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**On or Off the Record?  
Detecting Patterns of Silence about Death in Guatemala's National Police Archive**

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**Abstract**

This paper investigates how the production of police records was linked to the policies of repression and violence during Guatemala's civil war. We provide empirical evidence from the Historical Archive of the Guatemalan National Police (AHPN) that the police used language, terminology and codes to record deaths in ways that produced silences about the level of violence during the height of repressive military rule. Using a dataset derived from a statistically valid sample of police records together with qualitative archival analysis, we find evidence of profound changes in the terminology used to record and report on deaths – changes that follow a pattern consistent with the policies of information control and concealment of the three different military regimes that ruled Guatemala between 1978 and 1985. We argue that researchers will need to consider the silences created through the selective use of terminology in documents when using archives to produce historical knowledge. Detecting and intercepting silence will be especially important as state records are increasingly sought in service of ongoing pursuits for truth and justice about past atrocities.

**Key words**

Guatemala — sampling in archives – silences – police archives – violence – human rights

**Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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\* Tamy Guberek wrote an earlier version of this paper as her MA/MSc thesis: "Off the Record: Concealing State Violence in Guatemala's National Police, 1978-1985" (Columbia University & London School of Economics and Political Science, 2012). She conducted the research and the analysis in this paper, and she presented a version of it at AERI in Maryland, 2015. Between 2006 and 2010, she served as the Latin America Coordinator for the Human Rights Data Analysis Group, and in that position she co-led the design, collection and preparation of the probabilistically sampled data used from the AHPN.

\*\* Margaret Hedstrom provided the comparative framework on sampling in archives and assisted with writing in this version of the paper.

## **1. Introduction**

What happens when a new source of records – a cache of documents of one of the main perpetrators of state violence – suddenly becomes available in a country where historical memory is contested and justice for past crimes is still pending? What is the power of old records in struggles for truth and justice when the institutions and individuals of former authoritarian regimes still hold significant power? These questions are central to Guatemala's ongoing processes of dealing with the legacies of state-sponsored violence in what was perhaps the bloodiest conflict during Latin America's Cold War (Coatsworth 1994).

In 2004, in response to local complaints about suspected explosives in some warehouses in Guatemala City, the government's Human Rights Ombudsman stumbled upon more than a century's worth of rotting records. The estimated 80 million pages were the historical documents of the Guatemalan National Police (in Spanish, *la Policía Nacional - PN*). For over 30 years of military dictatorship and conflict, the PN was one of the main repressive state forces in Guatemala's urban centers, alongside the military, intelligence agencies and death squads. The PN also had important surveillance and reporting mandates – tasked with monitoring the population and enabling the administration of justice (Weld 2014; AHPN 2013). Due to its notorious abuse of human rights, the 1996 Peace Accords that ended the armed conflict also disbanded the PN, yet the government officially denied the existence of any PN records (Tomuschat 2001). The chance discovery of the police archive in 2004 galvanized activists and researchers and renewed aspirations for truth and justice. Thus began a monumental archive recovery project, which today is the Historical Archive of the National Police (in Spanish, *El Archivo Histórico de la Policía Nacional - AHPN*).

This paper focuses not on the specific accounts, numbers, statistics and data that the AHPN records hold, but on what was recorded, how it was recorded and the ways in which classification, changes in terminology, misleading accounts, and missing data alter and obscure the events the records are assumed to document. Our interest is as much in what was not recorded as it is in the secrets that the police archive can continue to conceal if silences are not deliberately probed. Is there evidence of deaths being recorded in ways that produce ongoing silence within this massive primary source? How did the

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specific nomenclature that police agents employed to record deaths as they carried out their administrative duties in the normal course of business contribute to the production of silences in the Historical Archive of the National Police in Guatemala? We use evidence of what the AHPN documents reveal in order to explore what they conceal about death during what was arguably the most violent period in the country's internal armed conflict – 1978 to 1985 (CEH 1999).

What are silences? The high-level concept of silence is often treated as a specter – something that is forcefully present and shrouded in absence at the same time. Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) argues that silence is a kind of missingness of information produced by logics of power. The missingness may be purposeful or inadvertent, but it is rarely completely random. Instead, according to Trouillot, it is biased in the direction of power, i.e. “uneven contributions” to historical knowledge by those who have “unequal access” to the means of its production. Trouillot offers a useful framework for understanding not only what silence is, but also when and how it enters the production of history. He laid four “moments” in historical knowledge creation where silences are produced. The first moment is in the creation of sources; and additional silences enter the historical production process during archival assembly (moment two), the creation of narratives (moment three), and the attachment of overall significance to a narrative by academic, political and social communities (moment four). In the first moment, as documents are produced within their political, social and institutional contexts, actors and dynamics of power within these contexts will shape records and collections in ways that both offer and withhold information about the past (Trouillot 1995; Burns 2010; Hamilton et al. 2002; Stoler 2009; Caswell 2014).

Archivists, scholars, activists, and others will access records of past violent regimes in hopes that they will reveal evidence of the secrets of past terror. It will be important for them to be attuned to the mechanisms that initially generated missingness or partiality in that same documentation in moment one, as well as to remain aware of their own participation in perpetuation of those silences. A critical reading of both the records and the conditions and purpose of their creation is necessary in assembling an archive (moment two) that reveals the richness of what was recorded and the depths of what was not said. People who construct narratives from an archive in pursuit of

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historical memory, truth and social justice should work to uncover the omissions and obfuscations that are interwoven with its seemingly authoritative statements of what occurred (moment three). When those narratives are evaluated for their completeness, accuracy, and significance, accounting for silence must be one measure of credibility (moment four).

In this article, we analyze one silence-producing mechanism – the shifting use of terminology to record deaths – at the moment of creation of records in the AHPN. A few authors have conducted important studies on other specific mechanisms that produce silences that plague official documents. For example, Ciaran Trace’s review of literature on recordkeeping in law enforcement identified social processes which produce records that are not mere reflections of facts and transactions, but rather are tools to advance agendas, control behavior, and speak to specific audiences (Trace 2002). John Van Mannen and Brian Pentland (1994) discuss how U.S. police documents keep information secret either by producing records with limited content or by blocking access to records by outsiders. Others have described how the specific fields in data entry forms used by administrative, military and police bureaucracies include and exclude certain information about the individuals or experiences they are meant to document (Trundle 2011; Garcia 2014; Drake 2014). Here we study the semantic meaning of key terms and observe how the choice or use of different, yet similar terminological categories to describe acts of violence achieve different degrees of visibility and invisibility about the phenomenon they are meant to describe.

We attempt to unravel silence in death records in the AHPN by analyzing a sample of its content. We combine quantitative analysis of terminology used by police to record deaths with qualitative analysis of policy statements and directives and discover evidence of profound changes in terminology used in the PN records to record and describe deaths during this period. We argue that these changes follow a pattern that is related to the varied and systematic efforts to hide the full extent of violence at the peak of Guatemala’s political repression. By deciphering a pattern of silence expressed through the use of terminology to report on deaths, produce statistical accounts, and assign culpability (or not), this study provides an alternative to an exclusively extractive approach to analyzing archival documents, as Ann Laura Stoler (2002) advises. We

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provide archivists and researchers with new ways of reading these records by explaining what was written as well as what was not written due to the variations in the larger political context in which they were created. Drawing attention to the ways in which silencing operated within the AHPN should also help inform ongoing efforts to use its records in service of historical clarification and justice.

We focus specifically on death because it is a phenomenon with which the National Police had intimate connections. During this violent period, the police were both law enforcers and perpetrators of human rights violations. They were mandated to monitor, report on and prevent crime, but – as well documented by the UN Historical Clarification Commission and many victims’ associations – PN officers were also responsible for committing much violence, including killings and disappearances (CEH 1999). And today, while death lives like a ghost within the “paper cadavers” at the AHPN, it is one of the most important phenomena that people want to learn about from these records (Weld 2014). Despite decades of research and activism to reveal “the truth” about killings and disappearances, information about deaths continues to be elusive.

