

The forms and dynamics of political violence in apartheid-era South Africa: Findings and testimonies from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

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Abstract: *This article analyzes the experiences of victims of political violence in South Africa during the apartheid era, with a particular focus on the period between 1960 and 1994. The study is grounded in the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The analysis encompasses enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detentions, torture, severe ill-treatment, forced displacements, and systemic repression targeting women, children, youth, and religious communities. Additionally, it addresses violence committed by liberation movements and political factions opposing the state apparatus. Particular emphasis is placed on the blurring of boundaries between victims and perpetrators, as well as the justification of violence through the paradigm of a "state of war." The conclusions indicate that the legacy of apartheid extends beyond the memory of direct victims to include unresolved issues regarding exhumations, the prosecution of perpetrators, and reparations.*

Keywords: *apartheid; South Africa; Truth and Reconciliation Commission; political violence; victims; enforced disappearances; torture; human rights.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Apartheid was a system of institutional racial segregation, the maintenance of which necessitated an extensive legal, administrative, and security apparatus¹. The authorities utilized measures such as arrests, the banning of political activities, torture, forced displacements, and violence against political opponents. Rather than eliminating resistance, these repressions contributed to its radicalization. The conflict involved state security forces—primarily the South African Police, the Security Branch, and the South African Defence Force (SADF)—as well as the African National Congress (ANC), the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), the United Democratic Front (UDF), the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), and other organizations². Established in 1995 under the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was tasked with documenting gross human rights violations, hearing the testimonies of both victims and perpetrators, and laying the groundwork for a reconciliation process. Its documentation demonstrates that violence was a systemic phenomenon, yet its manifestations varied depending on the gender, age, location, political affiliation, and social standing of the victims³.

2. MISSING AND MURDERED:

Abductions and enforced disappearances constituted one of the most severe forms of political violence. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) compiled over 1,500 testimonies concerning individuals who had disappeared or gone missing following prior abduction; the fate of approximately 477 remained unknown⁴. The majority of these cases were concentrated in the Transvaal and Natal regions between 1985 and 1994. Approximately 90%

¹ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, 1998, Report, Vol. 1, p. 24–28.

² Ibidem.

³ Ibidem.

⁴ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, 1998, Report, Vol. 6, p.514–519.

of the reported missing were men, with youth constituting a particularly large proportion. Over 70% of individuals with established political affiliations sympathized with liberation movements, underscoring the extent of targeted repression directed at the opposition⁵

The Commission distinguished between enforced disappearances and abductions carried out by the state security apparatus, disappearances in exile, disappearances during periods of civil unrest, cases falling outside its mandate, and instances of undetermined cause⁶. The mechanism of abductions also extended to extraterritorial operations beyond South Africa's borders. The case of Moss Morudu illustrates a typical pattern: the victim was lured under the pretext of contacting a liberation organization, subsequently detained, tortured, and killed, with the body subsequently concealed or destroyed. Concurrently, a portion of the disappearances was linked to the conflict between the ANC/UDF and the IFP, highlighting the multi-faceted nature of the violence⁷.

Killings encompassed both the targeted elimination of political opponents and civilian fatalities resulting from armed actions⁸. The TRC accounted for political assassinations, executions, and other forced deaths. The most common methods of killing were shootings and knife attacks; however, beatings, arson, poisonings, drownings, electrocution, and "necklacing" were also documented. Young men predominated among the victims, with a high concentration of cases attributed to the ANC, the IFP, and the South African Police⁹.

The issue of disappearances did not conclude with the political transition¹⁰. Established in 2005, the Missing Persons Task Team (MPTT) was tasked with conducting searches, exhumations, and the identification of human remains. Nevertheless, a lack of resources, legal constraints, and institutional delays hindered the fulfillment of this mandate. Civil society organizations also emphasized that the TRC's mandate failed to encompass all cases linked to apartheid-era violence¹¹.

The psychological dimension of disappearances is equally significant¹². Families received no information regarding whether their loved one had been killed, was living in exile, or remained in hiding. This prolonged uncertainty functioned as a form of ongoing psychological violence, while the absence of a body precluded traditional burial rites and frequently complicated legal and estate matters. For individuals missing outside South Africa, the problem was further compounded by the clandestine nature of political activism; families were often unaware of the whereabouts or destination of their relatives, and subsequent, incomplete information was frequently contradictory¹³.

