

## Terrorism and Political Violence during the Pinochet Years: Chile, 1973–1989

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Chile has historically viewed itself as atypical compared to other Latin American countries, especially because of the political stability achieved following independence and the marginality of the military from explicit involvement in politics. Convinced of this particularity, the country was shocked by the violence exhibited by the armed forces on the morning of September 11, 1973, and during the days and months that followed the unseating of the constitutional president, Salvador Allende. Seventeen years of one of the most cruel dictatorships in the memory of Latin America brutally replaced Chile's long history of civilian rule. Terror took control of a large part of the population, incapable of understanding and, least of all, responding to the violence that hovered systematically over it. As Norbert Lechner has put it to so well, Chilean society "was dying with fear."<sup>1</sup>

The level of political and social polarization in Chilean society during the months and days leading to the military coup constituted one of the factors that, from the beginning, allowed the Pinochet regime to justify the violence it employed against the population at large. The high degree of concentration of power and social control in military hands also facilitated a hegemonic discourse about the causes of, and those responsible for, the final crisis: the Marxist left that made up the overthrown Unidad Popular (Popular Unity). For seventeen years Chilean society had ample opportunity to internalize the messages emitted by the dictatorship. This rendered the regime's repeated refusal to recognize its systematic use of repression intelligible. During the entire period, General Pinochet and his followers rejected

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the votes of the international community condemning Chile for human rights violations and denied their accusations. The relative economic stability achieved by Chile after 1985, and the 43 percent support won by Pinochet in a 1988 plebiscite to determine whether he would remain as head of state, favored the persistence of this version of the facts: the armed forces had committed no sin; on the contrary, they had saved Chile from the grip of communism, turning the country into a bulwark of Western values in a world riven by the cold war.

Consistent with this argument, the Chilean armed forces formally rejected the Rettig Report issued by the Commission on Truth and Reconciliation created in 1990 to investigate human rights violations and the fate of the *detenidos desaparecidos*, the disappeared. According to the military, the report failed to recognize “the true causes that motivated the action of national restoration undertaken on September 11” and gave a status of credibility to a “one-sided truth.” For the military, this “biased view” explained why the report did not acknowledge “the situation of subversive war that existed during the period selected to investigate the *“supposed violation of human rights.”*”<sup>2</sup>

Ten years later, following the appearance of corpses in clandestine graves, the trials of a number of officers implicated in repressive activities, the persistent activism of the Agrupación de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos (Organization of Family Members of the Disappeared) and the Agrupación de Familiares de Ejecutados Políticos (Organization of Family Members of the Executed), but above all, the arrest of Pinochet in London in 1998, the response had to be different. The military agreed to participate in a new commission constituted by representatives of the armed forces, human rights lawyers, leaders of different religious institutions, and members of civil society, to look for a definitive solution to an open and painful wound. The so-called Agreement of the Roundtable established that “there are other facts about which there is no legitimate response other than rejection and condemnation and the firm conviction to never allow them to be repeated. We refer to the *serious violations of human rights committed by agents of state organizations during the military government.*” The generals and admirals who signed this document committed themselves to collect, over a period of six months, the information necessary to locate the bodies of the disappeared or to establish their fate, and issued a report in January 2001.<sup>3</sup> Thus, twenty-eight years after the coup, the Chilean military admitted for the first time the acts of violence and terrorism carried out by its institutions during the years it was in power, and it openly referred to them as “crimes” instead of as “excesses,” which it was used to doing in most cases. Today, in spite of Chilean society’s pervasive exhaustion concerning these matters, nobody can deny what has been universally established.