The paper continues as follows: In section 2, we describe our methods in more detail. In section 3, we provide historical background on the three military regimes that ruled Guatemala during the period of this study and their policies about how visible and invisible violence should be within their counterinsurgency strategy. In section 4, we present the patterns of terms used to categorize and describe deaths in the documents across the archive based on a statistical sample drawn from the entire AHPN. In section 5, we relate the quantitative insights with qualitative archival analysis suggesting highly controlled and changing practices in the way death (and violence more generally) was written up. In section 6, we discuss the relevance of the findings and then we conclude in section 7.

## **2. Methods**

### *2.1. The Sampling Plan for the AHPN*

The Historical Archive of the National Police is a massive collection of documents estimated to constitute 80 million pages (AHPN and HRDAG 2016). When it was found in 2005, paper records were sprawled across seven warehouses. Efforts to

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restore the archive have been valiant. To date, over 10 million documents have been cleaned, organized, scanned and made available through a website hosted by University of Texas-Austin's library (Digital Archive of the Guatemalan National Police Historical Archive: <https://ahpn.lib.utexas.edu/>). Given the huge number of documents and the desire to gauge some of the key features and content relatively quickly, the AHPN teamed up with the U.S. based-NGO, the Human Rights Data Analysis Group (HRDAG), to study the documents using statistical sampling methods.

The use of sampling in archives is not a new practice, but the sampling methods used in this study differ in some key respects from the way that archivists typically approach sampling (Kulsrud 1947, McKay 1978, Hindus et. al. 1980, Hull 1981, Kepley, 1984, Bradsher 1988, Cook 1991). Most archival sampling projects have been conducted in conjunction with records management and appraisal with the explicit goal of reducing the volume of large series of homogeneous records, such as case files from administrative agencies, court case files, investigative files, and Congressional constituent correspondence, before transferring the selected records to an archive. Archivists have used sampling methods that range from selecting examples or specimens, to purposive sampling where records are chosen based on pre-determined criteria, to systematic sampling also on a predetermined basis, to random sampling based on probability theory and statistical methods.

The goal of most sampling projects in archives is to save those records that are judged to contain the richest information content or that best represent the activities and administrative practices of the originating agency or unit. Archivists address the problem of heterogeneity by sampling within groups, series, or sub-fonds where some degree of consistency is assumed on the basis of the function that produced the records, their form, their purpose, or their arrangement. Archival sampling is perilous for several reasons. When sampling is carried out in conjunction with appraisal, the final results tend to be irreversible because only the records that are selected for the sample are transferred to archives and the remaining records are destroyed. Samples rarely are drawn with one particular study or type of research in mind, but instead are designed to support multiple uses of the records. As a consequence, it can be difficult to determine the degree to which the sample represents the whole or to establish the validity of inferences drawn

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from the records, especially if the sampling methods were haphazard, involved subjective judgments, or were poorly documented.

The sample on which these findings are based is different. It was carefully designed with three specific research purposes in mind: 1) to understand the scope and heterogeneity of a massive and disorganized archive, 2) to get a sense of broad patterns of police operations, command structures and communications, and 3) to estimate the proportion of documents in the archive as a whole that recorded certain “acts of interest” to the project, such as disappearances, detentions and deaths (Guzmán et al. 2009). HRDAG’s statisticians and their advisors designed a sampling plan that had to accommodate movement of records within the archive, discovery and addition of new records to the archive, and uncertainty about the resources needed or time available to restore the archive. The complete details of how this dataset was created are found in a series of papers published in the proceedings of the Joint Statistical Meetings in 2009 (Guzmán et al. 2009; Shapiro et al. 2009; Price et al. 2009).

HRDAG’s team used a multi-staged iterative probability design to draw a sample of documents. The specific technique used was Probability Proportional to Size (PPS) where the probability that any unit of information would be selected was proportional to the amount of space it occupied in the archive. Lacking an inventory of the contents of the archives or any enumeration of the quantity of documents by office of origin, type, form, dates of creation, inclusive dates, or other distinguishing characteristics, the statisticians relied on a topographical inventory of spaces occupied with paper records in the seven buildings that comprised the archive, called the Location Master Register and known by its Spanish acronym (RMU). Using the RMU as the sampling frame, environments (rooms or semi-enclosed areas) within buildings were selected at random in stage one, and containers (file cabinets, bookshelves, boxes, bags, or distinct piles of documents on the floor) were selected at random in stage two. In stage three, the team selected Last Units of Aggregation (LAU) that were randomly distributed within the randomly selected containers, where the LAUs were those used in the original physical arrangement of the records (boxes, drawers, folders, tied bundles, etc.). In the final stage four, Information Units (IU), consisting of a single document, several documents stapled or clipped together, a file folder, or a case file were selected at random to be coded. The

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topographical information was used to track the probabilities of selection at each sampling stage, which in turn served to assign a weight to each sampled IU corresponding to how many documents in the AHPN it represented. The weight is the inverse of the probability of selection. When IUs were sampled from larger topographical areas, they have correspondingly smaller weights, and vice versa. The entire Archive was sampled in eleven waves, with some adjustments made to the sampling design used in the first nine waves as the team gained insight into the process and implementation challenges. Specifically, in wave 10 the sampling plan was modified to three stages based on an estimate of the total occupied space by the entire archive and changes to the selection of LUAs and IUs. In total, approximately 8,000 documents were selected in waves 1 through 9, and another 10,000 documents were selected in waves 10 and 11. The probabilistic sample of documents with their associated weights is used to calculate estimates about totals and proportions of AHPN documents and their coded content. Each inference consists of a point estimate and a standard error. The weights enable us to make unbiased estimates, but they also contribute to larger standard errors.

## *2.2 Coding and Building the Dataset*

A coding scheme was developed by the research team to characterize all documents in the IUs and to code specific pieces of information about “acts of interest.” The research team, consisting of five to fifteen Guatemalan human rights workers and archivists at any given time, selected the IUs and coded the document characteristics and contents about acts of interest in each document in the sample. The research team only coded data from documents created between 1960 and 1996 – the period of Guatemala’s internal armed conflict – resulting in a data set of 13,817 documents from the original sample. The researchers coded two types of information: 1) metadata about each document (authors, recipients, date of creation, provenance, etc.) and 2) information about the “acts of interest” related to human rights violations and political repression (detentions, deaths, denunciations, physical and psychological abuse, intimidations, disappearances, writs of habeas corpus, interrogations, entering private property, sexual abuse, surveillance). The full coding scheme (available in Spanish) was designed to answer questions of “who knew what” and “who said what” about these acts (AHPN and



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HRDAG 2016). For each act of interest recorded in the sample documents, coders recorded the type of act, the date, location, and actors involved in its occurrence. To ensure that the application of the codes was consistent, we conducted periodic inter-rater reliability tests throughout the process. The inter-rater reliability (IRR) was calculated by taking all observed pairwise agreements over all possible agreements. The coding for all death classifications met the 75% IRR threshold used for all the variables in the study (Cicchetti 1994). This study draws specifically on all of the sampled documents that mention violent acts that were coded as Death (MUERTE). Of relevance to this study, death acts were coded when a “document refers to a body without life, no matter what caused the death. One dead person mentioned in a document is equal to one coded act. The number of people affected in a given document should be equivalent to the number of acts coded.” Each coded act refers to its presence in one document (or “information unit”). If the same act or subject of an act (e.g. a victim of an act) is mentioned in more than one document included in the sample, that act or person will be coded more than once as well. Therefore a count of deaths based on the sampled documents represents how many times deaths are mentioned in the documents, not a number of uniquely identified deaths.

