

Routledge Critical Terrorism Studies

NARRATIVES OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE

LIFE STORIES OF FORMER MILITANTS

Raquel da Silva



Narratives of Political Violence

An exploration of how political violence is constructed; this book presents the life stories of individuals once committed to political transformation through violent means in Portugal.

Challenging simplistic conceptualisations about the actors of violence, this book examines issues of temporality, gender and interpersonal dynamics in the study of political violence. It is the first comprehensive case study of political violence in Portugal, based on the perspectives of former militants. These are individuals from different political spheres who became convinced that they could not be mere spectators of the circumstances of their times. For them, the only viable way of making a difference was through violent acts. Applying the Dialogical Self Theory to trace the identity positions underpinning their narratives, this book not only sheds light on radicalisation and deradicalisation processes at the individual level, but also on the meso- and macro-level contexts that instigate engagement with and encourage disengagement from armed organisations.

This book will be of interest to students and scholars of critical terrorism studies, political violence, European history and security studies more generally.

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Life Stories of Former Militants

Raquel da Silva

First published 2019
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

A catalog record has been requested for this book

ISBN: 978-1-138-54252-5 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-351-00840-2 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Taylor & Francis Books

Dedication: For Carla Machado, who planted the seed of this book; and for Filipe, whose steadfast support allowed me to make it a reality.

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Acknowledgements

This book is the result of having dedicated a good part of the last decade of my life to the study of political violence in Portugal. I want to start by thanking all the Portuguese women and men who shared their life stories with me. I thank them for their trust, empathy and respect. I am also thankful to the Foundation for Science and Technology which funded much of the research for this book.

Throughout this journey, the unwavering support of several people has been essential to keep me going, to keep me sane and to keep me joyful. I am very grateful to Nicolas Lemay-Hébert, whose role as dissertation advisor and mentor has been invaluable. He has never been too busy to care for my project, to listen to me or to help me work out what to do next. His energy and passion are contagious and I am very fortunate to have knocked on the right door!

I want to thank Richard Jackson for supporting this project from day one and for all the useful advice which led me not only to turn my doctoral dissertation into a book, but to develop my research further through this book. This was also made possible through the work I developed with the amazing team of researchers from the Change Processes in Psychotherapy Research Group at the University of Minho, Portugal, in particular Catarina Rosa, Joana Silva, Pablo Fernández-Navarro, and Miguel M. Gonçalves. They introduced me to Dialogical Self Theory and helped me to take the first steps towards the analytical framework developed in this book. Their support has proved indispensable.

The relationship with the fantastic people at the Centre for Narrative Research at the University of East London – Molly Andrews, Cigdem Esin, Aura Lounasmaa, to name just a few – has also been a source of motivation. Their annual postgraduate research conference – “To Think is to Experiment” – provided a venue to test my ideas, gain inspiration and learn more about narrative research. The same applies to the ConnectFutures team – Zubeda Limbada, Laura Zahra McDonald, and Lynn Davis. I admire their commitment to social justice and thank them for welcoming me into the team, and for their friendship and ongoing support. I am also very grateful to Jeremy Hollow and Michael Jaxa-Chamiec from Listen and Learn Research,

who over the years have been infinitely patient and kind to me. Working with them helped me grow as a researcher and as a team member. I thank them for their example and for all the fun we have had together.

I also want to thank all the people who gave me feedback on my writing at various stages: Airi Lampinen, Josefin Graef, Ruth Densham, Diana Quigley, Molly Andrews, Paul Jackson, Catarina Rosa, Miguel M. Gonçalves, Jon Catling, Monica Pinilla-Roncancio, Debs Condy, Susanna Samson, Julia Cole, Rosey Meiring, Emily Lange, Paddy Greenleaf, Sanne Weber, Megan Armstrong, Laura Zahra McDonald, Lynn Davis, Simon De Lay, Tom Hewitt, and Lou Carter. A big thank you to Alexandre Cardoso, who took the time to understand my rough sketches of figures and tables, then helped me improve them.

