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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Paramilitary territorial control and patterns of violence against civilians in Colombia: Disappearances in a stable paramilitary fiefdom<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** The article looks at territorial control in a paramilitary fiefdom in Colombia, through the lens of a specific form of violence against civilians: disappearance. It finds that the outcomes and micro-dynamics governing disappearance can hardly be explained plausibly through some of the core ideas found in the literature of rebel governance. It explains why this is so, and proposes alternative conceptualizations.

**KEYWORDS:** Colombian paramilitaries, territorial control, armed brokerage, patterns of violence against civilians, disappearance

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## 1. Introduction:

James, aged 16, did have no known occupation. He lived with his grandparents, who pampered him blissfully, so he was protected from any pressing concern. He spent all his time walking the streets of his town, up and down, with his friends. At some point, he received a mysterious visit from a group of people who issued him a warning: they would not tolerate vagrants in the town. James refused to speak about this even to his mom, but did not change his ways. A few days later, he was disappeared by the Ramón Isaza paramilitaries. Nobody seems to have heard of him since. It is highly probable that he was assassinated.

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As will be seen below, his assassination was just one more case among the scores of “non-political” disappearances committed by paramilitaries in the Magdalena Medio region, and more generally in the country, throughout their bloody saga. Disappearances were in a sense characteristic of everyday life in many paramilitary fiefdoms. The question is why, and what the pattern and evolution of disappearances tells us about paramilitary territorial control.

The main reference point here is Kalyvas’ *opera magna* (2006), which explicitly establishes a theoretical link between territorial control and homicide—which he takes as an index of all forms of violence—. Since non-state armed groups are entities that look at information and decide whether or not to kill, and the population is composed by rational individuals who want to optimize their chances of survival, groups eventually stop killing people in their secure territories. People try not to irritate the group, and the group has no incentives to castigate them if they do not misbehave. Only challengers and new entrants will want to pick on the population. A rational equilibrium is arrived at (for an evaluation and ratification of the model, Kalyvas 2012). It is easy to see that the rebel governance literature (as discussed in the next section) is informed by this concept of rational territorial equilibria.

In the light of such model, the narrative I will develop below is an anomaly. I will focus on the Magdalena Medio region of Colombia, and in particular on the Ramón Isaza fiefdom between 1994 and 2006 (the year when Isaza demobilized). This was as stable a territorial control as one can get in the Colombian conflict. The region was the epicenter of the canonical paramilitary experience in the 1980s led by ACDEGAM, a guild of cattle ranchers which coordinated paramilitary activities in the region. One of its municipalities, Puerto Boyacá, boasted the status of “anti-subversive capital of Colombia” (Verdad Abierta 2011). After ACDEGAM imploded, Isaza created his ACMM (Autodefensas Campesinas del Magdalena Medio), which inherited a substantial chunk of ACDEGAM territory. Unlike other paramilitaries, he was able to avoid conflicts with his peers. He was never seriously challenged, at least in the core municipalities of his territories. And yet he continued displaying a brutal repertoire of violence against the population under his control—actually increasing the frequencies of some attacks, as will be seen below—.

This analysis is relevant for the theory for two equally simple reasons<sup>2</sup>. On the one hand, by far the majority of victims of disappearance, both in the Magdalena Medio and in the country as a whole, were eventually assassinated<sup>3</sup>. On the other, it would be interesting to know why different forms of violence are governed by different dynamics. Actually, I will show below that different modalities of violence cannot be analyzed in isolation, because sometimes one has an impact on the other (a point already made in Gutiérrez and Wood 2017). So, the question remains: how can we characterize and explain the relationship between territorial control and specific forms of violence against civilians in the context of a civil war? What does the type of violence against civilians displayed by a certain armed group say about the nature of such control?

I will suggest the following answer. The Ramón Isaza paramilitaries were armed brokers between the region and the central state, in the sense that they co-administered their territory with an assortment of state bureaucracies—armed and civilian—and with core social constituencies. One and the other had a say in the type and level of the violence the paramilitaries displayed. In this sense, to put the “rebel governance” tag on paramilitary fiefdoms may be an act of conceptual stretching (Sartori 1970). The paramilitaries were not rebels, and they did not rule alone.

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<sup>2</sup> There are other, clearly not obvious, counter-arguments, which I will consider in the conclusions.

<sup>3</sup> I have spotted a handful of “happy endings”, where people were disappeared and managed to survive. But there are very few.

The difference between “rebel governance” and “armed brokerage” is not purely notational, but consequential. For this article, it has five main implications. First, the “rebel governance” concept suggests usurpation: a group took away a specific territory from the state’s sovereign control. It is hardly plausible to suppose that this narrative holds for the Colombian paramilitaries. It is not even clear that they can be classified as a “non-state armed group”, because although in some periods they were illegal —and committed illegal acts— at the same time they enjoyed heavy army and state sponsorship. Second, looking at the paramilitaries as armed brokers brings the key role of the state back into the picture. Third, and in relation to this, it also brings politics back in and with it, the costs of violence. Fourth, the concept of armed brokerage stresses the coordination and collective action problems faced by the paramilitaries and its network of sponsors and supporters. Last but not least, it highlights the multiple connections between war, governance forms and patterns of violence.

Characterizing paramilitary territorial control as a form of pure delegation —to enable the state to indirectly encroach upon the population while maintaining “plausible deniability” to avoid its political costs— captures some of these issues, but misses others —conflicts and tensions between different actors associated to paramilitary regional projects, constraints under which these operated, etc.—, which arguably are fundamental to understand the evolution of disappearances in Isaza territory.

