

Despite some similarities with Paula’s discourse, the aim of Clara’s strategy is totally different because she revealed a series of details that makes her experience not the “exception to the rule” but rather the emblem of a way of being military which is real, more common than what we might think, and jarring with the commonplaces on the milicos. In several passages, Clara stressed the “normality” of her father, her family’s habits and her condition of daughter, taking for granted my assumption that everything related to the Argentine military must be somehow intrinsically “deviant”. Her father’s affiliation to the military was justified and described as a job at first, in line with most children’s testimonies regardless their father’s involvement in a trial. By talking about everyday family life rather than the circumstances that led his father to be convicted, Clara’s aim to highlight her normality was reinforced whenever she used in opposition the term “monster”, to underline an exaggerated, out of place way of depicting the military:

I want you to understand I haven’t been raised in a concentration camp. It’s not that just because you’re a military daughter you never pulled a prank, or you never misbehaved. I mean, we are normal kids [...] Many people say “Uh, your dad is a military” like if he was “Uh, a monster!”… No! Actually, if I have to compare my dad with my mum, I think she is much more authoritarian. She yelled at us all the time, while just a look from our father was enough to entitle him respect. But not the respect you pay to a monster you’re scared of, it’s the respect you owe to your father.

(Clara)
Clara used the term “monster” that can be assimilated to Paula’s use of “milico” since both words belong to the common vocabulary the majority of Argentines use to address the military and the perpetrators, two categories that in the official narrative definitely overlap. Unlike Paula, however, Clara did not abstract herself or her family from the “typical” and intrinsically negative military world, based on the supposed unique qualities of her father; she rather attempts to dismantle this dominant vision, and deconstruct any bias the interlocutor may have, given her experience with civilians. By anticipating my supposed vision about the military world, Clara offers a narrative of her family life and her father in particular that aims to demonstrate that being a military in Argentina does not necessarily mean belonging to the detestable kind of perpetrators, milicos and monsters. We saw how Paula tried to picture her experience as something different to what established by the official discourse on the military (that she ultimately accepts as valid), and used the formula “all the military are milicos but my father is not really a military”. Clara lived instead a more intense experience of condemnation because her father had been convicted; therefore, presumably in the attempt of rehabilitating his image, she aims with her narrative to tear the official discourse on the milicos/monsters apart, offering another version based on her first-hand experience in the military world. While Paula rejected her father’s military legacy, Clara does the opposite: she accepts, recovers and gives a new meaning to her link to the military world, and contrasts the dominant social constructions around it by creating a counter-narrative based on her experience of military child.

This operation rests on a certain “training” that Clara had consolidated and perfected in time: as a daughter of a military convicted for crimes against humanity she had been adapting her daily life since the trial started and, like Paula, she needed to implement her own strategies in the new scenario. Like many military wives I interviewed, Clara and other children who experienced their fathers’ arrest admitted the involvement in the trials
marked a before and an after in their lives. Clara’s parents were about to leave the country to go on holiday when they were stopped at the border: according to some papers provided by the local authorities, the former officer was forbidden from leaving the country being under investigation for the accusation of crimes against humanity, specifying the name of the judge and the number of the cause. They immediately returned to Buenos Aires, where Clara read the documents and suggested the family travelled to Tucumán to report to the judge, to show good will to collaborate with justice:

If I go back to that day, I tell you: I was aware that the military were being prosecuted, the big ones, people everyone in Argentina thinks they are really sinister characters. But it was something very remote for me, I never related it to my father. He used to read the newspapers, watch TV and he was interested whenever something about Tucumán came up, but I never saw him too concerned. I mean, he used to go out, on holiday, he wasn’t hiding. So when it happened, at first I felt like my whole world was falling apart. My little castle on a cloud, my life of good girl who always made everything right suddenly...
Everything suddenly crashed on me. I close my eyes now, and I clearly remember the moment I read those papers and thought “My life is over”.

(Clara)

Clara had graduated as a criminal lawyer three years before her father was stopped at the border: she immediately realized how serious the matter was. Despite her initial shock and despair, Clara reacted to the unexpected event by resorting to her juridical knowledge and skills, and promptly setting up a defence (this time in juridical terms) in order to face the trial in the best way, by literally doing damage control and striking back:
Unlike any other cause, the causes for crimes against humanity aren’t notified to the accused until they find out because they want to leave the country and cannot, for example. Or someday they just receive an arrest warrant, which is what happens most of the times. And the military have their own file in the Army, where there is all their professional record, and in my dad’s case it had been asked by the judge like two years before he was stopped at the frontier. The Army never said “Hey, look, they’ve asked for information about you”. No! The institution just disappeared, it left them alone. It’s not something that worries me personally, but I know it affects my dad. Because one thing is the family level, or the social level, another is your own institution. I know my father is annoyed with it. Because it hurts, it’s not just resentment, it’s sorrow and sadness. They all play the strong men but these things hurt them, it’s understandable. This year it’s going to be 50th anniversary since my dad graduated in the Military Academy. It’s all his life, he can’t do anything else. He thinks like a military and will die thinking like a military. However, for me it was like the end of the world at first, but then I reacted. I didn’t even allow myself to be depressed; there was no time for that. My sister is just the opposite, very shy and introverted, and it cost her a lot before she could adapt to the new situation. And my mom, well, sad and accompanying, as usual. But I got kind of crazy, and sometimes even cruel. I never lied to my father, I never said “Don’t worry, we’ll sort it out”. No. “Look, this is the reality: let’s find a way to face it”.

(Clara)

If Clara’s character and her experience in judicial matters let her face the crisis relatively promptly, taking the helm of the family, this does not necessarily happen in every family.
affected by the trials. The sense of bewilderment felt by the children is possibly even
greater than their mothers’ one, just because they are less trained in the adaptation and
preparation to the challenges of military life in general. Many military wives described
their children’s reactions to the fathers’ imprisonment as a total shock, admitting they had
to gather the family together and gave them instructions on how to deal with the new
situation, as if it was a new move in some remote corner of the country. Children always
stressed their feeling of “not being ready” to the change brought by the trials, despite the
warnings received in many cases by fellow members of the large military family,
especially their fathers’ comrades. In fact, the arrest is only the tip of the iceberg, because
the detention drags the family in a whole change of routines, duties and responsibilities
that completely subvert the equilibrium established in decades. It was the case of Gabriela,
37, the eldest of four sisters. Her father had graduated from the Military Academy in 1975
as a specialist in communication systems, and at the time of this study he had been under
preventive arrest in a prison of Buenos Aires since 2014, and he was still waiting for his
sentence to be pronounced. The families who only recently experienced the detention of
their relatives were slightly more prepared than those who experienced the trials in the
early 2000s. However, Gabriela remembered when her father had been arrested:

I was still near my parents’ house, I was going to the dentist when my mother
texted me: “They came for dad”. I felt pure terror, it was horrific. I jumped
down from the bus and ran. The longest two blocks of my life (bitter laughter).
But, well, we had seen this coming, we had seen how things were going, so we
just stayed closed as a family and tried to be informed. Anyway, when this
finally comes to happen, you’re never prepared.

(Gabriela)
The trials are usually held where the tried facts happened, which is also the place of detention of the accused; therefore the relatives who usually want to be present to the hearing are supposed to travel and attend in person often in far provinces. In Clara’s case, instead, since her father’s health declined two months after he was preventively arrested, the place of detention was moved to the Central Penitentiary Hospital in Ezeiza, near Buenos Aires, where he could be medically attended and Clara could visit him. So they used to follow the hearing together via teleconference:

During the thirteen months of the trial, I almost lived in Ezeiza. [...] Three times per week I just ran from Buenos Aires to Ezeiza, 80 miles return, I sat with the accused in front of the screen, and listened. During the normal visits on Saturdays I used to stay a lot of time, I entered the prison at midday and left at 6pm, I was always the first to get in and the last to leave. And you stay six hours alone with your old man in a place with no TV, no distractions… It never happens to spend six hours alone with your father, does it? Normally how long do you chat with your parents? One hour? Instead there (in prison) you have a lot of time: you talk about the trial, about the situation, about the way he feels, about how you feel, about the little things that happen in his daily life. Sometimes you have a problem maybe, but you don’t say anything about it, because you know he’s in there and… there’s nothing he can do to help. And you just think “Should I give him this burden too?” It’s like too much.

(Clara)

These children of convicted military did everything they could to relieve their fathers from the burden of imprisonment, by taking it on their own shoulders; and as Clara implied, it refashioned the father-daughter relationship. However, we will see in the next section how
this burden also needs to be shared with other children in the same situation, retracing a mechanism of mutual support that is typical of the large military family whenever its members face distressing situations.

This description should not be read as an attempt of “victimizing” these military children, shocked at their fathers’ conviction; as I explained in the Introduction, this is not the aim of my study. One could argue the reactions to condemnation described in these pages would be the same for most organizations. However, this is an ethnography, and ethnographies provide interpretations of societies in particular contexts without claiming for a generalization of the conclusions they draw. In other words, we cannot presume children of other kind of convicts would behave like Clara and Gabriela, as we cannot assume military children in similar situations in Argentina – but also in other countries, such as Chile – would react like these daughters do. My interpretation refers to a consistent group of military children in present Argentina, before the situation of condemnation experienced by their fathers, and in the context of de-politicization and discredit experienced by the Armed Forces since 1983. They react like they do not in an automatic way because they are military children, but in a way that is also calibrated on the actions of other subjects: their parents and siblings, the rest of the people and the society they live in, and the members of the military environment they come from. Their “indirect” being military plays a role in their behaviour, and in the meaning they construct about their own reality in present Argentina; but it should not be interpreted as a general rule for military children worldwide, or for children of convicts under the most diverse circumstances.
5.3 Children of accused officers in the public arena

When their fathers’ judicial troubles started, Clara and Gabriela joined the association Hijos y Nietos de Presos Políticos (HyN), “Children and Grandchildren of Political Prisoners”. As the name indicates, the group was formed in 2008 by children and grandchildren of mostly military, but also police personnel and civilians involved in the causes for crimes against humanity. The group, which counts today almost 2,000 members all over the country, seeks for public visibility and fights to denounce the irregularities of their fathers’ accusations, trying to make their detention, whether preventive or definitive, a bit more bearable.

The members of the group work incessantly to their cause, meet every week and carry out a series of public acts to sensitize the public opinion around the irregularities of the trials, sometimes in conjunct action with the UP and AFyAPPA. Due to both her commitment and her skills as a criminal lawyer, Clara in particular passed from being a member of HyN to become one of its most strenuous leaders. After some interviews, she invited me to attend one of HyN’s general meetings, where I observed its internal dynamics and conversed with several of its members.

The objectives set by the leaders seem to be shared by the totality of the children, the structure and working of the group pretty efficient; however, I also witnessed some frictions among its members. As I could observe in the meeting attended by about fifty people that day, the group is quite heterogeneous. People in the room were between 30 and 60 years old, their fathers were former senior and junior military officers, police and security personnel. There were also some children of civilians. However, the most divisive issue is the position to be taken towards the violence of the Seventies which, although it does not represent an explicit objective of the group, is an unavoidable topic. Before the
group started discussing the agenda a debate emerged, which turned into a violent altercation among some of the members. Some children argued that what happened in the Seventies was a (legitimate) war, and that therefore their parents should not be tried, nor should they publicly ask for forgiveness; the majority of the group were instead in favour of a more conciliatory attitude towards the “other side”, they implicitly admitted the violence had gone too far and advocated the achievement of realizable objectives considering their fathers’ judicial situation. A woman ended up in tears and abandoned the meeting, while one of the leaders reminded the rest of the group about the necessity to focus the struggle on the legal aspects of the issue.

In my view, these discussions – which according to Clara were recurring in the meetings, although not always so harsh – reflect the internal division between the oldest children, sons and daughters of senior officers during the Seventies who remember that period, and those born after the end of the dictatorship, like Clara and Gabriela. Some children try to contextualise their fathers’ actions, others tend to justify them due to the position in the ranks they occupied at the time; some have an heroic image of them, while others still prefer not to get involved in discussions on hot topics, and use “black humour” as a way to diffuse tension, or perhaps as a self-defence.

The group is conscious that the violence of the past still represents source of divisions, even among military families, and prefer to direct its action towards the resolution of the trials. After all, the trials were the reason that brought its members together in the first place. The association has a slogan – *There is no justice without legality* – and a logo, a puzzle whose pieces compose the Argentine flag, perhaps symbolizing the collateral intent of recomposing the fabric of the Nation by overcoming the fractures posed by the Seventies, including the families affected by the trials in the new social weave. HyN
abandoned its original name in 2015 to adopt the title *Puentes para la Legalidad* (Bridges for Legality). At the core of its claim, there is the active denunciation of:

The irregularities and violations of human rights our parents and grandparents suffer during the judicial proceedings. In this search, we have encountered prejudices and paradoxes embedded in Argentine society that have allowed to justify, by action or omission, the injustices that we suffer and that we believe must be overcome in order to find a common path towards legality. [...] For this reason our association is called "Bridges for legality" symbolizing the opportunity we have to build new bridges that may allow to overcome our differences in the search for justice through the encounter and the dialogue\(^6^0\).

The members of HyN do not fight to obtain pardons, or the annulment of the trials. Some particularly open-minded members are even aware about the moral legitimacy of the trials, and the need for this step to be taken in the society’s healing process. However, they blame the State and the government for the partial attitude in neglecting the violence perpetrated by the guerrilla, and for what they see as the political nature of the trials, whose irregular and summary conduct is affecting the accused and their families. The group in fact wishes to make public “the situation of more than 6,000 direct relatives also victims of different misfortunes, for example in their jobs, and who are also subject to different types of discrimination” (*Puentes para la Legalidad*, 2017a).

