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# Views to a Kill

## EXPLORING THE IMPLICATIONS OF SOURCE SELECTION IN THE CASE OF GUATEMALAN STATE TERROR, 1977-1995

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To investigate the implications of source selection, three different sources regarding Guatemalan state terror are compared: newspapers, human rights documents, and interviews with eyewitnesses. Results show that each source pays attention to diverse types and aspects of repression in line with the objectives of the observer, the characteristics of the repressive events, and the overall political context within which events take place. Who is consulted influences what is observed/recorded. Suggestions are presented for understanding sociopolitical behavior through diverse data sources, especially behavior related to contentious activity and/or occurring within contexts that are not easily penetrable.

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**T**hose investigating sociopolitical phenomena frequently rely on information “requisitioned” from others, that is, collected by individuals other than the one interested in examining the behavior of interest (McClelland 1972). The use of this kind of information has always presented something of a double-edged sword for those seeking to understand events. On one hand, through these sources one gets to find out about political behavior that is beyond her or his immediate observation/control. On the other hand, when using this data one continually wonders about whether and to what extent the sources employed lead to specific understandings of diverse phenomena, understandings that might be altered if another source had been used. These questions haunt our analyses, but despite their importance to researchers and the generation of knowledge, they are rarely subjected to rigorous investigation.

Quantitative literature concerning domestic conflict or what is commonly referred to as “contentious politics” provides the perfect example of this dilemma. Within this body of work, news agencies have been used almost exclusively to analyze causal relationships regarding protest and repressive events (e.g., Hibbs 1973; Tilly, Tilly, and Tilly 1975, McAdam 1982; Taylor and Jodice 1983; Tarrow 1989, Ziegenhagen 1986; Davenport 1995, 1999; Francisco 1996, 2000; Bond et al. 1997; Krain 1997; Beissinger 1998; Hocke 1998; Moore 1998). This source has facilitated research by

allowing observation of state and dissident behavior across time, space, and context—the one edge of the sword. At the same time, perhaps because of the extensiveness with which the source has been used, new agencies have also been the subject of a large amount of scrutiny regarding their usefulness to those who wish to understand contentious political relations—the other edge of the sword (e.g., Azar et al. 1972; Burrows 1974; Danzger 1975; Snyder 1976; Snyder and Kelly 1977; Jackman and Boyd 1979; Stohl et al. 1986; Franzosi 1987, 1990, 2001; Brockett 1992; Samuelson and Spierer 1992; McCarthy, McPhail, and Smith 1996; Gibney and Caliendo 1997; Mueller 1997).<sup>1</sup>

To date, scrutiny has taken a very specific form. Most analyses compare the content of one newspaper against one or several others,<sup>2</sup> conducting tests of intersource reliability.<sup>3</sup> It is not clear, however, whether comparison against a completely different type of source might not provide a better test—especially if one is trying to ascertain how reliance on new agencies might influence what can be found as well as what can be known.<sup>4</sup> In line with research that compares newspaper accounts of contention against police records (e.g., McCarthy, McPhail, and Smith 1996), we explore the implications of relying on different information providers as they pay attention to entirely different phenomena and/or to different aspects of the same phenomena. Within this research, we undertake just such an analysis.

To investigate this subject, reports of state repression in Guatemala are examined in three sources between 1977 and 1995 (by the event). These include 17 newspapers within Guatemala, documents from four human rights organizations within as well as outside of the country, and 5,000 interviews conducted by the International Center for Human Rights Research within Guatemala during two waves between 1994 and 1996. From our analyses, we find that different information providers observe distinct aspects of and present different statistical patterns in state violence (i.e., there are distinct “views to a kill”). Within our investigation, newspapers tend to focus on urban environments and disappearances; human rights organizations highlight events in which large numbers of individuals were killed and when large numbers were being killed throughout the country in general; and finally, interviews tend to highlight rural activity, perpetrators, and disappearances as well as those events that occurred most recently.

1. Individuals listed here are investigating domestic as well as international conflict, for many do not make a distinction between the methodological processes and/or problems confronted by those attempting to operationalize them.

2. Some would eschew the necessity for consulting multiple sources, maintaining that from an array of information providers, there is usually one that possesses the greatest amount of resources or ability to cover events and thus one that is most useful in documenting and investigating history. Others would suggest that single sources are best because these are the most consistent across levels of observation as well as analysis. These individuals would eschew the very possibility of consulting multiple sources, because they would maintain that different sources focus on different phenomena entirely.

3. Similar approaches have been taken in other fields. For example, Wooley (2000) considers source variation in the area of public policy.

4. This having been said, numerous scholars have compared newspapers that are somewhat more diverse in nature (e.g., Davenport and Litras 2001; McCarthy et al. 2000).

To develop our argument, the article is organized in the following manner. First, we review the literature on reporting bias, particularly within the case of contentious politics. Second, we present our theory about how source type influences what is reported by different information providers and, in turn, what is used by researchers within their analyses. In the third section of the article, the data and methodological design are discussed. Fourth, we present our empirical findings investigating what is observed within different sources and how this coverage impacts causal inferences. The conclusion outlines what the present research effort has to say about existing practices of events-based data collection and investigation. Additionally, it puts forward numerous suggestions about what can and should be done to improve these efforts in the future.

### INVESTIGATING THE SOURCES OF CONFLICT DATA

Since the beginning of empirically oriented conflict research (e.g., Sorokin 1937; Lasswell and Blumenstock 1939; Rummel 1966; Tilly, Tilly, and Tilly 1975), news sources have been relied on by a large number of individuals for information about what has taken place and why. As designed, those interested in contentious politics read newspapers and wires<sup>5</sup> and through them collect information regarding when and where events occur and about diverse characteristics of the actions in question: for example, size, objectives, tactics, actors, and so forth. After this initial compilation is completed, event catalogues are arrayed into chronological sequence, placed into some format for more rigorous investigation (e.g., a spreadsheet), and then examined for relationships with theoretically relevant variables.

The reasons for using newspapers are clear. Olzak (1992, 57), for one, notes that this source “provide(s) the most complete account of events for the widest sample of geographical or temporal units.” As Rucht and Neidhardt (1998, 73) identify,

(newspapers) are, for the most part, easily accessible. Relevant information is usually grouped together in particular sections so that the coder must not look through the whole issue. In addition, some newspapers have made searches easier by providing a conventional index and/or electronic search facility.