After 2005, the MPTT aimed to restore a public dimension to the cases of the missing: to locate remains, establish identity, and return them to their families¹⁴. These efforts held not only evidentiary significance but also profound symbolic weight. Recovering the body made it possible to end the state of uncertainty and demonstrate that the post-apartheid state acknowledged the families' suffering as part of its public responsibility¹⁵.

3. DETAINED AND TORTURED:

Detention served as one of the primary instruments of social control¹⁶. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission indicated that approximately 80,000 South Africans were detained between 1960 and 1990, the vast majority of whom were released without charge. Detentions were utilized for interrogation, intimidation, the isolation of entire communities, and the suppression of political activity. Particularly severe were detentions without trial, which enabled the authorities to prolong the isolation of political opponents without standard judicial guarantees¹⁷.

Torture was inflicted within prisons, police cells, and other detention facilities¹⁸. The TRC documented beatings, electrocution, burning, deprivation of food and medical care, mock executions, solitary confinement, threats, disinformation, sexual violence, and other forms of physical and psychological abuse. Men aged 13 to 36 constituted

⁵ Ibidem.

⁶ Ibidem, p. 520-524.

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, 1998. Report, Vol. 3, p. 4–10.

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ Aronson, 2011, The strengths and limitations of South Africa's search for apartheid-era missing persons.

¹¹ Ibidem.

¹² Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, 1998, Report, Vol. 4, p. 270–274.

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ Aronson, 2011, The strengths and limitations of South Africa's search for apartheid-era missing

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, 1998, Report, Vol. 4, p. 201–206.

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, 1998, Report, Vol. 5, p. 16–20.

the largest demographic among torture victims. The South African Police were most frequently identified among the perpetrators, though violence was also committed by non-state organizations¹⁹.

A distinct category comprised "severe ill-treatment," encompassing attempted murder and acts causing extreme physical or psychological suffering²⁰. This included beatings, shootings, arson, stabbings, sexual assaults, suffocation, and "necklacing." The scale of these violations demonstrates that violence was not confined to formal places of detention, but rather permeated daily life. In many instances, repression also carried an economic and social dimension: job loss, family harassment, surveillance, and property destruction were employed to deter political involvement²¹. Conditions of detention constituted an integral component of the repressive apparatus. Restricted access to medical practitioners, inadequate treatment, and the obstruction of hospitalization linked the deprivation of liberty with physical and health control²².

Agricultural labor prisons, where detainees could be subjected to forced labor, also held significant institutional weight²³. This system combined punitive repression with the economic exploitation of the Black population. The history of these facilities illustrates that the apartheid apparatus operated not only through high-profile acts of violence, but also through mundane administrative practices that subjected the population's daily life, labor, and movement to state control²⁴.

4. WOMEN, CHILDREN AND YOUTH:

The experiences of women did not fit neatly into a model of violence focused exclusively on direct political combat²⁵. Women were detained, tortured, intimidated, and subjected to sexual abuse. Emotional blackmail served as a particularly key instrument of pressure: threats directed against children and other family members heightened the efficacy of interrogations. Concurrently, sexual violence functioned as a mechanism of humiliation and subjugation²⁶.

Children and youth constituted one of the most prominent groups of victims²⁷. For specific analyses, the TRC adopted the age cohort of 13 to 24 years, as young people in this bracket experienced similar forms of violence and were frequently present in protests, schools, and political structures. Repression encompassed student arrests, police occupations of schools, the deployment of tear gas, and physical beatings. Educational institutions, serving as spaces for anti-apartheid mobilization, were frequently treated by the state as sites of political threat²⁸.

However, youth were not merely passive victims²⁹. A portion of young people joined liberation organizations, formed self-defense units, or participated in retaliatory violence. Others were recruited by pro-government structures or the police force. This dynamic exacerbated the breakdown of social cohesion and complicated the clear categorization of perpetrators versus victims. The TRC documentation records individuals who simultaneously experienced violence and perpetrated it themselves³⁰.

Repression against youth carried profound intergenerational consequences³¹. Children witnessed the arrest of their parents, localized violence in their communities, and the physical presence of security officers within schools. Intergenerational trust eroded, as young people were simultaneously dependent on adults and drawn directly into political conflicts. In certain communities, children actively participated in patrols, public demonstrations, or self-defense actions³². Schools emerged as particularly vital battlegrounds. School boycotts and protests against Bantu Education developed in direct response to the discriminatory nature of the educational system. The state countered

¹⁹ Ibidem.

