

“Why is a nice girl like you working on a topic like this?” I have received this question more times than I can count in some form or another since I began this project. At first my answer focused on my personal and physical distance from these political matters. I argued that it was precisely because I had not experienced anything remotely like this political violence that I could work on it. That critical distance, however, broke down after spending years working with perpetrators, victims, and survivors, video and photo archives of violence, and confessional and testimonial accounts. While I still had not directly experienced authoritarian state violence, violence and violators formed a large part of my life. Now I have to honestly reply that I did not understand the emotional and physical toll that such a study would have on me. But I have learned a lot along the way. I hope that this project contributes to a comprehension that political violence affects all of us once we begin to acknowledge it. I also hope that it encourages less silence and more combative dialogue to challenge the legitimacy of state-authorized violence.

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To all of you who know me, it won’t surprise you that I conclude with the idea of “contentious coexistence.” I have to thank my three older brothers Gary, Steve, and Randy, my sister Sara, and my parents for providing ample opportunities to sharpen my dialogic combat weapons while I was growing up. I dedicate this book, however, to my husband Steve and my children Zack and Abbe, who endure contentious coexistence in our home. It has not been easy. We have not always reached consensus or achieved reasonable deliberation. But in case contentious coexistence gets in the way of my expressing myself clearly, please know that I love you forever and unconditionally.

Now that it is time for me to move on and leave this project behind, I find myself missing it. I am not sure I’ll miss talking, reading, and writing about torture, killing, and the deep emotional pain of surviving it. I will, however, miss the intensity and the passion that so often gets left out of contemporary academic studies of political life. Fortunately, or unfortunately, many dramatic and irreconcilable conflicts await future study.