We must shed light on these blind spots to explain why Isaza and other paramilitaries failed to arrive at a rational, low level violence equilibrium in their stable territories. The Isaza fiefdom was more than delegation, but it was clearly not usurpation either. It appeared more as a co-administration, where the power of Isaza depended on the support of core constituencies, including state agencies. The paramilitaries had to negotiate the different modalities of violence they displayed —repertoires, frequencies and techniques— with them. As will be seen below, this goes a long way in explaining the evolution of disappearances in the Isaza territory. Thus, the paramilitaries also had to answer to several social —in contrast to purely atomistic, individual— demands for more violence, or for violence targeted against specific groups. Furthermore, these constituencies were not fully able to align their interests. And the very act of governing creates new cleavages and ever new motives for violent behavior. Many paramilitaries, including Isaza, were pursuing territorial control, but also had other objectives. They also wanted to impose a diffuse but fully operational notion of social order —shared with important legal partners and peers, and probably taken from them— which implied advancing a brutal and homicidal disciplining agenda.

The article proceeds in the following order. I first discuss some key ideas about the relationship between territorial control and patterns of violence against civilians. The next two sections are dedicated to the two main contextual reference points: the Colombian paramilitaries and disappearances. Then I zoom into the evolution of disappearances by the Isaza paramilitaries. Based on this, I discuss social and institutional demands for engaging in disappearances. The paramilitaries were definitely NOT operating in a social and institutional vacuum. The following section presents evidence suggesting that Isaza was, regarding the dynamics of disappearance, not an outlier. The last part discusses the relationship between disappearance and paramilitary territorial control. In the conclusions, I wrap up and forward some research questions.

Before starting, a word on data. I mainly rely on a massive repository of judicial sources, coming both from the transitional justice created during the paramilitary demobilization (the so-called Justice and Peace tribunals), from rulings by these tribunals, and from ordinary justice. I also use press, web portals and academic literature on the case, especially the output by the Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (CNMH)<sup>4</sup>. Specifically for Ramón Isaza, I have worked with more than 2200 judicial documents. I discuss

<sup>4</sup> National Center for Historical Memory.

these sources, their strengths and limitations, in (2019). The paramilitaries knew better than anybody else how they operated; but they had strong incentives to edulcorate their own behavior, etc. Regarding the evolution of frequencies, targeting, and techniques of paramilitary disappearances, up to now the evidence converges rather massively.

I will sometimes refer to the paramilitary as “self-defenses”, which was their official denomination. All the translations from Spanish into English are mine.

## **2. Territorial control and violence against civilians**

Kalyvas (2006) established a link between the objectives of non-state armed groups—which he characterized as seeking sovereign control over increasing patches of territory—and violence against civilians. He concluded with an equilibrium model which predicted levels of homicide according to the degree of territorial control achieved by the dominant actor. Where the latter had triumphed over its rivals, the population already had learnt the hard way that it was better not to defy the group, and for the group it was rational to refrain from attacking the population. Harassing obedient people can become dangerous for the group itself, because if the risk of compliance is as big as the risk of non-compliance, rational individuals can decide to collaborate with the rival group.

Below this level of resolution, however, many things can happen. Any understanding of armed group territorial control has to take into account informational dynamics; as will be seen below, this applies very strongly to the Colombian paramilitaries. Franzinelli (2012) shows how much snitching went on below the surface of political life in fascist Italy. People used information and denunciations to settle accounts with their neighbors, to get access to different goodies, etc. Kalyvas (2006) also has valuable insights in this respect.

The interest in the nature and effects of non-state territorial control crystalized in the category of rebel governance, which Kasfir (2015, 22) defines as “the range of possibilities for organization, authority, and responsiveness created between guerrillas and civilians” and Huang (2016) as “a political strategy of rebellion in which rebels forge and manage relations with civilians— across civil wars”. The concept was soon being applied to different participants in civil wars, not only to guerrillas. In her analytic tour de force, Arjona (2017)—discussing the Colombian case but proposing a more general analytical approach— sees the guerrilla and paramilitary territorial control as variants of rebel governance, concluding that they respond to basically the same system of incentives. Rebel groups, broadly understood, want to maximize their territorial control. If communities, though, are able to maintain some power, they can protect themselves better—and thus maintain violence at bay. Idler (2019)—also focusing on Colombia, this time on borderlands— looks at economic pacts and arrangements between non state armed groups, once again assumed as essentially identical, and the way in which the nature of these influence the level of violence against civilians.

These insights are important and fruitful (for an important criticism, see Gutiérrez, José Antonio, 2018), but some key analytical dimensions and actors do not appear, sometimes by explicit decision, in these models. The first one is the state, which—save in situations of extreme collapse—is a major player in civil wars. However, I will suggest below that looking at the paramilitaries as a simple fabrication of the state, to whom the dirty work was assigned, is an oversimplification. Two venerable and powerful perspectives can assist us here: on the one hand Mann’s concept of “indirect rule” (1993), and on the other Blok’s (1974) “brokerage”. “Indirect rule” is defined by Mann as both a war strategy and a form of governing through intermediaries. During processes of modern national state formation, if these intermediaries can manage to seal off their territory to a certain extent, they will be able to interact with the state, and discourage it from attempting any modality of direct rule. If they have the power to do this, they become indispensable actors in the fundamental process of regulating the relationship between the central state and the region, as (Blok

1974) explained when analyzing the Sicilian Mafia. Paramilitarism in Colombia was created as a form of territorial response, sponsored by the state, to subversive challenges. Here we have both the war strategy and the group's territorial control. But this control was always partial and marked by collective action issues — different paramilitary units clashed with each other frequently and some of these showdowns degenerated in massive intra-paramilitary confrontations (Gutiérrez 2019)—. Even then, the paramilitaries became very powerful actors who contained the guerrillas and expanded the territorial reach of the state, in complex relationship with different state agencies (see Romero's pioneering work, 2003; also, Gutiérrez-Sanín 2019). In this sense, they can be seen as typical Blok brokers<sup>5</sup>.