Parts of Chapter 3 appeared in: Da Silva, R. (2017) 'Narrative resources and political violence: the life stories of former clandestine militants in Portugal', *Contemporary Social Sciences*, 12(1–2), pp. 40–51, © Academy of Social Sciences, reprinted by permission of Taylor & Francis Ltd (www.tandfonline.com) on behalf of the Academy of Social Sciences. Parts of Chapter 5 appeared in: Da Silva, R., Fernández-Navarro, P., Gonçalves, M. M., Rosa, C. and Silva, J. (2018) 'Disengagement from political violence and deradicalisation: a narrative-dialogical perspective', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, doi: 10.1080/1057610X.2018.1452709, © Academy of Social Sciences, reprinted by permission of Taylor & Francis Ltd (www.tandfonline.com) on behalf of the Academy of Social Sciences. I am grateful to Taylor and Francis for permission to use the material in this book, and to my co-authors of the second article.

Without the moral and practical support of my family and friends, writing this book would never have been possible. I am very thankful for each one of them and for everything they have done for me. I want to thank in particular Ruth and John Mountford for their acts of love and kindness towards me and my family. They are our English family and Ruth bakes the best chocolate cake ever! Ellen O'Brien has also been a great source of support and encouragement. There are no words to thank my mother and my parents-in-law for all the childcare they have done while I worked on this book and for all their love and support. Last but not least, I thank Filipe and Gabriel, who are immeasurably more than all I asked or imagined.

List of abbreviations

| | |
|---------|--|
| ARA | <i>Acção Revolucionária Armada</i> / Revolutionary Armed Action |
| BR | <i>Brigadas Revolucionárias</i> / Revolutionary Brigades |
| CTS | Critical Terrorism Studies |
| DST | Dialogical Self Theory |
| ELP | <i>Exército de Libertação de Portugal</i> / Portuguese Liberation Army |
| FP-25 | <i>Forças Populares 25 de Abril</i> / Popular Forces of 25 April |
| FRELIMO | <i>Frente de Libertação de Moçambique</i> / Mozambique's Liberation Front |
| LUAR | <i>Liga de Unidade e Acção Revolucionária</i> / League of Unity and Revolutionary Action |
| MDLP | <i>Movimento Democrático para a Libertação de Portugal</i> / Democratic Movement for the Liberation of Portugal |
| MFA | <i>Movimento das Forças Armadas</i> / Armed Forces Movement |
| MPLA | <i>Movimento para a Libertação de Angola</i> / Movement for the Liberation of Angola |
| PAIGC | <i>Partido Africano para a Independência da Guiné e de Cabo Verde</i> / African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde |
| PCP | <i>Partido Comunista Português</i> / Portuguese Communist Party |
| PREC | <i>Processo Revolucionário em Curso</i> / Ongoing Revolutionary Process |
| PRP/BR | <i>Partido Revolucionário do Proletariado/Brigadas Revolucionárias</i> / Revolutionary Party of the Proletariat/Revolutionary Brigades |
| PSD | <i>Partido Social Democrata</i> / Social Democratic Party |
| UNITA | <i>União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola</i> / National Union for the Total Independence of Angola |

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Introduction

Artur: the journey to being a martyr-hero

Artur starts by telling me that his village was “very Catholic” and “very *salazarista*”, which means that almost everyone supported Salazar’s authoritarian regime known as the *Estado Novo* (literally “New State”). The same applied to his family:

From my father’s side, there was a priest ... and there was also a nun ... and one part of my family was *salazarista*, fascist, and pro-Hitler during the war. The other part was republican, secular, and social democrat. And then there was my father, who was more communist.