Each time a death was mentioned in a sampled document, the researchers coded three literal terms “*homicidio*” (homicide), “*asesinato*” (assassination), and “*cadáver*” (cadaver) precisely as the documents’ authors used those terms to specify a death. The AHPN researchers postulated that these three terms might indicate acts of a criminal or political nature, due to either the cause or context in which the deaths took place. All other terms (e.g. “*muerto*” “*fallecido*”, “*perecido*,” etc.), were coded generically as “*muerte*” (death). The quantitative analysis in this study draws primarily on a subset of 222 sampled documents created between 1978 and 1986, the period of interest to our study, and that mention one or more deaths. Given the relatively small number of sampled documents in this subset, the standard errors are relatively large. Nonetheless, the observations and interpretations we draw are still valid within margins of error. All the estimates and standard errors were calculated using the R ‘survey’ package.

Finally, it is important to note that while the dataset allows us to make statistical inferences about the documents in the AHPN, these are not necessarily representative of

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all records made and received by the PN during the 36 years of conflict. Some records may have been lost, stolen, or intentionally destroyed in the intervening years, and the sampling method (PPS) only allows for inference about the total quantity of documents in the AHPN and their coded characteristics. However, as Kirsten Weld (2014) narrates, archivists have carried out extensive appraisals of the AHPN and they do not find evidence of its contents having been systematically purged. Furthermore, the dataset does not capture the totality of police activity; it represents only those acts that the police chose to record in the documents that they created or received and that survived to form part of what is today known as the Historical Archive of the National Police. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that analyses based on this statistical dataset were presented as evidence to support arguments about main features of the archive in two successful trials and convictions against a former police director, a former senior police officer and two ex-police agents for the forced disappearance of Edgar Fernando García (Guzmán 2011).

## *2.2. Archival and Qualitative Research*

Since the construction of the dataset, the first author of this paper returned to the AHPN several times in 2011 and 2012 to conduct archival research on police concealment of violence. She continued to study documents shared with her in digital form throughout 2014 and 2015. During this archival review, she read collections and documents from police units with important recording and reporting functions. These included documents from the PN's leadership, its public relations department (PRD), the PN-Military Joint Operations Center (COC), the National Police Second Corps and other special units central to counterinsurgency operations. To complement her review of the documents, she conducted unstructured interviews in March 2012 and February 2015 with several of the AHPN archivists and staff that have been appraising and studying the documents since the archive was discovered. Their intimate familiarity with the production and provenance of the documents were valuable in the process of identifying and interpreting police recording practices and their concealment of violence.

## **3. Historical Background: State Violence and the Changing Information Policies about its Visibility and Invisibility**

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While Guatemala's internal armed conflict lasted for 36 years, the United Nations Historical Clarification Commission noted the period between 1978 and 1985 as extraordinarily violent (CEH 1999). These eight years encompassed three distinct presidential regimes at the end of three decades of military dictatorship in Guatemala. While each of the three military heads of state oversaw much state-sponsored violence, each leader had a distinct *modus operandi* and different policies for controlling and censoring information about violence (Weld 2014; Schirmer 1998). In the first period, between 1978 and early 1982, under General Fernando Romeo Lucas García, security forces assassinated and disappeared high profile politicians, trade unionists, university students, journalists, peasants and clergy members, often in broad daylight (Weld 2014). At the same time, unidentified bodies, often tortured, were found regularly in the streets (Torres 2004). A combination of highly visible violence with less visible killings by unknown perpetrators against unspecified victims was used as a tactic of terror and repression. But as Greg Grandin (2004) noted, the Lucas García regime was “the threshold of an even more violent future” (p. 165).

General Lucas García was ousted and General José Efraín Ríos Montt came to power due to a military *coup d'état* on March 23, 1982. In its efforts to legitimize the coup, the new ruling military faction worked to create the appearance that it was reversing the “two evils” of the previous regime: to abandon the state ‘terror’ and ‘chaos’ of the Lucas García era, and to eliminate the subversives whose resolve was only strengthened by the tactics of terror and the chaos that ensued. In this vein, Ríos Montt instituted a stark change in how violence would be regulated and how information about violence would be publically released. He enacted severe censorship laws, which included making killings invisible as a matter of policy. Ríos Montt boasted about his legal procedures for prosecuting and executing criminals to ‘clean up’ the mess left by the previous regime. “I make the laws. I guarantee to the public the just use of force. Instead of cadavers in the street, I will execute by firing squad those who commit crimes,” he said to delegates of the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights in September (CEH 1999, vol 2, para 289). The firing squad was to result from convictions by the Special Military Tribunals (in Spanish, *Tribunales de Fuero Especial*) he set up. These special courts with anonymous judges were to be the legalistic way to expedite trials and executions of political opponents, corrupt officials and even common criminals, serving as a “procedural veneer” for Ríos Montt to appear to have top down control over

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killing (Weld 2014). He also attempted to centralize all information and ordered a major purge of the police (Weld 2014). By changing the law in an attempt to control the visibility and invisibility of political and criminal violence, the Ríos Montt regime aimed to construct a more favorable narrative about his contribution to reducing violence in the country. Meanwhile, under his watch, the military and death squads committed “acts of genocide” against the civilian indigenous population in the rural highlands (CEH 1999). His tight control over sources of information and the success of these policies in cloaking responsibility for extreme violence in late 1982 are apparent in key U.S. documents (See, for example, Digital National Security Archive DNSA\GU00880).

Seventeen months later, General Oscar Humberto Mejía Víctores overthrew Ríos Montt in another *coup*. His government quickly lifted the censorship laws put in place by Ríos Montt. The Guatemalan Chamber of Journalism welcomed the new “unrestricted freedom of information” and their ability to work in “service of the truth” once again (AHPN\GTPN\30\DSC\F41966). While violence became more targeted and clandestine, the rhetoric about it changed. According to Jennifer Schirmer, this regime was characterized by denial, “publicity” and “loot[ing] the vocabulary of human rights and democracy” (Schirmer 1999, p. 93). Downplaying, concealing and employing “double discourse” about state violence (rather than stopping it) was seen as important in the lead up to the highly orchestrated transition to civilian-led democracy in 1986 (Jonas 1991; Cohen 2001, pp. 82-84). In 1985, after a counterinsurgency campaign that was considered to be a success by the ruling echelons of Guatemala, the military agreed to facilitate a transition to democratic civilian rule (Schirmer 1998). The transition required the appearance of improved security in a way that did not infringe upon the power that the military had consolidated with extreme violence (Schirmer 1998; Holden 2004). Even today, the fact that much of the violence remains off the record continues to keep the secrets in service of a still powerful, although less dominant military in Guatemala (Weld 2014).

While there are sources of information documenting deaths, disappearances and other types of violence from this period in Guatemala’s history, there is no dataset that represents all victims or all violent acts. The CEH estimated approximately 200,000 people were killed during Guatemala’s 36-year armed conflict, but it could not

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approximate levels of deaths by regimes. Patrick Ball et al. (1999) contrasted three datasets across regimes, urban/rural divides, and time periods, but they suggest that even these sources are limited. Indeed, a motivation for this analysis is that it is hard to analyze ‘actual’ patterns of violence without discussing the document production through which we can know about violence. Therefore, while there are many sources to demonstrate the presence of considerable state violence during this period, we focus on general differences in what is known about violence and about visibility policies across regimes. These can be summarized as follows:

Table 1: Regimes & Policies

| Years     | President<br>(last names) | Violence & Visibility Policies                   |
|-----------|---------------------------|--|
| 1978-1981 | Lucas García              | Partially visible violence, terror & concealment |
| 1982-1983 | Ríos Montt                | Extreme violence & official censorship           |
| 1983-1985 | Mejía Vítores             | Targeted violence, denial, & “double discourse”  |

These differences will be a useful reference to compare with the quantitative data presented in section 4 below.

