

“Some dance to remember, some dance to forget”: Empirical insights from working on books on activism insurgency and Martial Law in the Philippines

Memory, Activism, and Historical Truth: Stories of Resistance and Martial Law in the Philippines

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In an era where history is systematically revised and memories are weaponized, the act of remembering becomes a form of resistance. For decades, stories of activism, insurgency, and Martial Law (ML) in the Philippines have either been forgotten, suppressed, or sanitized to serve particular narratives. But what happens when those who lived through it—activists, insurgents, and survivors—take charge of their own histories? Drawing on three decades of work across three critical books, Soliman M. Santos, Jr explores memory and forgetting at personal and historical levels, asking difficult questions not only of the Marcos dictatorship but also of the revolutionary movements that arose in response. It invites both introspection and action, at a time when the struggle of memory against forgetting has never been more urgent

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This is to briefly present my paper which covers some notable empirical or practical insights and critical perspectives on issues of memory, forgetting and history derived **from working on three particular books on activism, insurgency and martial law (ML)** in the Philippines, as may guide further relevant studies, work and action. I have had the privilege, **as an amateur historian of the practitioner-activist tradition**, to work on these three particular books over a span of three decades from 1994 to 2024:

1. ***Militant But Groovy: Stories of Samahang Demokratiko ng Kabataan*** (Anvil, 2008) as co-editor; mainly on Activism pre-ML and ML
2. ***Tigaon 1969: Untold Stories of the CPP-NPA, KM, and SDK*** (Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2023) as author; mainly on Insurgency pre-ML
3. ***Mga Daso: Stories of Martial Law in Bikol*** (University of the Philippines Press, forthcoming in early 2025) as co-editor; mainly on ML, also covering Activism and Insurgency



My paper has **two parts**: first, on “**The Struggle of Memory Against Forgetting**” at the **Micro or Personal Level**: and second, on **Approaches to Historical Work**. This discussion will be a little different from most relevant discussions of the Marcos ML dictatorship and the systematic historical revisionism in its defense. As quite much has been said, written and published about and against the latter by both academics and progressive political actors, I pay **a bit more attention here to some (needed) critical introspection on the part of political activists and revolutionary movements**.

In the first part on “The Struggle of Memory Against Forgetting,” I noted that it was a challenge to find contributors of stories of activism and martial law. This had to do with motivations and counter-motivations, as well as other factors. Potential contributors were of several categories. **The unable** refer to those physically and mentally handicapped to tell their stories due to old age and poor health. Several contributors in fact died of natural causes after they submitted their stories but before these came out in the published books. This is not surprising in the case of two books which each took more than a dozen years in the making and where most of the contributors were activists of the 1970s, and some too of the 1960s.

The unwilling were also of several kinds. Some potential contributors were **somewhat hostile** to an avowedly independent book project because of ideological or political grounds. One ground was that it was not sanctioned by the dominant “reaffirmist” Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). Another ground was a view “never to commemorate failure... celebrating defeats such as The Fall of Bataan... I’ll reserve my remembrance of things past to that seminal moment of victory.” Some were **not hostile**, in fact they were supportive of the book project **but had their own reasons** for not contributing their stories. Like one who has had enough of intra-Left conflicts. Like another who was supportive but candid enough to say “*Huwag na lang*, you will not like what I will write,” essaying that his new “Rightist” capitalist perspective may not fit well in a book of predominantly Leftist socialist perspectiveS.

A number suffered **lingering trauma**, the effects of physical and psychological torture during ML, and refused to remember. We editors apologized to them for dredging up dreadful and painful memories. Many still live in constant fear of the military in light of activists still being arrested, disappeared, and “salvaged.” And one former human rights lawyer and retired judge said **all the stories had already been told and there was nothing more to tell**.

But there was and is. This was shown by the significant stories given by those who were **willing and able** to struggle successfully to remember against forgetting. Most were motivated this way: We have to make this effort, even if late in the day or the night, with more reason now when *memories of names and events of decades ago are fading and before they are lost forever* – **an effort we owe ourselves as well as posterity**.

Among those who did submit articles, not a few shed tears as they looked back and wrote, just as we editors did when we read their stories. Two writers in their early 80s and not as mobile as they used to be were the most keen to share their experiences. One contributor said his children and even his closest friends had not heard his story before and it was the first time he actually sat down to write it. Another thanked us for “forcing” her to do this before she forgets these very important parts of

her past. **The act of writing and story-telling can serve not only as a memory-keeper but also as a form of catharsis and closure in the twilight of our lives.**

One particular story of note is that of a longtime activist and retired psychology professor who wrote on her **post-EDSA traumatic arrest and detention providing catharsis for her “survivor guilt” for not having been arrested and detained during ML**, and I quote her: “My imagination became wild as I speculated on the torture that Nonna must have suffered. Then a sudden realization dawned on me. This arrest and detention, with all the suffering it may entail, was a chance for me to partake in communion with the suffering of Nona and all the rest of the victims of military abuses. This epiphany gave me the strength I needed until the cases were dismissed. It also healed in time the survivor’s guilt I had carried for a long, long time... I have walked through the valley of darkness with fortitude, knowing that this suffering from the scourge of military atrocity was joined with the sacrifices of those who had walked under the same fire of persecution.... Thus, we remember, thus we dream.”

