

Seven days in Chile's climate of fear

A report from Santiago, five months after the U.S.-backed 1973 military coup by Augusto Pinochet.

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Augusto Pinochet, dictator of Chile, meets with Henry Kissinger, then-U.S. secretary of state, in 1976. [Some rights reserved](#) by the General Historical Archive of the [Chilean Ministry of External Relations](#).

Soldiers and *carabineros* (paramilitary police) seem to be stationed everywhere we go—their submachine guns at the ready. Almost as prevalent are billboards and posters which read: “En cada soldado hay un Chileno; en cada Chileno hay un soldado” (“In every soldier there is a Chilean; in every Chilean there is a soldier”).

Upon arriving at our hotel, we—an ad hoc Chicago-based fact-finding commission concerned about the status of human rights in Chile—are greeted by three women

from Santiago's Christian community. They warn us not to talk with Chileans on the streets—not only because the ruling military junta encourages “patriots” to inform on “suspicious” persons, but because there are many plainclothes intelligence agents around. We invite the three women to join us for dinner, and on the way to a restaurant we note that there would hardly be any strangers to talk with anyway; except for the military, the dimly lit streets are virtually deserted—even though curfew is several hours away.

At the restaurant one of our dinner guests expresses guilt feelings about partaking of what, by her standards, is an expensive meal; she is acutely conscious of the hunger and suffering of the Chilean poor. Though the junta claims to have inflation under control, the cost of a number of basic necessities has skyrocketed in recent weeks; the price of bread, for example, has risen 400 per cent in less than two months. We learn that many families now eat only three or four meals a week. Unemployment is widespread—about 20 per cent; thousands of workers, most of them leftists, were dismissed from their jobs following the *coup d'état* of September 11. Wages are fixed by decree, but some workers receive considerably less than the official minimum wage of 18,000 escudos (\$24) a month.

As we return to the hotel, we witness the kind of happening that has become commonplace in Chile: one of our guests encounters a distraught friend who tearfully reports that her fiancé was picked up by the military three days before and that, though she has been to every place of detention in Santiago, she has not been able to locate him.

We have had a sobering introduction to Chile's siege atmosphere. More than five months after the violent putsch that overthrew the Marxist but democratically elected and constitutionalist government of President Salvador Allende, Santiago is still a fear-ridden, terror-filled city.

I

By day, however, Santiago has a deceptive surface calm: the streets are crowded, the tourists and the American corporation executives are reappearing, the summer weather is delightful. And one gradually grows accustomed to the ubiquitous presence of the military. The apparent tranquillity is largely a consequence of the fact that the wanton bloodletting of the early stages of the coup has given way to more sophisticated and discriminating methods; instead of the dragnet, there is the

nocturnal knock at the door. Though the junta's campaign to "extirpate the Marxist cancer" is as ruthless and relentless as ever, the September savagery is being replaced by low-profile repression. As an exceptionally candid army colonel is reported to have remarked: "We've ended the phase of massive slaughter and entered the phase of selective slaughter." The military authorities have become much more calculating and efficient; no longer, for example, are they publicly putting books to the torch—if only because they are concerned about their credibility abroad.

One evening a young man who has heard about our commission of inquiry hazards a visit to the hotel. He is a member of the Inner Religion of Silo, a youth-oriented sect that draws on Eastern mysticism. Thirteen of the sect's leaders are in jail; Bruno von Ehremberg, the principal leader, has been badly tortured and is being held incommunicado. Because some young people leave their homes upon joining Silo, the junta-controlled press has accused the cult of "corrupting the youth" and breaking up family life. Because the group is antimaterialist and therefore anticapitalist, the authorities have concluded that it is procommunist; actually it is apolitical. Handing me a copy of one of Silo's now-banned books, my visitor pleads with me to publicize the plight of his sect. The junta's incarceration of these harmless young Utopians leads me to wonder if it is really being "selective" after all. (But certainly it is thorough; we have discovered that several of our hotel rooms are bugged.)