The PN of 1978 to 1985 was a police force with a specific legacy and form (McClintock 1985). Historically, the police in Guatemala served the landowning class and protected their private property. As with many Latin American police forces, the PN was also definitively shaped by the Cold War. Between 1957 and 1974, the United States invested heavily in ‘counter-terror’ police aid and training, and focused especially on the areas of intelligence, surveillance, military coordination and archival organization (Weld 2014; Kuzmarov 2009; Huggins 1998). By the height of the internal armed conflict, the PN was effectively a counterinsurgency force – conducting its intelligence and operations to combat a vaguely defined internal enemy as its own internal training and secret operational plans attest (AHPN\GTPN\51\01\S01\F27826; AHPN\GTPN\26\S001\DDR-573171). Although situated within the civilian realm of the

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Ministry of the Interior, the PN was subordinate to the military, and highly militarized in its training, its leadership and its loyalty (AHPN 2013; Weld 2014; AHPN\GTPN\30\01\S010\DDR-1667246&\DDR- 1667247).

The PN produced records for internal and external audiences. The records were often meant to serve as evidence of police actions and to provide information about the affairs they observed in the population (AHPN 2013). Internally, many police documents were written to communicate information along a chain of command and to give orders or to confirm that orders were executed. The PN also reported information to many external agencies and institutions – namely the military, the judiciary, and the press. As such, police agents’ recording and reporting held considerable influence at the time over what and how others learned about individuals and activities of interest, about general crime, and about political violence. So, how did regime policies governing the visibility and invisibility of violence get translated into what agents in the PN inscribed in the records now found in the AHPN? To answer this question, we turn to the analysis of the terminology the PN used in their records to describe deaths over this period.

#### **4. Statistical Findings: Reading the Visible and Invisible in the PN’s Death Documents**

In this section, we analyze some characteristics of the police archive’s records using the statistical sample of the AHPN. Based on the documents in the sample that mention deaths, there are approximately two million documents in the AHPN created between 1960 and 1996 that mention at least one death (AHPN & HRDAG 2016, p. 27). We found deaths mentioned across all of the different documents types that the PN produced in accordance with their regular operating procedures, but most highly concentrated in news summaries (*novedades*) and informative notifications (*oficios*), both document types used to report information internally between units within the PN.

Recall that the AHPN documents contain various terms to record deaths: “homicide,” “assassination,” “cadaver,” and several terms to describe death generically. We did not find a police manual or guide that specifically defined these terms or instructed officials when to use one term rather than another. The coding team assumed that “homicide,” “assassination,” “cadaver,” could potentially refer to deaths of a

criminal or political nature, and they coded these terms specifically as they encountered them in the documents. They coded all other terms in a general category using the term “death.” To further understand the semantic meaning of these terms, we scrutinized hundreds of pages of documents containing mentions of deaths and deduced that there are indeed observable differences in the conventions that police used for each term:

1. **“Homicide”** is the most explicitly legal term used in the police records, and the penal code that defined it remained unchanged throughout this period. This term was used to describe a crime of one person killing another. Documents that mention homicide tend to include information about the context in which the death took place, weapons used, the alleged perpetrators, and their alleged culpability. 20% (SE 3%) of documents that use “homicide” include a specific alleged perpetrator, which is a slightly higher percentage than the other death classifications. Notably, documents that use the term homicide also hold the least amount of descriptive information about the deceased victim compared to deaths described using other terms.
2. **“Assassination”** is a term used mostly to describe intentional killings. When police agents used this term, the description of the events sometimes included the identity of the perpetrator or the name of the person who was arrested as the alleged perpetrator.
3. **“Cadaver”** is used to describe a dead body. When the term cadaver is used, the document usually specifies whether or not the body was identified. The term “cadaver” is used to describe the largest number of deaths mentioned in the PN documents, an estimated 57% (SE 2%) of all deaths mentioned. This is not necessarily surprising given that one of the functions of the National Police, in conjunction with an official judge, was to witness the removal of bodies. Documents recording cadavers tend to contain two specific pieces of information: a description of the cause of death and the place where the body was found. The terms used to notate the causes of death range from “tragic” accidents, to violent deaths, to deaths due to health failures. The majority of the bodies, 80% (SE 2%), are reported with no identifying information. Most of the remaining 20% (SE 2%) of cadavers were reported to have been found on public roads, and to a much

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lesser extent in hospitals, morgues, and private homes.

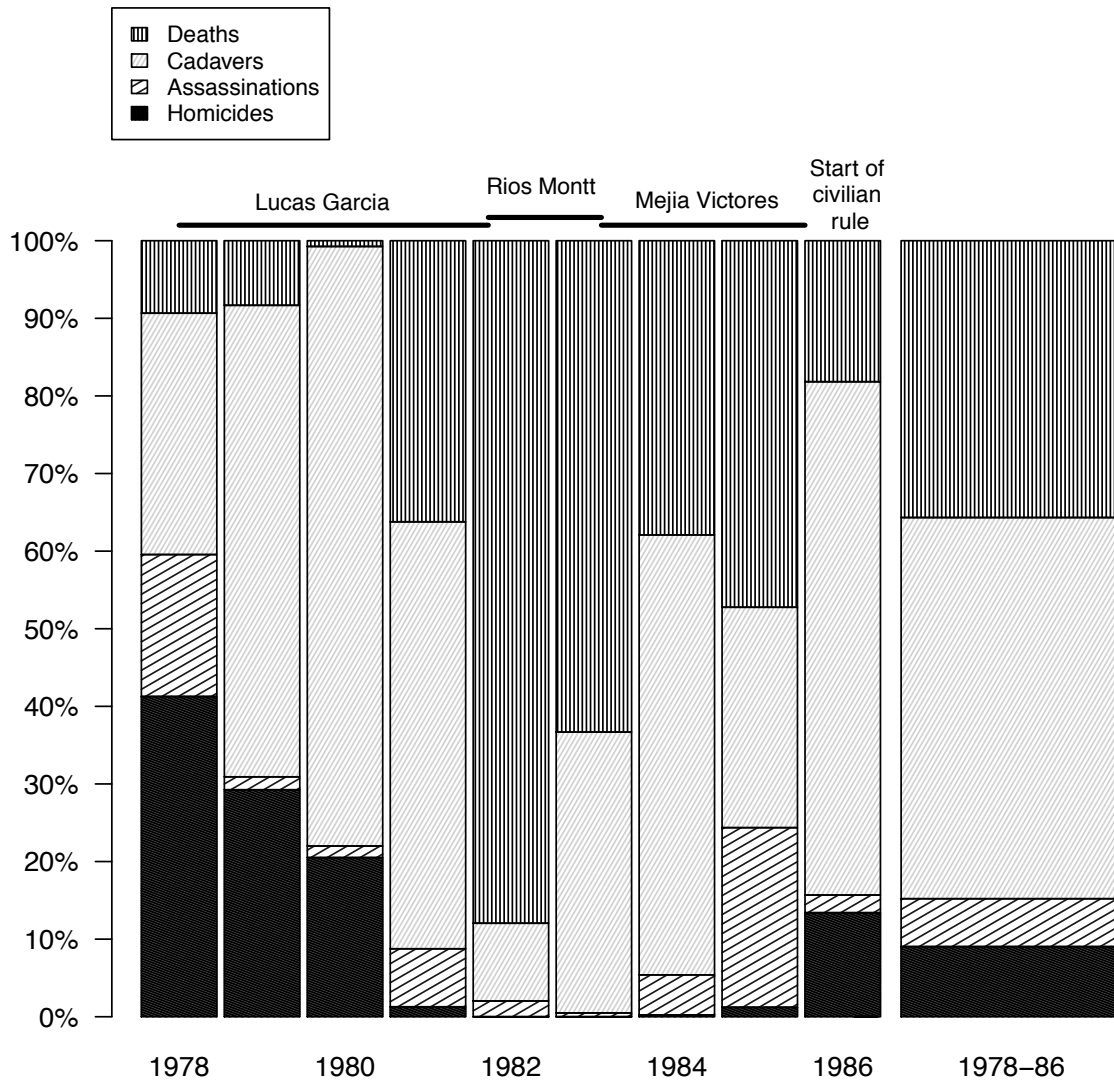
4. Descriptions of all other deaths, coded as “**Death**” contain the least amount of additional information about the events that transpired. The descriptions usually include only a few words to indicate the cause of death, most commonly due to firearm, blunt weapon, transit accident, choking, drowning, or unknown cause.