Although the children and grandchildren officially opt for taking distance from the dispute on the Seventies, their struggle is recognised by associations like AFyAPPA and the UP, that fight to promote the “complete memory” of that period. Therefore there is a certain convergence of objectives in the activities of these groups. However, they tend to

\(^6^0\) (*Puentes para la Legalidad*, 2017a).
collaborate, the group HyN abandoned its original name to adopt the title *Bridges for Legality* in order to take further distance from the organizations run by military wives and former officers that are commonly branded as reactionary and pro-dictatorship, and to stress even more the aim at the core of its struggle. Despite the name change, the group is still commonly known as “*Hijos y Nietos*”, both outside and inside the military environment, where they are just “*los hijos*”, “the children”, as if they were the sons and daughters of every officer and wife in the family of the Army.

In its public declarations before institutions such as the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights, an autonomous organ of the Organization of the American States, the group put forward a discourse that places them in a position different to comrades and wives, aiming to denounce the faults in the trials of their fathers, but also attempting to create a dialogue with the other side. AFyAPPA and the UP organize their claim from their position “in the front row” during the Seventies, reviving the human bonds created in the “battlefield”. This is something that children cannot do since most of them were not there; they stress the consanguinity tie with the accused, instead of the commitment to their fathers’ cause as they conceived it in the Seventies. As a result, the discourse and the action of the children does not stem from the universe of war, but are constructed in the legal terrain. Indeed, the judicial framework is currently the predominant way of dealing with the aftermath of the Seventies in Argentina (Crenzel, 2017), so the action of HyN inserts within this tendency. HyN position themselves not against their fathers’ former enemy and their followers (the ex-guerrilla, the left wing, the Kirchners, the human rights movements), but against the Argentine State that once again would be stepping on its citizens’ rights by virtue of the political circumstance:
The Argentine State is lying to the families of the victims of the dictatorship once again, because it lied when it made their relatives disappear, and it is lying again every time it gives them a culprit who is not.\footnote{Aníbal Guevara, spokesman of the association in a meeting with the civil society organised by the Interamerican Commission for Human Rights (OAS) in Montevideo, 25 October 2017 (Puentes para la Legalidad, 2017b).}

The reason why the group does not officially ask for pardons or the suspension of the trials is just related to this aspect; one of the leaders of HyN declared in the meeting I attended in Buenos Aires:

We cannot ask for an amnesty, we can’t hope our fathers will be pardoned. First of all the society would never accept it, and we couldn’t even be able to leave our houses without getting assaulted. But above all, this would just mean that the government and the State can decide who to prosecute, and when, and under which political circumstances, which is just what the dictatorship did, or Menem when he pardoned the juntas, and every democratic government in this country.\footnote{Participation in the monthly general meeting of Hijos y Nietos de Presos Políticos, Círculo Naval de Olivos (Buenos Aires, 14/05/2016).}

In their official website, the association goes in detail denouncing the rights and the constitutional guarantees that the Argentine State violated in the conduct of the trials, from the unnecessary use of prolonged preventive prison to the summary imputations, from the impossibility for the attorneys to prepare a proper defence by interrogating the witnesses (with the justification of impeding their re-victimization) to the denial of the inmates’ right to work and study during their detention. HyN particularly emphasize that:

Most of the times prosecutors take as evidence the historical context of the facts that are tried, which are well known by everyone but do not constitute...
evidence enough to condemn to the maximum penalty of life imprisonment almost 50% of the accused. In a criminal trial it is not the historical context to be debated. What is being investigated and determined is the individual criminal responsibility of each accused, based on conclusive evidence that leaves aside any reasonable doubt.\textsuperscript{63}

Reflecting the narrative of the officers’ I interviewed, HyN’s members declared their fathers had been prosecuted for “being military in a certain place and time” or because of their position as “necessary participant” (participante necesario) in the events.\textsuperscript{64} In addition, they often lamented that the trials do not take into account the position of the accused in the ranks. In other words, children claim the trials are partial in the instruction and non-proportional in the sentence. They denounce several injustices they are forced to suffer alongside their parents. Clara and Gabriela found decisive the help of other children in the same situation. Besides the public role assumed by the organization, the group indeed works as a space of strong emotional support for the families, which find and in turn provide reciprocal aid:

I started meeting a lot of people from... the (military) environment when my father was arrested. I knew no one in the military before that, and now I know half country. It’s been such a drastic change.

(Clara)

As soon as my father was taken we contacted Clara, and she told us what to do. She’s the one who helped us the most, especially to make the first decisions, which no one ever tells you anything about, and are usually the most important.

Maybe this sounds wrong, but the truth is no one can understand better than

\textsuperscript{63} (Puentes para la Legalidad, 2017a).
\textsuperscript{64} Interview with Gabriela (15/06/2016).
another child of a lesa prisoner how you feel when this happens. My group of friends changed completely. My friends for life – well, my other life – we used to be really close. Now my closest friends are all children of other imprisoned military, whose fathers are in the same conditions as mine. [...] And the group of HyN was born from the identification of one child with the other, really, the fact that their fathers are taken just like yours (bitter laughter). It doesn’t matter if your father is a general or a sergeant, if you have more or less power, or money: in the group we’re all the same, we’re all children of convicted. And we all go through the same pain when we enter a prison.

(Gabriela)

Despite some clear cut differences, Gabriela’s words echo the way officers describe the special relationship among cadets in the barracks, or soldiers in the battlefield, their condition of equality before the institution and, ultimately, before death. We saw how also military wives are able to interweave a sort of “feminine comradeship” in the home-front. Interestingly, a conscious identification of military children with their peers in adult life comes later in time, compared to the rest of the bonds in the large military family, and only in case of manifest hardship like the trials. The identification, in the case of the children, is not something they needed as their life in the military world started; while cadets in the academy, soldiers in the battlefield or wives in the home-front needed to feel supported, and sought to find a bit of themselves in their peers to cope with the hardship of military life, it seems children did not necessarily feel this sense of belonging during childhood. With the exception of those children who undertook the military career, the rest of them tended to lose or omit the tie with the military world during the years of the high school, because they gradually opened up to the civilian world.
So, many children abandoned their sense of military association as they felt more identified with other civilians. However, for those whose fathers, now old and in some cases ill, are being convicted, condemnation is a singular experience. Due to the fact that many of them had lost contact with the military community and did not live the Seventies directly, these children do not have tools today to make sense of the violence and the trials. The impossibility of making the experience of the Seventies their own, and to relive the state of permanent cultural war like their parents do, led them to take distance from it. This is why many members of HyN do not want to publicly take a position on the violence. Even so, they still have to deal with the trials which are a direct consequence of that violence. One way of doing it, is to go back to the military world and re-construct a link with it by identifying with fellow sons and daughters of convicted officers. Like their parents, they identify with their peers, and this is a tendency that, as it often happens in military life, is once again triggered by adversity. The strength found in the equals is something children resort to much later in this case, and in many cases it builds up in opposition to and in aid of the progressive weakening of their fathers’ condition:

It’s really difficult to understand what this implies until you live it, all the problems you start facing with the penitentiary service. [...] You become part of any basic need of your father, even the most unthinkable. If he wants to eat something sweet or if he has some medical problem, you, as a daughter, have to deal with all these things in a way you would have never thought.

(Gabriela)

Clara, Gabriela and the adult children like them, react to the trials by undertaking an obligatory direction that will mark their lives. This change is more than just an adaptation to a new situation; it also opens new spaces of sociability for a group of young Argentines
that had to deal with deep changes in their life in society following their fathers’ incarceration. Clara, who never felt too embedded with the military world, and developed a career ironically enough in the judicial environment, came back to the military family, retraced the bonds existing among the officers by getting close to their children, and fighting besides them in a common battle. Gabriela did the same: she found strength and support in the presence of her fellow children of military that even replaced her civilian social circles. These children would not have returned to spend so much time with others with military parents were it not for the trials. The impossibility for them to take distance from the military world, like Paula did, ended up in the elimination of any distance at all, a reintegration, and the acquisition of a position in the military family where they are not anymore the cared for, but the carers: the original relationship of dependence between the officer and his family is subverted, the officer needs the child to care after him in order to survive in the new scenario, just like he needs his wife and comrades.

Wives look often weakened in this context, many children said how their mothers fell into a deep depression or went ill after their husbands were taken. These mothers’ attitude seems to align with what Victoria said about the members of the wives’ group, AFyAPPA, as she stressed how they are getting older and older, so that always fewer and fewer women join the organization. The every year smaller number of women joining AFyAPPA seems to coincide with the high numbers of the group HyN, which counts hundreds of members all over the country. The position taken by the children corresponds to a generational interchange that is happening in the military world, which also gives new vital energy to the large family. And since the institution cut itself off from this issue, refusing to get involved, the anchoring points need to be found in the military families themselves.
Although it is not possible to assert that the sense of filial responsibility of these children is deepened because of growing up in a military environment, their return to the military world does look in this case like almost a service that children feel obliged to give. We will see that this feeling is also felt by children who are not directly affected by the trials, meaning it is an issue that transcends the strictly judicial prosecution of the Seventies and has to do with broader dynamics proper of the military world.

5.4 Crossing boundaries

A part of my research sample is made of children who lived the 1970s and in some cases vividly remember those years; although in a way different to the children of convicted military, they also have been affected by the political violence. These children, in fact, lost their fathers at the hand of the guerrillas while they were in active service during the years immediately before the military coup. In some cases the officers died in a confrontation against the armed organizations, in others they were executed after being kept hostage for several months. Although especially in the second case these stories are well known in Argentina, and shocked the public opinion for the crudeness of the facts, the dead never received moral or economic reparations from the State, and are only commemorated within the military environment in relatively low-profile ceremonies. On a societal level, the place of the relatives of these dead is quite controversial: they are related to military (perpetrators by definition, according to the official discourse) that ended up being victims of the guerrilla (the young idealists) a group that in turn counted thousands of desaparecidos during the dictatorship. As a consequence, the public recognition of their loss is still pending.
Despite the clear cut differences in their experiences, the children whose fathers were victims of the guerrilla and those affected by the trials are sympathetic with each other, since they all tend to oppose the partial attitude of the State and the society towards the aftermath of the Seventies. The children of the convicted military may have not lived the dictatorship but inherited the conflict and the consequent trauma in the form of a judicial condemnation; those who were left fatherless by the guerrilla attacks are not involved in the trials, but are exposed to the same condemnation because their loss is just as taboo as the memory of their fathers. We will now observe how these children now adult, whose stories are emblematic of the violence of the Seventies, made sense of their relationship with a military world that is officially the only responsible party for that violence.

Darío was born in 1974; he was not even one year old when his father got killed in the first battle of the Operativo Independencia, when the Argentine Army confronted the ERP in the mountains of Tucumán. After his father’s death, Darío’s mother remarried in 1979 to a diplomat. The family travelled during many years around the world, going back to Buenos Aires only in the breaks between one mission and another. Darío returned to Argentina for good when he was 19 in 1983, and decided to settle in the city of Mendoza, where he was still living when carried out our interview:

I was raised far from all this. And after living abroad for so many years, in so many countries, I felt I had no roots. But, well, at some point we all want to know where we come from (laughter) so when I turned 19 I came to Mendoza, where my father’s family belong. My old man always called my attention, also because we didn’t talk about him at home. You know, I had another (step)father and we didn’t want to overrule him. So I had no information about my dad, about anything, really. I only knew he was in the military, he got
killed and ended up in the newspapers. That’s all. And about the military, I only knew what I saw on TV. On top of this, my (biological) father’s family, his siblings, they are all left-wing people. It must be because they studied at university, and it used to be very politicized by the left. So they told me my dad got killed because the military sent him to die: he was just cannon fodder, a bait. That’s the answer they gave me when I came here, 19 years old. You can imagine my shock when I heard this shitty theory that everything was like set up, that they (the Army) needed a hero – just my old man – and that’s why they did what they did. I knew nothing about those times, so I started studying and asking around, but it was difficult, no one talked.

(Darío)

Darío approached his father’s siblings looking for answers. The officer’s family was not able to provide the answers Darío was looking for, and so he came to feel more bewildered: he passed from knowing nothing about his father and the circumstances of his death, to discover an uncomfortable story according to which the military deliberately sent his father to death in the mountains of Tucumán. By accepting this version, Darío would also have to accept that his father made a sort of absurd suicidal choice by joining an institution that sacrifices its members, giving to his death a kind of senselessness.

The vision of Darío’s family might be assimilated to the testimony of other participants I already exposed, subaltern officers that described themselves as “the cannon fodder” of their superiors, or military wives like Victoria that alluded to the indifference of the Army to the fate of the soldiers sent to battle. Nevertheless, these last testimonies reflect the awareness that the members of military families acquired during their experience in the Army, conscious of both the interchangeability (and the replacement) of one soldier with
another, and their position in the hierarchy that implies different scales of risk. According to Darío, instead, the story his uncles and aunts provided would be imbued with left-wing anti-military elements acquired during their education in university in the late 1960s-early 1970s.

Whatever the reasons behind the answer provided by Darío’s relatives, this version of the facts confused him even more. Therefore, he decided to find answers by himself, researching the history of the Seventies and “asking around” about those events. However, this move came with scarce success since apparently he did not manage to break the wall of silence around the Operativo Independencia in the years after the end of the dictatorship. Then:

Some years later – I was 22 – I received a phone call. It was a General from my father’s promoción. I have no idea how they found me, but the guy said “I’m a friend of your father, promoción 97”. I think it was the 30th anniversary of their graduation, my old man’s promoción, so the General asked me to join them for the occasion, that it would be an honour if I could go. So I travelled to Buenos Aires with my mother and went to the Military Academy. It was… such an emotion to see all these people, singing the anthem, although I had listened to it so many times before. So, that’s when I met people from the military world for the first time, and I was 22. My dad’s friend, he was such a kind man, so different from the idea of soldier I had, he treated me like a son. He took me everywhere, always by my side, a great guy really. At a certain point during the ceremony the people from the promoción – they are hundreds – they joined a queue and came to greet me one by one (laughter). How terrific! And then I
took contact with some close friends of my dad. My mum too, they hadn’t seen each other in ages.