Of course, every state formation process —not only in contexts of indirect rule— can involve different forms of violence (Castaneda and Schneider 2017). Contemporary states are not the exception. How does their relation to violence pan out today? According to Strauss (2015), genocide is directly related to certain types of nationalist ideas embraced by key state actors. Ron (2003) connects state activity with violence against civilians through the following proposition: the state promotes and supports violence by its agents and allies, but is subject to political costs —vis-à-vis key international actors— if it goes above a certain threshold. If it does, then the state tends to discipline its agents, through a process he aptly calls “savage restraint”. Ron's analysis is particularly relevant for this paper, as his focus are states from middle income countries which can pay a high price if they run against powerful global forces.

How plausible is the operation of disciplining armed brokers? In other terms: Did the Colombian state apply on the paramilitaries some sort of savage restraint regarding disappearances? Why or why not? These questions highlight how important it is to be able to characterize in a finer way how violence against civilians is implemented. Wood (2012) and then Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood (2017) defined pattern of violence against civilians as a quadruple constituted by repertoire (basic forms of violence), frequency, targets (categories of people that are victimized) and techniques (the way in which the crime is implemented). Having fixed the repertoire on disappearance, it remains to be seen how it evolved regarding the other three dimensions.

Disappearance has certainly been studied in detail in Colombia (see for example CNMH 2013, 2014 a; 2014 b, 2017 and 2018, and Rojas and Benavides 2017) and in Latin America. Initially, the focus was on political victims, which constituted by far and large the core of the state and death squad targeting. Slowly but surely, however, it started to surface that the universe of victims was much broader. There is already a very valuable book on the ACMM disappearances (CNMH 2017), which discusses the gradual broadening of the disappearance targets by the paramilitaries and highlights the significance of the evolution of the disappearance targeting and techniques. I turn now to discuss paramilitary disappearance and its evolution, and what it can tell us about the nature of the paramilitary territorial control.

### **3. Paramilitary trajectory —national and regional**

The Colombian paramilitaries gained prominence between the late 1970s and early 1980s, though they were institutionally created in the 1960's. From then until 1989, they enjoyed a semi-official status. By institutional design, they were a loose alliance of groups —not a unitary structure— that expressed territorial demands sponsored by the army (Gutiérrez-Sanín 2019). At the beginning, they were small undertakings, and their structures generally did not go beyond that of a death squad, a network of hitmen, and/or small localistic undertakings. However, in the 1980s and hand in hand with the growth of the guerrillas, the Army's sponsorship became more vigorous and the involvement of legal and illegal economic elites broader.

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<sup>5</sup> This assertion does not involve any naïve claim about the paramilitaries being like the Mafia. There can be many types of territorial brokers.

Some units started to seek territorial control in a more assertive manner. The phenomenon was particularly clear in the Magdalena Medio (MM), a large region that comprises 31 municipalities in the Andean core of the country. There, the 1980s canonical paramilitary experience developed (Medina Gallego 1990), under the aegis of a guild of large cattle ranchers (ACDEGAM<sup>6</sup>). The latter are a very good illustration of armed brokerage. They enjoyed massive sponsorship by the Colombian Army. They were associated with a group of politicians, the most important one being Pablo Emilio Guarín, a member of the dominant Liberal Party who belonged to the faction of the minister of government. The cattle rancher guild was legal, and displayed an energetic regional activity that was not in the least circumscribed to violence; for example, they set up a network of health services, a periodical, and a political network. By the late 1980s, one of the core MM and ACDEGAM municipalities, Puerto Boyacá, was proudly declaring itself the “anti-subversive capital of Colombia”. However, the very success of ACDEGAM attracted unwanted attention. After it massacred a judicial commission that traveled to the region to investigate what was going on there, some of its heads, including Puerto Boyacá’s mayor, were jailed. Furthermore, the narcos were investing massively in MM land –paramilitary protection shielded it not only from guerrilla attacks but also from state supervision–, and they soon got the upper hand within ACDEGAM (the proverbial inefficiency of Colombian cattle ranching was no match for the dynamic and globalized narco economy). This put them at odds with the government that was waging the global war against drugs. Eventually, the main MM paramilitary leader got into a dispute with the Medellín cartel and was killed. The ACDEGAM experience imploded.

In part due to this phenomenon, in the 1990s the balance of paramilitary regional power shifted towards Urabá, a banana and cattle ranching region where the activity of two guerrillas and strong social conflicts prompted the creation and escalation of paramilitary groups by the combined action of rural elites (banana exporters and cattle ranchers) and state agencies (the Army’s involvement, as in MM, was massive, see for example Salinas and Zarama 2012). Once again, eventually narco-traffickers became a major player within the paramilitary coalition. The Urabá paramilitaries launched, with other regional actors, including the MM paramilitaries, a national federation (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, AUC) which operated until 2002/2003, when the paramilitaries started their demobilization process<sup>7</sup>. The last units surrendered their weapons in 2006/7.