Perhaps most important, news agencies have been used because they generally focus on the same types/aspects of sociopolitical phenomena across space and time. As a consequence, the source in many ways is ideal for researchers because news agencies are basically preformatted for comparative analysis. This has led to a situation in which new agencies are used extensively in the area of contentious politics and within social science in general.

Not all accept this position uncritically. Although many have gravitated to these sources for the reasons identified above, others have been more focused on questioning and examining their validity (e.g., Azar et al. 1972; Danzger 1975; Franzosi 1987,

5. Some sample from particular days of the week, but most read through complete time periods, albeit focusing only on specific sections of the paper deemed relevant.

1990, 2001; Brockett 1992; McCarthy, McPhail, and Smith 1996; Mueller 1997; Oliver and Myers 1999; Sommer and Scarritt 1999). The method of cross-validation employed comes in two varieties: (1) by comparing local news agencies against more global ones or (2) by comparing multiple news sources at the same level of analysis regarding a single geographic locale.<sup>6</sup>

This work has advanced our understanding of news coverage a great deal because we can conclude that newspapers identify instances of contentious politics under three very specific circumstances. First, the probability of event coverage is increased when events are large, violent, and/or bizarre in nature and when there is no other major news story occurring at the same time (e.g., Snyder and Kelly 1977; Franzosi 1987; McCarthy, McPhail, and Smith 1996; Hocke 1998). Second, the probability of event coverage is influenced by where events are located relative to news agencies (e.g., Gans 1980; Moeller 1999). Third, the probability of event coverage is influenced by diverse characteristics of the source utilized, for example, when newspapers are commercial and the newspaper expresses an interest in protest and/or human rights (e.g., Mueller 1997; Hocke 1998; Davenport and Litras 2001).<sup>7</sup>

Despite the advances that these insights have provided, however, this work has been limited to the degree to which it maintains its central focus on newspapers and on intersource reliability. This approach makes sense because different sources might focus on different phenomena and at different levels of analysis. But other information providers exist that cover the same topic areas from which one might obtain important information about relevant behavior (e.g., police records, documents from non-governmental organizations [NGOs], and testimony from eyewitnesses). These other sources have received varied amounts of attention within existing literature. Each will be discussed briefly below.

#### **POLICE RECORDS AS A DATA SOURCE (OR, NOTES FROM THE COPS)**

Although some earlier investigations of contentious politics relied on the records of police agencies (e.g., Rude 1964; Tilly, Tilly, and Tilly 1975), only recently have efforts been made to systematically compare the content of these reports with the information contained within newspapers (e.g., McCarthy, McPhail, and Smith 1996). This research has proved to be important in many respects. First, it has provided a tremendous amount of information about what challengers to political authority have done. Second, and most important to our research, systematic comparison between police records and news reports has revealed that media organizations tend to

6. There have been some interesting variations on this theme. Spilerman (1970) and later Dangzer (1975) examined how different newspaper coverage was influenced by the existence of newswires—an important source for the newspapers themselves. McCarthy, McPhail, and Smith (1996) compare different newspapers, television stations, and police records.

7. The last characteristic is operative in those situations where the newspaper directly emerges from a challenging group, as in the case of the *Black Panther Party Intercommunal News Service* (Davenport 1997; Davenport and Litras 2001), or when newspapers express an interest in directly challenging authorities, as in the case of the dissident press (e.g., Goodman 1994; McCarthy et al. 2000).

underreport the actual number of events that exist (i.e., relative to what was found within police records). Certain events are deemed worthy of attention by news organizations (specifically events with large numbers or that are considered rare); others simply are not. By comparison, the police are less influenced by these event characteristics.

Although informative about the biases present when one uses newspaper data, there are several problems with this work. To begin, it is hard to rely on consistent access to police records for many research efforts. Additionally, no attention has been given to the problems inherent in relying on an agency that has a vested interest in identifying challenges to public order. Finally, within this source, little information is provided about police actions against challengers (especially those considered violent or overly aggressive), and thus one ends up with a lopsided view of state-dissident interactions.

#### **NGOs AND GOVERNMENT DOCUMENTS AS A DATA SOURCE (OR, "HEARING IT THROUGH THE GRAPEVINE")**

Police organizations are not the only alternative sources to news agencies that are available within the area of contentious politics. Researchers of human rights and repression frequently use NGO documents (such as those provided by Amnesty International) or government reports (such as those provided by the State Department) to obtain information about state activity (e.g., Poe and Tate 1994; McCormick and Mitchell 1997). The use of these organizations proves to be quite logical for they, unlike police organizations, are directly concerned with documenting and cataloguing activities enacted by governments (identifying perpetrators, dates, and locations).

Although useful because they focus on one of the main actors involved in contentious politics, there are some important limitations with this practice of data collection. For example, it is frequently maintained that human rights NGOs cover specific types of regimes, ignoring or downplaying others. More relevant to the analysis is that the information contained within human rights NGOs is never directly compared with information derived from any other information provider, for example, newspapers or police records. Are similar events being captured? Is one source reporting more information regarding human rights conditions than another? We simply do not know because these sources have only been compared with one another (e.g., Lawyers Committee for Human Rights 1991).

#### **WITNESSES AS A DATA SOURCE (OR, FROM THE TERRORIZED COME DATA)**

Considering our last alternative information provider, it is clear from the literature on contentious politics that sources of information exist that are used exclusively by more qualitative scholars (e.g., Corradi, Fagen, and Garreton 1992) but that have never been used within quantitative investigations of the subject. In particular, there have been no empirical examinations of repression or protest that relied on the testimony of those who directly experienced or were somehow connected with the events in question.

One can immediately see the benefit of using such a source. The individuals discussed here were either present at the time of the relevant events or interacted with someone who was. Additionally, they would not likely be disinterested parties to what transpired, but, in all likelihood, they would be connected, therefore improving their recall of what happened. At the same time that these reasons can be identified for utilizing eyewitnesses, there are numerous reasons for neglecting them (Grele 1998). First, in many respects, eyewitness accounts are discounted as unreliable or biased. Those who are actually several steps removed from the context are viewed as more valid in their characterization of what has taken place—in part because of this removal from the context.<sup>8</sup> Second is the more practical issue of cost. Obtaining testimony data is extremely expensive and time consuming because one must acquire adequate language skills, transportation, and research assistance. These are not trivial concerns.

As shall be clear from the discussion below, our research is motivated by the proposition that different information providers should be consulted, because they produce varying types of information as well as distinct types of data and causal inferences for those who use them. The differences are important when, after the fact, we attempt to piece together what has happened.