(Darío)

Interestingly, Darío’s return to the military community happened, he said, on the initiative of the military themselves. The promoción, while recreating the social space to perpetuate its internal bonds of loyalty and camaraderie, transcended once again the limits of the barracks to embrace the family; it got in touch with the son of the fallen comrade to reconstruct the tie that broke in the battlefield, finally to pay him homage. Darío, whose father was killed in action, was socially adopted by the surviving comrades, and experienced the solidarity that was probably felt by his deceased father. The vertical lineage tie was retraced after decades to make sense of an empty place that was significant for both parts, the large military family and its “lost child”, and generated at the same time a solidarity tie between Darío and his father’s comrades. More than twenty years after his abrupt departure, not even a child, Darío was invited by his military family to re-join the world he belonged to. Darío also involved his mother in this re-encounter, which led to the construction of a fictive kin tie, and on top of all this he was finally able to find the answers he was looking for:

After that, I realized my dad had died in combat to save the life of a comrade. I asked the members of my father’s promoción if the guy was still alive, and if I could have his phone number, so I called him. “Hi, Ricardo. I don’t know how to tell you this but I’m Captain Cortéz’s son”. “I’ve been waiting for this call for 22 years”, he replied. So we met, I sat with him – he’s paralyzed since the accident – and he told me what happened, which is what I was looking forward to, to hear this from someone first-hand. He told me everything. How their unit
crossed the ERP’s ranks in the mountain, they opened fire, Ricardo got shot in the back and my father went to rescue him. But there he got shot in turn, lethally. Then I realized a war happened, which wasn’t being told, and that some things were being distorted. I mean, my dad didn’t just shoot himself. And I also realized that falling under fire to save a companion’s life is the greatest honour for a military.

(Darío)

By returning to the military community Darío found a closure and a new beginning at the same time. The encounter with Ricardo was revelatory for him; it let him find satisfactory answers to his father’s absence, and had a deep impact his own identity-making process. The answer he got made sense to him and was functional to a world he finally felt he belonged to. The integration into the military community only came in adult life for Darío; he was welcome into the military family as the son of a fallen comrade, and to a certain extent he would re-orientate his compass from the recently acquired position within a social world that respected and understood who his father was.

According to his testimony, it seems that the people of the military play an important role in Darío’s life, providing answers on the past that he was looking for since he decided to find out about his father. After some years from that episode, Darío started working as a clinical psychologist in the military hospital of Mendoza, where mostly military personnel and their families are attended. There he had the possibility to observe and participate in a whole social world he belonged to by “birthright” and whose logics where obscure to him at first. He was finally able to live in the society as a member of the large military family that contributes to the community with his own abilities:
I was 28 when I started to work in the military hospital, so there I could start to see the military world in the front line: I spent time with them, I understood their culture, how they really are. And what I saw it was nothing to do with the idea of the military I had in my head, because my father’s siblings told me things completely different about them. I mean, I work in a hospital, it’s not even as strict as a unit in the field, everything is much more relaxed… And I learned how they think, how their everyday life is, their education, and I saw it on a daily basis. So, well, I grew up.

(Dario)

However, in his adult life which partly coincided with the Kirchners’ administrations, Darío also came to learn what his father’s identity implied for him on a public level, once he decided to embrace it. He said he had been affected by the aggressive anti-military tones used by the Kirchners, by the incompatibility between the heroic narrative of the Army and the lugubrious stories of the victims of the dictatorship, and he painfully realized that there was no place in the public memory of the Seventies for his father’s story.

As a personal crusade against this state of things, Darío collaborates with several organizations – formed by relatives of the victims of the guerrilla, this time both civilian and military – promoting the “complete memory” of the Seventies such as the CELTYV (Centre for the Studies on Terrorism and its Victims) and AFAViTA (Association of Relatives and Friends of Victims of Terrorism in Argentina). Some participants with stories similar to Darío are involved in the activities of these associations, which constitute for them a sort of group of self-help, as they described it in the interviews. Interestingly, within this action the children who are indirect victims of the guerrilla often came in contact with their “counterpart”, the ex-guerrilla members. In 1974 Silvana’s father, at the
time Lt Colonel, was kidnapped, held prisoner during almost one year and eventually executed by the ERP. She was 18 at the time. This is how she recounted the first time she met a member of an armed organization, forty years after her father’s killing:

The first time I met an ex-guerrilla I was confused. The wives of some convicted military had organised a meeting and invited this ex Montonero, open to talk to people from the other side, and me, a victim of leftist terrorism. I went there on the warpath, but found instead a man extremely well educated, pleasant and brave, I have to say. I drove back home thinking “This man after all is like me, like my brother or my husband”… and I had been fighting to obtain a recognition, a moral reparation from the State for so many years, with no result at all. I was unmotivated. So I started collaborating to the national reconciliation, with ex-combatants on both sides, and this helped me. We give talks – in private schools and universities only – about the need for reaching a harmony. Because I realized those who lived the Seventies are all victims: those who died are victims just like those who are still alive, and still talk about that period after so many years. […] My soul felt repaired, although the wounds will never heal. But I felt like what I was doing was healthier, I felt like was finally putting the figure of my dad in a different place.

(Silvana)

Surprisingly, some people found a way to overcome divisions. They often speak about exceptions: ex guerrillas “open to the other side”, former officers “ready to talk”. They might not be representative of the totality of the former combatants involved on both sides in the Seventies, but they exist indeed. This phenomenon has probably been favoured also by some ex members and sympathizers of the guerrillas who expressed certain criticism
about the action of the armed groups in the Seventies, both in the media and in publications (Anguita and Caparrós, 1998; Giussani, 2011; Fernández Meijide and Leis, 2015). However, although we have testimonies of this phenomenon of contact among the two parts from the side of the military, it is still something the front for human rights do not talk about.

Even more striking, children of convicted military are also involved in this process. Some participants referred about meetings and chats with children of desaparecidos, which unexpectedly even for them, offered touching points of contact and interchange. Clara for example, whose father is serving a severe sentence for crimes against humanity, recounted about a meeting she had with an Argentine anthropologist, a journalist and another member of HyN for an interview. At the meeting, though, the journalist introduced himself by his name, and as the son of two desaparecidos. This is Clara’s memory of that unexpected conversation:

It was hard. I never thought I could get to have such a close encounter. We talked for quite a long time, everything happened in reciprocal respect. No one hurt, no one insulted each other, we talked about our positions [...]. We had the same age, so I couldn’t help thinking “Uh, this could have been me, easily. I could have been in his place” [...]. And the challenge is with the person you disagree with, with the person on the other side. And it’s not about convincing, it’s about respecting. And coexisting. Which I believe is our limit as a society in this chapter of our history, because maybe there are people we’ll never be able to sit and chat with, like Hebe de Bonafini. I doubt she would ever

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65 De Bonafini is one of the founders of the association Madres de Plaza de Mayo, renown for her aggressive and sometimes belligerent attitude towards the “enemies” of her disappeared children.
receive us, but if she did... then we should go and talk to her. After all we, as children, we are taking charge of a problem that is not ours. I wasn’t even born.

(Clara)

This emblematic contact between two different kind of Argentine children happened through non-institutional channels; the organizations of HyN and H.I.J.O.S. did not take the initiative in making this magic happen. I would assume the organizations would perhaps even discourage such encounter from happening, especially on the side of the human rights front. Maybe because in this case kinship and consanguinity did not work as a vehicle to express opposed political claims of justice, but as the starting point for a reflection, a confrontation, an open question about the past and especially about the future of this generation.

The two sides of the violence are still in contact. Not only ex-combatants – guerrillas and military alike – “speak the same language” as César said in an interview, and even agree on the inaccurate historical transmission of the events of the Seventies; but also the next generation is involved in a process of slow reconciliation. This is the word I would use to describe these contacts after all, although such term is spectre of impunity and oblivion in Argentina, but evidence suggest that these encounters are beneficial to these people, and hopefully one day to the whole society, to the extent to which they open a space for dialogue. In this grey area, military children in particular seem to act as a vehicle for a testimony that is more orientated to getting close together with the other side, rather than to stay captive of an age-old confrontation.
5.5 “Blood is thicker than water”

Adriana was born in 1986, only daughter of a second marriage. Her father remarried in 1975 to her mother, who was much younger than him. Adriana said her mother “seemed to be born the moment she met him”, and that she knew nothing about her life before that point. Adriana’s case represents the only exception within my research sample, since her father did not belong to the Army, but to the Air Force, and he was not a subaltern during the dictatorship but a Commodore who retired in 1972. Despite this important variation, I decided to include her story in the analysis anyway, because it is just as fitting to the purpose of the study, especially in terms of the children’s relationship with the military environment.

During her childhood Adriana was fully integrated in the military social circles. This happened especially on her father’s initiative because her mother, due to her condition of second wife, was not too keen to share everyday life with the military community. Divorce was only legalized in 1987 in Argentina. Despite this, Adriana’s mother never prevented her from joining the leisure activities for military children organized by the Air Force, especially during the three months of the summer holidays. When Adriana’s father passed away she was only 10, and after his death her mother let her keep the contacts with the military world. As a teenager it was Adriana’s choice to cultivate her military friendships besides her civilian ones, that she made at high school and then at university where she studied as accountant. She exercised the profession during the first years after graduation and, just before turning 30, she took her last chance to join the military career herself by entering the Air Force. Adriana attended the four months compulsory training for officers.

66 I cannot confirm this was the case of Adriana’s parents, but talking with locals – both military and civilians – I ascertained many Argentines who could not remarry in the past because of a precedent marriage and the impossibility to ask for divorce, used to do it in Uruguay, and would legalise their situation in Argentina only many years later.
who opt for supporting roles (while the training for commanding roles lasts the usual four years period). She graduated six months before our first interview and she currently serves in the Air Force as a professional accountant; at that time she was also engaged to a fellow comrade belonging to a promoción one year older (más antiguo) than hers.

From the very beginning Adriana seemed very talkative about several aspects of her experience as an officer and a military daughter. However, I must also clarify that there are other issues I will mention later, that Adriana carefully avoided. We had a first informal meeting at her house to plan the interviews, and then some recorded interviews, the first of which at her workplace. As I entered the Cóndor, the colossal building hosting the administrative offices of the Air Force in Buenos Aires, Adriana received me downstairs in the main hall and escorted me through the labyrinth of corridors leading to her office. On the way, she respectfully greeted every officer, soldier or civilian we met, according to the grade, and once we sat at her desk she explained:

We are all family, here. Some people I’ve known them since we were children. And people in the higher ranks know I’m the daughter of a Commodore, because of my surname. We all know each other, people talk a lot. And it has pros and cons, like everywhere.

(Adriana)

Adriana declared to be in the process of finding out more about her father and his experience in the military. She always considered the link with the military element as a crucial part of her identity, and at this point of her life she felt like the only way for her to be fulfilled was to recover and seal her bond with the Air Force by becoming an officer herself. According to her, this choice was only the last stage of a wider process of self-discovery that, contrary to what is generally supposed for the children of the military, has a
lot to do with her father’s absence rather than his patriarchal influence on the family. Not only Adriana as an adult decided fully to incorporate the military vein which was always present in her life, but she also said she was in the process of retracing her father’s path in the Air Force as a way to find out more about herself.

Military codes say that “the soldier does not have two personalities” (Fuerza Aérea Argentina, 2013:70), which means since the military and the civilian souls are incompatible in an officer, the first must dominate. For children we cannot say the same, because the relationship with the military world and their position on the edge can often be source of strife, it may not always be continuative in time, or positive in its nature, especially when children enter adulthood and the relationship with the military world gets transformed, or even undermined by the “contaminations” from the civilian world:

I understood many things of the military only as I joined the Air Force. You’re a daughter of a military, you live with them, you belong to their circle and still you don’t get it… How they get to weave this close tie, why they are all “family”, why there is so much trust. Or why they feel so superior, so distant to civilians. It shouldn’t be like that. As a military I’m not superior to a civilian, I serve. […] I’ve always been a hybrid. My dad was dead, I could freely decide of staying in the military circle or not, my mother didn’t put any pressure on me. So, whenever the military world became overwhelming – because that’s what it does at a certain point, it suffocates you – I just ran away and disappeared for a while. If you’re a military you’re a military 24/7. It’s not a job, it’s a lifestyle for you, for your children... You drag a lot of people in it. It’s a bit selfish. But I decided to be selfish in turn, and did it myself. And when I’ll have children, if they won’t bear it, then they can do as I did. […] I
had to deal with my own life (in the civilian world) before starting looking back to my roots. If you don’t stand on your own feet first, you can’t really look anywhere else. So I did everything I had to do: I studied, I got a degree, and this (joining the Air Force) was the last thing to do before looking back in the past.

(Adriana)

I realized during our interviews that, besides being a military child early deprived of her military father, Adriana’s family story was quite complicated. Part of the discovery process she voluntarily undertook had to do with the Seventies and her father’s first family, with which Adriana had limited but cordial contacts:

I guess this need I have to find out about my father’s past comes from the fact I have no one to answer my questions. Or even if I have someone (her mother), I can’t really ask too much. My mum always says my dad died of disappointment. Maybe he wouldn’t be too happy to know I joined the Air Force. That’s also why I have to find out more, and my father’s niece is helping me. My father had four children from a previous marriage, and apparently one of my stepbrothers was a Montonero. At some point he was taken and disappeared for several weeks. He was tortured and lost part of his lung because of the *picana*. And of course my dad was a Commodore, so someone told him about my brother and forced him to choose between his son and his career. And obviously he chose his son. That’s why my father was forced to retire, he must have stepped on somebody’s feet and they used his son against him. The Air Force is family, but it has its control mechanisms too, and there is always someone who doesn’t like you. On the other hand, the
career is made by both fathers and children: as a son of a military you can’t just do whatever you like, because it’s the father who pays for the mistakes of his children.