Chile has a strong, well-entrenched legal tradition, and the military government has sought to give a veneer of legitimacy to its despotic operations by invoking the constitutional provision pertaining to a "state of siege" and reinterpreting it in terms of a "state of internal war." The junta insists that accused persons have the benefit of the procedural guarantees that obtain under such extraordinary circumstances—but those guarantees amount to very little indeed. Under the "internal war" declaration, the authorities can detain, search and interrogate anyone at any time or place—and by any means. (To facilitate "interrogation," the junta has imported Brazilians who are expert in that art.) Prisoners can be held incommunicado and without charge, and if and when a case does come to trial, the defense lawyer generally cannot see his client—or even the list of charges—until a few hours beforehand. The military officer presiding over the trial—which is completely secret—often adds many years to the sentence recommended by the prosecution. Max Silva, vice-minister of justice, freely acknowledged in an interview

with our group that prisoners are presumed guilty.

In short, due process does not exist in Chile. And the junta's claim that it is acting legally rather than arbitrarily is singularly unconvincing; for one thing, a "state of siege" decree requires authorization of the Congress—but one of the military's first moves was to abolish the Congress, along with outlawing the leftist political parties and declaring all other parties to be in "indefinite recess."

II

Our 12-member commission has a very full agenda; frequently we split up into groups of two or three or venture out individually in order to cover more ground. We are received by junta officials who profess to be surprised that a group such as ours would come to Chile at a time when "we are restoring the country." We speak with professors who describe how the universities, after being seized by the military, have been decimated by large-scale expulsions of both students and faculty, and how entire departments—the social sciences, public health, journalism—have been closed down.

We meet with foreign ambassadors who inform us of the difficulties encountered in securing safe-conduct for some of the people who took asylum in their embassies after the coup. We interview "suspect," unyielding labor leaders whose union activities have been proscribed—as well as newly appointed labor "un-leaders" whose only task seems to be to pass junta directives on to the workers. We gain entry to one of the many detention centers—a gymnasium called Estadio Chile—and are permitted to talk with four prisoners on a balcony overlooking the gym floor where more than 200 others—some of them as young as 16 and 17—are confined; it is the "showcase" prison and a place of "recuperation"—but when no guards are watching, prisoners on the floor below open their shirts to show us the marks of the torture they have been subjected to in other detention centers.

And we visit with church people—courageous Catholics and Protestants who, often at great risk, are aiding the destitute families of junta victims and who in some cases have provided hiding places for fugitives from the repression. Comments one prominent Christian: "I try to look for good things in bad people. But I cannot find one good thing that the junta has done."

One of our commission's primary purposes, however, is quite specific: to investigate the murder of Frank Teruggi Jr., a 23-year-old American student who was caught up

in the early carnage of the coup. Frank's father, a typographer from the Chicago suburb of Des Plaines, is one of our group. He is not satisfied with the information that the Chilean government has conveyed via the U.S. State Department prior to our trip; it contains discrepancies and hiatuses. In Mr. Teruggi's opinion, the State Department itself has been remiss; in December it assured him that inquiries were being made in Santiago "at top diplomatic levels," but the end result was a report giving the same explanation of what happened to Frank that was given in a report issued in October, shortly after he was murdered. Originally the authorities stated that Frank had been arrested for curfew violation on September 20; this was patently untrue, since he and his roommate, David Hathaway, were picked up at the same time—in their apartment. But the junta has stood by the rest of its story: that Marxist literature was found in Frank's room; that he was held overnight at the soccer stadium for questioning, then released; that his bullet-riddled body was brought to the morgue the next day; that he was probably killed by "left-wing terrorists." Yet no other prisoner was detained for so brief a time—or released so near the curfew hour—as the junta claims was the case with Frank. (Hathaway was held for six days.) And the junta admits there is no record of Frank's release.

At the beginning of the week the commission has a session with U.S. Ambassador David H. Potter and four of his associates. They are cordial and, under Mr. Teruggi's polite but firm prodding, promise to try to "clear up the gaps." But they suggest no new line of investigation and even refuse to furnish Mr. Teruggi a letter of introduction to appropriate junta officials. (They are similarly unencouraging when we press them about the possibility of our country's opening its doors to Chilean refugees.)