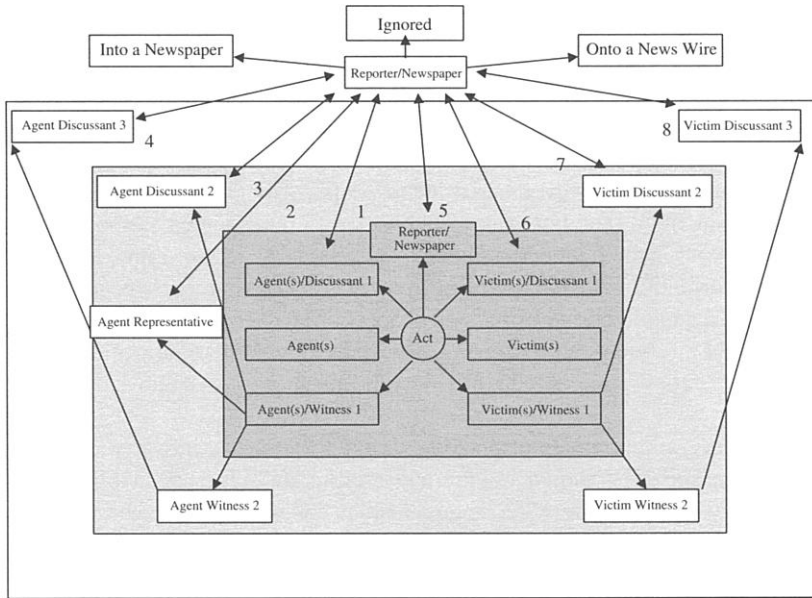
## UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT DATA COLLECTION

In any given act of repression, there are at least two and as many as several thousand actors who are present: the perpetrator(s) and the victim(s). Each of these actors can serve as an informant to a reporter about the action in question—individuals who work for a newspaper, NGO, or government organization. This relationship is represented by the innermost rectangle in Figure 1.

Ideally, witnesses/informants would be able to communicate very specific and accurate information regarding when and where the acts occurred (i.e., the time-place of repression), which perpetrators were involved, who suffered which acts, and maybe venture a guess as to why the events took place. Although one would like to think that any informant would be equally useful in communicating this information, in reality, each actor would likely have different observational advantages. The quality of our data is thus subject to limitation from the outset.

Any assessment of observed/reported repression must allow for the fact that information about events also comes to reporting organizations from individuals not directly present at the time-place of the act in question. Within the middle box (the second rectangle), it is possible that a perpetrator or victim/witness tells some other individual about what happened, who in turn tells a member of a reporting agency (relationships 3 and 7 in the figure). Alternatively, it may be the case that some representative

8. What becomes interesting about this practice is that the information providers used by existing research (e.g., nongovernmental organization [NGO] reports) invariably still rely on sources close to or connected with the events in question (i.e., eyewitnesses). The perceived objectivity provided by distance appears to trump all other concerns, however, because the potential differences that exist across observers are never investigated.



**Figure 1: Understanding Data Collection Mechanisms for Acts of State Repression**

for the repressive perpetrator(s) may issue a statement/report about what took place (relationship 2 in the figure). This latter situation would occur within those contexts where the perpetrator(s) had exclusive access to the events of interest (by chance, because of the geographic locale of the act, or purposely, because others were kept from the area in question). Finally, there is another manner in which individuals can discover information about events. Found in the outermost rectangle, it may be the case that perpetrators or victims/witnesses directly involved with the repressive act communicate their actions to someone else, who communicates to another person, who in turn tells the press or some other source (relationships 4 and 8, respectively). Perhaps similar to the American children's game of "telephone," this can be expanded to very large degrees, including hundreds if not thousands of indirect linkages to the reporting agency.

What is important about this conception of the data collection process is that information about repression can find its way to reporting agencies in different ways with different costs and benefits involved. The process does not end here with all events that come to the reporting agency finding their way into the information distributed by the source. Rather, as one would expect, the willingness and capacity of the information provider to report such events varies significantly. Moreover, the likelihood of perpetrator- and/or victim-oriented discussants being relied on by different organizations varies as well. We discuss this in the following section.



### SOURCES, PERSPECTIVES, AND UNDERSTANDING

Where and how one sits invariably influences what he or she sees or, in this case, reports. The simplicity of this understanding can be lost in quantitative examinations of political behavior, especially when the subject involves the loss of human life (which adds a certain measure of immediacy to the whole enterprise). When one accepts the basic point, however, one is led to ask particular types of questions, which prove to be quite important. For example, how do different sources go about collecting information, who is the intended audience, and to whom do the sources speak when collecting information? We pay attention to three types of sources that can be used for human rights data collection efforts: newspapers, human rights documents produced by NGOs,<sup>9</sup> and interviews with eyewitnesses. Individuals and organizations affiliated with each one of these sources tend to answer the questions posed above in very different ways.

For example, commercially oriented news agencies collect information for distribution to some specified audience—literate/semiliterate individuals within a specific geographic territory who speak the language of the newspaper and wish to stay abreast of what is taking place around them. The objective of data collection is not simply distribution, because these sources also maintain an interest in satisfying advertisers/sponsors and maintaining access to current as well as future news stories. This interest tends to influence paper content because the organizational personnel do not wish to upset readers, sponsors, or sources. Such a restriction compels news agencies to be relatively noncombative in nature toward the existing political authorities (i.e., the newspaper will advocate working within the existing system, not changing it in any substantive manner [e.g., Sigal 1987; Moeller 1999, 10]) and avoid discussing events that would be damaging to the authorities).

Information collected by human rights NGOs is likely to be quite different from that collected by news agencies. Like news agencies, these organizations collect information for the purposes of distribution to an audience. Also similar to news agencies, the objective of collection is not merely distribution. Indeed, within this case, there is an interest in changing the behavior of certain political actors who are engaged in actions that are viewed as detrimental to human life. This focus tends to influence the content of information that is distributed by these groups, because, unlike news agencies, who do not wish to upset readers/sponsors, it is the job of these organizations to inform/upset their readers.<sup>10</sup> As a result, one would expect information provided by these organizations to be more forthright, more comprehensive, more specific, and generally more challenging to authorities.

The final data source, personal testimony, represents the most distinct form of information considered by this research. The value of such testimony is simple.

9. Government reports are not considered here because of the particular case that we consider. The Guatemalan government has never made its data available about who was disappeared, tortured, and so forth.