Precisely because of this, it has been impossible to extirpate a discourse that insists on placing the themes of human rights in a wider historical context that, in some ways, would presumably justify what occurred. It has become commonplace

among the Chilean right to attribute the violation of human rights to the political violence supposedly initiated by the left during the 1960s. According to this interpretation, it was the left, particularly the Socialist Party with its ideological radicalization, that discarded the methods of negotiation and agreement hitherto characteristic of Chilean democracy to follow a totalitarian path. The right has repeatedly invoked the fact that in the 1967 congress of the Chilean Socialist Party in Chillán, the party recognized the legitimacy of all forms of struggle, including the armed path, to reach a socialist outcome. This statement has been interpreted as a real fact, discursively transforming the rhetoric into an alleged material transformation of the Socialist Party into an urban guerilla army that aimed to destroy the democratic order. For the right, the political struggles of the years of the Unidad Popular (UP) only confirmed that the party had chosen this path. Today, the Chillán Congress has become the foundation of the right's arguments, a historical "myth."

Paradoxically, however, no statement made by the military junta or other commanding officers of the armed forces after the coup mentions the Chillán Congress. In the memorandum prepared by the commanders of the armed forces in July 1973, in the military declarations on and after September 11, and in the speeches of various officers during the following months and years, the only historical period referred to is the era of the UP. They charge the government of Allende with taking the country to the edge of civil war, with fomenting the creation of armed groups (they never discuss right-wing paramilitary groups that sought to destabilize the UP government), and with having overstepped the bounds of institutional legitimacy and violating property rights. At least until the close of the 1970s, the congress of Chillán was not part of the military's or the right's justification for the coup. Only later, when the military's human rights violations could not be denied, would the socialists' 1967 recognition of the legitimacy of armed struggle become a key piece to the interpretation of the "historical truth" of the evolution of political violence in Chile during the 1960s.

For its part, the left's post-1973 *mea culpa*, in which it assumed its own measure of responsibility for political polarization during the years of the UP, has only reinforced the thesis of the right and the armed forces about their own innocence, thus blurring a clarification of the true extent and nature of the left's political violence during the 1960s. The use of the word *terrorist* by the military regime to refer to the supporters of the UP (socialists, communists, socialist Christians) has reinforced the blame of those parties in the public imagination.

However, no consensus existed within the left about the use of violence. It is well known that the Communist Party opposed until the very end the radicalization of the revolutionary process in the organization of, as well as the path to, socialism. It attempted to negotiate agreements with the Christian Democratic Party in order to find a legal and peaceful way out of the political crisis of the early 1970s. Armed struggle was not a part of the communists' strategy and thus their military prepara-

tion was minimal. In fact, in 1973, the Communist Party had a number of watch committees, with only a limited number of arms, whose task was to protect party leaders and meeting places. It would not be until after suffering repression between 1974 and 1976 that the communist subjectivity would begin to move toward a policy of “popular insurrection.”<sup>4</sup> For its part, the Socialist Party was divided: the sectors that supported Salvador Allende were convinced that the institutional order could be transformed from within in order to build a new socialist society. It is true that during the government of the UP Cuban advisors came to Chile and helped to organize a presidential guard (Grupo de Amigos del Presidente, GAP) and that the government did nothing to repress the members of its coalition that opted for civil war. Those radical sectors of the Socialist Party and the militants of the ultraleftist Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (Movement of the Revolutionary Left, MIR) called on officers to disobey their commanders, organized peasants to accelerate the agrarian reform, and mobilized groups of the urban poor in land invasions. But they had minimal influence over large sectors of the population, precisely because political violence was generalized. Urban squatter settlements, factories, and universities constituted battlefields disputed by all the parties: the centrist Partido Demócrata Cristiano (Christian Democratic Party), the right-wing Partido Nacional (National Party), parties of the left, and the ultrarightist Patria y Libertad (Fatherland and Freedom).