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 22-23.

²¹ Ibidem.

²² Ibidem.

²³ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, 1998, Report, Vol. 4, p. 206–211.

²⁴ Ibidem.

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 208–305.

²⁶ Ibidem.

²⁷ Ibidem, p. 254-264.

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 254-270.

³⁰ Ibidem.

³¹ Ibidem, p. 262-271.

³² Ibidem.

with police occupations, student detentions, and the use of force. From the perspective of the youth, violence was not a distant political phenomenon, but an everyday reality permeating the home, the street, and the classroom³³.

5. DISPLACED PERSONS AND REFUGEES:

Apartheid also generated forms of spatial violence³⁴. Forced removals deprived individuals of their homes, livelihoods, and community ties, aiming to reconfigure space in accordance with the state's racial ideology. The scale of these displacements was vast, with consequences extending far beyond the immediate moment of eviction. Internal migrations and political exile fractured families and severely disrupted social connections³⁵. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission also highlighted the plight of individuals compelled to flee the country. Many exiles joined liberation organizations, some perished under unexplained circumstances, and others did not return following the political transition in 1990. The lack of information regarding the fate of relatives induced a persistent state of uncertainty among families, mirroring the psychological trauma experienced by those affected by enforced disappearances³⁶.

6. PERSECUTED:

Political violence also encompassed measures that did not necessarily culminate in death or prolonged imprisonment³⁷. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission documented threats, harassment, surveillance, terminations of employment, property destruction, physical assaults, sexual violence, the deployment of tear gas, theft, and the detention of family members. These categories are significant because they demonstrate that the objective of repression extended beyond the physical elimination of opponents to compelling their withdrawal from public life³⁸. Harassment manifested through police visits, targeted telephone calls, ongoing surveillance, and threats directed at domestic animals or loved ones. These actions sustained a persistent state of insecurity. Victims could not anticipate when the next intrusion would occur, thereby enhancing the efficacy of state control³⁹. In numerous instances, repression spilled over from the individual to the entire family unit. The intimidation of parents functioned to curtail the activism of their children, while threats leveled against children were utilized to coerce activists into ceasing their political engagements⁴⁰.

The destruction of property and residential dwellings held particular structural significance⁴¹. The home, intended as a sphere of safety, frequently became the target of police raids, arson, or attacks by rival political factions. In this manner, violence directly dismantled the fundamental sense of stability. Victims lost not only material assets, but also the physical sanctuary necessary to protect their families⁴².

Consequently, repression operated across physical, psychological, economic, and social dimensions. Their cumulative impact was the restriction of public participation and the erosion of social ties that could otherwise serve as a basis for organizing resistance⁴³.

7. SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS AND THE STATE:

Repression extended into institutions that were not directly involved in political conflict⁴⁴. Religious communities experienced discrimination, surveillance, and forced displacement, with certain churches actively supporting state policy or reinforcing societal divisions. Concurrently, other faith-based groups emerged as key centers of anti-apartheid

³³ Ibidem.

³⁴ Platzky & Walker, 1984, p. 1-2.

³⁵ Ibidem.

³⁶ Ibidem.

³⁷ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, 1998, Report, Vol. 5, p. 125–140.

³⁸ Ibidem.

³⁹ Ibidem.

⁴⁰ Ibidem.

⁴¹ Ibidem, p. 249–261.

⁴² Ibidem.

⁴³ Ibidem.

⁴⁴ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, 1998, Report, Vol. 4, p. 65–77.

resistance. The TRC highlighted both the role of religious rhetoric in legitimizing segregation and the vital contribution of religious institutions to the subsequent reconciliation process⁴⁵.

The healthcare sector constituted another critical area of inquiry⁴⁶. TRC documentation reveals instances of medical neglect toward detainees as well as the unethical application of medical knowledge in torture practices. Certain physicians and medical personnel assisted in evaluating the physical limits of victims, concealing signs of abuse, or enhancing the efficacy of interrogations. This phenomenon demonstrates that the repressive regime co-opted specialized social institutions beyond the conventional military and police apparatus⁴⁷.

The judiciary similarly operated within the mechanics of the system⁴⁸. The TRC examined its role in perpetuating state ideology, detailing the linkages between the legal framework, security apparatus, and repressive practices. While this does not imply that every legal professional acted unlawfully, it underscores how the legal framework itself provided the structural mechanisms enabling sustained human rights violations⁴⁹.