(Adriana)

Adriana does not know and does not talk too much about her father’s first family, however the reason behind his (forced) retirement appear to be linked with this issue. Again, being military appears to be a family path that assigns precise roles to each member, which sometimes leaves the pre-established rail, especially when the public and the private dimensions fail to conciliate. In this case the political views of the child, Adriana’s stepbrother, clashed with the position of the father. The fracture in the family was too deep and became incompatible with the officer’s inscription to the military world, so he was forced to choose, and he abandoned the public field to fall back in the private one of the family.

Despite the fact that when her father remarried he had already retired from the Air Force, Adriana, as his daughter, was still entitled to join the military circle, while her mother – second wife – was tacitly excluded from it. The reasons behind her father’s (presumably illegal) divorce, his first family and the experience of her mother as a second wife of a senior officer, are important omissions in Adriana’s story. I also repeatedly asked Adriana to introduce me to her mother to have an interview with her, but she always bypassed my request. Interestingly, the circumstances in which the violations of human rights happened is not the only taboo in the conversations with military families, but also any “deviation” from the virtuous conduct predicated by the institution are things they are not happy to discuss in detail. A divorce, especially in a 1970s military family, was an issue that was equally, or perhaps even more condemnable in their eyes. When Rouquié (1981b) wrote
his study on the Argentine military in 1973, he described the shame that used to fall upon the officers with SFI, “irregular family situation”, who generally saw their promotion deferred. SFI was also a condition for rejecting aspiring cadets during the home inquiries mentioned in Chapter Three, which aimed to preclude the access to “disunited families or illegitimate couples”, associated with “popular non-Christian urban environments, not concerned with respectability” (Rouquié, 1981b:338).

Adriana’s family story is also emblematic of the extent to which the conflict of the Seventies and its consequences affected thousands of families of the middle-upper class in Argentina. Her family members from different generations were standing on opposite fronts. The inevitable clash of violence not only changed the fate of the contemporaries, but affected the next generations, with Adriana finding herself in the position of enquiring facts of the Seventies although its direct witnesses were gone (her father was dead and she had never been close to her stepbrother), in order to make sense of her present. On the one hand, Adriana wanted to understand why her father “died of disappointment” and maybe whether that disappointment would affect her too; on the other, she needed to know more about his career and his role during the regime.

I asked Adriana if she was ready to the possibility of discovering her father’s responsibility in “murky things”, using Paula’s words, and if she had ever thought about how she would react in that case:

I don’t know to be honest. He must have been involved somehow, because if you’re in the higher ranks then you must know. [...] If I, as a subaltern, feel the pressure, even in peacetimes, can you imagine my father who had eight stripes more than me on his uniform? I think I’d take it as... something that was the product of those times and circumstances. Like doctors, for example: they
denaturalize themselves because of their closeness to death and critical situations. Their brain creates a sort of shell, a self-protection in order to make decisions: “shall I cut the leg or shall I not?”… They don’t think as people. And war, or these situations of internal disturbance, they tend to denaturalize people too. We’re not civilians, we are military. Once we break the barrier of killing, of taking someone’s life for the sake of something superior, we lose part of our soul. We give it in. So I think that’s what happened in those times, there was an act of normality which was kidnapping and detaining people. That was the procedure. And they didn’t think about it as people, they did it according to the function they were fulfilling in that context.

(Adriana)

By joining the Air Force Adriana got to understand the military mentality more in depth, and managed to position herself in the scenario of the Seventies. By using the tools she had acquired she attempted to draw conclusions from the complicated knot of her family and national history. She did not just literally go back to the military world by joining it, but she also got closer to what she thought of as her father’s mentality, restoring a connection with him despite the fact he had died more than twenty years before:

If you’re the daughter of an officer you never know what your father does exactly (laughter). But I want to know, and I want to be told exactly how things went. Because I’m happy with everything the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo have done, their struggle was amazing, but I think only one part of the story has been told. The problem is, since the Air Force is a family and we are all so hermetic, if you touch someone then you don’t want to affect the rest. So what happened then was like “Well, people, nothing happened here, because
otherwise your cousin goes down, and then your nephew, your brother, your son”. […] When I was at university, my mum suggested I never said my father was a military. She thought they would have given me bad marks, because they’re all zurdos\(^{67}\) in the university. This makes me angry. It’s a cultural matter and it’s nobody’s fault, or everyone’s. And it’s nothing I can change, so I try not to take it personally. It’s a social construction that still needs to mature. I think it’s better than twenty years ago, because now we can talk about what happened. But we need twenty years more before we get to develop an impartial view. On both sides there’s still so much hate, so much exacerbation, and that’s exactly what made everything go shit in the Seventies. Maybe in twenty years, once they’ll all be dead, we’ll be able to talk without hurting anyone.

(Adriana)

The societal attitude towards the military touched Adriana as well, and the frictions around the Seventies on the one hand awakened a slight resentment, on the other fuelled her curiosity on those times, motivating her personal quest for truth.

A second interview with Adriana happened at her place. She received me in her living room, where she had just opened some boxes. They belonged to her father, and she was analysing the contents: maps, military history books, didactic material from the years in the School of Military Aviation, some black and white photos. Adriana lost her father when she was young. Her decision to join the Air Force was a way for her to reconnect with him, to make her own the teachings and the values of her father, and also to experience in so far as she could the world he belonged to and made him and herself what they were. Adriana

\(^{67}\) Spanish-Argentine term used during the dictatorship to refer to the “subversives” and more in general the sympathizers with the left-wing values.
had always been open to share her experience with me – although we saw there are important parts missing – and at the end of our work together she said our meeting was just timely with the process of identity-remaking she had been through since she made her decision of joining the Air Force. As I asked her why she accepted to participate in the study she said:

Because I saw a lot of me in your questions. They’re the same questions I ask to myself, for the things I decided to face being a woman, a professional, and a daughter of a military, by making my decision of joining the Air Force. When you talked to me about your study I thought “This can’t be a coincidence, this comes for a reason”.

(Adriana)

Despite her father’s absence, Adriana did not put him on a pedestal; she wanted to be in touch in so far as she could with her father’s military identity and position, even considering the possibility that he could have been implicated in something bad during the Seventies, and making the decision of finding out more about it. She did not idealize her father as a human or as a military because, precisely by joining the force, she could understand many things of the military mentality, and not all positive. Depending on what she would finally find out, she might end up condemning her father or justifying his actions but, whatever her reaction would be, she would get there by using the tools provided by both the civilian and the military worlds.

There are some ambiguities in the stories of the children presented in this chapter, and in the way they rethink of themselves in relation to the issue of condemnation. The way they deal with moral and judicial condemnation in turn reveals other aspects of being a child in the military community, as well as about being a mother much younger than her husband.
(and a second wife) or a father (whose children made big mistakes) in that same environment. The emphasis and the omission about particular aspects of family life stress even more the strict link between public and private, and between institutional and family life in the military, a framework we will see it gets even more complex considering the position of the military population in contemporary Argentine society.
Chapter Six. THE ARGENTINE MILITARY BETWEEN THE DOMESTIC AND THE PUBLIC SPACE: CONTRIBUTIONS FROM AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF KINSHIP

This last chapter draws conclusions from the material collected in the field and discussed in the previous sections. It explains a possible way to interpret the horizontal and vertical kin ties within the military family; it also describes how different actors belonging to the military community create those relationships and understand their position in relation to society and the State accordingly; finally, it shows that the action of those connected to the military in the context of the trials is organized around kinship, and this in turn shows how notions of family and kinship have been central to the construction of Argentine claims, in the search for meaning around their past.

6.1 Renewed alliances: understanding comradeship and marital bond

The first part of this ethnographic study explored two topics: the first about the way military families understand the crisis that is affecting their community, drawing on their experience within the military environment; the second about their reactions – individual and as a social group – to these late unforeseen developments. I argue these two processes are anchored to ties of kinship and comradeship, both pillars of the military world and identity.
In approaching my subject, I used a non-institutional approach that enabled me to observe how informants communicate, make sense of and transform kinship and comradeship into social practices and knowledge on an everyday basis. This was possible by looking at the promoción and the family, two connected social spaces that developed in parallel. We understood how the family is a point of reference that helps describing also many situations of military life, and how in turn life in the barracks and in the battlefield has an impact on the dynamics within the familial sphere. Since the very beginning, the family is involved within most aspects of the officer’s professional project – career plans, posts, social life and so on; at the same time the family is “military” from its early days, also due to the considerable institutional intervention in the private life of the members. In short, the first phase of officer’s professional project and the creation of the family (analysed here especially in the integration to the military environment) are two simultaneous and interdependent processes in the military world.

Participant observation with former officers enabled me to grasp the social aspects of solidarity and communion among these comrades that enable them to adapt to the military environment and understand their position in the world. Rather than describing comradeship exclusively as a mechanistic element that serves specific functions within training and combat, this study interprets native manifestations of comradeship as a form of fictive kinship, a bond of constructed brotherhood, that becomes crucial especially in critical situations. The Armed Forces are a highly hierarchical institution and this character defines the relations among the members and their families; the system of the promociones helps to identify these mechanisms in the aspects of military life that might not be explicitly prescribed.
Whenever the working of discipline and the related expectations jams, the dynamics within the pyramid of the Army are affected. The horizontal angle revealed by the ties of comradeship showed how subaltern officers tend to behave in such situations towards superiors and subordinates. Evidence from this study shows in fact that former subalterns presented a unified front against the lack of support of the institution in the judicial prosecution started by Kirchner: the vertical dynamic across the pyramid lost intensity (and its priority character) in favour of the horizontal bond among comrades, which has strengthened. Historically, this phenomenon had already erupted before the current trials in open rebellion and discontentment, particularly in relation to two emblematic moments for the Argentine Army: the counterinsurgent war and the Malvinas war. The leadership of the institution glossed over the issue of the responsibilities in both campaigns, leaving the subordinates at stake of moral, political and judicial condemnation; these events led to the *Carapintadas* mutinies and, although in more mitigated tones, I believe a similar process is happening with respect to the current trials for crimes against humanity. The trials and the policies of memory pursued particularly by the Kirchners revealed only the peak of a protracted situation of unattended expectations within the Armed Forces. Therefore the thesis confirms the structural character of the tension between vertical and horizontal relations in the Argentine Army, which sees its ranks closing when besieged by adverse circumstances. However, it is difficult at this stage to establish the extent to which this would apply for the whole military; given the characteristics of my sample, my study focused indeed on the consonants, rather the dissonants, and the cohesion, rather than the conflicts, within the large military family. There might still be factions that the majority would not support. In fact, although I had no opportunity to explore in depth the degree of conflict among the subaltern officers accused that I occasionally witnessed, I do not deny the persistence of horizontal tensions within that generation of military. I suspect political
and ideological divisions persist, as well as individual frictions and reciprocal dislikes, but
data suggest these tensions stay marginal today as they lost priority in the current scenario,
given the superior threat represented by the trials. In this sense the durable ties forged in
large military family are functional to the promotion of an image of a harmonious,
mutually supportive community of which participants are part, and which they they
represent, consciously as well as unconsciously.

Shifting from the promoción to the family, and sticking to a horizontal research
perspective, this study proved the family was and still is a complex organization within the
military world also due to its lifestyle. The family space is articulated on two different
levels that include and transcend consanguinity ties, the nuclear and the large military
family. The relationships that characterize the nuclear family are projected beyond its
boundaries onto other individuals its members identify with, generating constructed kin
ties among a multitude of military families, which can be interpreted as ficive kin ties.
Such bonds in the Seventies were reinforced comradeship outside the barracks, and
sympathy among military wives. These unique ties proliferated within the military
environment because the families’ path tended to be reproduced on a large scale: the
officers usually had the same professional project that developed thanks to the adaptability
and subjection of their wives and children. This general dynamic activated a process of
dependence of the family from the officer also because the belonging to the military world,
whose basic requirement was the feasibility of the officer’s duties, entitled the family to a
series of permanent life standards that were not at all guaranteed to the Argentine middle
class. Therefore, the family non-institutional dimension of “being military” had a
considerable impact in the life of the officer just as its institutional assets, thanks to a
thread of reciprocal expectations between the Army and the family.
By focusing on the role of military wife with its recurring patterns and dissonant expressions, this study sheds new light on the subjectivity of this actor. Looking at the political role played by the members of the large military family, an organization like AFyAPPA is based on a relationship among military wives than can be assimilated to comradeship as performed by its “masculine” counterpart, the comrades of the Unión de Promociones. Unlike its “filial” counterpart Hijos y Nietos, the name itself of the women’s association puts on the same level the figure of the “relative” – in this case the wife – and that of the “friend” – usually the comrade – of political prisoners. In other words, it associates kinship (in its matrimonial variant) and comradeship in a more than casual way. This choice of terms emphasizes in fact a special bond created among the members of the large military family that is again related to the universe of war, as intended by participants (Leirner, 2009). They express the relationship with friends, comrades and spouses in different levels of support, identification and mutual comprehension, in a way that is different to civilians.

