

Narration, documents and testimonies of forced adoptions in Chile: reflections from a research history

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Abstract

Studying the present time poses a major challenge to the relationship between history and justice, especially in those processes that are still open and in which there are no official records or they are not contained in the truth reports. This article seeks to think through a research history on forced adoptions in Chile, around the materials, tensions, and relationship with justice over these years. Our main general questions were: what are the main issues in accessing archives of the past-present? Which role do oral sources and memory archives play today? And what possibilities and issues are associated with the use of social media as repositories of testimonies and non-traditional sources? Along with these, we specifically ask ourselves about: what are the contributions of the subject history to grasping forced adoptions in Chile? And what challenges does research in this field of study face? With this paper, presented in the V International Seminar on History of the Present Time, we seek to address these questions from a research history.

Keywords: present time; dictatorship; forced adoptions.

Narración, documentos y testimonios de las adopciones forzadas en Chile: reflexiones de una trayectoria de investigación

Resumen

El estudio del tiempo presente supone un importante desafío de la relación entre la historia y la justicia, en especial en aquellos procesos aún abiertos y en los que incluso no se encuentran registros oficiales o no están contenidos en los informes de verdad. Este artículo busca reflexionar a partir de una trayectoria de investigación sobre adopciones forzadas en Chile, en torno a los materiales, las tensiones y la relación con la justicia a lo largo de estos años. Nos planteamos como principales interrogantes generales: ¿cuáles son los principales problemas en el acceso a archivos del pasado-presente? ¿Qué rol cumplen hoy las fuentes orales y los archivos de la memoria? Y ¿qué posibilidades y problemáticas se asocian a los usos de las redes sociales como repositorios de testimonios y fuentes no tradicionales? Junto con estos, de manera específica nos interrogamos sobre: ¿cuáles son los aportes de la disciplina de la historia en la comprensión de las adopciones forzadas ocurridas en Chile? Y ¿qué desafíos enfrenta la investigación en este campo de estudio? Buscamos a partir de este trabajo presentado en el V Seminario Internacional de Historia del Tiempo Presente, abordar dichas interrogantes de una trayectoria investigativa.

Palabras clave: tiempo presente; dictadura; adopciones forzadas.

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Introduction

In Hannah Arendt's great work entitled *Eichmann en Jerusalén*, the author reminds us of the relevance of testimony, especially in the face of attempts to erase material evidence of past events, she points out: "Exchanges of oblivion do not exist. No human work is perfect, and, on the other hand, there are too many people in the world for oblivion to be possible" (Arendt, 2023, p. 339). Despite attempts to erase the traces of history, evidence prevails over oblivion. Along with this, the testimonies of various generations of victims are of great relevance to the narration of history. At some point, memories prevail and allow us to illuminate the past; that is the beginning in the past, the beginning of reconstructing the events.

History appears whenever an event occurs that is important enough to illuminate its past. Then the chaotic mass of past events emerges as a story that can be told, because it has a beginning and an end. What the illuminating event reveals is a beginning in the past that was hitherto hidden; in the eyes of the historian, the illuminating event cannot but appear as the end of this newly discovered beginning (Arendt, 1995, p. 41).

It is this notion of *beginning* that we are interested in exploring in this paper, which reflects on a research history, based on the theoretical and methodological implications in investigating the *forced adoptions* that took place in Chile, mainly in the 1970s and 1980s. It is of particular interest in this study to highlight the particularities of research in the field of recent history, understood through the notion of open pasts that are turned to the present (Franco; Levín, 2007).

The 'recent past' is one of the most prolific and dynamic fields of research in the Latin American historiographical agenda, whose contributions have significantly enriched the understanding of the history of violence, human rights violations, and the main historical fractures that took place mainly after the establishment of military dictatorships in the Southern Cone.

The various issues addressed by these investigations have ignited the debate around archives and sources of the 'recent past,' highlighting both the complexities of accessing sources of repression and the challenges of working

with documents and testimonies of victims, a situation that has deepened as archival awareness and new reflections from historical practice have been strengthened (Caimari, 2017; Markarian, 2016). This is of great relevance, given the nature of studying the ‘past-present,’ which also implies a particular link between history and justice, a relationship traditionally strained by debates around the role of the historian as a judge in historiographical work.