In the meantime, the Magdalena Medio paramilitaries had been involved in a gradual rebuilding process. After a period of instability and internecine war, a group of cattle ranchers negotiated the redistribution of the old ACDEGAM territory (CNMH 2019) so that Ramón Isaza got part of it, and the other part fell to Arnubio Triana (aka Botalón). Isaza created the Autodefensas Campesinas del Magdalena Medio (ACMM; Peasant Self Defenses of the Magdalena Medio) and Botalón the Autodefensas de Puerto Boyacá (Self Defenses from Puerto Boyacá).

Both Isaza and Botalón were actually old ACDEGAM hands (Durán Nuñez 2013), though Isaza had been more prominent. Thus, instead of the cattle rancher/narco leadership which characterized ACDEGAM, the Magdalena Medio paramilitaries were basically led and constituted by specialists in violence. However, as was made clear by the cattle rancher negotiation that gave origin to the Isaza-Botalón territorial distribution, and as will also be seen below, the new teams still owed a substantial part of their power to their relying on some of the original MM paramilitary core constituencies (cattle ranchers, other economic sectors, state security agencies and sometimes mayors).

Isaza and Botalón enjoyed a relative unchallenged territorial control, unknown to many other paramilitaries. If any paramilitary fiefdom is to be tagged as “stable”, the Isaza and Botalón fiefdoms of the

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<sup>6</sup> The acronym in Spanish for Association of Peasants and Cattle Producers of the Magdalena Medio region.

<sup>7</sup> Which ended by 2006/2007. After that year, thousands of paramilitaries remobilized (Zuckerman, 2016).

1990s would be the top candidates. They inherited many power structures from ACDEGAM. Through combined action with military and civilian bureaucracies, they had for all practical purposes evicted the guerrillas in that decade – “free from subversion,” proclaimed a huge highway billboard in Puerto Boyacá. They had been so powerful in the 1980s that only the infamous narco Medellín Cartel Don Pablo Escobar dared to challenge them. Little before the demobilization, Botalón was actually harried by an Army officer, but once again this was a rarity. And Isaza suffered nothing of the sort. Botalón and Isaza carefully respected their respective zones of influence. Thus, despite the occasional scuffle with neighboring paramilitaries, their territorial supremacy was never questioned. This is especially true for the municipalities where the leaders established their quarters, like Puerto Triunfo in Isaza territory, or Puerto Boyacá in Botalón’s<sup>8</sup>. There, they were building on a long tradition, so they had strong ties with different social sectors and state agents. As highlighted by the very origin of both units, there was a distinct “community” component in their governance structures.

#### 4. Disappearances

Forced disappearance is habitually understood as “secret, extrajudicial murder” (Mayer 1999). Throughout this article I will be agnostic with respect to the role of the state, maintaining the other aspects of the definition.

The first reported cases of forced disappearance in this cycle of the Colombian conflict date from the late 1970s. The perpetrators were mainly Army and police members, and the victims were mainly members of legal leftist parties, social leaders and insurgents. Disappearance soon became a very important tool in the Army’s repertoire of violence (CNMH 2018). However, by the mid-1980s, the paramilitaries had already become the main perpetrators of disappearance, at least in some regions. According to Alonso de Jesús Baquero, a former guerrilla who became a very bloody paramilitary operative, disappearances were an effective war tool, as they created a “terrible panic” among the population. “People asked themselves: when will it happen to me?” (Judicial Document [JD] 13). Disappearances were exhibited and boasted about; sometimes the bodies of the victims were thrown in the roads and streets as a visible warning for all to see (HCHR 2014). Massive and spectacular disappearances were committed by the ACDEGAM paramilitaries, among other things to violently seal off their fiefdom. For example, in October 1987 a group of merchants went into the region and were intercepted, tortured, and disappeared by ACDEGAM, in coordination with militaries –purportedly including generals—from the XIV Brigade of the Army (in the MM region).

By the end of the 1980s, things started to change. The main paramilitary leader, Henry de Jesús Pérez, found that visible violence was risky. He started to advise his people not to leave bodies “thrown in the roads”, as without it, it was much more difficult to investigate the crime (Verdad abierta 2014). He also became aware of the negative influence that an escalation in the frequency of homicides could have on the region. Thus, it is not surprising that, according to Isaza himself, Pérez was the person credited with inventing the technique of killing, dismembering and throwing the victims’ body parts into a river or to a common graveyard (JD 1).

#### 5. ACMM disappearances

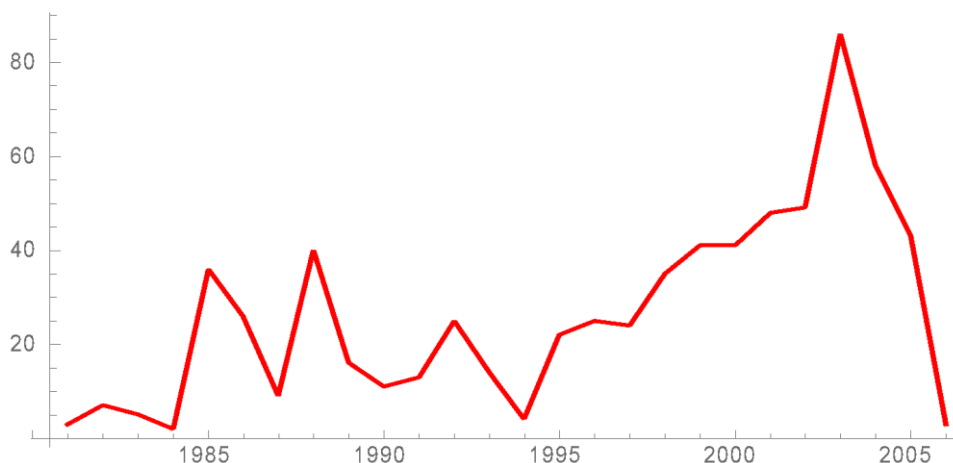
Disappearances by the ACMM exhibit four fundamental characteristics that would not be predicted nor even conceived by the models discussed above. First, the frequencies were very high. Many inhabitants of the region perceived an upsurge in the second half of the 1990s (CNMH, 2017). Figure 1, which depicts the evolution of disappearances in Puerto Triunfo —the de facto capital of Isaza’s fiefdom— according to the

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<sup>8</sup> Both Isaza and Botalón expanded, and naturally faced more armed competition in the new territories they occupied.