This relationship among peers whose empirical manifestations I observed in the field echoes an essential bond in the military sphere that is alliance. We must also remember that alliance as a system of kin ties defined by anthropology (Levi-Strauss, 1949) has served as a model in this thesis to read the horizontal relationships among the members of the military community. The general features of the military world as the participants depict it, and the specific circumstances of the political confrontation of the Seventies, gives to the figure of the peer a deeper meaning: the peer is not only the one who is similar to us due to a set of characteristics, but especially the one who shares our same fate and risks. The peer can be the fellow soldier, the prison mate, or the comrade, but also the spouse; in a word, the peer is an ally, someone that joins us in action and has a fundamental role in determining the outcome.
Alliances in the military world are crucial. In the native perspective every element is shaped, established and strengthened in their military meaning by the experience of war. In this view, which I grasped in the field and portrayed in my analysis, the choice and assessment of an ally is a serious business, and is part of the constant prospecting attitude of military actors; according to their concern in predicting scenarios and limiting damages, this characteristic becomes a conscious exercise that transforms cultural categories in prompt actions (Leirner, 2009:70). This thesis showed that wives and fellow comrades are the officer’s allies also outside the battlefield, they are functional to his mission, share similar expectations and prepare to the same fate. Leirner (2009) says war is a social relationship in the military’s perspective, and ethnography becomes “the extension of war by other means”. Considering the negotiations behind my research process, I agree with Leirner because the ethnographer enters this mechanism, and is perceived as an ally by participantes as long as he/she serves a purpose in the achievement of the objective. After all, at war information is only shared with trustworthy allies.

To this aim, there is one aspect of military wives that I wish to underline above all. Like in many military contexts worldwide, in the Seventies women did not talk and did not ask about the details of their men’s job; in the present, due to the risk for their husbands to be involved in the trials, I found those same women reluctant to talk about the military and political events of the Seventies, except for the wives whose husbands had died or had already been convicted. Spouses were indeed the participants most difficult to recruit. Silence seems to be therefore a central feature of the military wife of the Seventies that my study recovers, and that is striking of the Argentine case due to its history. In post-dictatorial Argentina silence about the Seventies has too often been dismissed as omission and complicity with the crimes of the regime. However, if we think of the explosive political climate of that age, and the general militarization of politics that involved military
and civilian actors alike, silence can rather be considered as a symptom of the secrecy that branded the generation of the Seventies: the Armed Forces, the armed organizations, the paramilitary groups, the political and State violence, the different codes and forms of militancy that characterized the years between 1955 and 1976, used silence and secrecy as tools for action and protection. Secrecy was synonym of commitment, the sign of a pact among people who gathered under a same cause and put their lives at risk. On the other hand, the silence of the non-politicized masses was a way not to get involved, to be excluded and excused from the spiral of violence.

Forty years later, silence is associated with the “pact of silence” by which the human rights organizations and the media refer to the unwillingness of the military to speak the truth about the fate of the desaparecidos. In a context where silence has become almost exclusively a synonym of impunity and oblivion, this study proposes a different interpretation of this phenomenon; it inserts the military family within the wider context of the Seventies – where silence was alliance – and adds a new player to the scenario, the military wife, an actor far from being passive or subjected.

To conclude, matrimonial bond and comradeship are relationships among peers; they can be interpreted as alliances, and are two of the elements that are essential in the construction and the perpetuation of military identity in Argentina. Marital bond and constructed brotherhood are both expressions of a peculiar horizontal human tie that is not natural but culturally constructed in the group which is object of this study. It is a strong and non-consanguineous kin type military families rely on to orientate themselves in a different scenario that is still characterised by hardship, given nowadays by the trials.

The feminine and the masculine threads of the military social world have been revealed. I use these terms in a descriptive way, not aiming to conceptualise military constructions of
gender per se, but simply to outline how officers and wives’ specific narratives of the Seventies are also the product of the neat limit between their realms, and of the exclusion of women from the military profession in force at the time. Their narratives cannot be fully described by a definition like “denial/pro-genocide front”. Rather, my analysis brings a more everyday explanation to the violence of the Seventies: as many of my participants said, it was a war, and so the social relationships that are necessary to make war continued to hold. The picture will be completed by the third component of the military family, the *filial thread* made up by military adult children.

6.2 Children's (recalcitrant) return

As they joined the military community, officers and military wives had to go through a process of transformation to prepare and adapt to the challenges of military life. Children, instead, were born in this universe of values, rules and social practices. This study deconstructs and reinterprets this particular link in the light of the current socio-political situation given by the trials. Although they tended to conceive their fathers’ military identity as something “natural” because it was pre-existing, and usually described as a job, the children’s relationship with the military world is more complex and more controversial than what they make explicit in their testimonies. Military children from the *Proceso* are generally seen in only simplistic ways in Argentina: either, the victims of the regime, the abducted children of the *desaparecidos* illegally adopted by military families; or the loyal defendant of the military’s criminal conduct. Recently, and only after the completion of this research, another group of military children who repudiated their fathers-perpetrators joined the human rights activists, becoming the “prodigal sons” in the official discourse.
and the emblematic representatives of a far more heterogeneous category. Interviews show instead that any stereotype of the military child must be found wanting, as children grew up with variety in their relationship with and to the military, and have come to think about the military in varied and sometimes unexpected ways.

First of all, they are definitely children of the military, and the native dynamics of this group shaped in part their identity and narratives; however, many of them are also adult civilians and, if we compare their experience with that of military wives, children lived on the edge between the military and the civilian world like their mothers, but unlike them in many cases they ultimately left the former to join the latter. If their parents consciously abandoned the civilian life to enter the military world and never left it, the path of their children often follows the opposite direction: they were born in the large military family but there is no guarantee they would belong there forever. Secondly, to a much greater extent than the rest of Argentines equals in age, the family story of these children is indissolubly linked to the national history of the country. This is due to the impact on their families of the age of political and State violence, but also to the coexistence, the overlapping and the constant tension between the State and the family in this environment.

Whereas their fathers chose to be embedded in the dynamics that tightly link the family to the State, and their mothers managed to adapt, the children’s experience has been moulded by this overlapping between public and private: homes, schools, friends, and later choices about career and relationships are usually determined to a degree by the provenance from the military environment. Military children, like their parents before them, often get married to fellow daughters and sons of officers. The case of Adriana, daughter of a Commodore who joined the Air Force herself, is emblematic in this sense: her military

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68 The group Ex Hijos e Hijas de Genocidas (Ex Daughters and Sons of Perpetrators) was born in 2017 and joined the struggle of the human rights movements. According to Erika Lederer, member of the group, besides denouncing their fathers’ crimes the objective is “denying (perpetrators) the right to be fathers, the right to filiation” (La Izquierda Diario, 2018).
ascendance not only determined where she came from, but also influenced where she was heading to, whose daughter she is and whose wife she will be.

The involvement and subjection of the family to the needs of the institution is often expressed by participants in terms of sacrifice, especially by wives. Indeed, the private dimension does not really exist in the military world because it is immolated, given up, surrendered for the sake of the State and its national interests. And although it might be difficult to accept, the fact that during the dictatorship these national interests, as they were perceived, led to acts of brutal violence does not change fact that the military families did pay their sacrifice to the institution at the time, according to the rules and social norms that tie them down to the Army. This tribute is now pushing forward wider claims from the families of former officers, which cannot be ignored and need to be analysed in this perspective.

The filial bonds of the military family do not just connect children with their fathers, but with the whole military community and its system of obligations and protections. The vertical relationships of lineage were elaborated in the anthropology of kinship (Fortes, 1953, 1959a, 1959b, 2013; Rivers, 1968a, 1968b) and served to better reflect on the specificities of these ties in the military world and in the Argentine case. In the present context of condemnation, the sacrifice takes the form of a cerco, a beneficial siege built around the convicted officers. Comrades, wives and children provide support according to the roles played in the large military family: the group asks for a last tribute to be paid by all its members, therefore children end up contributing their way. However, while officers and wives are involved in this mechanism of tribute-paying since the beginning of their military life, the study reveals the children’s participation can come late in decades, at a moment of crisis for the military community.
The late rapprochement of the children to the military environment also implies they adopt a stance on the Seventies and the trials. As for their parents, this issue acquires centrality for these children, and the inevitable association with State terrorism shapes their interactions with the rest of the society. Some children are more successful than others in managing their relationship with the military community and the social condemnation they find, also depending on the specific situation of their nuclear family, therefore their return to the military world – when it happens – is understood and performed in different ways.

The highest form of sacrifice is paid by the children of the convicted military. Although Clara specified that she had never received pressure from her father to support him, she stated she felt the obligation to react and defend him:

> For me there was no other option than getting involved. Maybe, being a criminal lawyer, I felt the *obligation* to get a bit more involved than the others (military children). It just wasn’t an option to abandon him. […] Sometimes I argue with my dad, he makes me angry. I’d like to tell him - “Don’t you realize how much I sacrificed for all this?” - But, well, the *sacrifice* is because one wants to.

(Clara)

Obligation and sacrifice are key terms in the narrations of children and wives of convicted military. Since the system of reciprocal expectations between the families and the institution failed, because the trials revealed the Army’s disregard towards its condemned subalterns, the traditional relation of dependence of the family from the officer, cited in the previous sections, is subverted: children replace the Army – the officers’ “maternal” institution – and, if in the past they were depending, like wives, from their fathers’ military condition to get their set of life standards, education, social sphere and, banally, their
position in the world, the trials reveal that mechanism is now inverted. The officer, now vulnerable in his condition of prisoner, needs his military family. He needs the support of not only his fellow comrades and his wife, but especially his children, who in turn feel the pressure of those expectations to the point of describing them as an obligation.

The obligation is felt to a different degree also by children who are not directly affected by the trials. Even Paula, the daughter of milico who wanted to take distance from the military, still felt the obligation to remove her father from the shame of “being military” rather than sharing the consequences of this condition with him. Her feeling could be interpreted at first as a natural, even biological sense of obligation, due to her condition of daughter. However, the military legacy and the aftermath of the Seventies are still haunting her: she does not return to the military world like other children, but the relationship with her father’s military identity still affects her interactions with people. Also in the cases where the father is absent, the children feel in the position of giving something back to the institution and the people their fathers belonged to, also as a way of accepting and understanding their own belonging to that same environment. Adriana, whose father had died twenty years before, went even further undertaking the military career herself and becoming in a way his mimesis:

I feel like I lost a part of myself with my dad. If I don’t find out more about certain things, I’ll always be incomplete. The Force is family; it’s more than just a uniform or a building. It’s a circle. I owe a lot to the Force: my father, my friends, now even my fiancée. So, joining was my way of paying homage.

(Adriana)

Adriana decided to solve her own conflict by accepting both components of her hybrid identity. She developed a civilian and a military career, civilian and military friendships.
She was at the same time a military daughter – the equivalent for the Air Force of a *green skirt* – an officer herself and a military wife-to-be. Adriana’s case is emblematic of how the native vertical lineages and the horizontal alliances can often intersect in the same person. She was also the example of how guerrillas and military confronted themselves within the battlefield of the family, since her Montonero stepbrother was taken by the military and her father had to quit his career to rescue him. The impact of her father’s “being military” on her decision to join the Air Force did not come uncritically or automatically: Adriana had entered and left the military world several times before making her decision of undertaking the military career in turn. She included both civilian and military identities in the sense of herself, and she accepted the tension between these two components when she decided to find out more about her father and address the darkest side of her family story. If she had chosen one way, like Paula who rejected the link with the military world, or the other, like military children who almost automatically opt for the military career after school, Adriana might have failed in solving the conflict inherited from the Seventies, and might have missed to glimpse the grey areas created by the aftermath of violence.

Children often used ways learnt in civilian society to re-engage with the military community. Many of them had lost contact with it and usually never participated of the purely military part of their fathers’ life. Those children who had lost any tool to reconnect with that part of their fathers’ and their own identities, especially at the beginning of the judicial troubles that in many cases dragged them back in the military world, activate a mixed strategy by anchoring a new interpretation of the military logics to their understanding of the world as civilians, and in turn contributing to the military community with their skills of professionals. It is the case of Clara, Darío and Adriana. The children’s return is therefore not passive, and the two understandings of reality, civilian and military, blend together in their experiences of return.
This return can also be a way of embracing, understanding and even sympathizing with the military mentality of the father, a mentality that had been difficult to understand when the child was younger. The return to the military world then happens on two levels. On the one hand it is a re-socialization process, because the child goes back to the people of the large military family: Clara and Gabriela joined HyN and bonded with fellow children of convicted military; Darío got close to his father’s promoción; Adriana was in the process of creating her own nuclear family within the Armed Forces, being engaged to a fellow officer. On the other hand the return is a sort of fabrication: children are really constructing their military lineage, and that is because their fathers are being condemned, although not always judicially; otherwise they would not do it that way, or perhaps would not do it at all. Despite some unbridgeable gaps in getting their fathers’ experience of “being military” in the Seventies and during the dictatorship, through this fabrication children do get closer to an understanding they can live with of their fathers’ military identity. Finally, doing so children deal with condemnation, because this understanding provides them with tools to make sense of themselves and live with the frictions within the society that affect them more or less directly.

Some children go even further: by making sense of their fathers’ “being military”, each one in his/her own way, they manage to cross the limits put by social condemnation getting in contact with the other side, the former enemy, their supposedly irreconcilable Other. Silvana and Clara, born respectively before and after the dictatorship, got to meet children of desaparecidos and ex-guerrillas: the first could have been victims of Clara’s father in the Seventies, the second could have been the killers of Silvana’s. Despite these circumstances, both women got to give a meaning to their distance (and their closeness) with the people from the other side, thanks to tools acquired in a process they shared with other members of the large military family, in particular from associations that gather
relatives of victims of the guerrillas (AFAViTA; CELTYV), and children of convicted military (HyN).