Religious justifications for apartheid illustrate that the regime did not rely solely on coercion⁵⁰. Certain ecclesiastical institutions shaped the discourse that legitimized racial segregation, whereas others served as spaces of resistance. A comparable tension existed within medicine and the judiciary: professions grounded in ethical standards were either instrumentalized by the state or sought to constrain its overreach⁵¹.

Institutional repression thus functioned on two levels: through direct violence against individuals and through the subordination of institutions intended to protect them. In this manner, political violence secured a durable social foundation.

8. VICTIMS OR PERPETRATORS:

One of the most complex interpretive problems involves the blurring of the boundary between victim and perpetrator⁵². In a conflict where the state justified repression as a necessary defense against "terrorism," while certain opposition organizations framed violence as an indispensable element of the liberation struggle, similar arguments could serve to justify human rights violations on both sides. Consequently, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission did not limit its inquiry to state-sanctioned violence, but systematically documented abuses committed by the ANC, PAC, IFP and other organizations⁵³.

The concept of the "grey zone" is of particular analytical significance⁵⁴. It encompassed, among others, the *askaris*—former members of liberation movements who, under torture or coercive pressure, collaborated with the state security apparatus—as well as young conscripts, *Kitskonstabels* officers, and other individuals operating under severe institutional pressure. While this context does not negate accountability for acts committed, it demonstrates that any comprehensive analysis of political violence must account for coercion, indoctrination, and the institutional conditions under which decisions were made⁵⁵. The invocation of a "state of war" served as a primary mechanism for rationalizing violence. The state depicted the opposition as a threat to national security, whereas movement actors perceived armed actions as a direct response to systemic state violence. As a result, political adversaries were re-conceptualized as "enemies" who could be stripped of individual moral status. The TRC demonstrated that this logic actively facilitated the escalation of violence and systemic dehumanization⁵⁶.

Cases involving individuals situated at the intersection of victimhood and perpetrator status require careful interpretative caution⁵⁷. A collaborative agent working for the Security Branch may have previously been subjected to detention and torture before participating in the repression of others. Similarly, a young conscript might have undergone heavy

⁴⁵ Ibidem.

⁴⁶ Ibidem, p. 115-136.

⁴⁷ Ibidem.

⁴⁸ Ibidem, p. 65-77.

⁴⁹ Ibidem.

⁵⁰ Ibidem.

⁵¹ Ibidem.

⁵² Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, 1998, Report, Vol. 5, p. 218–245.

⁵³ Ibidem.

⁵⁴ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, 1998, Report, Vol. 1, p. 115–130

⁵⁵ Ibidem.

⁵⁶ Ibidem.

⁵⁷ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, 1998, Report, Vol. 5, p. 273–280.

indoctrination and institutional pressure while simultaneously carrying out orders that resulted in human rights violations. In both instances, the prior experience of violence does not absolve moral or legal responsibility, but it clarifies the structural conditions driving its reproduction⁵⁸. The Commission thus sought to integrate the documentation of specific acts with a broader contextual analysis. Its amnesty procedure hinged upon the full disclosure of the facts and the political motivation underlying each act. Rather than relieving the moral burden of responsibility, this model was designed to reconstruct the underlying mechanisms of violence. In this respect, the TRC served simultaneously as an archival institution and as a public forum for confronting divergent historical narratives⁵⁹.

9. OTHER SELECTED CASES:

Individual narratives demonstrate that statistical categories fail to fully capture the lived experience of political violence. Steve Biko died in 1977 following severe torture, becoming an enduring symbol of resistance against apartheid⁶⁰. Sphiwe Mthimkulu, who was repeatedly detained and tortured, suffered debilitating health consequences after being poisoned with thallium before ultimately being murdered by state security forces⁶¹. These cases illustrate the continuity of repression: detention often marked the beginning of prolonged physical trauma, while the victim's death did not bring an end to the family's suffering⁶².

A contrasting case is that of Jeffrey Benzien, a Security Branch officer who publicly demonstrated the wet-bag torture technique during his amnesty hearing⁶³. Conversely, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela was simultaneously a target of state persecution and an individual to whom the TRC attributed responsibility for gross human rights violations. These instances vividly exemplify the "grey zones" and the inherent difficulty of constructing unambiguous moral categories⁶⁴. Nelson Mandela and the ANC similarly illustrate the complexity of historical evaluation⁶⁵. The struggle against apartheid encompassed political resistance followed by the formation of Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), its armed wing. Although Mandela was imprisoned for 27 years, the actions of the ANC were not devoid of violence. Mandela's subsequent international acclaim as a symbol of peaceful transition should not obscure this multifaceted history⁶⁶.

