



THE STANDS OF DIGNITY AND ESCOTILLA 8

Santiago, Chile

-33.46462, -70.61067



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Executive Summary

Following the military coup against Salvador Allende in September 1973, the Chilean Armed Forces transformed the former stadium of Estadio Nacional Julio Martínez Prádanos into the country's largest detention centre for political prisoners, where abuse was rife. Following the transition to democracy, the Estadio Nacional possessed a complicated status functioning simultaneously as a venue of national importance while also embodying the trauma of thousands of former prisoners. This case study explores how memory groups advocated to create a physical memorial within a space intimately linked to a traumatic past.

Introduction

Following the military coup against the Popular Unity government led by Salvador Allende in September 1973, the Chilean Armed Forces transformed the *Estadio Nacional* (national stadium) Julio Martínez Prádanos into the country's largest detention centre for political prisoners. From September 11th until November 9th 1973, some 20,000 people of all ages (and 38 nationalities) were incarcerated in the stadium and the full 64 hectares of its precinct were employed for the torture, abuse, and execution of prisoners. In 2003, as a result of campaigning efforts by the *Corporación Estadio Nacional Memoria Nacional Ex Prisioneros Políticos* in defiance of conservative calls for its demolition, the stadium was declared a National Historical Monument planning began for a series of monuments, most notably the *Graderías de la Dignidad*, a section of the stands on which prisoners were held prior to interrogation.

Despite this, an internal split within the *Corporación* and disagreements between state institutions over the redevelopment plans extended the planning process by 7 years. Work on the *Graderías* was finally completed in 2015, coinciding with the Copa America, and the stands are now framed by the words: '*Un pueblo sin memoria es un pueblo sin futuro*' (a people without memory is a people without a future). The interior of Escotilla 8 (whose restoration was completed in 2018) houses a memorial which exhibits photographs of prisoners and messages left by them on the walls.

Background

The Estadio Nacional Julio Martínez Prádanos, colloquially known as the '*elefante blanco*' (white elephant), is Chile's national sporting venue located in Ñuñoa, one of the 52 communes of Santiago. First opened on December 3rd 1938, the stadium has a maximum capacity of 80,000 spectators and sits within a 64-hectare sporting complex. On September 11th 1973, a group of military officers led by Augusto Pinochet staged a coup against the Popular Unity government led by Salvador Allende and formed a governing Junta, suspending all political activity and beginning a campaign of repression against left-wing parties and groups. By September 13th, the regime had arrested more than 6,000 individuals (including 2-300 foreigners) suspected of dissident activity or of belonging to a left-wing organisation. The historian Fernando Guzmán Muñoz described the detainees as a microcosm of Chilean society, comprising 'teachers, students, workers, artists, peasants, journalists, priests, civil servants, political activists, housewives, settlers, traders, foreigners, etc.' Lacking space in Santiago's prisons, Interior Minister General Bonilla designated the Estadio Nacional, like many other stadiums in the country, was designated as a centre for detention and interrogation of these new suspects.¹

At its height, according to the Red Cross, 7,000 people were imprisoned there, with the men confined to the wooden stadium stands while women were packed into a changing room in the swimming pool.² While the prisoners waited, fully exposed to the elements, the guards would bring

¹ Fernando Guzmán Muñoz, *Estadio Nacional: La sangre o la esperanza* (Santiago: Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, 2004), 8 and 99-100.

² Proyecto Internacional de Derechos Humanos, "Estadio Nacional," *memoriaviva.com*, 2020.

forward a hooded figure - later revealed to be former socialist activist Juan Muñoz Alarcón - who indicated which suspects were to be removed to the velodrome for torture.³ There they were subjected to a range of torture methods, as summarised by the findings of the National Commission on Political Prisoners and Torture (Valech Commission) which highlights that:

[The detainees] related having been beaten with fists and feet, or with a rubber or iron implement, in some cases even causing fractures; the application of electricity [to the body]; they were tied with their hands behind their backs and tied to a chair; their heads were plunged into a pool of water; women and men also endured rape and sexual harassment.⁴