In fact, in 1967 right-wing paramilitary groups had assassinated a government official that worked for the agrarian reform agency, Hernán Mery, to protest the implementation of the Agrarian Reform Law under the Christian Democratic government of Eduardo Frei, and in 1970 they kidnapped and murdered the commander and chief of the army, General René Schneider, in a vain attempt to prevent the ascension of Allende to the presidency. The left, on its part, did not generally contemplate political assassination as a tactic, although it pursued, in the case of the MIR, some assassinations of police officers. Rather, the left engaged in verbal violence and revolutionary rhetoric. The left’s minimal military preparation was made clear the day of the coup, when the efforts to resist the actions of the armed forces were rapidly neutralized, allowing General Pinochet to assert on September 18 of that year that the situation “was under complete control.” General Gustavo Leigh, head of the air force and a member of the military junta, confirmed this as well when asked about the military preparation of the *cordones industriales* (citywide organizations of factory workers): “They had no arms,” he said, “we would have seen them.”<sup>5</sup> In short, within the left and the UP, the option for armed struggle formed a complex question about which no consensus existed and which had little material relation to its rhetoric.

Paradoxically, the situation was similar within the armed forces. There existed a group of officers who interpreted the political situation in terms of the context of the cold war and paid more attention to the question of guerilla warfare and subver-

sion, but until the end the 1960s mostly as a question relevant to other parts of the world. It was only during the years of the UP that insurgency was associated with the MIR (which did not belong to Allende's coalition government) and, curiously, with the Communist Party, an analysis tied to the arrival of Cuban and Soviet advisors. Within this sector, there were officers who saw in repression a vital weapon for ending the Marxist threat and who even before September 11 persecuted popular organizations, broke into homes allegedly searching for arms, and threatened the leaders of unions, squatters' groups, and leftist parties. This was the case of Manuel Contreras, at that time commander of the Tejas Verdes Military School of Engineers, and later organizer of the Directorate of National Intelligence (DINA, Dirección Nacional de Inteligencia), Pinochet's secret police. The conspirators who planned the coup came from within these sectors.

However, not all officers shared their outlook. There were others who participated in debates about development as a principal instrument for confronting economic stagnation and social problems, attracted by the proposals of the United Nations Economic Commission on Latin America (ECLA) and the U.S. Alliance for Progress. Unlike their comrades in arms, they believed that Marxism could be neutralized with structural reforms and policies of regional integration rather than repression. As Major Claudio López argued in 1970, "Rather than plan or implement repression, it is important to prevent the outbreak of violence. That is why the armed forces need to be clear about the meaning and direction of the changes demanded by society during each stage of its historical development."<sup>6</sup> In sum, although there was consensus about anti-Marxism within military ranks, there was little agreement about the role of repression.

Thus a violent resolution of the political conflict of the early 1970s was not viewed as a necessary outcome by either the left or the armed forces as an institution. How can we understand and explain, then, what occurred on September 11? The coup d'état resulted from the coalition government's inability to find a viable political solution, but it was also due to the actions of the opposition, financed and supported by the government of Richard Nixon, which pursued a two-track policy focused simultaneously on destabilizing the Chilean economy and society by financing opposition groups and a massive propaganda campaign against the UP government, and imposing an economic embargo. At the same time, it clandestinely supported a military intervention. The climate of uncertainty and chaos of the last weeks and months of the government of the UP strengthened the most anticommunist sectors of the armed forces and weakened the position of constitutionalist officers bent on a more peaceful solution.

That morning a stupefied population watched as the planes of the air force bombarded the presidential palace, La Moneda. There were massive arrests and, according to the reports of the Organization of American States, it is likely that as

many as 1,500 people died during the first days after the military takeover. The dead floated near the banks of the river that crosses the city of Santiago; President Allende killed himself rather than surrendering to the military, and a little later the members of his presidential guard were killed. Those who survived the initial assault on La Moneda were shot later and their corpses disappeared. According to declarations of officers who participated in the coup, the Chilean air force engineered the bombardment exclusively as proof of the irreversible decision to put a definitive end to the Marxist government. As General Leigh made clear during a press conference held on that same night, the armed forces had decided to “extirpate the Marxist cancer.”