For the reasons stated above, the question about documents, textures, and materials in the historiographic making of the present time has become a relevant area, making analyses and scales more complex and challenging ethical commitments in historical research. Faced with the fragmentation and concealment of the ‘archives of horror,’ Human Rights organisations and groups have been working for decades to promote the creation of archives of memory and the collection of documents. This movement to create archives has expanded its impact through digital media and the use of social media for their dissemination, imposing relevant challenges for historical research. What has been named in recent decades ‘born-digital documents’ (SIK, 2019) is of special interest to this study, and personal documents, built through autobiographical exercises of preserving materials of various kinds. Personal archives offer us clues about everyday issues of private life, which are relevant to the complex understanding of relationships and issues of society.

This scenario of autonomous production of documents and information, outside of official archives, poses theoretical, ethical, and methodological challenges that challenge historical research.

In this article we propose to account for some of the complexities described, based on the reflection of a research history around the forced adoption of Chilean girls and boys, practices that intensified mainly during the context of the civil and military dictatorship in Chile.

The beginning in the past: testimony of Orfelina and Alejandro

Orfelina and Alejandro’s history (Alfaro Monsalve, 2018) may be understood as a beginning in the past, a family history that I had the opportunity

to learn about since 2014, where, based on their testimonies, I began to ask myself about the nature of forced adoptions in recent history. In one of the first interviews I conducted with Orfelina, she told me about the impact that having been forcibly separated from her son had had on her life:

I am a mother of 5 children and the guardian of a girl with Down syndrome, I was moved by the situation I had experienced, because when I became a mother at 14, my son was taken away from me and he was presumed dead [...] At 11 at night, when I went to see my son, he was no longer there. I went out and asked the lady in the room: Where is my son? I thought that by having one child after another I would fill the void that he had left... (Entrevista a Orfelina Quezada, 2015)

In September 1979, Orfelina Quezada, at the age of 14, gave birth to her son Iván Alejandro. The birth took place at her home, on the Los Venados farm, on the road to Futrono, in a rural area in southern Chile, which at the time was a regular practice with the assistance of a midwife. After giving birth, she experienced complications and was transferred to a nearby hospital in the town of Paillaco, where she was admitted with her son. The Dutch nun Gertrudis Kuijpers arrived at the hospital and cared for the mother from the very beginning. When night fell, and after breastfeeding her baby twice, Orfelina was informed that her son had died and had been thrown into a mass grave, so the child's body was not handed over. The mother says that this information was provided by Gertrudis Kuijpers herself. The next day she was transferred to the town of La Unión where, under the pretext of carrying out "*the procedures for the minor's death*," Orfelina attended in the company of her mother to sign a series of documents, completely unaware of the situation she was going through.

After the events described, she only had further information about Sister Gertrudis when, in 1997, she arrived at her home with a young man who told her that he was her son Iván Alejandro. After staying for only 15 minutes in the household, they left, without allowing any exchange between mother and son, since due to language barriers, they were unable to communicate adequately in that first meeting.

Alejandro was adopted in the Netherlands by a married couple and was recognized as Iván Gabriel De Boer. As a teenager, he became worried about being different from his siblings and discovered that he was adopted. His adoptive parents contacted the nun so that she could accompany them to Chile to find their son's family of origin. Only when he learned Spanish and was able to contact her again did he discover that he was not “*voluntarily handed over*,” as he had been told, but that he was taken from his mother at birth.

When I met Alejandro and Orfelina, he had come to Chile along with his wife and children, with the aim of strengthening ties with his family and his culture. At that time, one of the consequences he faced because of the irregularities of his adoption was the impossibility of recognizing children while in Chile, since their Dutch identity did not communicate with their Chilean one. In short, Alejandro Quezada and Iván De Boer were two different people.

It was during this process that I began to gather documentation that would help regularize his legal situation in the country. In this way, I reviewed various archives in the region, until I found the case in the town of La Unión, filed by a social worker from the municipality of Paillaco, in which the granting of custody to Gertrudis on behalf of the adoptive family took place.

The story of Orfelina and Alejandro became a matter of public interest, and the various dimensions and responsibilities of a forced adoption case were conveyed by the press. After that, various testimonies began to appear on public television, mainly from mothers looking for their sons and daughters, women who saw themselves represented in Orfelina's testimony.