His father had been an immigrant in the United States of America, which seemed to have influenced his political views. According to Artur, “Whoever went to the Soviet Union would come back right-wing, reactionary, and fascist. Whoever went to the capital of entrepreneurship, to the United States, would return half communist, which happened to my father”. At home, his father would talk about the Soviet Union and even had a picture of Lenin on the wall, despite nobody knowing who he was, but he never talked about the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP): “Probably he feared that I would associate myself with the Communist Party and then something could happen to me”. However, his father’s fears became reality when in 1959 Artur joined the PCP, and in 1964 he went underground to found the party’s armed arm, the ARA (Acção Revolucionária Armada / Revolutionary Armed Action).

Artur’s decision was motivated by his views on the contextual circumstances of his time, the existence of an oppressive regime – the *Estado Novo* – that had been in power for almost forty years, not allowing any form of alternative political choice and violently repressing any dissidents. However, even with such a context in mind, Artur considered that going underground was “a very violent thing” – an expression that describes a very difficult experience, both emotionally and physically. Making such a choice completely disrupts one’s life:

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[I]t was a very difficult decision in my life, because I knew what I was getting involved in, and what I was leaving behind – my family, all my friends, not friendship in itself, but relationships with people, leaving my degree unfinished ... [W]ell, it would be a radical change in my life.

Nevertheless, Artur believes that his choice was justified because of the position he occupied in that particular moment in time and space, in that particular context which framed the decision to commit his life to a clandestine, politically violent organisation. This was a position that made him choose “martyrdom” of his self-interests for a greater good:

In all wars, there is always one of those heroes, a martyr-hero, who instantly throws himself onto the grenade that is about to blow up to save the fifteen or twenty comrades fighting around him. So, these things are highly dependent on context, aren't they?

Afonso: defending against communism

Afonso believes the political education he received at home prevented him from embarking on the “ideological drifts” that happened to some young people after the revolution of 25 April 1974. Such a revolution brought the *Estado Novo* regime to an end and put in place a process towards the establishment of democracy. At his home, during mealtimes, the family did not discuss money or other people, but there were plenty of topics of conversation: “International politics was one of the themes that my father used to develop. My mother talked more about religion. She was a great activist in social work”.

Afonso also believes that his military training and participation in the Colonial War were push factors in the context of his involvement with the ELP (Exército de Libertação de Portugal / Portuguese Liberation Army) after the revolution. For him, the Colonial War was about “defence missions” liberating both the settlers and the natives from the extreme violence of the communist guerrilla movements, which were undermining the great work done by the Portuguese regime in the development of the colonies. From his position as a military man, defending his nation, Afonso could not accept the decolonisation process that took place after the revolution. What is more, on his return to Portugal, he found that “things that had nothing to do with democracy” were taking place, which put the country “in a situation of open violence”. He thought “the situation was getting out of hand” because the PCP was clearly already commanding operations in Portugal. However, the problem was that “the Portuguese people, who were not communist, were afraid”. Therefore, he felt it necessary “to prove that the PCP was a minority, that the PCP could be made afraid, if necessary, and that the majority of the Portuguese people was not communist”.

Afonso acknowledges that the ELP aimed to drag the populace into revolt and target PCP's headquarters, in order to prove that “the Portuguese people were not communist” and did not want communism installed in Portugal.

However, at the same time, he emphasises that the ELP followed Christian principles, so gratuitous violence was not an option. Thus, he feels that his organisation was faithful to higher principles and defended a righteous cause, leaving him with a clear conscience and a belief that he fulfilled his obligations: “I am glad to have been able to do what I did, both in the military and afterwards. I even take a certain pride in it”.

Mariana: a natural disposition to a violent response

When asked what made her “available” to the armed struggle, Mariana answers that she had been available since she was born. She was “born and bred in fascism”, which, in her opinion, accounted for a “very reactionary training”. At the origin of her political awareness she places her mother’s tales of a republican grandfather who was “systematically arrested”. Mariana’s mother’s intention was to discourage her children’s involvement in politics, but the stories only increased their curiosity and enthusiasm. Then came the death of her father, which caused the family to become intimately acquainted with financial hardship, and, finally, her involvement with the very active and oppositional student movement: “I was having political meetings at age fourteen, listening to Zeca Afonso¹ and reading Trotsky’s books in secret”.

