



Colombia's Quest For Historic Memory and Peacebuilding

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11 December 2017

Colombia's year-old peace accord is already showing signs of fatigue, but important work on the preservation of the memory of the conflict is advancing and aiding the peacebuilding process.

While the implementation of Colombia's year-old peace accord is showing first signs of fatigue, the preservation of the memory of the protracted armed conflict is advancing. Promoted by the National Centre for Historical Memory, the long-standing quest for the recovery of the historical memory of a degraded war that killed more than 220,000 people – mostly civilians – and victimized millions more over a period of some fifty years has reached unprecedented heights. Today, the memory process also involves the armed forces of the state, a difficult-to-achieve development that despite its many challenges bodes well for reconciliation in Colombia. The international peacebuilding community, including academics working on reconciliation and post-conflict reconstruction, would be well advised to do more to support it.

Colombia's peace process one year on

One year ago, Colombia made international headlines with a rare item of good news: in a landslide vote, both in the Senate and the lower house, the Colombian Congress ratified the 310-page peace accord that the government of President Juan Manuel Santos (2010-2018) and the insurgent Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC, in Spanish) had hammered out during four years of talks in Cuba. This breakthrough, which a couple of months earlier had still hung in the balance after the agreement was narrowly [voted down](#) in a

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plebiscite, formally ended over half a century of armed conflict between the Colombian state and the Western Hemisphere's longest-standing left-wing guerrilla organization. In a symbolically important [gesture of support](#), the Norwegian Nobel Committee awarded President Santos the Peace Prize "for his resolute efforts to bring the country's more than 50-year-long civil war to an end."

Colombia has since embarked on the difficult task of implementing the agreements. Yet, the mood in the country is somber. There have been advances in some areas, particularly with regards to disarming and demobilising the insurgents, but relatively little progress in others. Following the accord's acclaimed ratification (frankly, no politician wanted to miss the photo opportunity), Congress has been dragging its feet on passing the required laws on key provisions, including the broader participation of FARC-turned-political-party in national politics and the establishment of a transitional justice system. Decision-making on these vital issues has been left to the Constitutional Court.

With the 2018 general election drawing closer and political dogfighting in Bogotá and elsewhere getting more vicious, law makers are showing little commitment to moving the implementation agenda forward. In effect, influential elements of the opposition and a large part of public opinion remain adamant in considering the settlement to be politically toxic. This is not helped by improvisation-reigning-supreme in the Office of the High Councilor for the Post-conflict and the responsible line ministries, resulting in poor coordination between the central and regional authorities and growing discontent at grassroots level, amongst other ills.

Experience tells us that none of the above should, alas, come as any big surprise. Peacebuilding is an uncertain and volatile business, and there are

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always those who would rather see the enterprise fail. To prevent failure, it is paramount that the spoilers are kept in check as much as possible, and political, technical and other blunders are kept to a realistic minimum so as not to derail implementation. But it is also important to focus on the 'backstage' work, that is, on other initiatives that may not be directly or formally related to the peacebuilding effort, but are nonetheless fundamentally geared at helping overcome the deep cleavages that characterize societies emerging from armed conflict. I believe that among this kind of important 'backstage' work in Colombia is the – ongoing and open-ended – quest for reconstructing and preserving the historical memory of the conflict.

Historical memory: what's behind a term?

Colombia's pursuit of historical memory is presently led by the [National Centre for Historical Memory](#) (CNMH, in Spanish) an independent entity ascribed to the Presidency. [1] But the memory effort dates back longer, perhaps two or three decades. Over the years, it has involved a wide range of academic, civic and governmental actors. According to distinguished historian Gonzalo Sánchez, [the CNMH's director](#), "breaking with the usual experience of countries affected by violent conflict, the armed confrontation in [Colombia has unfolded] in parallel to the increasing confrontation of memories and [growing] public demands for justice and reparation. [...] Memory is an expression of rebellion against violence and impunity". (Translation by author).