Orfelina's story allowed us to shed light on the stories of hundreds of women who faced contexts of poverty and institutional vulnerability. Being single mothers at an early age, they were seen under the family mandates of the military dictatorship as a danger to the gender order.

Forced adoptions of Chilean girls and boys

After learning the story of Alejandro and Orfelina, and resorting to various testimonies of mothers who reported having undergone the abduction of a child

in the river region of Chile, I became interested in studying their life history and finding out what made this widespread practice possible in the country.

During this period, the Agrupación Hijos y Madres del Silencio was founded, an organization that brings together many people affected by forced adoptions, mainly international ones. This group initially gained visibility as a *Facebook* group, in which the life history of people looking for children and of adopted people looking for their families of origin is shared. To make the stories created through this social media platform visible, there are 'search pictures,' a printer in which a photograph and the basic information associated with the people being searched for are recorded (year of birth, hospital, municipality, name, etc.). Relevant information in the search pictures consist in indicating whether people underwent a DNA test, since this mechanism facilitates the reunion processes.

Initially, the searching mothers included a photograph and some document, such as a birth certificate. In the case of adopted children, the documentation that accompanied their search pictures were passports with their childhood photograph, adoption documents, among other documents that accounted for the bureaucratic procedures involved with these adoptions.

In this *Facebook* group, the asymmetry in documentation was evident, since mainly the searching mothers have not been able to access documentation from the civil registries. This is limited by the regulatory framework that ruled adoptions, given the validity of Law No. 16346, which established adoptive legitimation: if a child was legitimized by an adoptive family, all documentation related to his/her biological origin had to be destroyed in the public records. This measure was based on the notion that adoption should remain secret, and that this condition guaranteed the adoptive family's stability (Salvo, 2018).

Given the aforementioned issue, many searching mothers do not currently have their children's documents or records; they only have their testimony and memories regarding the moment of birth and the conditions in which they were separated from their children. In this way, the role of activism has been key to public and political position on forced adoptions, resorting to key references associated with the search for origins, such as the non-governmental organization (NGO) Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, in Argentina (Gesteira *et al.*, 2021).

Since 2014, a series of reports from searching mothers (Alfaro Monsalve, 2022) have emerged in the media, with women's life history appearing in public spaces, permeated by separation from their children, either at the time of giving birth, in a daycare center, or in a facility for girls and boys. The circumstances in which these acts took place were permeated by the participation of public system officials, social workers, doctors, family judges, among other players who were part of a network consisting of civilians and military personnel who acted throughout the country. Given the lack of documentary evidence from the mothers, the value of their testimonies and the information contained in their memoirs were crucial.

In this research history, I have had the opportunity to support the filing of complaints, collaborating in the writing of these accounts of permanent abduction of girls and boys. Based on these complaints, I was able to notice that most of the reported cases were concentrated in the 1970s and 80s, and specifically between 1975-1982, a period that acquired great relevance in terms of promoting public policy in the military regime, a key regulatory framework for these forced practices. This was corroborated in an interview with a social worker, who managed many adoptions abroad; she repeatedly pointed out during the interview that “everything was legal and carried out under the policies of that period.”

In parallel to working with oral sources, I began the work of reviewing archives. In the documents from various ministries, I was able to verify that the situation of adoptions abroad was indeed a matter recorded in the official letters and documentation of that time, detailing the main destinations, names of girls and boys, and passport numbers of those who left the country. The characteristic that is repeated in most of the registered cases is that they correspond to children of single mothers, which at the time meant having only the mother's surname.

In 2017, an investigation led by the prominent jurist Mario Carroza was initiated, a case that has since brought together the various complaints associated with “irregular adoptions.” That same year, a special commission of the House of Representatives was established, chaired by Deputy Boris Barrera, who submitted to the authorities the *Informe de la Comisión Especial Investigadora de los Actos*

de Organismos del Estado, en relación con eventuales irregularidades en procesos de adopción e inscripción de menores, y control de su salida del país (CHAMBER OF DEPUTIES OF CHILE, 2018). This report contains some of the conclusions of the research that I have managed to conduct on forced adoptions, especially the attention to the dictatorial period, because it concentrated the largest number of cases.