10. VIOLENCE ACROSS MULTIPLE FACTIONS OF THE CONFLICT:

The findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission demonstrate that political violence cannot be reduced to the actions of a single actor⁶⁷. However, because the state commanded vastly superior resources and exercised legislative power, its responsibility for establishing the structural conditions of violence remained unique. The Commission documented operations of the Security Branch, actions by the South African Defence Force (SADF), the role of the State Security Council, and the political accountability of the highest echelons of government. At the same time, the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and other organizations engaged in violence against political opponents, with localized conflicts in KwaZulu/Natal escalating into prolonged social strife⁶⁸. Liberation organizations such as the African National Congress (ANC), Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), and the United Democratic Front (UDF) likewise committed human rights violations. The Commission investigated killings, torture, abuses within detention camps and interrogation sites, as well as actions directed against individuals designated as traitors by their own organizations⁶⁹.

⁵⁸ Ibidem.

⁵⁹ Ibidem.

⁶⁰ Wawrzyński, 2016, p. 190.

⁶¹ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, 1998, Report, Vol. 4, p. 260.

⁶² Ibidem.

⁶³ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, 1998, Report, Vol. 5, p. 125–135.

⁶⁴ Ibidem.

⁶⁵ Elliott, 2019, Why anti-apartheid hero Nelson Mandela was once labelled a terrorist,

⁶⁶ Ibidem.

⁶⁷ Ibidem, p. 229–245.

⁶⁸ Ibidem.

⁶⁹ Ibidem.

The extraterritorial dimension of the conflict constituted another critical area of inquiry⁷⁰. SADF operations in neighboring states and the exile activities of Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) demonstrated that apartheid-related violence operated on a regional scale. The case of Kassinga, where over 600 people were killed in 1978, illustrates the contested nature of military operations: while authorities justified the assault by pointing to the presence of guerrillas, the TRC underscored the heavy civilian casualties among refugees within the broader framework of state security policy⁷¹.

The political transition initiated in the late 1980s and accelerated following the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990 did not lead to an immediate cessation of violence⁷². The assassination of Chris Hani in 1993 underscored the fragility of the negotiation process. At the same time, the history of Mandela and the ANC highlights that any assessment of liberation movements requires balancing their struggle against apartheid with instances of violent conduct⁷³.

The TRC documented abuses by the ANC within its exile camps and organizational structures, including instances of torture, extrajudicial killings, and severe repression of suspected infiltrators⁷⁴. Regarding the PAC, the Commission analyzed attacks targeting civilians, police officers, and traditional authorities. In the case of the IFP, attention centered on the intense political violence concentrated in KwaZulu/Natal⁷⁵.

Juxtaposing these varied accounts does not serve to relativize the primary responsibility of the state. On the contrary, it illuminates the systemic nature of a conflict in which state violence coexisted with violence perpetrated by social and political entities. For victims, ideological distinctions between factions were often secondary to immediate physical threats, as neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces were transformed into arenas of conflict.

11. THE TRC AS A SOURCE OF KNOWLEDGE:

The TRC Final Report represents a unique primary source for the study of political violence, as it synthesizes statistical data, witness testimony, institutional documentation, and perpetrator hearings⁷⁶. This methodology enables scholars to contextualize the macro-scale of violence alongside individual experience. At the same time, the Commission's materials possess inherent limitations: not all victims submitted statements, extensive state documentation was destroyed prior to the transition, and the TRC's mandate was temporally restricted and focused primarily on politically motivated gross violations. Consequently, not every disappearance could be formally linked to state or political action⁷⁷. These methodological constraints are particularly evident regarding missing persons. Families often lacked sufficient information, while witnesses were frequently reluctant to identify perpetrators. Thus, the figures presented in the report ought to be interpreted as a documented subset of a broader phenomenon⁷⁸.

A foundational element of the TRC's methodology was the analytical distinction between a violation and its perpetrator⁷⁹. While the Commission attributed institutional responsibility to organizations, it systematically analyzed the specific roles played by individuals, institutions, and command structures. Ultimately, the report illuminates the complex intersections between state policy, localized conflicts, organizational behavior, and individual experience⁸⁰.

12. PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF VIOLENCE:

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission emphasized that the ramifications of gross human rights violations did not cease with the termination of direct physical violence⁸¹. Victims frequently experienced enduring psychological trauma, debilitating health impairments, loss of livelihood, and the breakdown of familial relationships. Children raised in environments characterized by pervasive violence internalized fear and institutional distrust, while the families

⁷⁰ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, 1998, Report, Vol. 2, p. 3–10.

⁷¹ Ibidem.

⁷² Elliott, 2019, Why anti-apartheid hero Nelson Mandela was once labelled a terrorist.

⁷³ Ibidem.

⁷⁴ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, 1998, Report, Vol. 5, p. 229–245

⁷⁵ Ibidem.

⁷⁶ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, 1998, Report, Vol. 4, p. 60–85.

⁷⁷ Ibidem.

⁷⁸ Ibidem.

⁷⁹ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, 1998, Report, Vol. 6, p. 514–529.

⁸⁰ Ibidem.

⁸¹ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, 1998, Report, Vol. 5, p. 125–140.

of murdered or missing persons remained burdened by the ongoing pursuit of information and official recognition⁸². Social consequences extended to the erosion of institutional trust. When law enforcement, judicial bodies, medical personnel, or religious leaders actively participated in repression—or remained passive in its presence—victims lost faith in the neutrality of public institutions. Consequently, post-1994 institutional restoration necessitated not merely legislative reform, but also the formal acknowledgement of historical responsibility⁸³.

The reconciliation process encompassed dimensions far broader than the prosecution of individual perpetrators⁸⁴. It required engaging collective memory, vindicating the rights of victims' families, preserving archival records, and undertaking symbolic measures. The TRC effectively transitioned private experiences of suffering into the public sphere, integrating them into the official national narrative⁸⁵.

Reconciliation cannot be equated solely with the cessation of violent conflict⁸⁶. For the families of the missing and deceased, critical imperatives remain: the exhumation and identification of human remains, access to historical archives, official acknowledgement of injustice, and material reparations. The Khulumani Support Group highlighted that a substantial number of cases fell outside the full operational scope of the TRC, leading to a widespread perception of the reparations process as incomplete⁸⁷.

From the perspective of victims, truth possesses an inherently practical dimension. Information regarding the fate of a family member, the recovery of remains, and the identification of responsible parties are essential to the recognition of suffering. Institutional delays serve only to perpetuate state-induced uncertainty.

13. SUMMARY:

An analysis of TRC documentation reveals that political violence in South Africa was all-encompassing and multidimensional⁸⁸. It encompassed enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, torture, arbitrary detention, severe ill-treatment, forced displacement, and symbolic violence. While young men and youth aged 13–24 constituted the primary victims of direct physical encounters and state repression, the lived experiences of women, children, families of the disappeared, refugees, and religious communities demonstrate the much broader reach of the system⁸⁹.

The most significant analytical conclusion is the necessity of moving beyond a simplistic dichotomy of "victims" and "perpetrators." While state violence was structural—leveraging the legal framework, security apparatus, and administrative machinery—other parties to the conflict likewise committed severe human rights violations. The concepts of a "state of war" and "total war" enabled combatants across factions to frame violence as an imperative. The TRC successfully exposed the underlying mechanisms through which such rationalizations precipitated the dehumanization of political adversaries.

The process of transitional justice did not conclude with the publication of the Commission's Final Report. Delays in exhumations, forensic identification, criminal prosecutions, and the disbursement of reparations mean that many families continue to await resolution. The legacy of apartheid thus encompasses both the memory of violence and an ongoing demand for truth, justice, and the restoration of dignity to all direct and indirect victims and their families.

The Commission ultimately left a dual legacy: an extensive record of testimony and personal narratives, alongside unresolved questions of legal accountability and redress. It is precisely this tension between truth revealed and justice incompletely realized that defines the landscape of post-apartheid memory.

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⁸² Ibidem.

⁸³ Ibidem.

⁸⁴ Khulumani Support Group, 2015, p.12-15..

⁸⁵ Ibidem.

⁸⁶ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, 1998, Report, Vol. 5, p. 215–245.

⁸⁷ Ibidem. Khulumani Support Group, 2015, p. 12-15

⁸⁸ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, 1998, Report, Vol. 4, p. 255–260.

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