Based on our analysis of records both quantitatively and qualitatively, these definitions and semantic characterizations of death terms remained constant in the PN documents. Therefore, we contend that any intention by the police to change how death was to be recorded in the PN documents would be better explained by their use of different terms, rather than by changes in how any given term was defined or interpreted.

Figure 1 below shows the proportional distribution of all the terms used to describe the deaths mentioned in the PN documents by year during the period of the three Guatemalan military regimes discussed above and the first year of the transition to civilian rule. Each bar shows the total estimated documents mentioning deaths for each year using the terms homicide, assassination, cadaver, and death as a proportion of the estimated total number of documents with references to deaths in each year. At the top of the graph we have indicated which regime was in power. Finally, on the far right side, we plot the estimated average proportion at which each term was used for the deaths mentioned in all of the PN documents from 1978 to 1986 to serve as a point of reference for the entire period. Tables presenting the estimates and standard errors of the proportions seen in the graphs below are included in appendices.

Figure 1: Estimates of the Proportion of Death Terms Used in AHPN Documents





As seen in Figure 1, the changes in the proportions at which the various death terms are used align roughly with the information policies of each of the three regimes, as summarized in Table 1 above. In the Lucas García period, the overall distribution of the way deaths were recorded is very different from the later periods. “Homicide” made up a significant proportion of all deaths mentioned in documents, and then it was rarely used again until 1986. “Cadavers” made up the largest share in 1979 and 1980, exceeding the average presented in Figure 1. The generic “death” category was rarely used before 1981.

The changes in terms used during the Ríos Montt period are the most notable. Use of the term “homicide,” which connotes a criminal act, decreased considerably in 1981

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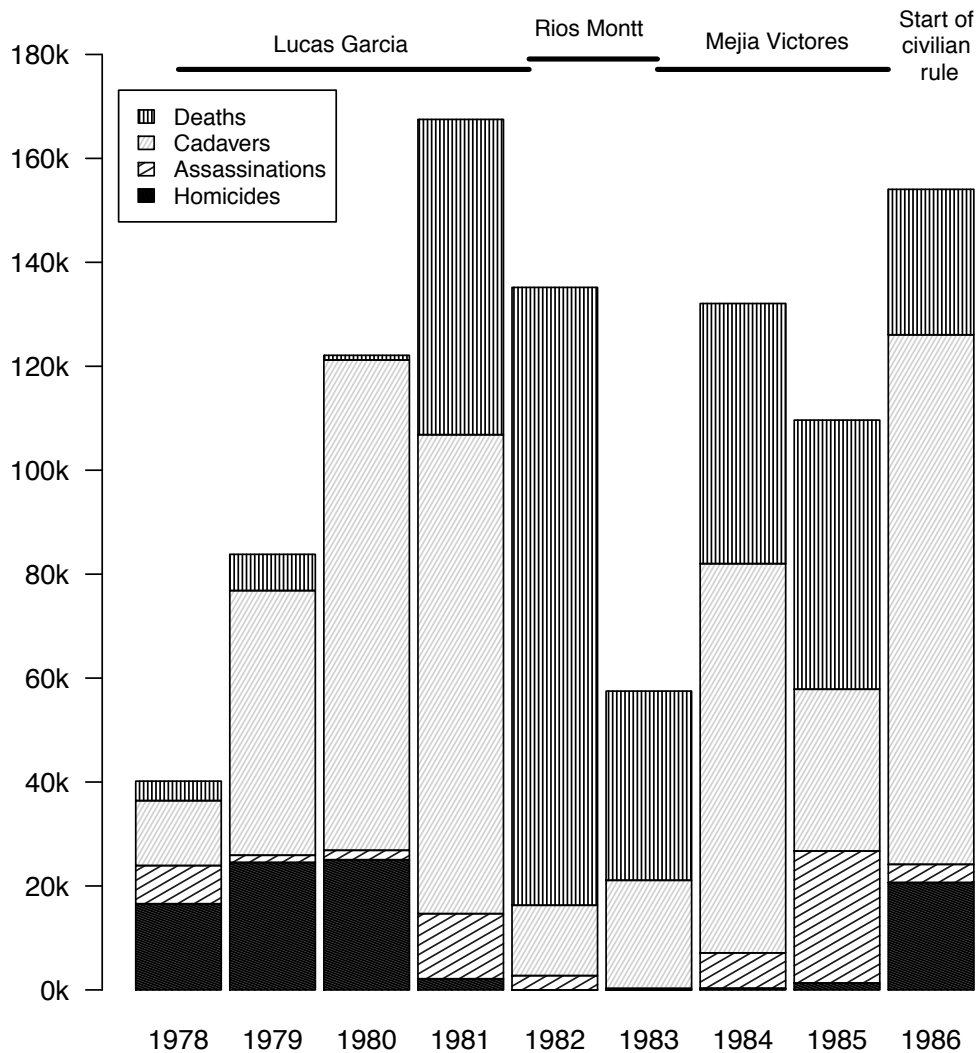
and was not used at all in 1982 and 1983. Said differently, in documents ranging from reports, to orders, to letters, to summaries of PN activities reports, written by police from the lowest PN agent all the way up to the Director General and from units across the entire security force – police agents did not use the term “homicide” to describe deaths in 1982 and 1983, and only very infrequently in the overall period between 1981 and 1985. In 1982, the large majority (86% (SE 8%)), of deaths were recorded using generic “death” terminology, which came with the least amount of information about the nature, cause, or circumstances of the death, as seen above. That same year, use of the term “cadaver” also fell to a surprisingly low 12% (SE 7%) of all deaths mentioned in the records.

Beginning in 1983, when there was another change in presidential regime and its policies regarding public disclosure, manipulation, or suppression of information about the level of violence in Guatemala, there was also a notable change in the frequency with which the four terminological categories were used. Under Mejía Vítores, the term “homicide” was very rarely used, “assassination” was not used until in 1986, “cadaver” was again used for a large proportion of all the records mentioning deaths, and use of general terms coded as “death” fluctuated between approximately one-fourth and one-half of those documents. “Homicide” was not used again at any significant level until 1986 after the transition to civilian rule. By presenting the results in Figure 1 as proportions of the total estimated number of documents produced each year, we control for variation in the number of documents created in any year. Recall that the patterns we observe here tell us about police documentation practices, but are not necessarily a reflection of actual levels of violence.

In Figure 2, we present the same data, but as a stacked estimated frequencies of the documents using each term each year.

Figure 2: Stacked Estimates of the Total Number of AHPN Documents Created Using

Each Death Term



As shown in Figure 2, the estimated total number of documents that mention deaths also varies considerably from year to year. What is important to note in Figure 2 is that variation in the total number of documents from any given year is independent of both which regime was in power and differences in use of the four terms that indicated deaths. While a deeper institutional history would be needed to explain why the total number of documents in the AHPN fluctuated from year to year, we can observe for now that the change in total number of documents does not explain the pattern of terminological use.

So, what might explain the dramatic changes in the terms used to report deaths?

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Why did use of the term “homicide” cease in the early 1980s? And, of greatest interest, why is the overall description of deaths in the PN documents from 1982 so different from the other years? By situating the changes in the patterns of death terms along with other pieces of evidence, it does not appear that these changes are due to coincidence or chance, but instead suggest a practice of changes in the application of death terminology consistent with each regime’s overarching information policies of visibility and invisibility of violence.