RUV<sup>9</sup>, coincides with this perception. Though the data is imperfect, other sources corroborate the existence of this trend and no one contradicts it.

**Figure 1 – Disappearances in Puerto Triunfo according to the RUV**



**Source:** RUV 2015<sup>10</sup>

Second, and very fundamentally, we observe a massive diversification and broadening of the targets of disappearance. During the initial ACDEGAM period, the victims were mainly from left-wing parties, trade unionists and social leaders, purported guerrilla supporters, and human rights activists. Isaza certainly maintained violent pressure over all these. But, at the same time, he broadened his targets significantly. According to Isaza himself, “I ordered to kill” guerrillas and their collaborators, drug sellers –“the people who poisoned our youth”, criminals and rapists. The latter “did not deserve a second opportunity” (JD 2). This contrasts with thieves and even with guerrillas, who, if they repented, could be used as informants or transformed into paramilitary cadres.

Though the term social cleansing is frequently used to describe Isaza’s targeting, the new categories of victims cannot be easily plugged into the pigeonholes of standard classifications. People like purported rapists, drug users, thieves, burglars, and possibly homosexuals<sup>11</sup>, were put under the same umbrella of punishable deviance. But the ACMM also picked on a broader set of people, including—as we saw at the beginning of this article— supposed loafers, the mentally deranged, the rowdy, and those who dared inquire about relatives and friends who had been killed or disappeared. In a sense, Isaza was waging yet another war, this time against troublemakers. For example, a man who drank too much—and then tended to lose control— was eventually disappeared (JD 14). The same fate was suffered by those who were considered awkward, harmful or strange and even people who suffered epilepsy (JD 15) or who simply mingled with a wrong crowd (JD 3)

<sup>9</sup> For Registro Único de Víctimas or Unified Roster of Victims, the main governmental database of conflict victims.

<sup>10</sup> I had access to the RUV micro-data in 2015, as member of the Comisión Histórica del Conflicto y sus Víctimas, summoned by the peace negotiation table between the government and the guerrilla.

<sup>11</sup> At least those that the group considered aggressive or disruptive.



In this context, many people found that they had good incentives to provide information to the paramilitaries about who to attack. This allowed them to settle scores with neighbors and to be feared by their peers.

As other paramilitaries, the ACMM were an armed undertaking but also a large economic network. Its disappearance pattern reflected this. The ACMM could disappear people whose properties were attractive to individual paramilitaries or had strategic importance for the group. Business partners that supposedly double-crossed the paramilitaries—for example in joint ventures related to narcotrafficking—and victims of extortion that failed to pay their monthly quota, also became killable and disappearable, as well as those who stole gasoline without the group's permission.

Information leakages were drastically punished. This, of course, was much more predictable. However, Isaza pushed the notion of informational transgression to the limit, and here the underlying rationale is no longer obvious. Indeed, he picked on purported informants and on imitators (people who impersonated the paramilitaries to extract rents, for example by extorting somebody in the name of the ACMM). But he also attacked people who supposedly had a gossipy character, or who criticized the group in private conversation. Whole subcategories of workers, like peddlers and motorists, were also classified as informational hazards.

What peddlers and motorists have in common is that they travel across different regions. Thus, it is difficult to control the way they use information. But they also share another key characteristic: they are prone to appear on the wrong side of social and/or agrarian conflicts. This was another focal point for the ACMM disappearance activity. For example, the merchants of the region complained about the presence of peddlers, who did not pay taxes and represented an unfair form of competition (JD 16). This, by the way, is the re-enactment of a standard rhetoric of Colombian merchants across the country—except here in a particularly deadly context—. Other social sectors that were the subject to harsh treatment and sometimes homicidal rage were fishermen (JD 17) and truck unloaders (JD 18).

The same can be said of the disappearance/assassination of cattle rustlers, who appeared high in the Isaza list of diabolic figures, almost with the same standing as rapists. Consequently, cattle rustling was punished with disappearance or execution, which by the way constituted an old demand from some sectors of ranchers (Gutiérrez-Sanín 2019). Other grounds for disappearances included misdeeds related to cattle negotiations (JD 4), settlement of land disputes (JD 15) and rural labor conflicts. Workers at the lemon farms were also attacked and harassed (CNMH 2017)

In many events, the categories of “killable/disappearable” overlapped. A small-time thief could be accused of subversive proclivities or other types of immorality besides stealing. Peddlers were often suspect for leaking information, but also because they were disliked by merchants.

Third, the techniques to disappear and kill evolved. Victims of disappearance were abducted and taken to specific places where they were dealt with. Sometimes, they were interrogated, but not necessarily, as many disappearances were purely punitive. Then they were killed, and their bodies dismembered following a more or less standard protocol. The paramilitaries devised a dismemberment technique that ensured that the bodies did not float (JD 6). Both Isaza and Botalón had specific places to dispose of the bodies: rivers, common graves and rural properties (CNMH 2017).