Prisoners were also suspended from the ceiling from iron bars, subjected to 'the telephone' (blows to both ears with open palms to the point of permanent auditory injury), cigarette burns, trappings by groups of interrogators, and beatings with rifle butts.⁵ Detainees were repeatedly brought before a firing squad only for the soldiers to fire into the air. One detainee, Teresa Anativia, recalled later: In the velodrome, they killed me twice in the same day. I fell in peace, in silence, with faith. Minutes before, I had committed my son to God.⁶

The exact number of those imprisoned and executed in the stadium from September to November 1973 is not known but most estimates place the figure at 20,000 incarcerated with up to 500 being executed. The majority of prisoners were subsequently transferred to other prisons and detention centres throughout Chile.⁷ According to the Valech Commission, 94% of all those imprisoned by the Junta were subjected to torture and almost all of the 3,400 women who testified reported having been raped while in custody.⁸

Anxious to protect the public image of the stadium prior to the qualifying match against the Soviet Union in November 1973, the regime concealed the majority of prisoners below the stands during inspections by FIFA representatives who reported that 'in the interior of the stadium, beyond the exterior walls, everything appears normal.'⁹ This illusion of normality was maintained domestically in Chile until the early 1980s even as testimonials of witnesses and former detainees proliferated abroad. Thereafter, however, organizations reuniting family members such as the Association of Relatives of the Executed (AFEP) began to publish oral testimonies by survivors of the stadium.¹⁰

After the rejection of Pinochet's rule in the 1988 plebiscite, the stadium hosted the *Así me gusta Chile* (Chile the Way I Like It) ceremony marking the transition to democracy in 1990. Despite this,

³ Jorge Montealegre, *Frazadas Del Estadio Nacional* (Santiago: LOM Ediciones, 2003), 147-9.

⁴ Comisión Nacional sobre Prisión Política y Tortura, *Informe de la Comisión Nacional sobre Prisión Política y Tortura (Valech I)* (Salesianos Impresores, February 5, 2005), 440.

⁵ Zachary McKiernan, *The Public History of a Concentration Camp: Historical Tales of Tragedy and Hope at the National Stadium of Chile* (Santa Barbara: University of California, 2014), 60 and 72.

⁶ Jorge Cardona Alzate and Theo González, "La gradería de la dignidad," *Elespectador*, June 29, 2015.

⁷ Peter Read and Marivic Wyndham, "Carved Cherubs Frolicking in a Sunny Stream: The National Stadium," in *Narrow But Endlessly Deep: The Struggle for Memorialisation in Chile since the Transition to Democracy* (ANU Press, 2016), 60.

⁸ Comisión Nacional sobre Prisión Política y Tortura, *Informe de la Comisión Nacional sobre Prisión Política y Tortura (Valech I)* (Salesianos Impresores, February 5, 2005), 6.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Zachary McKiernan, *The Public History of a Concentration Camp: Historical Tales of Tragedy and Hope at the National Stadium of Chile* (Santa Barbara: University of California, 2014), 76-79 and 104.

official histories during the 90s generally ignored the previous role of the stadium in the interests of maintaining a narrative of reconciliation. The stadium continued to be used as both a sporting and entertainment venue, hosting the Rolling Stones, Paul McCartney, Elton John, and Madonna, as well as the 1991 Copa América.¹¹

History of the Contestation

The site's decaying condition prompted inconclusive governmental discussions over its possible demolition or restoration. In 1998, the conservative mayor of Ñuñoa, Pedro Sabat, inspected the venue and declared it to be 'in a lamentable state of deterioration... [with] serious structural failures,' before proposing its demolition and replacement with an urban polo field.¹² This proposal provoked an outcry from many activists and intellectuals and galvanized efforts to have the site declared a National Monument.¹³

The first effort to memorialise the stadium was made in 2001, coinciding with the 28th anniversary of the beginning of the coup. The documentary filmmaker Carmen Luz Parot wrote to the CEO of ChileDeportes to suggest the erection of two memorial plaques, one by the main entrance and the other on the velodrome. Despite receiving no reply, two AFEP activists fixed a plaque beside the main entrance at a considerable height in order to prevent vandalism. It read:

Between the 11th of September and the 7th of November 1973, the National Stadium of Chile was used as a concentration camp, and place of torture and death. More than 12,000 political prisoners were detained here without charge or process.