Children perform their own identities in the light of the return to the military community, which happens many years later, in a circumstance that forces them to come back and reinterpret their link with the military. The obligation they accomplish with is their own way of participating in the reciprocity of expectations that link them to the military world, and contrasting the bewilderment provoked by condemnation and the deterioration of civil-military relations. However, this dynamic stresses again the failure of the institution in providing protection for the families. Children go back to the military, but not to its institutional side; they go back to the society it creates, because where the military failed as an institution, it still survives as a community based on kinship, also in its more fictive forms: where the Army falls, the military family stands. Children go back to the large military family based on its human bonds also as an answer to the inefficiency of the military institution that disappointed their fathers. They are all reinventing an image of the military based on mutual support. It is an image obviously based in a reality, but that later becomes idealised; partly because they are under threat from the trials, and partly because it is a way to reach accommodation with the terrible connotations of having been associated with this condemned actor.

In a way or another, the bond with an institution responsible for the atrocities of the Seventies affects the participants’ identity and their perception from the rest of the society. In the age of the trials, dealing with their fathers’ (and therefore to an extent their own) military identity represents an issue for many children, a limit that is sometimes evident, sometimes latent, but definitely present in all the cases presented. The provenance from the military environment has long-lasting consequences regardless the path undertaken by the children as they become adults; once again the trials offered the opportunity to observe
these dynamics within the military family, considered all the specifics of the present socio-political context. These children belong to a generation of military families who were marked by the age of political violence, and they are in turn marked by the aftermath of those events. The reason why children still return to the military community of which their fathers were part and re-join its family dimension is therefore a pragmatic reason: the large military family stays despite the faults of the institution and the changes in the society, and this social group provides them with the protection from condemnation they cannot find in any other group within the civilian environment; in turn, children end up coming together as part of an extended family in a moment of vulnerability.

However, the relevance of kin ties in gathering people together around the issue of the accused officers, does not impede the emergence of nuances and even factions within the large military family when it is about constructing political claims and adopting different strategies to achieve their objectives in the public space. This was proved for example by divisions among children of convicted military, and the effort of the organization HyN to take distance from AFyAPPA and the UP, whose discourse on the Seventies they found “too military”\(^{69}\), their tones too belligerent and their members too prone to present political and State violence as war facts. The action of children in this sense, and their contacts with the other side, highlight not only continuity but especially change within the military families of the Seventies when it is about interpreting and understanding the experience and the consequences of violence, removing it from what was considered to be the only possible framework to make sense of it, the battlefield.

\(^{69}\) Participation in the monthly general meeting of *Hijos y Nietos de Presos Políticos*, Círculo Naval de Olivos (Buenos Aires, 14/05/2016).
6.3 Reciprocal tensions and legitimate claims

The mutuality of interests and expectations that link officers, wives and children to each other, to fellow military families and to the institution translate into a network of social norms and practices that can be expressed in terms of reciprocity, the principle at the basis of social interactions explained in Chapter Two. The membership to the large military family is often expressed by participants in terms of kin ties (conventional and fictive) that go in multiple directions: descending, ascending and collateral. Officers, children and wives understand their ascription to the military community by virtue of their condition of either sons or daughters of the Army (officers and green skirts; children of military families) and/or allied before the hardship of military life (comrades and military wives).

As anticipated in Chapter Two, participants refer to the military family not just as a figure of speech: it is a community that is still highly endogamous as they tend to marry each other (young officers and daughters of senior officers), they do not always open up to the civilian world when it is time to choose a partner and start a family. This tendency reinforces the feeling among its members of being other to civilians. By getting married with daughters of superior officers, the subalterns extend reciprocity horizontally in the military community, generating a tight and durable network of kinship.

In the cases analysed for this thesis, these unique ties translate into practices of solidarity in relation to a pressing issue, condemnation: the masculine, feminine and filial threads that support the large military family weave together around the military involved in the trials. Wives and children support the military in jail; former subalterns who are still free support more senior officers who are in prison and are often also their fathers-in-law; younger wives of officers in active duty visit in jail their husbands’ fathers, in turn former subalterns of the Proceso. The relationships of alliances and lineage of the large military
family extend in time and space, and intersect in the distinctive space of the prison. One of the arguments of this thesis is the solidarity network is a spontaneous response to the way the institution abandoned the officers when they were condemned. Despite the subordination of private to public in the military, in fact, the trials are definitely a public issue that has been neglected by the institution and treated as a private question of the families affected.

It is legitimate to ask to what extent this military community actually exists nowadays. We saw the officers of the Seventies feel a distance and perhaps even a fracture with the current generations of officers in active service, due to a lack of commitment among the ranks and a lack of resources within the institution, which made “being military” an office job since the return to democracy. Moreover, the officers of the Seventies felt betrayed by the next leaders of the Army about the responsibilities in the conflict of the Seventies, and this seems to have undermined that sense of military community among generations; however, it seems to resist to the extent to which it strengthens the ties within the generations of officers who were subalterns at that time, and that constitute the largest portion of the military accused in the last ten years. Indeed, it is merit of this thesis to stress how comradeship and loyalty among officers remain resilient, or are reinforced despite the endemic divisions that owe to long-standing differences based on class, religion, politics and the place of the military within the Argentine nation. As stated in Chapter Two, due to the nature of ethnographic fieldwork I managed to access people who are likely to come from one element of those divisions; however, I am aware that there are others in the Argentine military who might think differently about the past and the present. My participants’ narratives about violence, military power and its legitimacy in the 1970s suggest they were politically loyal to the dictatorship at least in its early stages, and that they still prize their military career highly as they were relatively successful in it.
Therefore, their way of reacting to the current politics and remaking their ties of the 1970s also reflect those developments; but the Argentine military is an institution that used to promote loyal personnel and purge entire sectors whenever these lost the political favour; then bonds of loyalty and alliances have been used, stressed and hidden depending on the changing political context. Ties of comradeship are considered a universal feature of military identity, but in the practice they are constructed, recovered and removed everytime conveniently; today, in the context of the trials, former officers find it more convenient to stick together (as long as possible) horizontally and prioritize their “being military” above these past political divisions. Although I cannot make assumption about the actions of my participants in the past beyond what they said they did and did not do, it is clear that what keeps them together today is the support for their cause and the convicted military, and the defense of their position at the time and in the present.

The end of the Kirchners’ legislatures made the military more inclined to talk, although not for this reason they feel less persecuted; the process of criminalization and condemnation of this group had been triggered and still looked unstoppable at the time of fieldwork. Social contexts can change greatly but not always accordingly to the sudden mutations in the political climate. Although since before his election Macri’s attitude towards the military and the trials looked less dogged than Kirchners’, the public opinion generally did not support his view; the sentiment of rejection towards the military exacerbated even more, and Macri’s alleged favouritism for the criminals of the Proceso was strongly criticised. In this scenario, relatives of the accused officers gather and protest in organizations that use the ties of kinship to acquire legitimacy and obtain a public space for their demands. Members of military families end up playing a political role outside the boundaries and the rules of the military community; however, the claims of groups such as
the Unión de Promociones, AFyAPPA and Hijos y Nietos de Presos Políticos remain substantially contested by most part of society.

In the modern nation-states, kin ties normally belong to the private sphere, the domestic and intimate dimension of sociability which is often defined in opposition to the public sphere and the space of politics (Vecchioli 2005). Nevertheless, in the Argentine case this seems not always to be true. There are different moments when Argentines took the public space and used kinship to gather together and construct their claims before the State. During and after the dictatorship several human rights groups were formed by virtue of consanguineous – both ascending and descending – kin ties with the victims of the regime (Jelin 2011; Vecchioli 2005): Familiares de Desaparecidos y Detenidos por Razones Políticas (1976); Madres (1977) and the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo (1977); and H.I.J.O.S. (1995). Familiares and Madres first stepped into the political space to publicly ask about their missing relatives. In fact, the families were the only subjects that could visit regular political prisoners70, or present a petition for habeas corpus to the authorities if a relative had disappeared, without risking of being abducted in turn. Even so, relatives could still provoke suspicion in the representatives of the regime. So, on the one hand kinship legitimized their quest, on the other it became a bond that protected both the relatives and the person they were looking for, because while it revealed the existence of a relation of consanguinity, kinship overshadowed the potential political commitment of the victim. The members of clandestine armed groups could not rescue the companions who had fallen in the hands of the military, because their relationship to them was a proof of their subversive militancy. Relatives and especially parents, instead, could claim before the authorities by virtue of their condition of mother or father of a missing citizen. Many have argued that

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70 Regular political prisoners were held in regular prisons and their captivity was noticed to the families. These represented a small number compared to the thousands of desaparecidos that were secretly abducted and sent to clandestine detention centres.
such choice for action was given by the fact that all forms of political aggregation were forbidden during the dictatorship (Jelin, 2011; Vecchioli, 2005); however, organizations based on kinship born in democratic times, like H.I.J.O.S., and also defending other causes, prove that this is not necessarily the only reason why political action is linked to kinship in Argentina.

Another case is represented by the organizations born straight after the Malvinas war. Veterans and ex-combatants led a convergent action with an organization made of relatives of the fallen (Familiares de Caídos en Malvinas). Moreover, Argentines who were asking about their children, this time conscript soldiers missing in action, created a special commission to ascertain the fate of the soldiers “disappeared” in the South Atlantic (Comisión Nacional de Padres de Combatientes Desaparecidos en Malvinas), then baptized by the media as Padres de Plaza de Mayo (Guber, 2001b, 2004b).

Guber, Jelin and Vecchioli raise fundamental interrogatives about how to interpret the use of kinship in the configuration of political action in Argentina. In the cases of the human rights movement and the organizations for the fallen in Malvinas, the State represented by the junta was responsible for a situation of pain for the families, since it provoked the loss of their loved ones intentionally or because of negligent acts, in two very different scenarios where the elements at stake were still the same: violence, kinship and the State. Guber (2001b:171) suggests Argentines tend to make sense of their nationhood by reinventing kinship as “the last irrevocable and legitimate pillar for social organization”: kinship seems to provide a universal language that legitimates their claims. Moreover, the State is also the agent such claims meant to confront in the institutional space (Jelin, 2011:556). In the case of the military families of the Proceso, the relationship with the State is probably even more problematic, regardless of who represent it and under which
circumstance. The State (through its Armed Forces) made these families “military” when the officers entered the Army; it gave them purpose, principles and models. Then the State (incarnated by the military juntas) gave orders to the subordinates in the context of the cultural war of the Seventies, defining their role and their position, according to which they acted; the families were affected by this conjuncture. And nowadays, it is again the State (this time democratic) that reopened the trials, implemented politics of memories, and boosted a single-sided narrative of the past that condemns military families to public hatred. Within this extremely complex framework, any military feature of these actors’ identity becomes problematic; once again kinship seems to be the only way to put forward a legitimate claim, and even so, the action of these groups is often labelled as reactionary and pro-genocide.

According to Vecchioli (2005:244,245), the groups for human rights present their public action as a consequence of the relation of consanguinity they had with the victims, a tie that naturally determined their political act, an unavoidable choice. This apparent naturalization has been corroborated by the academic literature, and accepted by the public opinion thanks especially to the State that recognized the organizations’ claim and promoted political actions to support it, such as the trials and the economic reparations for the victims. However, Vecchioli stresses the human rights groups’ activism represents a political choice, although constructed on a biological tie.

In this study it is evident that the centrality of family in the military preceded the formation of groups and organizations around the issue of the Seventies and the trials, whose members appeal to a kin tie with the victim/accused military. Therefore, it is necessary to bridge this study with other cases of groups that succeeded in occupying a legitimate place in the Argentine society by virtue of these same ties.
Interestingly, the organization of relatives of the convicted military HyN (*Children and Grandchildren* of Political Prisoners) adopted a name that is specular and opposed to its counterpart in the human rights front, the *Mothers and Grandmothers* of Plaza de Mayo. Following Vecchioli, also in the case of the members of HyN it could be argued that the consanguinity tie with the military would *naturally* lead children to take their defence. However, not all the children of ordinary felons engage in activism to defend their convicted parents, like not all the children of military defend the cause of the officers accused: the political action is only taken by a group of military children whose fathers are being accused or convicted. Although HyN use kinship to legitimize their claim and to present themselves as a homogeneous group to the society, it is their being *military* children, more than *children* of convicts for crimes against humanity, that needs to be deconstructed and reinterpreted to understand their claim.

On the one hand, military children of HyN present themselves as *children* of prisoners whose rights are being violated in the causes for crimes against humanity, leaving aside their identity of members of military family. In their public claim, they tend not to take a position on the issue of the Seventies, an age of violence that would have nothing to do with them; that is, they put forward the legitimate kin tie with their fathers in order to be able to undertake a political action that is more likely to be received by the society. However, this study showed how in their private conversations with the researcher, those same children actually resort to their own and their father’s *being military* to explain their view of the present, the working of their community, the role of their parents in the Seventies and that of the large military family in their lives, as well as their activity in HyN and their interaction in the society. This striking difference between the public and the private narratives, and the different elements these children use to represent their identity, prove that they are affected by the condemnation that comes whenever society look at them
as military children. The limit of condemnation therefore shapes their identity in the current context, confirming that identity is not a fixed concept, but a set of features that are constantly negotiated: some traits are hidden while others are emphasized, and they even change in time, depending on the interlocutor and the environment. Everything military is condemnable in present Argentina, therefore the members of the military family adapt to that state of things, at times stating their military identity, at times hiding it.

For children, “being military” is a question between them and the State since before the Seventies and the trials; their belonging to a military family has always been a public, political issue that has only recently been recovered and impugned outside the boundaries of the military community. Like in the human rights organizations, the claim for a public space and the choice for activism is a decision that is not a natural fact, but a voluntary act. In other words, the members of HyN find themselves in such position for being part of the military community in a certain moment and in a certain place, just as their fathers’ “being military” in the age of the violence determined the circumstance of their captivity in the age of the trials. Being the relations between military, civilians and the State different, and not affected by condemnation, they would not be in such position and they would hardly embrace the activism.