One of the peculiarities of recent history is the link between historical research work and justice, a situation that I have had the opportunity to learn about through my own experience during these years of research. Since there is an open case, I have been required by the Investigative Police to hand over all the documentary material that I have managed to gather throughout these years of research. One of the notifications made by the then minister of the case, Jaime Balmaceda, took place after I was interviewed by national media; the document reads as follows:

In case Rol N° 1.044-2.018 Main Notebook, substantiated by the undersigned in Extraordinary Visit, followed by the crimes of illegal adoptions and abduction of minors, it has been decreed to notify you to report on the background contained in the reports of Bío Bío Chile and the electronic portal Interferencia of last October 28. Likewise, it is requested that you accompany the investigation called "Salvar la infancia pobre. Apropiaciones y adopciones internacionales de niño/as bajo la dictadura militar en Chile (1973-1990)," and a copy of the documents considered in view to reach the conclusions pointed out therein (Oficio N° 1.517-2021).

Faced with this request from the judiciary, I had to send all the requested documentation, a situation that left me with the question of what happens with confidentiality in the case of historical research? Unlike the existing protection for journalists, guaranteed in the press and media laws, in Chile there is no similar regulation for historians. I think it is a challenge to be able to discuss this issue, especially given the nature of research associated with the field of recent history, permeated by these sensitive plots in which revealing the truth about the past has major implications in the lives of those seeking justice.

The media followed the various advances in the investigations and stories of reunion began to appear in various towns throughout the country. Following the major role of the media in making the issue visible, various documentaries,

movies, and photographic exhibitions have challenged public opinion. I have had the opportunity to contribute to various works that have the value of conveying, from other languages, history; one of these works is that carried out by the outstanding documentary filmmaker Cristián Leighton, under the title *Adoptados. La historia que nos falta*, shown on public television in 2023. This work allowed a public discussion on the issue in the country to be opened.

This year, the aforementioned Minister Balmaceda was removed from the investigation into irregular adoptions, after issuing statements in the newspaper *El País* where he said that despite all the available evidence: “In the five years of investigation I have not been able to establish that there was a crime” (Laborde, 2024). These statements caused great indignation in the institutions that filed the case and in the victims’ groups, which asked the Minister of Justice to remove him. Currently, Minister Guillermo de la Barra is responsible for investigating this issue that affected hundreds of people.

This year, President Gabriel Boric announced the creation of an inter-institutional working group to advance collaboration between public institutions to clarify the responsibilities existing in the management of forced adoptions. This announcement has generated great expectations among those affected, especially as a hope for hundreds of elderly mothers who hope to be able to embrace their children who were taken from them.

Conclusions

This paper has allowed me to systematize the concerns of the profession in a research history permeated by the commitment to narrate the history of forced adoptions in Chile. From this text I highlight some final reflections that I consider relevant to the field of recent history.

Firstly, in relation to the dynamics of time frames, navigating recent history places us in a complex plot between the intersections of the public and the private spheres, and the building of research issues involved in the dispute over the story about the past. In this way, social listening to our historical time and paying attention to the beginning in the past are of great relevance to isolate ourselves from certainties and focus on the search for historicity.

Secondly, I would like to highlight the contributions of the feminist approach in historical research, which allows us to put into question the traditional categorical canon and the writing of history. I think it is crucial that feminist listening allows us to focus on other dimensions of historical time, highlighting the intersections of life experience between the public and the private spheres. Recognizing in this case women's history within the framework of a genealogy, others always existed before. This makes great sense in activism, to analyze in the medium and long terms the shared repertoires of mobilization, especially for this study in the field of Human Rights.

Thirdly, in relation to sources, we wonder if all or any trace becomes a historical source? Especially in the field of history of the present time, not all the information is in the documents, nor are all the documents contained in the official archives. In this way, we may speak of fragmented sources, clues that remained or traveled along with girls and boys who were adopted. The possibilities offered today by technologies such as social media and other digital media, mainly managed by activism, are of great relevance as democratizing devices for public discourse. However, they add a complex dimension to the free use of information, which not only has an ethical aspect, but also implies putting into question the authority of those who investigate these materials.

Finally, in relation to ethics and the uniqueness of history of the present time, in this study I have shown the particularities of investigating the past around an issue that occupies the public situation. It seems to me that there are major challenges to address as an academic community of researchers, especially in times when theoretical and political boundaries are strained by the current issues of society.

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