### **5. Explaining Changes in PN Death Recording and Reporting**

Evidence from a probabilistic sample of documents in the AHPN indicates that the PN’s use of terms to report on and classify death changed significantly between 1978 and 1986. The proportional changes in the use of each term follow a pattern that coincides with changes at the top of the government and closely resembles each regime’s policies about violence and its visibility. To date, no documents have been discovered in the AHPN that provide evidence of deliberate orders to members of the police force to change their use of specific terms when reporting on deaths. Through searches for and analysis of documents in key AHPN collections, the first author of this paper found evidence for a more specific and nuanced explanation that might shed light on death recording and reporting practices, which we describe below.

One document type was the “*memorias de labores*,”— the annual reports that the PN was mandated to produce for its effective superior – the Minister of the Interior. These reports summarized the PN’s main accomplishments, its activities, and the status of crime in the country (AHPN 2013). While all police subunits wrote their own reports, only a selection of those reports were included in the final compilation sent to the Ministry. A key section of the annual *memorias* reported summary statistics of “events of major importance,” among which death featured prominently (AHPN\GTPN\30\02\S007\CUIT-22224471772012). Although this report was meant to facilitate year-by-year monitoring of activities and information, the structure of the summary crime statistics changed often. For one, which PN subunit was responsible for accumulating, aggregating and reporting the statistical counts changed approximately

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every two years; and with each change in the reporting unit, the categories employed to report death and crime also changed. This suggests that there were multiple layers of silences, specifically in this example, through the terminology used in the firsthand reports by the police and then again in the extraction of information from the police reports into summary statistics.

Reporting of the summary counts in the annual reports breaks down as follows: In 1978 and 1979, the PN's General Archive Unit provided the summary statistics on deaths. "Homicide" and "assassination" were among the categories included in this crime report, and the counts were further disaggregated by the victims' sex (AHPN\GTPN\30\02\S007\CUIT- 8334681672012). Then, in 1980, one year before the notable drop in the use of "homicide" in the records that mentioned deaths, the terms "homicide" and "assassination" were no longer used in the annual summary reports. The 1980 statistics section was prepared by the PN's Public Relations Department (PRD), and it used the language of "violent death," further disaggregated into "tragic," "accidents," and "unknown causes." The PRD also reported identified and non-identified cadavers (AHPN\GTPN\30\02\S007\CUIT- 22224471772012). In 1981 the PRD and another unit, the *Gabinete de Información*, provided the statistics on deaths and employed the language of "*hechos de sangre*" ("blood acts") to report deaths by cause and by month. In 1982, the PRD again reported alone. Between 1983 and 1985, the office tasked with PN-military coordination (COC) produced the statistics for the report. In these years, the COC reported crimes and accidents by month. Deaths were reported with the generic term "death" and were then disaggregated into subcategories attributing the cause of death to a type of weapon or a traffic accident. It appears that over time, the categorization of the death counts became less descriptive and less informative about the nature, perpetrators, and circumstances, and increasingly more focused on listing deaths and their causes in general terms. This is consistent with the increased number of documents that use the generic "death" category between 1982 and 1984 in the estimates presented in Figure 1 above.

Beyond changes in the structure of the summary statistics in PN annual reports, there were multiple mechanisms operating within the PN for concealing the extent and nature of violence. These changes, further described below, can be mapped to the shifts

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in the overarching policies of the Guatemalan presidential regimes in power. Recall that between 1978 and early 1982, the Lucas García regime used the specter and visibility of violent death as a terror tactic (Torres 2005). In addition to targeted repression, the visibility of death was meant to terrorize and warn the population of the consequences of any kind of “oppositional thinking” (Weld 2014). The “feared” PN Director at the time, Colonel Germán Chupina Barahona and his boss, Interior Minister Donaldo Álvarez Ruíz, oversaw some of the most violent acts in Guatemala (Schirmer 1998, p. 18). Correspondingly, documents from the AHPN that mention deaths contain more specific information about type of death and perpetrators than the documents from the latter two regimes. Some specific records suggest that the PN operated with particular secrecy during the Lucas García regime by, despite it being illegal, refusing to open its books even to the judiciary (AHPN 2013, p. 303). In one example, Chupina ordered “for no reason should the book controlling detentions be shown to the judges that come to practice habeas corpus for any detainee – this is an order from the Chief” (APHN\GTPN\24\09\02\S001\DDR-2796484). Violence and secrecy reinforced each other during this period.

When Ríos Montt’s came to power in 1982, his censorship policies and his rhetoric of “cleaning up” crime and chaos had notable repercussions for PN personnel and PN recordkeeping practices. One of Ríos Montt’s first acts was to purge certain police units, blaming much of the previous regime’s violence on the “personal crimes of the police that exceeded themselves” (*Diario de Centroamerica*, 6 June 1983). Accordingly, the new PN Director during this period, Infantry Colonel Hernán Orestes Ponce Nitsch, oversaw one of the most comprehensive police purges – the abolition of the infamous Detectives Corps – because, as indicated in the reform decree, “there existed rational signs of [them] having participated as perpetrators, accomplices and concealers of crimes” (AHPN\GTPN\35\DDR-758897). He replaced the Detectives Corps with the new and allegedly ‘clean’ Technical Investigations Department (DIT). This was a classic instance of “purging and recycling” the investigative branch of the police in keeping with what Kirsten Weld (2014) has shown to be a tradition since the 1950s. The purge created the façade of combating corruption, but in reality, much of the corrupt structure and agents remained in place. Less formally but similarly, the notorious

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*Commando Seis* also disappeared under Ríos Montt's regime, but its demise conspicuously coincided with the start of essentially the same unit, called the Special Operations Command (COE), also called at times the Special Operations and Reaction Force (BROE) or the *Quinto Cuerpo*.

Col. Ponce Nitsch tried to emphasize to the PN agents that the mechanism of accountability for their actions would be increasingly enforced. He reminded them that any detention they made required them to show up in court, a practice they had been neglecting (AHPN\GTPN-26-03-S004\Total\360285). Overall, there was a strong indication to PN agents that there was heightened surveillance *of them* by members of the more powerful disciplinary ranks of the military. The explicit and implicit warnings to be cautious, as their actions and reports would be scrutinized, could have impacted their internal reporting practices. With respect to their production of documents, this climate may have motivated PN agents to report narrowly to fulfill their duties, without revealing any more information than necessary.

The PN certainly had an important role in reinforcing Ríos Montt's overall censorship policies towards external audiences. This was the case with PN documents that were on the subject of the infamous Special Military Tribunals (SMTs), which Ríos Montt held as emblematic of transparent and legalistic state executions. The SMTs had a profoundly secretive character, and deep within the internal flow of communications, the PN contributed to help keep those secrets (IACHR 1983). For example, in November 1982, the Sub-director of the PN ordered his agents to "omit the name of the person to whom the letter was directed" any time they sent correspondence to the SMTs (AHPN\GTPN\51\Clave-102). The PN Secretary General, in a memorandum dated December 1982, told the night officials who were in charge of consolidating and aggregating the most important PN news from the corps and the departmental units, that henceforth information on detainees sent to the SMTs "should not be put in the [regular] news summaries, only in the CONFIDENTIAL detainee lists" (sic) (AHPN\GTPN\30\01\S004\F28352). In other words, they were instructed to intercept and redirect information related to the SMTs away from public view.

The domestic and international media constituted another crucial audience for information collected and compiled by PN officers. Between 1978 and 1985, the PN was

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the main conduit between the regime and the press for information about criminality and violence. As such, the PN's Public Relations Department (PRD) took on special importance with respect to the 1982 censorship laws (AHPN\GTPN\35\DDR-1849940). The PRD received directives to manage "documents with absolute secrecy" (AHPN\GTPN\añs\1982\DDR-1784362). On July 12, 1982, the Deputy Director sent a circular to "the whole staff of the Office of Public Relations" about the daily bulletins they sent to journalists. He ordered:

...FROM THE PRESENT DATE FORWARD, IT IS STRICTLY FORBIDDEN TO INCLUDE IN THE NEWS BULLETINS TO THE PRESS ...NEWS PIECES SUCH AS: RAPES, DISAPPEARANCES, KIDNAPPINGS, ABORTIONS AND ALL THAT IS RELATED TO PRIVATE CRIMES. IN THE EVENT THAT SUCH NEWS ITEMS APPEARED IN THE LIST OF CRIMES THAT COME FROM THE GENERAL SECRETARY, THE CONVENIENT THING TO DO IS TO RIP OUT THE PAGE, SO THAT WHEN IT IS PASSED AROUND IN THE JOURNALISTS' ROOM SUCH POINTS ARE NOT TAKEN [Upper case original].