With step-by-step perseverance, Mr. Teruggi accomplishes more in five days than the U.S. Embassy has in five months. Followed everywhere by two men in a small blue car, he goes to the place where Frank lived and finds on a telephone book the embassy number in his son's handwriting; he visits the police substation where Frank was first taken and learns that no inquiries have been made there. Particularly helpful is a conversation with a conservative Chilean businessman—a friend of David Hathaway's family—who says that David's girlfriend notified him of the two youths' arrest on the morning of September 21, and that he immediately phoned the American consulate. (The consulate is queried and claims it has no record of any such call.) The businessman arranges an appointment for Mr. Teruggi with General Oscar Bonilla, minister of the interior. Visibly taken aback by the conflicting evidence

Teruggi confronts him with, Bonilla vows to reopen the case and declares that the government will apologize if it is established that Frank died as a result of “negligence” on the part of the military.

Near the end of our stay, Mr. Teruggi finally finds out the appalling truth about his son’s death. It comes in the form of detailed eyewitness testimony presented in a document delivered by a well-known and trustworthy Chilean woman to an embassy of a Western European country. The document “clears up the gaps” between the time Frank was separated from David Hathaway at the soccer stadium and the time his body was brought to the morgue. Young Frank was never released from the stadium while still alive. After what the authorities had done to him, they did not dare release him. “I honestly don’t believe they’ll ever admit they killed him,” Frank Sr. ruefully remarks.

III

Undeniably, the democratic process was falling apart toward the end of Salvador Allende’s three-year presidency. Operating with a narrow electoral mandate and often hamstrung by the opposition-controlled Congress and courts, his Popular Unity coalition government angered the oligarchy with its efforts to redistribute wealth through agrarian reform and other measures. Attacked by the left for moving too slowly and by the right for moving too fast, Allende was very much a man in the middle. The revolutionary left resented his insistence on proceeding by means of “bourgeois legality”; the rightists resented his failure to prevent the left’s illegal expropriation of a number of small farms and his “sectarian” way of handing out jobs according to party affiliation. Polarization between extreme left and extreme right led to political stalemate and social disruption—with the right doing all it could to sabotage production and to paralyze the country through strikes staged by truck owners and people in the professions. The role of the United States in Allende’s downfall has been well documented; its “invisible blockade”—the termination of all aid other than military, the credit squeeze, etc.—was devastating. But whether that role was *decisive* remains a question.

Whatever the shortcomings of the Allende regime, however, there is no conceivable justification for the political genocide that is now taking place in Chile. (Estimates of the number of people executed by the junta range as high as 200,000—though the figure we have heard most often is 40,000.) Even certain members of the Christian Democratic party are now being rounded up —the party which was Allende’s

principal opposition and most of whose members supported the coup. What happens in regard to the Christian Democrats will be a key to the future: if the junta arrives at an accommodation with them, it will have decided on a kind of populist authoritarianism; if it cracks down on them, it will probably move toward total police-statism. Ismael Huerta, the junta's minister of the exterior, apparently is not prepared to deny that Chile is a fascist state; at the recent conference of foreign ministers in Mexico City he told reporters that he cannot say whether the military government "is or is not fascist." Certainly its methods are fascist; what it lacks is an undergirding ideology. And Catholic leaders sadly point to several signs indicating that the junta plans to use the church in developing that ideology.

Throughout the week many people—Chileans, Ford Foundation personnel, and others—voice the hope that we and similar groups will appeal to the U.S. government to apply its considerable leverage with the junta in order to bring about the restoration of fundamental human rights in Chile. But the prospects for our government's doing anything of the kind seem dim indeed, in view of its hasty resumption of aid following the September coup.

Our commission of inquiry is escorted back to the airport by a German-born, strongly pro-junta tour guide who fought with Hitler's army in World War II. His parting words to us: "I hope you come back soon." Numb from all that we have seen and experienced—and from all the true-life horror stories that we have listened to—we can scarcely muster a smile.

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