Last but not least, disappearances entailed massive coordination between the ACMM, the Army, and the police (and sometimes a third party). This can be seen very clearly during massive disappearances. In 1996, a general at the IV Brigade agreed with Isaza on the political cleansing of the La Esperanza county (belonging to the municipality of Carmen del Viboral). What followed was an orgy of extreme violence, that

included several disappearances (Verdad Abierta 2016a). Collaboration to disappear included operational interaction and the exchange of lists about who to kill and/or disappear (Verdad Abierta 2016b)

## 6. Demands for disappearance

It is difficult to understand the apparently anomalous dynamic of disappearances in ACMM/Isaza territory without considering the demands from its core constituencies. In some cases, disappearances and other forms of violence were used as a legitimizing tool vis-à-vis “the community”. This was certainly the case with respect to rapists, drug vendors and thieves (JD 19).

The first key Isaza interlocutor were the state security agencies. Many Isaza disappearances were decided and implemented hand in hand with Army officers. The police were also fundamental for the disappearance logistics before, during and after the operation. The second main interlocutor were territorial actors. The cattle rancher influence remained heavy. Demands and complaints coming from those sectors were attentively listened to.

All these regional and national forces and agencies converged on two issues: on the one hand they demanded violence, but on the other they tried to shield the Isaza fiefdom from unwanted negative visibility. It is in this context that disappearance appeared as a substitute for outright homicide, or for the boastful disappearances of the ACDEGAM-Army alliance in the early 1980s. This crystallized in pacts to disappear more and kill less. A member of the prosecutor office synthesized the situation thus:

*“The network of support [of the ACMM] was composed of civilians, state officials, policemen, even members of the prosecutor’s office...[also] judges...at the municipal, regional, and national levels...The “goodwill” [in English in the original] of the group generated a disappearance strategy to undermine that social negative reaction vis-à-vis the number of dead people in the region...and in second place to prevent the legal authorities from discovering the bodies and gaining material evidence of crimes. I insist, there are also documental references of recommendations by the national Army for forced disappearances” (JD 21).*

However, even here we do not have delegation in pure form. Many retired officers but also some active ones were disappeared—and assassinated—by the ACMM. Some of them were accused of working for the guerrilla. But also those who were supposedly at the service of the security agencies of the state were almost invariably disappeared or killed; according to Isaza, to do so was an ACMM policy (JD 22). The police were hit much harder in this context, because the paramilitaries held the rule of not attacking the Army nationally, whereas the ACMM and other paramilitaries had mixed opinions of the police (Gutiérrez-Sanín 2019). The police and the Army occasionally attacked the paramilitary, so providing any information to them was clearly unwelcome.

## 7. The national landscape

We know that the paramilitaries were a loose alliance of localistic groups, with markedly different characteristics. This applies even to the national paramilitary federation, AUC. Up to which point, then, was the ACMM logic with respect to disappearances shared by other units?

There seem to have been important commonalities between the ACMM and others, at least the largest and most visible ones. The evolution was analogous. For the bulk of these paramilitaries, disappearances were a fundamental part of their repertoire of violence: they were linked by the standard counter-insurgent

procedure of taking away the water from the fish. And, as time went by, they also started to broaden their targets. These covered ever more categories, including purported rapists and deviants, and troublemakers. Juancho Prada, the leader of Frente Héctor Julio Peinado<sup>12</sup>, declared in his typically ill-tempered manner: “Yes, I ordered killings: the killing of every guerrilla member, every guerrilla supporter, common criminals, cattle rustlers, satanic sects, drug pushers” (JD 8). The assassination of “subversives” and their surrounding “water” was already in the original script and was at the core of the entire paramilitary project. The targeting of cattle rustlers expressed the huge weight of ranchers in it. But small-time criminals, deviants and “satanic sects” were relative newcomers.

Many other units also broadened their targets and ramped up their disappearance frequencies correspondingly. Isaza’s neighbor and peer Botalón engaged in massive social cleansing and the abduction and subsequent killing of supposed informants, be them from the guerrilla or from the state security agencies. The huge and ultra-powerful Bloque Central Bolívar also apparently preferred disappearance to homicide when eliminating “undesirables” (JD 9).

In several paramilitary units, land conflicts appear frequently as part of the set of reasons to disappear (Gutiérrez-Sanín, 2019). In the previous section, we saw how Isaza operatives terrorized people who entered in conflicts with paramilitarized rural elites. However, the ACMM never really indulged in massive land dispossession—at least not in the scale of others—. Here it was probably more the exception than the rule. For other units, disappearance was used to push forward land dispossession in at least four ways. First, to overcome any resistance by the victim to abandon her land. Second, to punish peasants or their leaders when they failed to surrender their properties fast enough. Third, to hit the workers, debtors and business adversaries of landowners that were well connected with the paramilitaries. Finally, people were killed and disappeared to dispossess them, but also simply to settle land disputes (Gutiérrez-Sanín 2019).

All this had to be coordinated with the army and the police. Paramilitaries and state security agencies frequently exchanged information on a regular basis. Part of it were lists killable and disappearable people. For example, many guerrilla deserters turned themselves in to the army, which in turn delivered them to the paramilitaries. Ranchers eager to collaborate with the Army became informants and then paramilitaries, and from then on maintained intimate relations with officers and Army units. These were precious and shared sources of information for the self-defenses and their state allies: these informants boasted detailed knowledge on who was subversive and who was not.

Networking with the authorities was also fundamental to stop any civilian from starting a judicial process. Paramilitary stooges within the police or the prosecutor’s office identified people who filed complaints or requests to find a disappeared person, and immediately reported them to the paramilitaries. They were invariably threatened, and sometimes also disappeared.