It has been argued that the revolutionary rhetoric of the UP created the conditions for the violence used by the military during the coup, since the constant threat of a popular insurrection awakened fears that would later turn into hatred. The left’s revolutionary rhetoric is said to have made the armed forces fear that the leftist parties had significant military organizations with the capacity of generating a civil war. The call of sectors of the Socialist Party and the MIR to low-level officers to disobey the high command supposedly provided the ultimate proof that the UP was attempting to divide military institutions in order to provoke a civil war. The initial coup-related violence, as well as the execution of many officials of the Allende government, is said to have been aimed at neutralizing this possibility and paralyzing the more indecisive supporters of military intervention with an action that would leave no doubts about the lengths to which the armed forces were willing to go.

They quickly understood, however, that the left’s supposed revolutionary capacity did not, in fact, exist. The resistance in factories and urban squatter settlements was easily suffocated because of the limited preparation of the UP’s working-class supporters, and the country fell into the hands of the military almost immediately. Pinochet’s statements, reproduced above, recognized that the military had expected five days of war, but that the opposition to the coup had lasted only twenty-four hours. Every center of resistance was controlled and the provinces remained calm. Despite this fact, Pinochet himself kept insisting that Chile was “in a state of war for seventeen years.”

According to the Rettig Report, the violations of human rights committed between 1973 and 1989 did not occur in a context of war, as the armed forces claimed. Rather, they were committed against defenseless people for political reasons. The report established three stages of repression. First, between September and December 1973, repression was not systematically implemented; massive detentions occurred throughout the country, prisoners were interned in concentration camps, political prisoners and peasants involved in the process of agrarian reform were executed, and a “social cleaning” of young people in urban squatter settlements took place. During this period, executions were a product of the so-called war councils, in which defense lawyers had no real power and corpses were hidden, thrown into the sea, or dynamited.

A second phase corresponded to the period between 1974 and 1977, during which the regime developed a systematic policy of repression in order to exterminate those whom it deemed a political threat, applying on a massive scale the method of forced disappearance. The goal was to kill and hide the bodies of the dead in order to destroy the supposed enemy. The principal military institution that implemented this political repression was the DINA, created by decree with numerous secret powers and resources, which acted throughout the entire country and engaged in operations outside the country (like the assassination of Allende's ex-foreign minister Orlando Letelier in Washington, DC in 1976), and depended directly on the "president" of the military junta, General Augusto Pinochet. These years produced the greatest number of disappearances. Victims were detained in the DINA's clandestine centers, where they were blindfolded and submitted to physical and psychological torture, which included rape, especially, though not exclusively, of female prisoners. Torture often resulted in death.

Finally, the Rettig Report defined a third stage corresponding to the years 1977 through 1989, identified with DINA's successor, the National Information Center (CNI, Centro Nacional de Inteligencia). This period began with a brief repressive lull, owing to the international pressure following the assassination of Orlando Letelier, but the CNI and other repressive organs did not take long to revert to a familiar pattern of violence, resulting in the deaths of prominent opponents of the military regime, like union leader Tucapel Jiménez. A similar fate awaited the mass protests unleashed in 1983, where many Chileans fighting against dictatorial rule fell under police or military bullets.

According to the information collected by the commission, during this entire period there were 2,279 fatal victims, 164 resulting from political violence and real armed confrontations, and 2,115 resulting from violations of human rights.<sup>7</sup> The majority of the victims—71.2 percent—were between sixteen and thirty-five years old; 50.2 percent belonged to the Socialist and Communist Parties and the MIR, while 46 percent had no known political militancy. A high percentage were workers and peasants. The report also stated that the judiciary did not react with appropriate energy, an attitude which aggravated the systematic violation of human rights, leaving victims defenseless and granting "the agents of repression a growing certainty of impunity for their criminal actions." Finally, the commission recommended the creation of a Foundation for Public Law that would determine the location of the disappeared.