In memory of all those who suffered within its walls and those who hoped, in the darkness, to see the light of justice and liberty.¹⁴

Carmen Luz Parot's documentary *Estadio Nacional* was released in 2003 together with the efforts of Judge Juan Guzman Tapia to investigate the death of Charles Horman in the stadium, both of which drew extensively on witness testimony, strengthened efforts to declare the site a National Monument. A nine-person National Stadium Committee was formed under the leadership of Congresswoman Carolina Tohá who issued a letter demanding the stadium's designation as a National Monument to the Council of National Monuments in April 2003, citing Mayor Sabat's repeated calls for its demolition. This was approved on September 11th 2003 which secured the preservation of the site for the next seven years and appointed a team of heritage consultants to plan further memorialisation projects. Mayor Sabat responded that: 'The national monument declaration is so subjective that it has even been given to vacant lots where supposedly there was torture. So at this point, one can expect anything. The stadium has plenty of independent merits

¹¹ Ibid., 20 ; Peter Read and Marivic Wyndham, "Carved Cherubs Frolicking in a Sunny Stream: The National Stadium," in *Narrow But Endlessly Deep: The Struggle for Memorialisation in Chile since the Transition to Democracy* (ANU Press, 2016), 61-2.

¹² Zachary McKiernan, *The Public History of a Concentration Camp: Historical Tales of Tragedy and Hope at the National Stadium of Chile* (Santa Barbara :University of California, 2014), 152-3.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Peter Read and Marivic Wyndham, "Carved Cherubs Frolicking in a Sunny Stream: The National Stadium," in *Narrow But Endlessly Deep: The Struggle for Memorialisation in Chile since the Transition to Democracy* (ANU Press, 2016), 66-72.

whether it was a detention center or not.¹⁵

Just over two weeks later, the Valech Commission was created by presidential decree. Its findings, based on 35,865 testimonies, were made public in 2005 and described in detail the use of the stadium as a detention centre, making the recommendation that:

[I]t is important that an open museum of memory is established [in the Estadio Nacional] and that the state devotes all the resources that are necessary so that these projects are realized and are made permanent.¹⁶

The team of heritage consultants (known as the National Stadium, National Memory Committee) was led by Wally Kunstmann, President of the Metropolitan branch of the organization of Political Prisoners, who began creating a blueprint for an 'Open Museum Site for Memory and Homage'. This entailed creating a carefully choreographed route for visitors beginning in the women's detention room in the swimming pool, entering the stadium to view the prisoner's inscriptions in Escotilla 8, and finishing in the velodrome which would contain a 3D display. The plans also called for a Museum of Memory to be constructed beside the velodrome.

From the outset, however, the entire project was beset by factionalism. Even prior to the stadium's declaration as a National Monument, two members of the heritage committee - the architects Claudia Woywood and Marcelo Rodríguez - had issued an independent proposal for a memorial which recognised the stadium's wider architectural and cultural value.¹⁷ This 'Rodríguez Plan' consisted of 8 separate 'memory tunnels' each situated around the most critical sites, such as Escotilla 8.¹⁸ The Committee rejected this and both Woywood and Rodríguez were expelled but continued to present their plans to the Council of National Monuments despite the protests of Kunstmann and the Metropolitan branch of the organization of Political Prisoners. The latter maintained the right of the surviving victims to realize the project, as one such - Lelia Pérez - declared to Woywood and Rodríguez during a joint-meeting: 'I was in the bathrooms... you aren't anybody to make a [museum] project at that place.'¹⁹