10. As Susan Waltz (1995, 14) identifies, “by content alone, the message of human rights groups directly confronts vested authority.”

Because the individuals providing information have lived through the events of interest, they can provide important information about what transpired, who was involved, and when it occurred. Unlike the other data sources, information here is generally compiled less for some external audience than for selfish purposes—individuals wish to tell their stories. Because the information is largely introspective and therapeutic, it is not likely that sensitivity will be shown. At the same time, however, it is logical to assume that interviewees might be very careful about what they say to interviewers (especially to “outsiders”).

In sum, the differences between news agencies, NGOs, and eyewitness accounts are important for researchers to identify because they directly influence the type of information that each provides. Specifically, two characteristics are relevant: (1) the specific attributes of the acts in question that are highlighted within collected/distributed information (e.g., location, propensity to identify perpetrators, propensity to address particular types of abuse because of what they represent to distinct information providers, and size of the group murdered within the event) and (2) the importance of the overall context within which the violations took place (e.g., type of regime, year in which the event occurred, overall amount of killing within the year, and number of human rights organizations in the country at the time). Each is discussed below.

#### EVENT CHARACTERISTICS

Based on the argument made above about how sources differ, Hypothesis 1 suggests that violations that occur in rural areas would be less frequently reported by news agencies because (relative to urban areas) these locales are geographically farther away from their principal readership and thus their interests. By contrast, documentary sources should report rural and urban violations equally because organizations focused on human rights are less concerned with identifying information that is “digestible” or of interest to a particular geographically defined audience than with identifying abuses wherever they occur. Like news agencies, we would expect interviewees to have a geographic preference, favoring the locale within which the questions were asked (i.e., where they reside or have resided in the past). The interviews that we rely on in this research were conducted primarily in the rural context, and thus we expect focus to be placed there.

Hypothesis 2 concerns the willingness to identify perpetrators, and we expect variance across sources. Specifically, we anticipate that journalists who wish to maintain a “working relationship” with state actors/agencies would be less likely to report on violations in which the perpetrators are identified as state agents. In contrast, NGO sources that are somewhat more antagonistic to the state would report violations and specifically identify the perpetrators involved. Interviewees are likely to be indifferent about whether the violations are identified with particular perpetrators. The primary focus of their information is likely to be on the act itself and not the perpetrator; much of the information surrounding events might thus be ignored, suppressed, or forgotten.

Hypothesis 3 focuses attention on the specific type of repressive event involved. For instance, disappearance is a form of political violence in which the body is never found. Consequently, it is anticipated that journalistic sources are less likely to cover

disappearance than forms of violation that produce tangible evidence. In the context of NGO data collection and interviews, however, we expect a different reporting practice. Because disappearance leaves victims' families in a state of limbo, it can be especially traumatic and mobilizing (Corradi, Fagen, and Garretton 1992). Both documentary and interview sources should therefore be more likely to report on disappearances than on other kinds of killings.

Our last hypothesis concerning event characteristics, Hypothesis 4, addresses the size of the group killed within a specific violation. One would generally anticipate that the larger the number of victims, the greater the likelihood that events would be covered. Our research challenges this position because it ignores important information about who does the killing and who would be interested in conveying such information. For example, the responsibility for killing a larger number of individuals is more difficult to conceal than responsibility for smaller groups, and thus state involvement becomes correspondingly more obvious. For the reasons stated previously, journalistic sources are less likely to focus on situations that involve the state and thus are less likely to report large killings. Alternatively, it may be the case that when an event gets so large that it cannot be ignored, it compels news agencies to cover it. In contrast, NGO and interview sources are more likely to report large-scale killings because they include the cases that are most of interest to them and perhaps also those that will most likely be recalled/remembered by victims/discussants.

## CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

We must of course consider that reporters are responsive to the political, economic, and cultural situation within which they exist (especially salient in more authoritarian contexts). Accordingly, the next series of hypotheses changes the focus from event characteristics to the context within which events take place.

One of the most important contextual factors concerns the degree of "openness" within the political system (i.e., the magnitude of democracy)—Hypothesis 5. This is deemed important because in a democracy or more open political context, journalistic sources should report violations more frequently than those in less open regimes. Within the former context, they are less fearful of antagonizing or inciting authorities, sponsors, and readers. Within the latter context, journalists probably fear for their lives and avoid controversial subjects that would draw unwanted attention. In contrast, it is expected that documentary and interview sources would record violations equally without regard to the current regime status. If any influence of regime type exists, it would probably concern the likelihood of coverage within NGO sources, because human rights organizations must be able to move around the country to investigate abuses and seek the information that they require for their reports.<sup>11</sup>

11. We acknowledge that there may simply be fewer human rights violations within democratic contexts and, thus, that coverage of these events might decrease when these political systems are present. Alternatively, it may be the case that greater political freedom facilitates communication of human rights abuses because the various agents for information feel more comfortable relaying such information to their selected audiences.

Another aspect of context that is expected to impact event coverage is the sheer number of killings that take place during a given year (throughout the country)—Hypothesis 6. Here, we anticipate that news agencies survey the overall number of killings that are taking place within a year, which would influence newspapers to report more individual events. This is different from just considering the number of individuals being killed in any one specific event, because this characteristic provides information about a larger pattern of state behavior and not just one instance of repression. Larger numbers of violations in the society might increase the overall “newsworthiness” of the subject, leaving news agencies in a situation of potentially losing legitimacy with readers as well as sponsors by ignoring something that most individuals seem to know about. Again, NGOs present a different case. Given the somewhat lagged fashion in which human rights organizations generally work, coverage in these sources might be negatively influenced by the number of killings observed in a particular year. More killings mean that NGOs work harder, and this directly influences the likelihood that they will report specific events. In contrast, retrospective interviews should remain unaffected by the overall number of murders experienced within a given year and would document killings proportionally across years with widely varying numbers of killings.

It is clear that the interest in human rights has grown in Guatemala as well as globally over the time period of interest to us (Keck and Sikkink 1998)—Hypothesis 7.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, we hypothesize that, because of this change, the likelihood of NGOs’ reporting should grow over time. Witnesses’ memories, however, have a different relationship to time. As Kundera (1995, 128) reminds us, memories fade; indeed, this is one of their defining characteristics. As a consequence, we would anticipate that events earlier in our time period would be less likely to appear within data sets constructed from these sources, which were compiled toward the end.