The children’s activism, as well as other manifestations of solidarity within the military community observed in this study, is the result of the circumstance of the trials since 2006, rather than a natural dynamic of the military world. Nevertheless this solidarity is articulated by following the social structures based on kinship that this thesis has exposed as native to the military community. On top of this argument, it is worth it to observe that the action of HyN is only happening in a moment when the generation of the children can
supplant the generation of their parents in the defence of the military cause, a symptom of the inversion of the relation of dependence of the family from the officer explained above.

Family is the traditionally private terrain that counterbalances and opposes the public one of the State. However, in the military’s case, the family is completely subjected to the public sphere and it is ultimately a political subject in both its nuclear and large dimension analysed in this study. Looking at the network of solidarity constructed on kinship that supports the military convicted, it does not surprise that the military community resort to these ties to legitimate their claims: first, the argument of kinship is a characteristic of the Argentine way of social and political mobilization; secondly, kinship is a constructed element in the military community that reveals its hybrid nature, in constant tension between the private and the public terrain. As explained in the previous chapters, not only kinship is a foundational element of the Argentine military identity, but the family is greatly involved in the pact that officers secured with the institution, the State and the society as they embraced the military career. In their eyes, this pact has been progressively undermined since the end of the dictatorship and it makes officers, wives and military children rethink and re-shape their “being military” in the current scenario.

To conclude, as Robben (2005a) and other authors stressed, the practice of forced disappearance was meant to affect the realm of the family; kinship is therefore at the core of violence in its forms of perpetration, contestation and memorialisation. This thesis adds that it is a fundamental element that not only victims, but also military families use to make sense of the aftermath of violence. However, the outcome and the social reception of their action are different in the two cases. As Vecchioli (2005:260,261) explains, the State implemented politics and legal measures that made the relatives of the desaparecidos victims themselves, recognized as such especially in the judicial field. I add that large
sections of Argentine society tend to apply this same logic, triggered by the State particularly since the 2006 trials, more broadly to the families of the “perpetrators”: if the military are all criminals, monsters, and deserving punishment, so must be their relatives. While the families of the victims became a responsibility of the Nation, which commits to protect them, this does not happen to the families of the convicted military. Argentines (but not only them) tend to look at the events and the protagonists of the past in a too simplistic way. The sharp dichotomy perpetrators/victims, and the assumption that “all military are perpetrators” end up hiding and flattening a whole series of political, cultural and historical specifics that are essential to understand what happened in the Seventies, and what is happening in present Argentina. This is true not only in the case of the military, but of all the actors involved in the violence, both exerted and suffered.

Members of Argentine military families have a different way of engaging with their “being military”, depending on their role and position in the community and the institution, as well as on the historical context: one thing was being a young subaltern in the Seventies, another is being a retired Colonel convicted for crimes against humanity; one thing is being a military wife that in turn was born in a military family, another is being a military child that opts for a career in the civilian world; “being military” is not the same for commanded and commanders, just as it is not the same being born in the 1950s and being “children of the democracy”. Especially children are far from indirectly perpetuate the culture of war as it was perceived by its combatants; they rather found multiple ways of expressing the ties of family loyalty, and so give the possibility of overcoming it.

This thesis showed that the actors who belong to the large military family oscillate between different degrees of “being military” in their everyday life, and interpret this element in very different ways one to another. Nevertheless, kinship as theorized by anthropologists
and expressed by participants offers a key to interpret these convergences and differences. In order to make sense of the Argentine military world, and in particular to understand the working of the social structures within this group, both elements are necessary: the *military identity* element, conferred by the belonging to the institution and the community; and the *kinship* element - both “factual” and “fictive” - as participants construct it in their everyday social practices. In this study both patterns have been revealed and analysed thanks to the adoption of a non-institutional approach, and the application of the ethnographic method and perspective. Researchers aiming to produce new knowledge on the military by adopting a holistic approach need to look at both these patterns, which are equally important in the construction of military identities and crucial in the interaction of these people in the society.
CONCLUSIONS

Contributions and limits of this study

This study questioned the military of the Seventies from a different position, constructing new knowledge around this actor. It revealed the existence of a network of social structures and practices that have been proved to be accessible only through channels made by the human relationships among the members of the military community. To achieve that aim, the researcher had in turn to participate into that web of bonds by adopting a non-institutional approach. As a result, this thesis questions perhaps the most problematic actor of Argentine society challenging the stereotypes that affect the social sentiments and the academic studies about the military. By exploring the family dimension of the military of the Seventies, this study pushes the boundaries that limit the understanding of not only political and State violence, but especially the social norms, the meanings and the practices that Argentines construct around it.

The Argentine military inflicted great harm on Argentine society. By implementing State terrorism on a large scale, they deliberately set out to murder political opponents and then extended the persecution beyond the guerrillas, fighting to include anyone who could be categorised as “subversive” in their way of thinking, acting and communicating. With the support of police and security forces, and the complicity of vital social sectors such as the Church, the unions and the industrial corporations, the military illegally kidnapped, tortured and disappeared thousands of people. They forcibly removed children from their biological “subversive” parents to have them adopted by “good” families – a phenomenon that definitely needs to be studied also in the light of the military expressions and understandings of kinship explored in this thesis. Many authors have rightly detailed the
abuses and crimes the military committed, and most of the work on human rights in Argentina stemmed from the need to uncover the truth about what they had done – by disappearing “subversives”, the dictatorship also wanted to silence them in the future.

The military’s conduct was unexcusable and the collective and individual responsibilities in the violations of human rights need to be acertained and condemned. However, it is time to consider what we can learn by looking at the perspective of those labelled “perpetrators”. Inspired by the work of Hannah Arendt and Christopher Browning, this thesis examines the everyday unexceptional backgrounds and dynamics that made systematic violence a normalised fact. Like Arendt and Browning, it attempted to frame the violence of the dictatorship as a phenomenon that emerged from and was produced by the society that also suffered that violence. The thesis then provides new insights into the Argentine military, and a framework in which further interpretations of violence can be developed in the light of the social relationships that have been broken and created within the military community, and between this and the rest of Argentine society in the past four decades.

The thesis contributes in three major ways to the understanding of the Argentine military and the aftermath of violence. First, it offers some glimpses into how subaltern officers, their wives and children lived the Seventies, producing new knowledge of that period; it shows how they construct their representations of the past and how such representations adapt to the current context of condemnation. Secondly, the thesis argues kinship is just as important as the institutional features of the military world, which informs social structures, actions and narratives. Finally, the thesis explains how kinship creates strong social bonds that the military of the Proceso use to orientate and to build political claims in the current context of condemnation, more than forty years after the facts of the Seventies and the genesis of the families that are object of this study. Besides, the observation of the
solidarity network developed around the convicted military, and the analysis of its political role contributed to the understanding of kin ties in Argentine culture and politics, confirming that kinship is an essential element in the violence of the Seventies on both “sides”, as it is a way today participants make sense of who they were then; and who they are now.

“Cause” and “consequences” are two key terms in my interpretation; the former in particular acquires different meanings: an ideological cause, a judicial cause, a political cause, but also the cause of a consequence. The battlefield, analysed in Chapter Three, is the symbolic space in which the military cause developed in the Seventies, the commitment that officers and to a certain extent their wives felt in the political confrontation against “subversion”. Fieldwork revealed that condemnation is the element that characterizes instead the consequence of that cause in the present, represented by the prison, an emblematic space explored in Chapter Four. Condemnation also traced the limits in the fieldwork and in the interaction of participants with the researcher and the rest of the society. Chapter Five showed that sometimes children of the military take on the cause of their fathers, adding new and different meanings to it, and also children who are not affected by the trials still have to come to terms with their indirect “being military”, which is also condemned. Chapter Six finally explained how kinship plays a decisive role in perpetrating, remembering and understanding violence not only for the victims’ side, but also for the military community.

The thesis argues family is a central element in the Argentine military institution, which in the Seventies strongly extended its control mechanisms to the households, and could not function without women and family. The concepts, the figures and the language of the family are often used to inculcate the Army’s precepts in the cadets, and in turn officers
use family to understand and explain military life. The thesis also reveals that the narratives of subalterns often do not reflect the declarations of the leadership and the former superiors, the masterminds of the Proceso. The participants’ position in the ranks during the Seventies influenced their actions, but also a certain reading of the events and certain behaviour in the decades to follow, especially towards the institution and the superiors, of which they are often critical.

Another element highlighted by this thesis is the crucial figure of military wives, and their unexpectedly active role in many situations of their life besides the officers. The experience of the Seventies of these women and their narrative of politics, violence and family life in the military, are complementary but sometimes dissonant from that of the officers. Their position in the shadows during the Seventies contrasts with the important role of these women in the current scenario given by the trials, as if breaking the silence they kept during the years of the violence, and defending their husbands in a context of public condemnation was a way to claim their contribution to the military community after decades of adaptation.

The thesis also puts at the centre of the analysis the military children’s engagement with the aftermath of the Seventies. By presenting a variety of cases that show how diverse the experience of these younger Argentines can be within and outside the military community, the study explains how heavy the consequences of the Seventies are for the generation of the children, and recounts their reaction to condemnation by resorting to the articulation of vertical kinship in the military world.

The thesis showed the interaction of officers, wives and children within the nuclear and the large military family, exploring the network of reciprocity that regulates the social world of the military. The “emergency” of the trials triggered the mechanisms of reciprocity
observable in the children’s sacrifice for their fathers, the wives’ commitment towards their husbands and the officers’ loyalty to their comrades. This thesis claims that, regardless of whether it is interpretable in terms of alliance or lineage, kinship represents the basis for the argument of reciprocity in the military community affected by condemnation. In the context of strong social repudiation that crystallized during and immediately after the Kirchners’ legislatures, military families assemble their solidarity network, fortifying the community ties and contributing to a common cause. This reciprocity is the channel through which these members of military families make sense of their past and their position not only in their own community, but also in the society, before the State and the Army. In a cross-comparison with the action of human rights movements, this thesis argues military actors often use the argument of kinship to construct their claims, to interact with a society that in the past approved their action and now condemns them; and a State that was supposed to give them purpose and protection, and now prosecutes them. And in this way they participate in the dispute for the meaning of the Seventies.

This thesis provides new knowledge on the military of the Seventies at the same time as it highlights aspects that need to be further researched. For example, the results of this study could be put in dialogue with similar studies on the armed organizations to be developed, where perhaps a similar approach and a holistic perspective on these non-State actors would be beneficial to a more complete understanding of the Seventies. The empirical basis provided by this thesis could also lead to further analyses of the ways that gender, understandings of violence and nation, allowed the normalisation of violence to happen; while further studies within the military might allow differences of opinion within this sector to emerge, and shed further light upon the military as a political, as well as a social, actor. This study should also be compared with the literature on the Cold War in Latin
America, to look at the international and the domestic role of the military in this context, finally to attempt conclusions about why violence in the region, and particularly in Argentina, has been so extreme. Moreover, the thesis sparks new spaces for further comparative analyses, especially of the aftermath of the Seventies on the generation of children of ex-guerrillas, desaparecidos and military families, and the weak but existing contacts between the two sides in the attempt of bringing reconciliation to society. From a transnational perspective, instead, this thesis would give rise to a comparison between the experience of the military family in Argentina and that of other post-authoritarian and post-conflict societies in Latin America.

The exact degree of involvement of the subaltern ranks in the violence triggered by the dictatorship is difficult to ascertain, but this thesis does raise serious questions about how to think about responsibility in this context. By addressing the “soldiership” within this social group, that is, by looking at the subalterns of the Seventies as soldiers, this study does show that violence, even brutal and unjustifiable, is not only possible but even easy to deliver if inserted and adapted to a complex framework made of ideological elements, doctrines and training, all components that make an organization and a social group like the military, extremely efficient and potentially autonomous in its survival. This argument emphasizes the normalization of violence in the Seventies and the “ordinariness” of its agents (Browning, 1992), and aligns with the broader theory of the banality of evil (Arendt, 1963).

This study confirms then two ways in which we can explain on the one hand why and how the violence of the 1970s happened; on the other, why participants compose the narratives of that violence in a certain way. First, violence has a social explanation: it was efficiently delivered by professionals of war who gave and carried out orders; the military used force
according to the position they occupied in society and in the armed organization at the time. This in turn explains why they narrate the facts of the Seventies as a war, focusing on the visible side of counterinsurgent warfare. This aspect has to do with issues concerning the structure, the norms and the spirit of the Argentine military; however, it does not constitute an exclusive trait of this group, since these elements are also common in other armies in the world. Therefore, it would be a rather sterile point to assume that what happened in Argentina could have happened anywhere else only because violence was exercised by a regular Army.

Here comes into play the second factor explored in this study, that is specifically Argentine and gives a cultural explanation of the violence: as argued by Robben within the “war of cultures”, the confrontation of the Seventies has a strong ideological component, which helps in understanding the reasons behind State violence, its targets and tactics. This in turn has an impact on the composure of the officers’ narratives, which emphasize the justness of the cause while they silence the disproportional and clandestine character of the violence. On top of this, the fact these aspects of the violence made it the object of judicial prosecution in the present further explains why participants do not mention them. Without this cultural specific of the Argentine case, the social explanation of violence mentioned above would be insufficient to understand its virulence and long-term consequences.