After repeated stalling and more than six months of investigation, the *Historic Report of the Armed Forces* of January 2001 provided information about the fate of two hundred disappeared people, especially those killed between September 1973 and March 1974. For the first time, and just in time to prevent the opening of numerous trials against personnel involved in human rights violations, the military admitted to the clandestine burial of corpses and to the fact that people were thrown into

the sea and rivers after being shot. As a result of these admissions, funerals were finally held for the disappeared member of the Communist Party, Juan Rivera Matus, who, according to the military report, was thrown into the sea near the port of San Antonio, on Chile's central coast. His widow and children threw flowers into the sea. Months later, however, human remains were discovered in a clandestine grave on the outskirts of Santiago; they turned out to belong to Rivera Matus, demonstrating the falsity of the information contained in the military report. This was not the only case, since the report described as dead under the same circumstances two members of the Communist Party's clandestine leadership, Waldo Pizarro (husband of the historic president of the Agrupación de Detenidos Desaparecidos, Sola Sierra) and Víctor Díaz (father of the current president of the same agrupación, Viviana Díaz). Something similar was said about Jorge Muñoz, husband of the president of the Communist Party, Gladys Marín, and Carlos Berger, husband of the well-known human rights lawyer Carmen Herz. These and other examples stirred considerable doubt about the accuracy of the information provided by the military and aborted the discussions begun by the roundtable. However, this did not undo the military's recognition of the crimes they had committed, and it did not detain the action of the courts now investigating officers accused of human rights violations.

During the 1960s, Chile witnessed very few victims of political violence. On the other hand, state terrorism under the military regime brought a significant break in the country's historical evolution. If Chilean democracy had not reached its full realization, it would never have created state security institutions designed to persecute and assassinate the political opposition, defined as an internal enemy that threatened higher and universal values. The argument of the Chilean right and armed forces that the historical context explained the violence of the dictatorship is an assertion that the Rettig Report, the *Report of the Armed Forces*, and history itself completely contradict.

## Notes

Article translated by Thomas Miller Klubock and Julio Pinto Vallejos. All translations are by Klubock and Pinto.

1. Norbert Lechner, *Los patios interiores de la democracia* (Santiago de Chile: FLACSO, 1998). Quotation translated by Klubock and Pinto.
2. "El ejército, la verdad y la reconciliación," *La tercera*, March 28, 1991; the emphasis added by translators.
3. "Texto completo del acuerdo," *La tercera*, June 14, 2000; "Desaparecidos: El histórico informe de las fuerzas armadas," *La tercera*, January 7, 2001.
4. On this subject, see Rolando Alvarez, "Desde las sombras: Una historia de la clandestinidad comunista (1973–1980)," (master's thesis, Universidad de Santiago de Chile, 2001). The watch committees referred to in this point should not be confused with the bodies of the same denomination organized by the workers in those factories they had taken over in the months leading to the coup.



5. *El mercurio*, September 18, 1973; General Leigh's testimony appeared in a posthumous interview broadcast by Televisión Nacional TV station on the day of his death, September 29, 1999, on the *Medianoche* show.
6. Major Claudio López, *Memorial del ejército de Chile* 311 (1970). These issues are developed more at length in my article "Militares y política: Los jóvenes oficiales de los años sesenta, 1960–1973," in *Contribuciones científicas y tecnológicas* (Santiago de Chile: Universidad de Santiago, 2001), 127. It is important to underline that the commission only considered as grave violations of human rights "the situation of the disappeared, the executed, and deaths due to torture . . . , as well as kidnappings and attempted assassination." It did not consider cases of torture in which the victims survived, nor those cases in which the evidence did not convince every member of the commission.
7. These were the numbers officially given by the commission. Some years later, however, its own further research plus the work of its successor body (the Corporación Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación, established in 1996), raised the final tally to 3,179 fatalities.