In closing, the circular warned: "Whoever violates these regulations will be sanctioned according to superior order. OBEY" (AHPN\GTPN\añs\1982\DDR-1784362). A month later, a PRD official confirmed that the order was being implemented and explained that the office was "immediately removing" any related news coming from the PN General Secretary (AHPN\GTPN\añs\1982\DDR-1783049). Of note, the PRD was to conceal information about "private crimes," which were a specific type of criminal violence that could threaten the regime's image of having total control over the public's safety and security. Although none of the documents we examined provides an explanation of the reasons behind the policy to conceal information about criminal violence, the circular's issuance and implementation does coincide with the notable changes in recordkeeping about death discussed above. Indeed, 1982 when criminal activity was highly censored turns out also to be one of the years when we observe no use of the term "homicide" and when reports that used the term cadaver also decrease dramatically. Simultaneously, use of the general category "death" with the least information about causes, circumstances, and perpetrators, permeated the PN's written record about deaths in 1982.



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In August 1983, when General Mejía Víctores ousted Ríos Montt in another *coup*, there were corresponding changes within the PN. A new PN director, General Colonel Héctor Rafael Bol de la Cruz, was appointed. Bol de la Cruz was remarkably prolific, as he authored numerous extended memos detailing his vision and opinion of Guatemalan current events and how they related to his policing policies, changes to policies and practices of concealment of violence, and the manipulation of language to portray it. He was keenly aware of the political environment in which the PN was operating, as he often made reference to improving Guatemala's international image, preparing for elections and transitioning to civilian rule. "Our work policy responds to the guidelines of the Head of State, dictated within this transitional stage" (AHPN\GTPN\51\01\S003\26-Dec-3-Ene-1985). He was the most sophisticated of the three PN directors in employing "double discourse" – i.e. writing and speaking of legality, neutrality, human rights, discipline and virtue, while hiding mass abuses under his watch (Cohen 2001). Clandestine disappearances were the preferred mode of repression during his period.

Bol de la Cruz recommended to PN agents of all ranks that in their routine procedure of apprehending and turning delinquents over to the courts, they should do so "without mentioning the participation of the agent," given that judges were biased against the police (AHPN\GTPN\51\01\S003\30-Ene-5-Feb-1984; AHPN\GTPN\51\01\S003\23-Ene-29-Ene-1984). And indeed, in many cases throughout the country, police agents consigned criminals to the courts, but reported in internal memoranda to their superior that they had omitted their own participation, thus confirming that the order to withhold information from the judicial system was being followed (for example: AHPN\GTPN\30\01\S020\DDR-1925071). We surmise that the police left important facts and contextual information out of official records that were created to assist in the administration of justice and to inform the press about crime and violence in order to manipulate the perception of crime and violence in keeping with the regime's policies to create the appearance of stability and order.

Under Bol de la Cruz, the PN's Press Relations Department (PRD) also courted journalists more closely, seeking to gain their "impartial collaboration" (AHPN\GTPN\51\01\S003\7-Nov-13-Nov-1983). He designated specific agents to

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request rectifications from the press when they published damaging news, sometimes paying personal visits to the media outlet itself. In line with the Mejía Víctores regime's determination to shed its international pariah status and prepare the transition to civilian-led democracy in 1986, the PRD carried out more engaged management of the PN's public image. Whereas the PRD under Ríos Montt sought to censor information flowing from the PN to the press, the PRD in the last period distorted the information differently, perhaps with more hands-on manipulation of the way in which information about violence was written in documents.

## **6. Discussion about Silences Produced in Sources**

Understanding what Verne Harris (2002) calls the “sliver of a sliver” of information that survives in archives from repressive contexts requires an explanation that is intimately linked with the context in which the information – and its absence – was created. In this vein, we argue that by analyzing the changes in the terminology that the PN used in their written accounts of deaths we make two contributions to the understanding of recordkeeping and critical interpretation of archival documents. First, we offer important insight about how to read these documents in the AHPN, as death is an important phenomenon that people want to uncover from these records. We also consider how the silences created by the police in their own documentation likely reverberated and compounded silences in many of the other sources that are often compared and contrasted for research and truth-seeking, burying aspects of the past from records more deeply than may be recognized.

Guatemalan victims and activists, supported by international advocates for human rights have persisted in their courageous efforts to identify and account for the dead for decades, and yet concrete evidence of who did what to whom, and why, still remains nebulous. Even the CEH's commonly cited estimate of approximately 200,000 people killed during Guatemala's 36-year armed conflict is likely an undercount. It does not include disappearances, and according to the statistician who calculated the estimate, the figure is based on data only from certain regions (Interview with Patrick Ball 2012).

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Also, there exists no homicide information for this period from official domestic or international sources. Other datasets, such as the compilation of interviews, press reports and human rights reports by the International Center for Human Rights Research (CIIDH), a Guatemalan NGO, find that the domestic Guatemalan press reported almost no state-attributed killings at the height of the genocide (Ball et al. 1999). Forensic teams continue to find mass graves, and there are also countless unidentified bodies buried in the country's cemeteries (Snow et al. 2008). In terms of language, many deaths are lost when they are only reported as detentions or disappearances of people who later were never found.

M. Gabriela Torres (2005) studied how the press reported about bodies found on streets over these years. She argues that much of the intended impact of the reports was achieved by providing some crude information about the state of a body itself (often tortured), its location, its gender and vague allusions to a politicized context, while simultaneously excluding information about who did the killing or why. She highlights that there is a clear pattern of phrasing information in such a way that it is almost impossible to recreate an event from any given press account. As seen in the PN archive, the police chose terms to describe deaths and used porous language to achieve similar forms of obfuscation. Generally, descriptions of crimes in PN documents included the acknowledgement of a victim (usually unidentified), the date, time and place of a death or recovery of a body, and a few contextual details that were abstrusely relevant but not altogether connected to the concrete death in question. Often information is missing about who did what, how something happened, and why. Indeed, it appeared as if things 'happened' without being 'done' by someone with agency. For example, in a report from early 1984, PN officials wrote: "located a hideout of the Movimiento revolucionario del Pueblo M.R.P. outcome one individual and one agent of the PN injured and one unknown individual dead, who was found with a 45 mm caliber gun and one Grenade MK-26 (sic)." (AHPN\GTPN\51\01\S003\2-Ene-8-Ene-1984). Another example is a case where police reported, "three subversive elements died ... when they resisted police activity (AHPN\GTPN\51\01\S003\9-Ene-15-Ene-1984). Moreover, given that the press relied on the PN as its main source of information about crime, it seems plausible that there is

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some connection between the peculiar ways in which the PN created records about death and the ways the press reported about them.

The press may have worked hard “in the service of truth” as the Guatemalan Chamber of Journalism suggested, but they were likely affected by the PN’s internal recording practices and by the PN’s more direct effort to manipulate information over this period. This is problematic in ways that are not often appreciated. A common approach to circumventing or overcoming limitations of a given data source is to search for the information of interest in other sources. It is the piecing together of multiple sources of information that renders visible a richer sense of what happened in the past. This study suggests that if one were to gain access to judicial records from this period, or to conduct an in-depth study of press reporting on violence, those sources will likely be limited by PN-produced biases and subject to a similar oblivion produced by the same overarching information policies that influenced institutional recording making and the visibility of violence during each regime.