All of this helped to convince Mariana that she possessed “a natural predisposition to respond” to social injustice. Unlike her friends at school, she “used to think about stuff” and used her “head for something else besides growing hair”. Social injustice, such as that perpetrated during the Colonial War, bothered her, as did incidents at home, especially the political police’s assassination of the law student Ribeiro dos Santos in 1972. This event precipitated Mariana’s first arrest at the age of fourteen because she was caught sticking up a poster of Dos Santos. She was also very politically active at school, where she was involved in “all school wars”, and made preparations for the revolution that she believed was inevitable: “At secondary school, I was always part of student organisations. When 25 April came, I was waiting for it. There were rumours. I was sixteen and I knew; I was organised. So, when 25 April happened, I was more than available!”

This availability took the form of Mariana’s involvement with a couple of radical left-wing (but legal) political parties from the age of sixteen, and her subsequent recruitment to an armed organisation at the age of nineteen, which made her very proud. She always believed that violence was essential for social and political change and that pacifism was disappointing. Thus, she supported ETA, the IRA, and the Red Brigades until she had an opportunity to participate in the struggle herself. In this vein, she proudly affirms:

I did not stay at home waiting for something to fall from the sky. I went to war, I took part in the struggle. I fought, I was there, I did not stay put. I did it all, me and my partner. We gave everything we could give.

Outline of this study

These and other life stories of former politically violent militants in Portugal are the topic of this book. Individual radical dispositions are often deemed as the primary drivers of political violence. However, when such dispositions are disconnected from biographical experiences and contextual factors, the result may be flat and limited descriptions and explanations that lack the complexity and richness of intertwined individual, social, cultural, political, and historical processes. Thus, the theorisation of the life stories of former politically violent militants is a new and welcome development in the political violence literature. As such, this book is about much more than specific life stories. It represents a case study that contributes to our understanding of politically motivated violence within different socio-political contexts, extending the findings of earlier studies that have incorporated the perspectives of the politically violent militants (see, e.g., Horgan, 2009; Toros, 2012; della Porta, 2013; Heath-Kelly, 2013).

Why do individuals engage in violent militancy? How are they radicalised? Why do men and women commit their lives to politically violent organisations? Why do they ultimately leave violence behind? Can they be deradicalised? The answers to these questions are not linear, but life story scholars consider that individuals respond to the conditions and stimuli of their environment in ways that are consistent with the storylines of their lives. In other words, they behave in ways that are consistent with the perceptions they hold about themselves, others and their political, social, cultural, economic, and historical milieu (see, e.g., McAdams, 2008). Such perceptions are generated by a personal cultural repertoire, which is influenced by the “early narrative environment of the family”, by the stories individuals access while growing up (Wang and Brockmeier, 2002, p. 54), and by the social interactions that occur across their life course (Elder, 1994). Thus, individuals’ perceptions differ significantly according to the cultural resources that are available to them (Ochs and Capps, 1996; Brockmeier, 2009).

Through the stories of Artur, Afonso, and Mariana, it is possible to see how historical moments and places shaped their political awareness, influencing their engagement with an armed organisation. Both Artur and Afonso reached their youth during the *Estado Novo* regime. However, while Artur was brought up in an environment that offered him some anti-regime notions, Afonso was raised by supporters of Salazar. Artur went to university, which was an environment populated by oppositional political narratives. Afonso chose a military career and went on to defend the Portuguese colonies in Africa. Later, Artur (whom I consider a pre-revolution militant) founded an armed organisation to overthrow the regime and end the Colonial War, while Afonso (whom I consider a counter-revolution militant) founded an armed organisation to stop a potential communist takeover of Portugal following the April Revolution. Thus, although they belonged to the same generation, pre- and counter-revolution militants chose to “work up the material of their common experiences in different and specific ways” (Mannheim, 1952,

p. 304). Finally, Mariana (whom I consider a post-revolution militant) built her narrative identity through seeing herself as a “product” of the April Revolution – which took place when she was very young – and all of the intense political activity and political narratives that surrounded it. She was strongly influenced by the cultural meanings of her environment, which in turn influenced the course of her life story (Brockmeier, 2009) and crafted the episodic particulars of her autobiographical memory, shaping her narrative identity (McAdams and McLean, 2013). Throughout their adolescence and youth, Artur, Afonso, and Mariana used their contextual variables as building blocks to form their life stories, moulding their personal narratives according to the moment in history when they were living (Habermas and Hatiboğlu, 2014).