Continuing this line of thought, we are led to our last hypothesis, one concerning the specific number of human rights organizations in Guatemala—Hypothesis 8. Much research has repeatedly stated that the presence of local human rights organizations facilitates the identification and documentation of human rights abuse (e.g., Blaser 1981; Scoble and Wiseberg 1981; Ball 1998). From this, we expect that the presence of these organizations would enhance event coverage within both newspaper and NGO sources. Principally, one could account for this pattern because it is expected that the more organizations there are in-country collecting this information, the greater the likelihood that events will be identified and made available to different information providers. Interviewees should also be influenced by the presence of human rights organizations because they make individuals feel more comfortable about giving testimony, providing something of a support network for them as well as a vehicle for the conveyance of this information. In a sense, human rights NGOs might create a culture of truth seeking and truth telling.<sup>13</sup>

12. On this point, Ball (1998, 69) notes that in 1970, “there were 69 domestically-focused, non-government human rights organizations” and that “by 1992, there were more than 659.”

13. The number of newspapers in Guatemala is relatively constant over short periods. As a result, the actual year in which something occurs should not affect coverage in the press.

## DATA AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

A small NGO based in Guatemala City, Guatemala, called the International Center for Human Rights Research (hereafter called the CIIDH), gathered the data analyzed in this research. These data are made available on the Web page of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.<sup>14</sup> Unlike all other work on the subject of human rights, the data here were recorded at the level of the specific violation rather than the aggregated event type across a specified spatio-temporal domain (such as the nation-year). Because our approach differs somewhat from normal human rights research, we will describe the distinctions between this work and existing literature.

### UNDERSTANDING VIOLATION-BASED DATA COLLECTION

Typically, contentious events are classified in the following manner: (1) they comprehend collectives, not individuals; (2) they represent aggregations of many discrete acts that are placed together, and (3) they are overt, public, and temporally and spatially bounded (e.g., Tilly, Tilly, and Tilly 1975; Taylor and Jodice 1983). That is, an event occurs at a specific place in a limited time and with a fixed set of participants.

Many have criticized this general approach and in different ways. For example, many scholars make the case that there are types of contentious behavior that are less visible, less overt, and less susceptible to identification (e.g., Churchill and Vander Wall 1990). This proves to be crucial, for it suggests that much of data collection is driven by the data-generation efforts of information providers: an event is merely something that is reported in a newspaper story. Another problem with conventional data collection concerns the type(s) of the events identified/coded. In the real world, the variety of violations (e.g., beatings, rapes, curfews, arrests, bans, and killings) exists in the state's repertoire. When an event is composed of violations being applied by states (of different types), in many research protocols, the content of the event must be arbitrarily fixed as being of a single type.<sup>15</sup> If an analysis attempts to track patterns of violations (such as trends of beatings in time), shifts in the modal combinations of violations composing events can affect the types into which the events are classified. The arbitrary classification decision can create statistical artifacts.

In an attempt to address some of these difficulties, we approach the subject of investigating contentious events in a somewhat different manner. Similar to existing research,

(a) "case" is defined as the information given by a single source (a press report, or an interview) concerning violations that happened at a particular time and place. "Violations" are instances of violence, including killings, disappearances, torture, kidnapping, and injury. "Victims" are people who suffer violations. (Ball, Kobrak, and Spirer 1999, 6)

14. Data can be obtained from <http://hrdata.aaas.org/ciidh/data.html>.

15. This is similar to McPhail and Wohlstein (1983), for example, who have argued that what researchers generally conceive of as singular events (e.g., a protest or a mass arrest) are actually made up of multiple, discrete activities, which our definitions do not allow us to address.

Within our research, violations occur in social space in direct transitive forms: a perpetrator commits a violation of a specific type against a particular victim.

Of course, violations may come together in sequences to compose events, but here is where our study differs. Our analysis focuses on the individual elements that make up the larger categories. For example, violation-level reporting records information on a diverse array of behavioral characteristics whereby each violation is defined as the combination of that violation with a single victim, although there may be more than one perpetrator.<sup>16</sup> Relative to traditional event-level analysis, violation-level analysis permits a more precise quantification of state violence. We are able to capture important aspects of information frequently lost through aggregation. For example, the CIIDH data records (1) the characteristics of violation, such as event type, the time and place of violation, and the number killed per violation; (2) the characteristics of the victim, such as name, age, home region, occupation, ethnicity, as well as (3) the characteristics of the perpetrator, such as the type of organization involved.

### DOCUMENTING GUATEMALAN STATE TERROR

In line with our discussion above, information about repression was coded from newspapers, NGO documents, and interviews with survivors and witnesses of human rights violations.

Following existing events-based research, 17 newspapers within Guatemala were consulted by the CIIDH to derive information about repression from 1977 to 1995. The papers included *Prensa Libre*, which accounts for 63% of the press cases; *El Grafico*, which accounts for 10% of the cases; *La Hora* and *El Impacto*, which each account for 8%; *El Imparcial*, which accounts for 6%, and 13 smaller newspapers, which account for 5% of the cases (specifically, *Nuevo Diario*, *Siglo Veintiuno*, *La Nacion*, *El Espectador*, *La Tarde*, *La Razon*, *Independiente*, *La Republica*, *Tinamit*, *La Extra*, *Diario de Centro America*, *Guatemalteco*, and *La Hora Dominical*).<sup>17</sup>

Numerous organizations within as well as outside of Guatemala provided documents concerning human rights abuses: the Guatemalan Human Rights Commission (CDHG), the Mutual Support Group (GAM), the Justice and Peace Committee, and the Guatemalan Church in Exile. These were collected through meticulous research from the organizations going directly into the field. Most of the information was taken from eyewitness accounts, but others were culled from individuals not directly present at events or from forensic evidence.