## **7. Conclusion**

Overall, this study finds consistency among several observations. Using a sample of the documents in the Historical Archive of the Guatemalan National Police, it has been possible to discover notable instability and changes in terminology and language surrounding reports of death during one of the most violent periods in Guatemala’s recent history. Further, changes in the PN’s death reporting varied in ways consistent with each regime’s strategy for managing and manipulating perceptions of violence for both domestic and international audiences. Taken together, the changes observed in the PN’s records are unlikely to be due to chance. This leaves little doubt that despite ongoing military dictatorship throughout the period, there were particular changes in the political and institutional environments and practices that influenced what was included in the official records, how they were written, and how those records were read at the time. And thus, while death was a painful and present reality for individuals, families, and society at large during those violent years, the record-making practices of the time distort the data now available for recovering knowledge about that reality.

During those years, silences of different kinds enabled the Guatemalan state to

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continue its preferred form of political repression – extreme violence – with an important degree of individual and collective impunity. In the battle for ‘hearts and minds,’ so central to the version of counterinsurgency waged by the Guatemalan military state, obscuring atrocity may have shielded the state from consequences of alienation that such levels of violence tend to have on the political consciousness of a population. Despite the outcry by many domestic and international organizations and individuals about the magnitude and brutality of the violence, the military was able to orchestrate the much-awaited civilian transition.

Beyond the specific insights about death reports, this analysis of the terminology surrounding death and killings, offers one example of how changing political contexts and policies could have impacted record production in different ways over this period. Researchers must ask themselves: If the documentation about violence is varied in its obfuscation or revelations about violence, then what implications does this have for our ability to understand the violence? As we use records created in the past as inputs to knowledge creation, understanding the dynamics behind silences allows us to adjust our analytic lens in order to detect the subtle ways that even seemingly straight-forward terminology may hide as much, or more, than it reveals. Rather than allowing silences in sources to proceed undetected and become amplified further along the chain of knowledge production, this study attempts to detect one type of silence – terminologically-produced silence. Detecting silences in records requires careful attention not only to the immediate context in which records were created but also the larger social and political context of public relations and information policies that govern censorship and release of information to the press. As we have shown in this case, the three regimes reviewed here used different tactics to achieve their desired perceptions of death, killing and violence. Understanding such subtle variations in the production of records is a necessary antidote for researchers engaged in record consumption in pursuit of an accurate accounting of past events, an approximation of the truth, and justice for those whose lives and voices were extinguished.

*“Prefiero guardar silencio,”* were the only words uttered by José Efraín Ríos Montt at his 2012 court hearing confirming he would be prosecuted for genocide and

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crimes against humanity.<sup>1</sup> Silences are powerful, and for as long as they endure they continue to benefit their producers. In the trial against Ríos Montt, an overwhelming case was made about his responsibility for genocide and crimes against humanity, with oral and empirical evidence. In his defense, Ríos Montt primarily offered silence, and together with the political power he maintained after he was ousted from the presidency, the strategy continues to favor impunity. While he was convicted and sentenced to jail, his trial was quickly overturned and justice remains stalled today. Indeed, Ríos Montt's contemporary choice to remain silent in court keeps with the sustained efforts by powerful agents within the Guatemalan state to cover-up violence in records.

Silences will continue to deter undesired consequences and to generate possibilities that might otherwise be unacceptable if they are left untouched to continue wielding their power. To subvert the power of silence, records cannot be read at face value, as previous works have well noted (Cochran et al. 1980; Trace 2002; Stoler 2009). In this study, we have seen evidence of the changing ways in which the nature of reported death can continue to deceive a direct reading of the documents. The PN documents also indicate that silences produced via records reappear when those documents are assembled into an archive for specific administrative purposes, used as the basis for official reports and narratives constructed by the media, and taken at face value in the search for truth about the past. At the very least, court files and press sources will also hold silences produced by the PN's efforts to conceal information about violent death, crime, missing people and illegal detentions.

The AHPN offers a case study on the extent to which archives can help “turn the surveillance state upon itself” (Blanton 2008, p.68). Accessing state archives themselves will not convert repressive papers into human rights archives. It is the tireless work of archivists and researchers at the AHPN over the past decade to understand the PN's production of records that have led to justice and dignity for victims. With this study, we hope to contribute to their efforts by pointing to varying recording and reporting practices – even in basic and routine documents about death – that enabled regimes to implement their preferred form of repression and control. Perhaps the approach and findings

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<sup>1</sup> “I prefer to maintain the silence.” 26 January 2012 (translation by the corresponding author).

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presented here will also help researchers of other archives break some of the access codes to silences and gain leverage in the ongoing pursuit for truth about past atrocities.

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**Appendix A:** The estimated proportion each term was used to describe deaths in the AHPN documents, with standard errors

| Classification | 1978    | 1979    | 1980    | 1981    | 1982    | 1983    | 1984    | 1985    | 1986    | 1978-1986 |
|----------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|-----------|
| Homicides      | 0.41    | 0.29    | 0.33    | 0.01    | 0.00    | 0.00    | 0.00    | 0.01    | 0.14    | 0.09      |
| SE             | (0.082) | (0.129) | (0.146) | (0.008) | -       | -       | (0.002) | (0.012) | (0.028) | (0.03)    |
| Assassinations | 0.18    | 0.02    | 0.01    | 0.07    | 0.02    | 0.00    | 0.05    | 0.23    | 0.02    | 0.06      |
| SE             | (0.061) | (0.005) | (0.009) | (0.026) | (0.016) | (0.003) | (0.033) | (0.112) | (0.01)  | (0.02)    |
| Cadavers       | 0.31    | 0.60    | 0.65    | 0.56    | 0.12    | 0.51    | 0.61    | 0.28    | 0.67    | 0.49      |
| SE             | (0.095) | (0.119) | (0.144) | (0.099) | (0.069) | (0.101) | (0.111) | (0.08)  | (0.057) | (0.06)    |
| Deaths         | 0.09    | 0.09    | 0.01    | 0.35    | 0.86    | 0.48    | 0.34    | 0.47    | 0.18    | 0.35      |
| SE             | (0.02)  | (0.037) | (0.004) | (0.096) | (0.076) | (0.101) | (0.109) | (0.089) | (0.049) | (0.06)    |

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This table presents the underlying statistical estimates of the proportion at which each death term was used in AHPN documents for each year between 1978 and 1986, and the average for the whole period, with standard errors, as presented graphically in Figure 1.

**Appendix B:** Estimates of the total number of AHPN documents created using each death term, with standard errors

| <b>Classification</b> | <b>1978</b> | <b>1979</b> | <b>1980</b> | <b>1981</b> | <b>1982</b> | <b>1983</b> | <b>1984</b> | <b>1985</b> | <b>1986</b> |
|-----------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Homicides             | 16,576      | 24,514      | 25,044      | 2,144       | 0           | 0           | 306         | 1,338       | 20,655      |
| SE                    | 3,315       | 10,904      | 11,080      | 1,715       | -           | -           | 306         | 1,605       | 4,131       |
| Assassinations        | 7,346       | 1,397       | 1,815       | 12,525      | 2,745       | 281         | 6,821       | 25,376      | 3,499       |
| SE                    | 2,490       | 349         | 1,633       | 4,652       | 2,196       | 281         | 4,502       | 12,357      | 1,750       |
| Cadavers              | 12,493      | 50,927      | 94,344      | 92,164      | 13,543      | 20,808      | 74,889      | 31,139      | 101,903     |
| SE                    | 3,829       | 10,101      | 20,901      | 16,293      | 7,787       | 4,121       | 13,627      | 8,897       | 8,669       |
| Deaths                | 3,752       | 6,975       | 901         | 60,665      | 118,890     | 36,403      | 50,062      | 51,786      | 27,990      |
| SE                    | 834         | 2,867       | 360         | 16,640      | 10,507      | 7,660       | 16,049      | 9,806       | 7,619       |

This table presents the statistical estimates of the total number of AHPN documents that employ each death term, with standard errors, as presented graphically in Figure 2.