This book is motivated by two goals. First, I intend to give centre stage to the life stories of individuals who were once committed to political transformation via violent means in Portugal. These individuals were convinced that they could not be mere spectators of the political circumstances of their times. For them, the only viable way to make a difference was through violent acts. Therefore, I provide a platform for individuals whose voices are typically not heard or taken into account, and whose lives represent narratives that are usually excluded from official histories. Irrespective of the reasons for such exclusion, be they related to stronger ideological tales taking precedence or to the teller’s character being considered dubious, politically motivated violence perpetrated by non-state actors did take place in Portugal and it did not appear out of thin air.

My second goal in writing this book is to provide a dialogical narrative identity analytical framework to make sense of the life stories of former politically violent militants. Such a framework is composed of three distinctive drivers of individual agency in the context of political violence: engagement with, life within, and disengagement from a politically violent organisation. This framework is underpinned by the analysis of life stories of former militants in light of Dialogical Self Theory (DST). This may be applied to different cases in order to analyse and understand politically violent militancy in the context of the broader life stories of its actors, as well as the political narratives surrounding them. I believe that by focusing on the journeys of involvement with, life within, and disengagement from a politically violent organisation (i.e., micro-level context) it is possible to shed light on radicalisation and deradicalisation processes at the individual level, but also on the macro- and meso-level contexts that instigate engagement with and encourage disengagement from armed organisations.

In order to achieve these goals, this book takes on board the perspectives of twenty-eight former politically violent militants who belonged to a total of six different armed organisations. Four of these organisations leaned towards the left of the political spectrum and two to the right. Three were active prior to the revolution of 25 April 1974, in dictatorial conditions. The other three were active after the revolution, in democratic conditions. The variety of

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organisations and people under study reveals that this is a complex topic; hence, this book reflects a diversity of experiences and understandings and explores the socio-political specificities of a country at a time when it was the scene of violent conflict.

In this vein, by exploring how politically motivated violence came to form part of several individuals' life courses, I examine the contexts that surrounded their militancy (e.g., historical – forty years of an oppressive regime; social – growing up listening to tales of family resistance); what their past militancy, and in some cases present activism, means for them (e.g., martyrdom of personal interests in order to achieve a greater good); how it impacted on their lives in different moments (e.g., while living underground, after release from prison); and how a few women, against all societal expectations, including in some cases the expectations of their own male comrades, played active roles within armed organisations, dealt with gender-motivated conflict, and became symbols of emancipation.

Who should read this book?

In the remaining chapters, I act as a “story analyst”: that is, I adopt an interpretive rather than a purely descriptive approach, using my own theoretical and analytical lens to make sense of individual accounts. As a result, I have produced a “realist tale” which allows “spaces for participant voices to be heard in a coherent text, and with specific points in mind ... [to] provide compelling, detailed, and complex depictions of a social world” (Sparkes, 2002, p. 55). In this sense, my voice as a researcher in the interpretive process is interactive. I examine the intricate interactions between former politically violent militants and myself.

It is also important to underline that perceiving the self as always multiple and multivocal, and working from an interpretive rather than a purely descriptive approach does not allow me to give a voice to – or speak for – the people I met. Rather, when I argue that I am giving them a voice, I mean that I am speaking about the words I have obtained from them. I am representing some of their selves which were co-constructed through dialogue, interpersonal interactions, and perceptions regarding who I am and the audience I represent. Thus, in order to be transported into the frameworks of meaning of other people, whose life circumstances are very different from my own, I resort to what Martha Nussbaum has called “the narrative imagination”:

This means the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have.