This process, which is eminently non-partisan in nature, has entailed recovering – through the active, emancipatory and free exercise of memory – the essence of the tragedy and suffering that has affected millions of Colombians since the start of the armed conflict in the early 1960s. Representing a truly monumental effort, in the past decade Sánchez and his team have researched and

published more than four dozen in-depth accounts of ‘emblematic’ instances of the horrors of Colombia’s degraded armed conflict. Among many other types of atrocities and human rights violations, they include accounts of massacres of unspeakable cruelty committed (mostly) by rightwing paramilitary groups, innumerable instances of violent land-grabbing and massive forced displacement, as well as the horrendous impact, on civilians and government soldiers, of internationally proscribed anti-personnel mines planted by the insurgents across swaths of Colombia’s rural territory.

At its heart, recovering the historical memory of the conflict does not aim to promote truth and/or justice in the wake of the conflict, once the violence and abuse have come to an end. The CNMH’s work is therefore not the equivalent to that of a post-conflict truth commission, the establishment of which is stipulated in the peace agreement. Rather, it has been reflective of an effort to reinstate and reaffirm the dignity and humanity of all victims of the conflict, most of whom are civilian, while the violence may still be ongoing or may only recently have begun to subside. Individual and/or collective memories of the conflict become ‘historical’ as they are salvaged and expressed through diverse narratives and processes of social communication in which the memory of the individual, community or group is **contrasted** with the “fundamental problems of the configuration of [Colombia’s] political and social order”.

Colombia’s armed forces and the reconstruction of historical memory

Hope beyond, and memory of, Colombia’s degraded war. Cover image of a [2013 report](#) by CMNH, entitled “Basta Ya! Colombia: memorias de guerra y dignidad”. Image credit: CMNH.

A pioneering, relatively new development in Colombia's historical memory process is the cooperation between the Colombian armed forces and the CNMH. The legal base for this cooperation is Law 1448 of 2011, which regulates the assistance and reparation to which the victims of the armed conflict are entitled. With respect to historical memory and symbolic reparation, the law stipulates that the Colombian state has a duty and an obligation vis-à-vis the victims of the conflict to recover and preserve that memory.

In practice this has meant that, starting in 2013, the armed forces and the CNMH have begun to engage in a process of inter-institutional dialogue geared at reconstructing the role – both as victimizers and victims – of the military and police in the conflict. To my knowledge this is an internationally unique endeavor and this work has gone through different stages and has involved different modalities of cooperation, such as incorporating taught courses on historical memory in the curriculum of the military academy in Bogotá and offering workshops for soldiers and police officers in different parts of the country.

While it is fair to say that the outcome of this endeavor in terms of contributing to the recovery of historical memory in Colombia is still uncertain, it strikes me as undeniable that there has been progress. Shortly after the commencement of the rapport between the CNMH and the armed forces, the relationship became marred by distrust and even hostility (which almost ended the effort prematurely had it not been for the intermediation of the Swiss government and other international actors), especially on the part of the armed forces. But the two sides have since advanced toward a more stable and less confrontational exchange. It is still difficult for the armed forces to accept that theirs has not always and in all instances been a 'heroic' and 'legal-legitimate'

part in the conflict. But one perceives that today, after five years of work with the CNMH, there is more openness among officers to look history in the eye and engage more freely in the reconstruction of the institution's memory of the war, including acknowledging its wrongdoings.

We do not know whether at some point in the future this process may have a positive effect on the institutional self-perception and identity of Colombia's armed forces, perhaps even on security sector reform and the wider [consolidation of peace](#). But in and of itself the quest for the recovery and preservation of historical memory, with the armed forces on board, cannot be seen as anything other than an enormously valuable effort to collectively and 'historically' heal the deep wounds inflicted by Colombians on Colombians over the course of more than fifty years of war. So far, the international peacebuilding community, including academics working on reconciliation and post-conflict reconstruction, has been all too silent on this important issue. There should be more of an effort to support Colombia (and other countries emerging from violent conflict) in the quest for recovering and preserving historical memory in an inclusive manner.

[1] The CNMH was established by Law 1448 of 2011 (the so-called 'Victims Law') and was preceded by the Historical Memory Group (GMH, in Spanish) which formed part of the National Commission for Reparation and Reconciliation (CNRR, in Spanish). The CNRR was created in 2006 on the basis of the so-called 'Justice and Peace' Law (Law 975 of 2005) and remained active until 2011 when its work was discontinued.

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