The state security agencies and the paramilitaries not only exchanged information: they also exchanged corpses. The infamous episode of the “false positives”—which cost the life of more than 6 thousand people according to the transitional justice court, the JEP (Canal Institucional 2021) consisted of luring unemployed youngsters to lonely places to kill them on the spot and then present them as guerrillas or paramilitary members killed in combat. The strong incentives to increase the body count of guerrillas and other wrongdoers were established in 2005 by the highest placed decision makers in the state, but the practice is far older (Rojas and Benavides 2017). According to the definition above, many of these cases were disappearances, and served the higher purpose of allowing the state to show it was winning the war and/or effectively combatting the paramilitaries.

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<sup>12</sup> Later Autodefensas del Sur del Cesar.

In contrast, another fundamental focal point of coordination between the paramilitaries and the army was to deflate the body count of civilians. As happened in the ACMM case, different authorities were eager to avoid the “heating up” of their territory, so the substitution of homicide for (non-exhibitionist) disappearance was welcome. The renowned Freddy Rendón reported that the national AUC leader Vicente Castaño —with whom he was in regular contact, as both operated in Urabá— said that the paramilitaries had agreed with the army and the police to disappear instead of killing (JD 10). According to Iván Roberto Duque —the national paramilitary politico—the tide of disappearances in the late 1990s was a result of an agreement of the self-defenses with the army and police. This included false positives, but went much further, as it was part of a larger alliance between the paramilitaries and the state.

Because of all this, disappearance within the BCB became a “practice”, which was carefully coordinated with armed and civilian bureaucracies (JD 11). According to Rodrigo Pérez Alzate —one of the three heads of the BCB— “it is a fact that disappearances were...a practice created by the pressure of the authorities themselves...our people in charge of coordinating with the state security agencies said that the commander” of those agencies requested that they be disappeared instead of killed (JD 23). Mayors, for whom high rates of homicide could have had consequences, could also be part of the group of people directly interested in promoting disappearance.

It is telling as well that —as in the case of the ACMM— the techniques also evolved more or less in the same direction throughout the country. Several units started to engage in disappearances in the same fashion. They first abducted the victim, and after an interrogation or torture session, they killed the victim, dismembered the body, and then threw it into a river. The Castaño brothers, national leaders of the paramilitary, adopted precisely this *modus operandi*. Others followed suit, in coordination or not with the Castaños. The take-over of Barrancabermeja —a middled sized city which the paramilitaries “recovered from the guerrilla” through red hot violence-- was the scenario of massive killings, but they were gradually replaced by disappearance, whose operation essentially followed the same sequence (JD 11). In the department of Caldas, according to BCB operatives “the river was our accomplice” and the decision to disappear was carefully negotiated with the authorities. “This was implanted by the army and the police, they told us to kill but to not leave the corpses in the territory” (JD 23).

In sum, the political stakes underlying the evolution of disappearance as a partial substitute for homicide were high.

## **8. Paramilitary territorial orders and disappearance**

The self-defenses evicted the guerrillas and expanded the territorial reach of the state. They did so through punitive and terrorist methods that had the notion of destroying subversives and their supporters at their very core. However, since the category of subversive was so elastic, it could be applied to any person who got in the way of the paramilitaries. Even if the population of purported leftists was eventually depleted, generating panic among the population was an important tool to maintain it under control. Something analogous can be said about challenges and threats coming from the “outside”.

However, relatively prolonged territorial control has consequences. Two are particularly relevant for this article. Firstly, the political costs of extreme paramilitary violence soon surfaced. The state had to respond to its international audiences and show some effort to limit the visibility of violence. It also had to exhibit some kind of effort to fight the paramilitaries. An important part of the Colombian state’s international and national legitimacy was conditioned by its capacity to demonstrate that it was not (so) complicit with paramilitary violence. Thus, there was real pressure to substitute the more visible and spectacular events for more regular, ordered, and systematic procedures.

Actually, even the paramilitaries started to become sensitive towards political costs, to the extent that they interacted more frequently with regional, national and global actors. For example, Carlos Castaño deplored the unhinged way in which the takeover of Barrancabermeja took place. Castaño himself, of course, had ordered all kinds of abominable crimes, but now the political costs were scaring him. Indeed, the respective commander, Camilo Morantes, was assassinated for the extreme nature of his methods. After his demise, disappearances were organized so that they were properly spaced in time. Soon, Castaño would be heading an initiative to rename massacres —now “operations with multiple military objectives”— and to try to limit their frequencies, replacing them instead for individual and more scattered killings (Gutiérrez 2019).

The problem of political costs was complicated by the fact that the objectives of the ACMM and different state agencies and sectors were never fully aligned. This is the case for the judiciary. Note that without taking this aspect of the state-paramilitary interaction on board, it is impossible to explain the need for secrecy that underlies the evolution of the disappearance techniques. Pérez and Isaza were afraid of prosecution. The relationship with other state agencies could be difficult and tense. Actually, not even the Army and the police were fully aligned with the ACMM. Both had to respond to bureaucratic peers and theoretical superiors and were also responsible vis-à-vis global actors. The demands of the latter could be inconsistent and heavily biased (Tate 2015; Mandic 2021), but actors within the Colombian polity knew that it was better not to ignore them. Furthermore, policemen, soldiers and mayors were constrained by indicators and overseeing processes typical of contemporary states in middle income economies, which were not taken into account by the ACMM —with its narrow localistic outlook—. All in all, there was a strategic alliance and widespread collaboration between the state security agencies and the paramilitaries —but one marked by collective action and interest alignment issues.