To add to this, ChileDeportes, who had formal jurisdiction over the stadium, issued plans in 2004 to fully renovate and beautify the stadium and its surroundings but made no mention of allowances for preserving sites of memory or incorporating a museum. This prompted the intervention of the Council of National Monuments who insisted the renovation plans comply with the stadium's

¹⁵ Zachary McKiernan, *The Public History of a Concentration Camp: Historical Tales of Tragedy and Hope at the National Stadium of Chile* (Santa Barbara: University of California, 2014), 150-4; Peter Read and Marivic Wyndham, "Carved Cherubs Frolicking in a Sunny Stream: The National Stadium," in *Narrow But Endlessly Deep: The Struggle for Memorialisation in Chile since the Transition to Democracy* (ANU Press, 2016), 69-70.

¹⁶ Comisión Nacional sobre Prisión Política y Tortura, *Informe de la Comisión Nacional sobre Prisión Política y Tortura (Valech I)* (Salesianos Impresores, February 5, 2005), 155.

¹⁷ Zachary McKiernan, *The Public History of a Concentration Camp: Historical Tales of Tragedy and Hope at the National Stadium of Chile* (Santa Barbara: University of California, 2014), 172-4.

¹⁸ Peter Read and Marivic Wyndham, "Carved Cherubs Frolicking in a Sunny Stream: The National Stadium," in *Narrow But Endlessly Deep: The Struggle for Memorialisation in Chile since the Transition to Democracy* (ANU Press, 2016), 74.

¹⁹ Zachary McKiernan, *The Public History of a Concentration Camp: Historical Tales of Tragedy and Hope at the National Stadium of Chile* (Santa Barbara: University of California, 2014), 189.

National Monument status. After seven years of disputes and negotiations between all parties concerned (during which time no physical memorialisation work was undertaken besides piecemeal preservation efforts), Kunstmann's National Stadium, National Memory project was approved by the government of Michelle Bachelet on February 24th 2010.²⁰

Following the publication of these plans, voices were raised in protest - most notably the 10th September Movement (a pro-Pinochet activist group) who condemned efforts 'to turn Marxists into Martyrs.'²¹ In 2010, the journalist Veronica Torres voiced concerns that neither the government nor wider society 'deserved' the memorial since both lacked sensitivity towards historical memory.²² According to Read and Wyndham ChileDeportes was also indifferent to the project, focusing instead on plans for the 2015 Copa América.²³

Despite this, National Stadium, National Memory was able to use its governmental approval to secure funding for their memorialisation efforts. Escotilla 8, whose inscriptions had been preserved, was opened to the public in 2010 and became a focal point for National Stadium, National Memory's guided tours.²⁴ In 2014 a display area was added to the women's detention centre while a mural by the artist Guillermo Núñez was erected on Avenida Grecia in the same year.²⁵

On July 23rd 2015, just prior to the final of the Copa América, an inauguration ceremony was held for the restored *Graderías de la Dignidad*. Which now consists of 13 original wooden benches from the dictatorship period, which are framed by the illuminated words '*Un pueblo sin memoria es un pueblo sin futuro*' (a people without memory is a people without a future) - a slogan used extensively by the National Stadium committee during their petition campaigns to the Council of National Monuments. In the presence of the Director of the National Institute for Human Rights (INDH), the Minister of Sport and the Sub-secretary of the Interior, Wally Kunstmann delivered a speech praising this 'wonderful restoration' demonstrating that 'people should remember their mistakes to avoid repeating them.'²⁶ Following further intervention work to maintain the prisoner messages, Escotilla 8 was also re-opened on April 20th 2018 in a ceremony attended by the Minister of Culture, Arts and Heritage, Consuelo Valdés who reiterated that 'preserving these types of sites is an ethical duty, because they support the memory of those who suffered, besides being a symbolic repair effort.'²⁷

²⁰ Zachary McKiernan, *The Public History of a Concentration Camp: Historical Tales of Tragedy and Hope at the National Stadium of Chile* (Santa Barbara: University of California, 2014), 174-9; For dispute with ChileDeportes, see Zachary McKiernan, *The Public History of a Concentration Camp: Historical Tales of Tragedy and Hope at the National Stadium of Chile* (Santa Barbara: University of California, 2014), 180-9.