Perhaps the most exhaustive effort (in terms of financial and emotional cost) concerned the witness testimony. The data utilized here were conducted in several waves and at different geographic locales (albeit principally within the more rural areas). To be specific,

16. There may be no identified perpetrators if the witnesses are unable to provide sufficient information.

17. Because all issues of each newspaper during the period of study were covered and coded, all violations reported in the press are included in the data.

some (testimony) was taken from the archives of participating organizations [identified above], but most . . . were collected directly by the CIIDH team. The first interview phase took place in 1994 and 1995, among survivors of state violence living in the Communities of Population in Resistance in northern Quiché, internal exiles that had never accepted army rule. As the military's control of the rest of the country slowly abated, the CIIDH formed regional teams to take testimonies throughout the country: on the southern coast, in the Petén jungle, in the Verapaces, and in the country's western highlands (in El Quiché, Sololá, Quetzaltenango, San Marcos, and Chimaltenango). (Ball, Kobrak, and Spierer 1999, 5-6)<sup>18</sup>

To capture the contextual importance of regime type, our variable for political democracy is the only measure taken from outside of the CIIDH collection efforts. The measure from Polity IV (Jaggers and Gurr 1995)<sup>19</sup> represents a cumulative index including the competitiveness of political participation, regulation of political participation, competitiveness of executive recruitment, openness of executive recruitment, and constraints on the chief executive. Full democracies are denoted by a score of 10 (e.g., the United States, Uruguay from 1989 to 1996). Full autocracies are indicated by a score of 0 (e.g., Guatemala in the period from 1978 to 1984).

#### BASIC OBSERVATIONS OF GUATEMALAN STATE TERROR

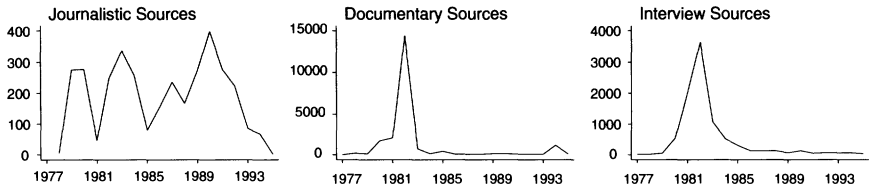
The data employed for this analysis are quite informative about what type of actions authorities were engaged in. As reported, each of the 17,423 violations in the database, reported by at least one of the three sources, was suffered by one or more victims: 91.9% of the violations were suffered by only 1 victim, but because there are some violations with many victims, the mean number of victims per violation is 6.1 (the high was 1,500). The analysis that follows will concentrate on the 10,591 violations that document the killing or disappearance of 33,969 victims.<sup>20</sup> Within the database, each violation was reported 1 to 10 times in one, two, or all three sources, but 94.6% of the violations were reported only once. Although the same events could be covered across sources, therefore, this is generally not the case; the "views" are very much distinct.

Are the identified events different from one another? When one plots event characteristics by the source, the description of political violence in Guatemala during the period from 1977 to 1995 is found to vary considerably. In the number of killings reported in each year, not only is the scale of reported violations different by a factor of

18. Trained by the CIIDH (the International Center for Human Rights Research) in interview techniques, team members used a standardized and semistructured interview protocol. The teams worked full-time for 2 years, throughout 1995 and 1996. Two-thirds of the interviews were conducted in witnesses' own Mayan languages. Respondents for these surveys were selected through casual "snowball" sampling rather than through rigorous probability methods. Such designs are frequently considered problematic because probability methods are appropriate to make population inferences about rates or absolute magnitudes. Because the objective of this research effort is to model how different sources produce different views of social reality, however, these sources—even with their limitations—are deemed adequate.

19. These data are available at <http://www.bsos.umd.edu/cidcm/polity/>.

20. Excluded from the database are injuries from shelling or those victimized by strafing from helicopters (when perpetrators could not be identified). Additional cases are excluded because they were not reported in a consistent way.



**Figure 2: Number of Killings in Guatemala by Source, 1977-1995**

nearly 50, the pattern reported in the press is completely different from the patterns reported in NGO and interview sources.

In Figure 2, NGOs and interviewees (albeit at different magnitudes) show that the period from 1981 to 1983 was a time of extraordinary and unprecedented violence. During this same time period, journalistic sources show these years as relatively high but not the worst of the period. The sources differ further on where they focus and on how (or whether) they identify different event characteristics.

Within the data, it is found that the sources differ significantly about what they emphasize. Although less than half of all killings reported in press sources occurred in rural areas, the corresponding proportion for killings reported in NGO and interview sources is more than 95%. Additionally, whereas more than two-thirds of the victims from killing reported in the press are identified by name, only 15% and 40%, respectively, of the victims in NGO and interview reports are named. Press reports are the most precise about time (i.e., they provide information of the day, month, and year of the event), whereas killings in NGO sources are slightly less precise, and killings identified in interviews less precise still.<sup>21</sup> The explanations for this are important because they show the distinct ways that sources provide information.

Discussed by many observers, it must be mentioned that, essentially, the press is interested in “news”—that which is timely (Schudson 1987) and collectively shared (Tuchman 1978). As a way of establishing this, the information provider is extremely interested in communicating information such as the time and date. Additionally, because the press is more likely to attribute action to individuals (as the principal “motors” of what takes place as opposed to something such as ideology or some social forces), it also makes sense that it would identify individuals by name (e.g., Sigal 1987).

This having been said, we were surprised by the amount of attention to rural contexts and interest in abuses paid by newspapers. Moreover, we found it interesting that

21. It is particularly interesting to note that many events had no date-specific information except for perhaps year or month. In many cases, the best date approximation was provided by the season (e.g., harvest). This is a manifestation of indigenous conceptions of time—natives were more apt to know what season an abuse took place than the day, month, and in some cases, year.



NGOs and interviews, although both were rooted in a similar rural context, paid varying amounts of attention to the names of victims and the specific time of particular violations. NGOs seemed to highlight abuses to an audience and, if particular aspects of the story were missing, this did not make what they had to say any less important. In contrast, interviewees are more likely to recall the names of victims who were killed or tortured. This makes sense because, in this context, identified violations reference a specific loss to an individual asked to recall what has happened, not merely some abstract pattern of state behavior covered in some general report of government activity.

### METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

To analyze these data and explore the accuracy of our hypotheses, we again deviate from existing research on human rights violation, which normally employs some form of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression (e.g., Poe and Tate 1994; Davenport 1995, 1999) or event-count model (e.g., Krain 1997). Instead, we use logistic regression (see Aldrich and Nelson [1984] and Judge et al. [1985] for good discussions). Given our theoretical interests to identify the likelihood of coverage for violations, across information providers, in the models below, the dependent variable identifies whether a particular event is covered by a source (a 0 denotes no coverage, whereas a 1 denotes coverage by one source—that is, a newspaper, an NGO, or an interview).