(Nussbaum, 1997, pp. 10–11)

How is this relevant for our theoretical and methodological understandings of political violence? For *researchers of political violence*, I offer the theorisation

of the life stories of former politically violent militants. I add descriptive depth and conceptual sophistication to existent understandings of political violence. I also demonstrate how the life stories of former militants seem to be strongly connected to the political narratives that inhabit their spatial and temporal coordinates. This offers a new way of thinking about individuals who chose to commit part of their lives to political transformation via violent means, but who are not simply violent militants. These are individuals who have had previous personal, social, and political experiences that made them available to such a choice; but they have also had other aspirations that were not related to politically motivated violence (e.g., careers, families). In addition, tracing the repertoire of identity positions throughout the three phases in the journeys of former militants – engagement with, life within, and disengagement from a politically violent organisation – advances the research in this area in three distinct analytical aspects: the decisional contexts involved in different moments of time in the life of a politically violent militant; the choices made by individuals who have been part of a politically violent organisation; and the nature and implications for individuals of different types of politically violent organisations, whose existence and structure were closely connected to the socio-political context of their time. I consider that such a framework to study political violence allows an understanding of the diversity that characterises politically violent militants, whose pathways into, within, and out of armed organisations vary across spatial and temporal contexts. In this sense, analysing political violence in context connects it to the structural violence in which it frequently occurs, generating multiple identities for the politically violent militants and rejecting the label “terrorist” as biased, judgemental, and of little explanatory value.

For *practitioners dealing with political violence*, one of the strengths of the framework developed in this book is its potential application to support both prevention and intervention work. In relation to prevention work, I do not mean singling out particular individuals who are perceived as being at risk of engagement with an armed organisation, or criminalising the pre-criminal space. I am talking about prevention programmes that build resilience against violence and extremism. These may take place in schools, community centres, religious institutions, and even prisons. Understanding the life stories and experiences of former militants enables practitioners, such as teachers and youth workers, to develop adequate counter-narratives and to facilitate the construction of more resilient selves. My analytical framework can equally assist intervention work with individuals who have been convicted of terrorism offences, including returnees who have participated in conflicts overseas. By promoting an understanding of the complex range of factors behind engagement and radicalisation, as well as disengagement and deradicalisation, such a framework rejects a one-size-fits-all model. On the contrary, it allows for recognition of both micro-level (e.g., personal aims, loyalties, priorities, grievances) and macro-level drivers (e.g., collective narratives, cultural resources), and the reasons for their change or maintenance over time.

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Understanding these aspects allows practitioners, such as social workers and psychologists, to identify the areas that need to be worked on and to look for alternative ways that will allow individuals to pursue their aims through legal means.

For *researchers of political narratives*, the methodological contribution of my research is linked to the work done by Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS) scholars since the early 2000s. These scholars have highlighted the need to establish narrative as an approach to study political violence and have worked on the notion of temporality in this arena (Jackson, Jarvis, Gunning and Smyth, 2011; Heath-Kelly, Jarvis and Baker-Beall, 2014). However, while these scholars have been mainly focused on the narratives of the “war on terror” and counter-terrorism narratives, very little critical research has looked specifically at the life stories of former politically violent militants. Thus, my empirical application of a dialogical narrative identity approach, informed by DST, has critical implications for the field of political narratives as a method of social inquiry. For instance, this methodological approach shows that the stories individuals tell about their past experiences are influenced by how they construct their present selves, the narratives they intend to corroborate or oppose, and who is listening. Stories are not only narratively performed and impacted by others; they are also actors in people’s lives, triggering decisions and behaviours (Frank, 2010). Consequently, this study contributes to our understanding of the performative abilities of stories in people’s lives and the role of the complex and dynamic identity system of each individual.