However, how does the focus on kinship adopted in this study help us in understanding the violence of the Seventies? War is a social relationship rather than a fact in the military’s perspective (Leirner, 2009). This study showed that the pressure implied by the military profession, and the context of permanent tension generated by the cultural war in the Seventies, directly affected the spheres of family and comradeship; this was an emblematic period for the subaltern officers, when they made connections with comrades, and
constructed their own family. The officers fought against subversion because of their professional preparation and their ideological convictions, but above all because they cared about their own people: they did not want their families to live in fear, as they did not want their soldiers and commanders to be threatened or killed by the guerrillas. I suggest the “human factor” of “being military” analysed in this thesis, combined with the features of the political confrontation of the Seventies – which cannot be compared to any conventional conflict – may have contributed to the fact that at some point for the military the end justified the means, and that the efficiency of combat became priority in spite of the rules under which it was conducted, regardless of the single officer was involved in operations within which human rights were violated. The emphasis this thesis puts on kinship, and the tangibility it gives back to the human bonds the young officers created in this period show that the principles, training and ideologies that made the violence possible were just as crucial as the relationships built among the people who embodied them, with their habits, their concerns, their affections and expectations.

In this perspective, the rich landscape of “mundane elements” (Ben Ari, 1998:3) recovered from the social dimension of the military, enriches our knowledge about the actors and the violence of the Seventies. The confrontation transcended the boundaries of the battlefield and was perceived by subjects other than the combatants, marking a whole generation of military and military families. The human explanation of the violence based on kinship puts its causes and consequences in the terrain of the family, as it is constructed and understood by military actors.

This thesis shifts its focus on the family, shedding new lights on less researched actors and objects of investigation that still present plenty of aspects to be further researched. For example, the study puts an emphasis on the figure of the military wife. Thorough studies
approaching such subject from a gender perspective (Boldry, Wood and Kashy, 2001; Carreiras, 2006; Enloe, 2000; Izraeli, 1997; Kronsell and Svedberg, 2011; Sasson-Levy, 2003; Segal, 2006) are necessary and desirable in order to disclose new knowledge on the role of women in the Argentine military, and also in other contexts. Nevertheless this study does add new knowledge on the active role of wives in the Argentine Armed Forces, not only by involving them in the research process and asking them important questions, but especially by adding value to their silences.

Similarly, the position of children within the military family is rather complex, and there are several aspects that need to be further explored: why do military children tend to undertake the military career themselves? Is filial devotion stronger in military children because they belong to a military environment? These and other issues need to be addressed not only in relation to the military of the Seventies, but more broadly with respect to the contemporary generations of Argentine military families. With its focus on children, however, this study boosts the reflection on the possibilities and the actors of reconciliation in Argentina, showing not only that the construction of spaces of dialogue and confrontation is possible, but also that the generation involved – that of the children – is able to overcome the divisions that contrasted their parents without necessarily denying or ignoring the political dimension of the violence of the Seventies. In this sense, their personal and public ways of dealing with the legacy (or the burden?) of the past represents an alternative path towards the future, other than blind punishment or deaf forgetting.

The trials for crimes against humanity represent an unquestionable progress in the cause for justice and memory; however, this study brought out some issues that are difficult to address on the judicial, political and ethical level: the existence of different levels of responsibility depending on the position of the accused in the chain of command; the
related problem of a proportional sentence for the subalterns, that perhaps would reinforce the impact on society of more severe punishment inflicted to the higher ranks, like life sentence; the necessity to make a distinction between those who gave orders and those who obeyed, and the need for ascertaining what degree of disobedience was actually possible in the context examined; the political nature of the trials that might lead to some arbitrary application of the law; the recognition of the victims and the judgement of the actions of the guerrillas in the Seventies, that is a still pending issue; the impact of a deleterious aggressive rhetoric on the overall process of national pacification.

The Argentine paradigm is only one of a multitude of models of transitional justice applied worldwide; therefore, it could probably be improved. Crenzel (2017) notices that some critics to the 2000s trials came from the front that condemned the crimes in the first place. Graciela Fernández Meijide (2009), mother of a desaparecido, militant for human rights and ex-member the CONADEP, proposed the adoption of the South African model of transitional justice. According to this example, it would be possible to ask the military the delivery of information about what happened exactly, in exchange for a reduction of the sanctions; Meijide argues this “agreement” would be functional to society’s right to truth, and to the families’ emotional need for knowing about their desaparecidos (Fernández Meijide, 2009 cited in Crenzel, 2017:242). In this way, the trials would generate a situation where both victims and victimizers are interested in constructing juridical and historical truth (Hilb, 2013 cited in Crenzel, 2017:243).

In Argentina, the superposition between justice and truth, instead, and the preponderant adoption of juridical tools in understanding and “dealing” with the past, implicitly limited the process of construction of historical knowledge. When asked about human rights violations, former officers firmly refuse to answer, regardless questions are asked within
the context of trial hearings, journalistic interviews, or academic studies. This thesis showed the trials more than everything generated a situation where not only judges and prosecutors are unable to obtain answers from the military about the abuses they are accused of, but also any other actor external to the judicial arena. The military never talked, and there is no reason to expect they will do it soon. Many questions need to be answered yet, but no collaboration will come from the side of the military while they have no incentive in doing so.

Causes, consequences and reconciliation

When I first started my doctoral research, it was my intention to study State and political violence. It was only at the end that I realized this study is instead about everything else around it. This “everything else” made of behaviours, narratives, representations, emotions, accessible through the “human side” of the actors involved, tends to change in time and is just as important as facts and documents to understand the implications of the use of violence in the Argentine political process.

This study led to reflect on some of the main elements of the Argentine case. In particular, the relationship between military parents and children allows further interpretations of the militarization of politics in the 1970s (Frederic, 2008), and the link between the causes defended by that generation, especially young people in the age of starting a family, and the consequences inherited and suffered by the generation of their children. The ideological and political causes of the years of the violence put forward different claims, often conflicting, and were embraced by distinct social groups in Argentina: the revolutionary cause of the guerrillas; the “sacred” patriotic cause of the military; the Malvinas cause, which for a while brought together a society torn apart by political
divisions; the Carapintadas cause, which contrasted the subalterns to the heads of the Army; the cause for human rights, foundational principle of a new Argentina; and, of course, the judicial cause for the crimes against humanity.

All causes have their consequences. Such consequences have been particularly bloody in Argentina, since violence became in many cases the tool to solve the political disputes generated by urgent claims and opposed ideologies. The binomial cause-consequence that emerged from the relationship fathers-children in these final pages, recalls one of the premises of this research, the binomial violence-trauma described by Robben in Political Violence and Trauma in Argentina. In more than forty years, Argentina saw the spiral of violence and trauma transferred from a military level of physical confrontation, and a political level of ideological dispute, to a moral and juridical level of construction of memory, responsibilities and justice. If the causes of the Seventies in particular produced extreme violence, Robben (2005a:341-359) explains they also generated traumatic consequences not only individually but also socially (traumas proper of each social group) and collectively (trauma of the Argentine society as a whole). Moreover, the different experiences of violence exerted, suffered and witnessed have contributed to the creation of a polyphonic memory of the Seventies that is far from being harmonic. In fact, the struggle for memory and the search for meaning in Argentina, the difficulty or the refusal to listen to some of the actors involved, such as the military families, highlight a need for rethinking the issue (and perhaps the myth) of reconciliation.

One of the arguments of this thesis is children end up inheriting a conflict they never lived or chose, and this is true for children of both victims and the military. The aftermath of violence, expressed by military children in the fear for a judicial, political, social and moral condemnation, created a series of consequences for the military community that are
transmitted from one generation to the other. Such consequences cannot be defined as a psychic trauma, intended as the extreme repercussion of an exercise of violence suffered or perpetrated; besides, the social trauma of the military cannot be compared to the social trauma of the victims and the members of the human rights organizations (Robben, 2005a:345). However, I believe the aftermath affecting the military families of the Proceso can still be considered within the broader collective trauma of the Argentine society.

Reconciliation can be interpreted as the other face of trauma: post-conflict societies that overcome the latter should be able to achieve the former. Despite the moral imperative behind them, the trials are far from bringing reconciliation in the Argentine society and sometimes seem to exacerbate that clash even more. The fact that the dispute on the Seventies still monopolizes the media, is the hot topic of books, movies and academic literature, and represents a matter of concern despite the impelling socioeconomic problems of present Argentina, confirms Robben’s thesis that the collective trauma of the violence of the 1970s has not been overcome. Therefore it might sound provocative affirming that reconciliation seems less achievable today than before the trials of 2006, and sadly it does not sound to go aligned with the attainment of justice. The reflections on the age of the trials of the military in Argentina presented in this thesis show how a conflicting scenario seems to be the condition for justice to operate, and even when it does operate, it is likely to be source of new disputes that involve new generations and new actors.

As Robben explained, the reason that impedes reconciliation lies in the perpetual revivification and representation of the violent facts of the 1960s and 1970s, in the incessant struggle for the imposition of one view of the past on the other. This thesis contributes to this argument as long as it clarifies one of these visions, the military one; in fact, as a consequence of the cycle violence-trauma-impunity-resentment, the military
families’ experience of the Seventies ended up being rejected for its “being military”. I argue the whole underworld made of private narratives, emotions and representations of a crucial actor of the Seventies like the military is not perceived, accepted or recognized by the rest of the society, and this directly undermines the process of overcoming the trauma and reaching reconciliation. The military families – while their trauma is not morally on a par with that of the families of the desaparecidos – are nevertheless part of that traumatised society. However, their experience does not achieve being inserted into the collective trauma of Argentina. It is rather excluded: not only its legitimacy, but even its existence seems to be neglected, when it is not denounced as denial and apology of genocide. The words of the participants in this study prove that such baggage of experiences and meanings does exist, instead, and its content is not at all predictable; it is relevant not numerically but for its significance, and it includes more generations and more subjectivities than the only officers of the Proceso.

The repudiation of the military, the exposure of their families to denigration, the trials, the attacks of the media, the expressions of social hatred, and the difficulty in communicating with the other side are understandable reactions, but are also part of the consequences that affect this social group and therefore nurture the collective trauma of the Argentine society. Robben argues:

Massive trauma is more than the sum total of the individual suffering because it ruptures social bonds, destroys group identities, undermines people’s sense of community, and entails cultural disorientation because taken for granted meanings become obsolete. A massive trauma is thus a wound to the social body and its cultural frame.

(Robben, 2005a:346)
Despite the reactions within the military community, the sense of bewilderment this social group feel diffusely, and its internal divisions, are a hint of the massive trauma as Robben describes it. The large military family refer to a common cultural frame in order to restore that sense of “being military” as they experienced it in the past; such cultural frame is a rich ensemble of meanings, feelings, practices and narratives that is proper of the Argentine military community, and therefore is ultimately a component of Argentine identity. Society’s resistance in acknowledging this link affects the generation of the children, and further complicates the frame of what is definitely a transgenerational trauma (Robben, 2005a:346). With the exception of children who are making contact with ex-guerrillas and relatives of desaparecidos, it is not possible to reach reconciliation because not even the step before, the reciprocal recognition, is achievable at the moment.

Until the military families – hopefully through their children – will not be recognized as a constitutive part of the society that lived, perpetrated and suffered the bloodbath of the Seventies, a tile of a same national history of violence and a same collective trauma, Argentines will be far from coming to terms with their cumbersome past.
LIST OF REFERENCES

PRIMARY SOURCES

AUTHOR'S RECORDED INTERVIEWS

Interviews with former officers

Interviews with César (Buenos Aires: 18/05/2016; 08/06/2016)

Interview with Miguel (Buenos Aires: 16/06/2016)

Interview with Luis (Buenos Aires: 23/06/2016)

Interviews with military wives

Interviews with Berta (Buenos Aires: 11/02/2016; 21/02/2016)

Interview with Norma (Buenos Aires: 02/05/2016)

Interview with Victoria (Buenos Aires: 19/05/2016)

Interview with Fernanda (Buenos Aires: 02/06/2016)

Interview with Patricia (Buenos Aires: 21/06/2016)

Interview with Teresa (Buenos Aires: 28/06/2016)

Interviews with adult children

Interview with Claudia (Buenos Aires: 19/12/2015)
Interview with Paula (Buenos Aires: 01/02/2016)

Interviews with Adriana (Buenos Aires: 16/03/2016; 08/04/2016)

Interview with Silvia (Buenos Aires: 31/03/2016)

Interview with Arturo (Buenos Aires: 23/04/2016)

Interview with Darío (Mendoza: 08/05/2016)

Interviews with Clara (Buenos Aires: 11/05/2016; 23/05/2016)

Interview with Gabriela (Buenos Aires: 15/06/2016)

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Interview with Emilia and Francisco (Buenos Aires: 05/07/2016)

GOVERNMENT DOCUMENTS AND OFFICIAL PUBLICATIONS


ONLINE NEWSPAPER ARTICLES


## SECONDARY SOURCES

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OTHER SOURCES

WEBSITES


Ref: ERP2247

24 August 2015

Eleonora Natale
4 Kimberley Road
Newcastle, ST5 9EG

Dear Eleonora

Re: A past bleeding into the present: the military’s perspective and the role of women in the construction of Argentina’s Dirty War’s Complete Memory

Thank you for submitting the revisions for the above research proposal for ethical review - the proposal was reviewed at the Ethical Review Panel meeting on Thursday, 20 August 2015. The panel discussed the revisions made and approved the application. The following documents have been reviewed and approved by the panel:-

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If the fieldwork goes beyond the date stated in your application (1 January 2016), you must notify the Ethical Review Panel via the ERP administrator at uso.erps@keele.ac.uk stating ERP2 in the subject line of the e-mail.

If there are any other amendments to your study you must submit an ‘application to amend study’ form to the ERP administrator stating ERP2 in the subject line of the e-mail. This form is available via http://www.keele.ac.uk/researchsupport/researchethics/.

If you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact me via the ERP administrator on uso.erps@keele.ac.uk stating ERP2 in the subject line of the e-mail.

Yours sincerely

Dr Bernadette Bartlam
Chair – Ethical Review Panel 2

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