Because the dependent variable of interest is dichotomous in nature,<sup>22</sup> the probability of an instance of state terror being covered by a source (i.e., a newspaper, a human rights document, or an interview) takes the following logistic form:

$$Pi(\text{Coverage} = 1) = \frac{1}{1 + \exp^{-(B_0 + B_1 + B_2)'}}$$

where  $B_0$  represents the constant;  $B_1$  represents the event characteristics—location, propensity to identify perpetrators, propensity to address disappearances, and size of the group murdered within the event; and  $B_2$  represents the contextual factors—type of regime, overall number of killings taking place within the year, year in which the event occurs, and number of human rights organizations in the country at the time.<sup>23</sup> To facilitate interpretation, all findings will be discussed as log odds.

22. Estimated models with Probit (available from the authors) did not reveal any significant differences. Additionally, given the distribution of the events and the lack of simultaneous reporting of events across sources, we considered multinomial logistic regression. Given that a small fraction of events were held in common, however, it is unclear whether we can validly maintain that the categories were distinct from one another. This we intend to investigate further.

23. To clarify, the comparison category (the 0) does not capture the category of “no coverage” of repression. Rather, it is the existence of coverage within one of another two sources. Our comparison is thus made against the other sources.

## EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION

The statistical analysis generally reflects our theoretical expectations well. In certain circumstances, however, we incorrectly anticipated causal influences. The sources are each addressed below.

### SOME OF THE NEWS THAT IS FIT TO PRINT: NEWSPAPERS

In the case of print media (provided in Table 1), the overall model accounts for 59% of the variance in event coverage. There is no equitable balance, however, in explanatory power across types of independent variables. By and large, the characteristics of the news items (i.e., the killings) prove to be less important than those that concern the overall context. In accordance with our expectations, we find that human rights violations taking place in rural environments are not well covered within this source (the effect is negative, and the odds of rural activity being covered is minimal). Of the violations reported in newspapers, perpetrators are also generally ignored.

Moving to contextual factors, it is found that the sheer number of individuals being killed during a particular year has an impact on the coverage of state repression in newspapers. When the overall amount of contention in society increases, the odds of any single killing's being reported are decreased by about 1. Newspapers in Guatemala tend to avoid controversy when the controversy exceeds certain parameters. Results further disclose that regime type influences coverage. Specifically, when the Guatemalan government was more democratic in nature (i.e., generally after 1985), newspapers were more likely to cover human rights violations. Actually, democracy increased the odds of event coverage by a factor of  $2\frac{1}{2}$  (the most important variable in the model in terms of causal impact).

Although fairly accurate with regard to the variables discussed thus far, not all of our expectations about newspapers were met within the empirical investigation. For example, counter to our expectation, time is found to play a role in violation coverage because it decreases the odds that a violation will be identified (by almost 1). Also counter to our expectation, we find that the number of human rights organizations in Guatemala increases the odds of coverage in newspapers by 2. This likely reflects a certain amount of codependence because it is clear that the level of democracy, time, and the number of human rights organizations are all positively correlated with one another.<sup>24</sup> From this, one can suggest (at least on a tentative basis) that minor efforts at democratization in Guatemala provide a political opportunity, which opens space for advocacy organizations. Following this opening, recently emboldened journalists pick up information compiled by these organizations and distribute it to a wider audience.<sup>25</sup>

24. The variables actually correlate with one another at .35, but observing plots, one can identify that the relationship may exist as they generally move together over time—albeit with lags and at different rates.

25. Such a complex causal relationship clearly requires additional investigation, but this suggestion does provide some interesting insights into what might be happening in transitional political systems. Beissinger (1998) offers a good example that is concentrated on newspapers.

TABLE 1  
Results from Logistic Regression ( $N = 8,822$ )

	Newspapers		Documents		Interviews	
	Coverage	Log Odds	Coverage	Log Odds	Coverage	Log Odds
Rural dummy	-3.45 (0.11)*	.03 (.00)	0.78 (0.07)*	2.18 (0.15)	3.84 (0.22)*	46.54 (10.28)
Perpetrator dummy	-2.94 (0.13)*	0.05 (0.00)	-1.25 (0.06)*	0.28 (0.01)	2.31 (0.06)*	10.12 (0.62)
Disappearance dummy	0.30 (0.27)	1.35 (0.35)	-0.77 (0.26)*	0.46 (0.11)	1.16 (0.23)*	3.17 (0.74)
Number killed in event	-0.01 (0.01)		0.02 (0.00)*	1.01 (0.00)	-0.02 (0.00)*	0.98 (0.00)
Level of democracy	0.90 (0.05)*	2.46 (0.12)	-0.29 (0.04)*	0.75 (0.02)	-0.35 (0.05)*	0.70 (0.03)
Year	-0.31 (0.02)*	0.73 (0.01)	0.03 (0.02)		0.27 (0.03)*	1.31 (0.03)
Number of human rights nongovernmental organizations	0.72 (0.06)*	2.05 (0.11)	-0.19 (0.05)*	0.83 (0.03)	-0.60 (0.06)*	0.55 (0.03)
Number killed during year	0.00 (0.00)*	0.99 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)*	1.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	
Constant	608.66 (48.88)*	NA	-50.47 (38.08)	NA	-545.63 (58.39)*	NA
Pseudo $R^2$	.59		.09		.38	

NOTE: Standard errors appear in parentheses. NA = not calculable.

\* $p < .01$ .

## MOVEMENTS AGAINST FORGETTING: HUMAN RIGHTS NGOS

Juxtaposed against the situation above, the coverage of human rights violations in NGO documents is not well explained by our model. Approximately 10% of the variance in violation coverage is accounted for. Across most of the independent variables, our expectations are incorrect, and we find that violation characteristics and overall context equally contribute to what little explanatory power exists.

Under what conditions are Guatemalan human rights organizations likely to cover violations? The odds are increased when many people are killed in a particular violation and when the violation occurs in a rural setting. The odds are decreased when the perpetrator is identified and when the event in question is a disappearance. NGOs are thus revealed to be less able and willing to identify violations that are one of the most secretive forms of state repression as well as the actors engaged in repressive activity, but they are very much interested in documenting the largest and arguably the most obvious abuses.

Patterns in NGO coverage are also influenced by different contextual factors—again, in ways that were unexpected by our argument. For example, the level of democracy tends to diminish the odds of violation coverage within human rights documents by 0.75. The number of human rights organizations further decreases coverage by nearly 1. Whereas the former relationship likely captures the fact that fewer human rights violations occur in democratic contexts, the latter finding is probably explained by the fact that, within a democratic country, human rights organizations begin to influence the press, which alleviates some of their organizational mandate.