²¹ Peter Read and Marivic Wyndham, "Carved Cherubs Frolicking in a Sunny Stream: The National Stadium," in *Narrow But Endlessly Deep: The Struggle for Memorialisation in Chile since the Transition to Democracy* (ANU Press, 2016), 72.

²² Verónica Torres, "Los Escritos de Los Presos Políticos Del Estadio Nacional: El Pergamino, La Lámpara y La Canción de Bebo," *Clinic*, November 10, 2010.

²³ Peter Read and Marivic Wyndham, "Carved Cherubs Frolicking in a Sunny Stream: The National Stadium," in *Narrow But Endlessly Deep: The Struggle for Memorialisation in Chile since the Transition to Democracy* (ANU Press, 2016), 74.

²⁴ Ñuñoa en Movimiento, "11 septiembre de 2010: ESTADIO NACIONAL - MEMORIA NACIONAL," *Ñuñoa en Movimiento*, September 9, 2010.

²⁵ Estadio Nacional Memoria Nacional, "Memoriales," 2020.

²⁶ Fernando Espina, "INDH participa en la inauguración de las obras realizadas en las graderías del memorial del Estadio Nacional," *INDH*, July 27, 2015.

²⁷ Cultura, "Ministra Valdés inaugura restauración de la Escotilla 8 del Estadio Nacional," *Cultura*, December 20, 2018.

Decision-Making Processes

The initial reluctance to commemorate the stadium's use as a concentration camp following the fall of the dictatorship can be traced to a desire by successive Concertación governments to avoid endangering the process of social reconciliation. As a consequence, much of the initial impetus came from grassroots memory groups responding to demolition threats by Mayor Pedro Sabat, such as the Association of Relatives of the Executed (AFEP) and the Metropolitan branch of the organization of Political Prisoners (RMEPP), along with notable individuals such as Congresswomen Carolina Tohá and documentarian Carmen Luz Parot. Even following the stadium's designation as a National Monument in 2003, the government provided neither financial nor institutional support to carry the project forward. In the words of the historian Zachary McKiernan:

In many ways, the national monument designation bookended the state's commitment to the memory of human rights violations at the stadium, and it was the grassroots activists who were left to sustain it. The state took credit for the monument, civil society responsible for the museum.²⁸

This relative indifference of state institutions, particularly ChileDeportes, placed an excessive burden of responsibility on the National Stadium, National Memory committee which was then compounded by the actions of Claudia Woywood and Marcelo Rodríguez. Their alternative plan - which arguably differed only in small ways to that of Kunstmann - created needless confusion in the decision-making process which would be dragged out for seven years as the Council of National Monuments, the National Stadium committee, ChileDeportes, and Woywood and Rodríguez struggled to impose a singular re-development plan for the stadium.

Dynamics to consider include Post-dictatorship reconciliation policies and narratives, opinions of local government, coordination (or lack thereof) between state institutions and civil society, factionalism in grassroots movements, lack of state funding, changing opinions of wider society, multiple uses and understandings of historical monuments and spaces.

Summary and Conclusions

The Estadio Nacional possessed a complicated status following the transition to democracy, functioning simultaneously as a venue of national importance while also embodying the trauma of thousands of former prisoners of the military Junta. A concerted effort by historical memory groups to secure the preservation of the site ran up against not only criticism from conservative figures but also a governmental failure to fully supervise and support memorialization efforts. An internal split within the National Stadium, National Memory committee exacerbated such problems and extended the planning process considerably. Despite this, physical memorials were eventually constructed with state assistance from 2014 onwards and now form a public and inescapable reminder of the

²⁸ Zachary McKiernan, *The Public History of a Concentration Camp: Historical Tales of Tragedy and Hope at the National Stadium of Chile* (Santa Barbara: University of California, 2014), 179.

stadium's legacy.

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Figures

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About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

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