All told, from these stories of activism, insurgency and ML, even just in Bicol, **there is still much to plumb from what is a rich wellspring for cognate academic disciplines, notably psychology, both personal and social**, including trauma studies, **and of course history.**

In the second part on Approaches to Historical Work, the first point to be made is that not only “open, democratic societies” but also revolutionary movements “need to be brave and honest about their own histories as well.” **Historical honesty is a value or standard not only for freedom-loving societies but also for revolutionary movements that purport to represent a better alternative to the status quo.** Unfortunately, revolutionary movements, and most sadly those of the Marxist-Leninist sort have some track record of no less than literally erasing or airbrushing former revolutionary leaders from historical photographs after they had fallen from the revolutionary party leadership’s grace. This is not only a matter of historical honesty (and truth, fairness and justice) but also one of moral ascendancy.

The book on how the CPP and the New People’s Army (NPA) started in Bicol via Tigaon, Camarines Sur in 1969 told the untold story of the unheralded all-Bicolano five-person (“First Five”) expansion team that took root there. This has been **omitted from the official CPP version** that starts only in 1970 with the return of the prominent native Tigaon brothers Romulo and Ruben Jallores brothers (later Kumanders Tangkad and Benjie) coming from the First Quarter Storm (FQS) in Manila earlier that year. But given the sufficient evidence of that initial expansion team presented in the book, it calls on those concerned to **“rectify the omission and recognize [or reaffirm] the mission”** that was made up of Marco Baduria (+), Nonito Zape, and David Brucelas (+), all of Tigaon; Francisco Portem (+) of Polangui; Albay, and Ibarra Tubianosa (+) of Bulan, Sorsogon.

In working on books on activism, insurgency and ML, I have had to grapple with **several tensions of historical work.** One was the tension between going for **official/ collective/ comprehensive history vs. unofficial/ individual/ anecdotal histories.** Parallel or akin to this is the tension between **academic/ professional vs. practitioner-activist/ amateur history work.** Historical works by academic and professional historians are expected to be comprehensive, in-depth and/or definitive in nature, often deservingly so due to the academic rigor put into their works. On the other hand, those by practitioner-activist and amateur historians tend to be of the genre of oral history, memory studies and radical memoirs. This **small-part writing is from the heart, from memory of experience, in contrast to big-picture writing from the mind, from research of references**

CPP Founding Chairman Jose Maria Sison once wrote, while immediately and critically commenting on my initial 2009 four-page article on how the CPP-NPA started in Bicol, that “The Bicol Regional Party Committee is in the best position to write or direct the writing of the history of

the CPP, NPA and NDFP, the mass movement and the organs of political power in the region of Bicol at least in one book that can do justice to the beginnings and further development of the aforementioned. When other regional Party committees do the same, then the Central Committee of the CPP would have a very sound basis for writing or directing the writing of the national history of the CPP in one or several volumes. The project of history writing is a good way of celebrating the 40th anniversary of the CPP and NPA.” But up to their last, 55th anniversary, no such CPP history writing project has been launched. Instead, in 2022, came out two thick volumes of Sison’s selected writings on CPP history. For all intents and purposes, he is **the de facto, if not official, because the only or sole, historian of the CPP.**

In any case, the writing of official CPP history, whether national or regional, for me should be done **not only “on the basis of CPP documents and further analysis” because this is not the only basis for establishing the facts**, which is basic for any history. But I agree, **the regional approach and basis for national CPP history writing is also the way to go towards a fairer and more comprehensive Philippine history.** When it comes to histories, whether of movements or of countries, **it is not always the official histories which are the best or better works, some of which are the unofficial ones.** The CPP might itself learn something from good unofficial histories of the CPP, also to help complete the picture, on the premise that there is no monopoly of the truth or of wisdom.

Working on the book *Tigaon 1969* became an occasion for **doing more history from below, to complement the of course still important, if not indispensable, history from above or the top**, as in “The Leader’s View” of Sison. The view from the headquarters can be very different from the view from the field. This brings to the fore the idea of revolutionary history as seen from those at the ground level of the time, the rank and file cadres and fighters, “the obscure, little people who were not heroic leaders of exemplary stature, the kind who would publish their books and invoke ideology.” There must be a conscious effort to redress the absence of small voices from the margins in the grand master narratives of history writing, lest their stories be forever shut out. For “They too have their story.”

It has been said that journalism is the **“first rough draft of history.”** If so, we can similarly say that oral history, memory studies and radical memoirs are **“the second draft,”** while comprehensive, in-depth and definitive histories by academic or professional historians are **“the third or final draft”** in a certain scheme of progression or iteration in the writing of history. But then, is the writing of history ever really final, finished and complete? For example, take just two August 21 unresolved mastermind questions: Will the real masterminds of the 1983 Aquino Assassination and the 1971 Plaza Miranda Bombing please stand up?

Having worked on and read books on activism, insurgency and martial law in the Philippines, and finding ourselves now in the new Marcos era, I would say **the writing of Philippine and revolutionary history must continue on a more grounded and rounded basis.** But there is **also a need for new and better trajectories of the generic and organic movement for progressive or even radical change**, premised on better Filipino virtue and political consciousness, and addressed to today’s youth or younger generations whose own time has come in making new history. *Dios mabalos.* — 11/23/24

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P.S.

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