## WITNESS TO TERROR: CITIZEN ACCOUNTS

We now address the last source investigated by this study—interviews with eyewitnesses. From the model, 38% of the variance in violations reported by this source was accounted for, with most independent variables falling in the expected direction. Empirical findings disclose that rural events are more likely reported within interviews. Indeed, the odds are increased by nearly 50. Commensurate with our hypotheses, individuals who are asked about human rights violations tend to discuss what has taken place within the territory in which they reside. Other violation characteristics are relevant as well. Repression identified by interviewees is more likely to identify perpetrators. This characteristic increases the odds of coverage by 10. Additionally, interviewees are more likely to focus on disappearances, which increase the odds of coverage by 3. The former relationship was not expected because we felt that this issue would have been secondary to the identification of the violation itself. Evidently, however, the identity of the perpetrator is intricately connected with the recollection of the act itself within the interview process; horror imprints memory and does so precisely (Hirsch 1995).<sup>26</sup>

26. Alternatively, the manner in which interviews were conducted brought respondents to the point at which they revealed information about who was responsible.

From our results, several contextual factors are also important for understanding violation coverage within eyewitness testimony, albeit at lower levels of magnitude and again in ways unanticipated by our hypotheses. For example, the degree of democracy in the political system is found to decrease the likelihood that repression is reported by interviews (by nearly 1). Somewhat puzzling is the fact that the increased presence of human rights organizations tends to decrease the odds of violations being identified (by about 1/2).

## CONCLUSION

What have we learned about state repressive activity in Guatemala from our exploration of alternative sources? We offer numerous observations and some questions that alter how one should use sources in efforts to investigate and understand contentious politics.<sup>27</sup>

First, we find that, within the Guatemalan case, different information providers lead those interested in state terror to different aspects of the behavior in question; diverse sources allow (or compel) researchers to ask and answer different types of questions. These aspects are tied to where the observers are situated, how they collect information, and the objectives of the organization with regard to the purposes of compiled data. For instance, newspapers, tied to both urban locales/markets and authorities, tend to highlight events that occur within time periods of excessive state repression (i.e., within years in which the overall number of killings is highest). This identification/distribution occurs predominantly in an environment where the regime is not overly restrictive. These sources become useful in documenting obvious behavior or that which is deemed politically salient within a specified political-geographic context. At the same time, journalistic sources may be relatively weaker at identifying events in more remote areas that occur during periods of relatively less state repressiveness and that are relatively smaller in scale. This characteristic follows the existing literature very well.

In contrast, human rights organizations in Guatemala tend to highlight violations where they are most frequent, most destructive (i.e., where they injure the most individuals at one time), and where the context is most dire (i.e., during historical periods when individuals are generally being killed in the greatest numbers and when political openness is limited). As a result, these sources are useful in comprehensively trying to document human rights abuses—especially those of a particularly destructive nature. It should be noted that there is something of a random element to this coverage, for which we have been unable to account in our statistical investigations.

Finally, interviewees tied inexorably to their homes, loss, revenge, and/or healing tend to highlight events that took place in the area with which they are most familiar (familiarity wanes over time). Interviewees also favor highlighting the perpetrator

27. Of course, many of the comments made above are tentative in nature because our study is fundamentally about one or three cases, depending on how one counts the alternative sources themselves (Lustick 1996). Many questions still remain from this research effort.

who abused the victim(s) and specifically what was done during the violation. As a result, such sources are useful for identifying what happened and who did it within particular locales.

In terms of our understanding of political conflict in general (our second point), the findings suggest that we should not be dismissive of information or research that is based on one source; rather, we should endeavor to understand the limitations of all single-source analyses from a juxtaposition across distinct types. For example, from our investigation, we would conclude that Brockett (1992) is too strong in his criticism of the *World Handbook* (Taylor and Jodice 1983) as being essentially worthless. Rather, we would recast his argument as one that points out that *World Handbook* data are based on sources (the *New York Times* in this case) that focus on urban areas and perform best in relatively open contexts. As a result of this practice, one would need to make sure that reported findings were generalized only to other urban and democratic settings. Without this acknowledgment, one would mischaracterize behavior as either too low or high, depending on the particular regime present at the time. Additionally, if our argument is correct, then analysts should avoid more aggregated compilations and disaggregate data along distinct geographic categories and qualify conclusions about contentious politics along these dimensions.

Our third point returns us to the larger theoretical literature on contentious politics. In this study, we have been examining the distribution of information across distinct sources as they exist within a relatively closed and frequently violent political context. By the end of the period, however, as Guatemala became more democratic, we have found a situation frequently encountered by researchers, especially those of protest (e.g., Beissinger 1998) but also many within the domain of state repression (e.g., Francisco 2000). It is interesting that after the regime has become democratized, human rights organizations account for a relatively smaller proportion of documented violations, and news organizations become relatively more significant, perhaps even the primary venue within which abuses are discussed. This is important because, at this point, the coverage of contentious politics has become subjected to the market-oriented biases identified at the outset (i.e., bizarre and larger events are deemed newsworthy and thus more likely to receive coverage), and specific instances of repression of a more commonplace nature have been ignored.

Many in the literature may consider this a “good situation,” for they would argue that what is covered is important for the state and citizens. On reflection, it is clear that this is problematic, for it renders invisible in many respects those who suffered and struggled through periods of authoritarianism, state terror, and regime change because the aftereffects of Guatemalan repressive behavior are left undisclosed. What happens to the victims of repression when the repression stops? When are past victims once again newsworthy? To these questions, most sources appear to provide no insight whatsoever; indeed, these are “nonevents,” and all three of the sources have no interest in reporting occurrences that lack clear-cut temporal and spatial locales.

As one thinks about the many problems confronted by states/societies that attempt to overcome past injustices with truth and reconciliation efforts, these issues become more and more relevant. When we identify how far the different sources take us into the realm of contentious state-dissident interactions, therefore, we are reminded of

how far we need to go. Perhaps we must move to consider a broader array of state and dissident actions to better situate contentious politics into conventional political behavior (identifying all domestic events before, during, and after contentious events). This would provide us with important information, but it would also point out some of the greatest weaknesses of current data collection efforts: much of what is classified as noncontentious political activity is not newsworthy, and thus we end up ignoring much of the context within which conflict and reconciliation emerge. In a sense, therefore, our conclusion takes us to another level entirely: after analyzing “views to a kill,” we are left with the broader challenge of simply identifying and analyzing “views” to a wider variety of sociopolitical phenomena.

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