NIGHT AND FOG

FORCED DISAPPEARANCE

Just as the FARC became notorious as experts in the cruel art of kidnapping, the paramilitaries have their own signature crime. The *autodefensas* frequently quarter their victims and then throw them into rivers, burn their bodies in ovens, or bury them in clandestine graves. The point is to make the bodies disappear without a trace. At least 34,000 Colombians have been forcibly disappeared over the past three decades, according to Colombia’s Attorney General’s Office.¹

The practice of forced disappearance is based on a macabre logic. By hiding their victims’ bodies, paramilitaries seek to sabotage any future investigation of their crimes. And given the effort required to hide thousands of corpses, paramilitary troops would dismember them so they could fit in shallow graves that are easier to dig. In the mind of the general public, the chainsaw was seen as the *autodefensas*’ weapon of choice, but in many cases they preferred the machete, as chainsaws tend to get inconveniently tangled up in the victim’s clothing.²

TRAINING CAMP

The AUC even held workshops on dismemberment, where they used living people as instructional material. As quoted in *El Tiempo*, one former paramilitary described the training he received at an AUC camp in the mid-1990s:

They were older persons that they brought in covered trucks, alive and tied up. They were taken to the place where the teacher was waiting to start the class. The instructions were to cut off an arm, the head, dismember them alive. They would cry and beg not to do anything to them, that they had families.³

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The *autodefensas* used forced disappearance also as a way to terrify the civilian population into submission. The Nazis pioneered the technique with their 1941 Night and Fog decree, which ordered secret detentions to eliminate resistance in occupied territories. The policy aimed to achieve “efficient and enduring intimidation” through “measures by which the relatives of the criminal and the population do not know the fate of the [victim].”⁴

THE SEARCH

As the numbers of disappeared multiplied over the decade of the 1990s, relatives set out on personal searches, obsessively scouring the country’s morgues, jails, and coroner’s offices for any trace of their missing. Like spirits with no rest, women would travel from town to town, asking after their children. They found support in victims’ organizations, as these groups pressured the government to take up the search.

The Colombian state first began a sustained nationwide search for the missing after 2006, in response to the Constitutional Court ruling that compelled demobilizing paramilitaries seeking reduced sentences to confess their crimes and reveal the location of their victims’ remains.

As of March 2011, Colombian forensic investigators had used information gathered from these confessions to exhume 3,245 graves and to positively identify and return 1,401 bodies to family members.⁵

This image—found in the cell phone of a paramilitary soldier—shows an instructor of the AUC paramilitary army demonstrating how to use a machete to dismember a man.
The website of Colombia’s Attorney General’s Office has an extensive photo gallery showing the clothes of exhumed persons. The site has helped families recover the remains of their missing relatives.
Mrs. Teresita Meléndez (right) lost her husband and son to paramilitary violence. The last time she saw Marco Tulio Velásquez and Alfredo Manuel was twelve years ago as they left the house one morning to go to work as day laborers on a nearby farm.

Because she never saw their bodies, nor had the chance to properly bury her son and husband, Mrs. Meléndez could never fully accept the fact of their deaths nor grieve for them.

In the instant of this photograph, Mrs. Meléndez still had not recognized the piece of her husband’s clothing shown to her by a forensic investigator. A moment later, her daughter whispered to her, “But Mamá, you sewed up those underpants yourself.”
Mrs. Teresita Meléndez is grief-stricken as she recognizes the garment, proof of her husband’s death.

The investigation carried out by the Attorney General’s office reveals that paramilitary troops under the command of alias Cadena, commander of the Heroes of the Montes de María Block of the AUC, killed her husband and son along with four other laborers in a woodshed and later hid the bodies in the San Onofre, Sucre cemetery.

There is no evidence of connections between the murdered men and guerrilla groups, or of any other motive for the massacre.
An investigator of the Attorney General’s office exhumes a person presumably disappeared by the Heroes of the Montes de María Block of the AUC under the command of alias Cadena. The AUC in this region hid victims by ordering cemetery workers to bury them underneath existing graves, thus complicating any potential exhumation of the bodies.
Women seeking the return of their disappeared children founded the Mothers of Candelaria Association in 1999. Since then, the group has held weekly vigils in front of the Candelaria church in Medellín, demanding to see their loved ones “alive, free, and in peace.”
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