For *historians of Portugal*, this book offers a novel perspective on the contexts that gave rise to armed struggle, how that struggle was fought, and its consequences. This perspective is built on the tales of political violence offered by men and women who participated in it. In this book, I quote their voices extensively in order to bring to life their experiences, thoughts, and emotions, but also to counter the tendency to silence their stories, which has been the norm in the Portuguese “battle over memory”, as coined by Manuel Loff (2014, p. 10). According to this author, this tendency took root because their activities were linked to events such as the April Revolution, which themselves have been politically and socially depreciated in mainstream political narratives. This is something that the Portuguese historian Rui Bebiano calls “unmemory”, rather than “forgetfulness”, because while the latter involves “carelessness, accident, casual blur of past reminiscences”, the former involves “a voluntary erasure of memory, a lack of knowledge or even a lack of interest in certain areas of living, considered irrelevant and not instrumental” (Bebiano, 2006, p. 9).

Finally, *the general reader* will find that this book provides an opportunity to come into contact with and reflect upon the life stories of former politically violent militants. My analysis presents each individual as a whole person, as a human being whose actions are not only violent, and have not always been nor always will be. In this book, all readers will meet political actors who are “fellow human beings and not dog-headed cannibals” (Leach, 1977, p. 36),

people whose lives are influenced and influence their spatial, temporal, and relational contexts and are liable to change.

Outline of subsequent chapters

In Chapter 1, I provide a brief historical contextualisation of the emergence of the various non-state politically violent organisations under analysis and the main characteristics of each. I assume that many English-speaking readers may not be familiar with contemporary Portuguese history, so I believe it is helpful to provide some background information regarding the *Estado Novo* regime, the revolution of 25 April 1974, and the counter-revolution of 25 November 1975.

In Chapter 2, I detail the conceptual framework behind this book. I argue that the application of the core commitments of CTS in conjunction with a narrative approach can contribute to the theorisation of the life stories of former politically violent militants and provide rich descriptions of political violence. I also establish my DST-informed dialogical narrative identity analytical framework to trace the identity positions underpinning former militants' political narratives of engagement with, life within, and disengagement from politically violent organisations. Finally, I elaborate on my approach to data co-creation and analysis.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 constitute the empirical chapters, which address the processes of engagement with, life within, and disengagement from politically violent organisations. As noted by Catarina Rosa and Miguel Gonçalves (2008), the ability of infinitely reformulating the identity positions' repertoire can be seen as a play in several acts. In this sense, each of these chapters corresponds to an act, where personal, social, political, and historical circumstances influence which identity positions take the leading role, while other voices are relegated to the background. Thus, in Chapter 3, I explore the origins of personal political awareness, which are closely linked to different socialisation agents, such as family members, and I tackle the dynamics of commitment to an armed organisation, which in many cases resulted in a total break in the militants' life courses.

Chapter 4 explores individual experiences lived within politically violent organisations. In this chapter, I discuss the dynamics of life under a clandestine identity, including the process of going underground, the challenges of the underground life, and the gender dynamics among clandestine militants. I also address the use of violence for political means, particularly in relation to the perspectives, personal experiences, and emotions that surrounded the commission of politically violent acts.

Chapter 5 focuses on the influencing factors, reasons, incentives, and barriers presented by those engaged in political violence when ending their commitment to an organisation. I also explore how former militants rework their pasts in the present, reflecting on their memories, on the moments and events that marked their lives, and on who they became.

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In the Conclusion, I return to the question of how the storylines, in which former politically violent militants in Portugal were moulded as subjects through their interactions with the social and political contexts of their time, influenced their involvement with armed organisations and how they act at the service of their present selves. I conclude that a narrative-based framework of analysis, which takes into consideration individuals' life stories, not only informs our understandings of the Portuguese armed struggle but also holds the potential for extending our knowledge of engagement and disengagement, radicalisation and deradicalisation processes across a number of other contexts of politically violent militancy.

Note

- 1 Zeca Afonso's music played a significant role in the resistance movement against the *Estado Novo* regime.

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