Secondly, territorial control posed the following question to the self-defenses: what kind of social order? The ACMM were not ACDEGAM in that they were not the central coordinating team of the cattle ranchers, like in the good old times. But they did pick up on their demands and concerns in a preferential way, through several mechanisms: old contacts, deference, reputation (“goodwill”), and market (whenever the paramilitaries sold their services, the rural rich paid better). They also had to negotiate with different types of state officials. What the paramilitaries had to offer to promote the alignments of these different interests was a violently conservative image of a well-ordered, hierarchical society. Sentences against “satanic sects” and other forms of spectacular deviance are explained by this drive. Isaza’s war against troublemakers was not purely idiosyncratic. It matched a not highly codified but broadly shared sense of propriety and the intuition that good order and good life could be arrived at and protected by using the method that had been applied against subversion: by physically destroying transgressors. They applied the method they knew to face the new problem of founding a viable social order. Aka Zeus —Army colonel Juan Carlos Rodríguez, jailed for collaboration with the paramilitaries and a key figure in the interaction between his institution and many key paramilitary units, including the ACMM— said it with the utmost clarity:

*“The self-defenses started to show... to civilians that life was better without guerrillas, that anyone that was a thief was called a first, a second time, and if he did not mend his ways, he was evicted from the region or eventually killed or disappeared. Thieves, homosexuals, everybody that was against the legitimately constituted society, were now given notice that there was an order [“empezaron a tomar un orden”]. Order was put in place in different urban and rural regions, even far away from the capitals of the departments. This had not been seen before because the state did not have the capacity of being everywhere, nor the Army, nor the police, so the self-defenses became the law in these municipalities where they were present, and civilians were very happy to live without homosexuals, without thieves, without trouble-makers, because then they had everything under control” (JD 25).*

This is intimately related to the characteristics and evolution of ACMM disappearances. At the beginning, they wanted to produce “extreme panic” and terrorize the population, demoralize the legal left, and contain the guerrillas. ACDEGAM had also used disappearances to close off its territory and shield it from the judiciary and snitches. Disappearances —accompanied frequently by torture— were basically an extreme tool to exhibit total control. At the end, however, Pérez had discovered the costs of violent visibility. The ACMM built on this.

For the late ACDEGAM and the ACMM, the new logic was the following. Counter-insurgency and sealing off the territory remained fundamental objectives. But stable governance gave origin to a new one: the purging of the population from deviants and troublemakers so as to build and maintain a conservative moral order (along the lines of the principles developed by aka Zeus, above). Additionally, the definition of subversion was increasingly expanded, as social conflicts that involved paramilitary core constituencies put ever new individuals and categories of people under the crosshairs. This trend was even clearer in other paramilitary units, where phenomena like brutally coercive land dispossession were massive. The combination of these elements broadened the targets of disappearances at a dizzying pace, to the extent that —while maintaining its counter-insurgent edge— disappearance became a tool for achieving additional objectives related to disciplining the population and purging it from deviants and troublemakers.

But the costs of exhibiting extreme violence could become very high. If at the beginning the key was to exhibit the corpses with the resulting terrorizing message, now it was essential to hide them. As seen above, for ACDEGAM this involved the development of techniques to dismember and conceal the corpses of the victims. In other cases, like the false positives, it was essential to exhibit the bodies as members of non-state armed groups killed in combat. The techniques were very clearly driven here by political alliances and concerns.

All this seems to account for the increasing frequencies, very broad targeting, and the evolution of the techniques. But there is an additional element that contributed to maintaining high frequencies. The conservative order thus created gave strong incentives to different people to demand violence against others —this was a way of settling scores— but also of befriending an armed group which had more or less discretionary power over life and death in the region. Information about potential or actual transgressors became a precious resource, that was used and abused by many, including the paramilitary network of supporters. This, in turn, continually created new collective action issues. For example, informants of the paramilitaries could decide to sell their knowledge to the Army and the police. When caught red-handed, they were duly disappeared (JD 12).

## 9. Conclusions

I have looked here at paramilitary territorial control through the lens of a crime which was fundamental for the paramilitary repertoire of violence: disappearances. Disappearances evolved in an apparently anomalous fashion: even in secure territories, their frequencies increased, their techniques evolved from openly exhibiting the bodies to trying to conceal them, and their targeting broadened extraordinarily.

No plausible explanation of this evolution can omit the state. Inevitably, the state is part of the mix. At the same time, the characteristics and evolution of the ACMM-paramilitary disappearance show that no one-sided description captures well what was taking place. The secrecy involved in disappearing and disposing of the corpses instead of homicidal displays of power involved intense collaboration with some state agencies and sectors to protect the paramilitaries from others; they also involved tensions and conflict. Seeing the paramilitary fiefdoms as a form of armed brokerage captures both aspects of the relationship, in a way that the concepts of usurpation (rebel governance) and delegation (no more than plausible deniability) does not.

It is to be noted that all the dimensions of this pattern of violence reflect in a more or less transparent manner the social conflicts and the politics underlying paramilitary territorial control. For example, the techniques to disappear, kill and then to display or not the bodies to different actors were governed by very specific and explicit political concerns. These concerns cannot be properly understood if the analysis remains within the limits of the paramilitary fiefdom.

Horribly enough, the politics of disappearance did not bring “savage restraint” but the substitution of one crime by another (terrible) one. For analytic and policy purposes it may make sense to pursue the analysis of the relationship of different types of armed group territorial control with different patterns of violence. And what kind of politics end up or not in savage restraint? These seem to be important open questions.

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