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Review

Chile: The Other September 11

Edited by Pilar Aguilera and Ricardo Fredes

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September 16, 2003—With the passing of September 11 for another year, there will be many who will be experiencing a distinct sense of unease. No one can forget the horrific images of that day, in 2001.

Like many others, no doubt, I cried on that day: and remained in partial shock for some time afterwards. For those who witnessed the atrocity, it is a date that will remain indelibly imprinted upon their minds for the rest of their lives.

There is, however, another reason to remember September 11. It is a date that also holds special meaning for Chileans. It is the date chosen by General Augusto Pinochet to launch a precisely calculated coup to overthrow that nation's democratically-elected socialist president, Salvador Allende. It was the date that marked the beginning of a 17-year reign of terror: a period during which the Chilean Left was crushed under the weight of persecution, torture, murders and 'disappearances.' 'Chile: the other September 11' is a volume modest in size, but bold in its ambition. Those who have compiled this collection of essays, speeches and historical representations have set themselves the task of reclaiming a buried history, a history lost in the triumphalist accounts of Cold War victory that have permeated since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

'Chile: the other September 11' does not claim to be a comprehensive history of those events leading up to and following that fateful day in 1973. Rather, this volume comprises a series of essays, speeches and remembrances intended to bring home the full horror of these events, to explore the lessons that are to be drawn from the 'twin September 11s,' and to preserve the memory of those who died, sometimes heroically, for a cause that many today have relegated to 'the dustbin of history.' Its contents include remembrances by Joan Jara, the widow of murdered song-writer and poet, Victor Jara, the last words transmitted on Chilean radio by Salvador Allende, and a speech by the fallen leader's daughter, Beatriz Allende. Also included is an in-depth chronology.

The world in 1973 was a vastly different place than exists today. America was smarting from its defeat in Vietnam. Richard Nixon was in the White House, while Henry Kissinger was his secretary of state. Then, as now, brutal geopolitics permeated below the surface imagery of competing ideologies. The Soviet Union's strategy, in no small part, rested upon its support for a succession of national liberation and socialist struggles throughout Central and South America, while the United States felt compelled to resort to all means necessary to maintain control of what it perceived to be its economic and geopolitical 'back yard.'

With the election of the Allende's socialist 'Popular Unity' government in 1970, fears were immediately raised in Washington that Chile may provide a 'Soviet beachhead' in South America.

US covert operations against the Allende government, including a campaign of economic and political destabilization and isolation, came to a head on September 11, 1973, with Pinochet leading a ruthlessly efficient coup to wrest control of government and decapitate the nation's Left.

The volume explores, through eyewitness accounts, the events of those days, and the days immediately following. Accounts vary, but it is widely accepted that well over a thousand were murdered in the immediate aftermath of the coup—methodically rounded up, taken to stadiums, tortured and often executed. By the end of Pinochet's 17-year reign, over 3,000 had been murdered in the ensuing Terror; many others simply 'disappearing,' never to be heard from again.

Joan Jara recalls the scenes upon finally being called to identify her husband's body after many nights of dread and anxiety: "[Rows] and rows of bodies [covered] the floor, stacked up into heaps in the corners, most with gaping wounds, some with their hands still tied behind their backs."

Finally, after searching through the legions of the fallen, Joan Jara remembers finding her husband: "His chest [was] riddled with holes, [with] a gaping wound in his abdomen . . . Part of me died at that moment too."

For Pilar Aguilera and Ricardo Fredes, the scenes of the Twin Towers aftermath created a cruel and disturbing sense of déjà vu: "[The] idea of an 'other' September 11 must seem incredible to some. But when Chileans saw the photos of New Yorkers holding up images of missing loved ones after the September 11 attacks, the scene was frighteningly familiar."

Ariel Dorfman, meanwhile, reflects upon how Americans and Chileans may well now have cause to identify with one another's sufferings:

"In Chile people muttered, 'This cannot be happening to us. This sort of . . . violence happens to other people and not to us.'"

Chile's tragedy demonstrated like no other event the potential fragility of democratic institutions and processes where crude geopolitical objectives and concerns intervened. In America today, as occurred in Chile, peoples' illusions of security were shattered cruelly and violently.

The liberal democratic hegemony of which Francis Fukuyama spoke during the aftermath of the USSR's collapse was won, in many instances, through a violence and a Terror of decidedly non-liberal democratic proportions. In Venezuela today, as yet another democratically-elected leftist government is undermined through US-sponsored destabilization, the parallels with Chile are deeply disturbing.

As the world unites to mourn the innocent victims of the Twin Towers atrocity, it is to be hoped that 'Chile's September 11' will not be forgotten either. Never again ought a democratic government be brought down through the intervention of ostensibly democratic nations, in Terror and bloodshed, for the sake of crude geopolitical objectives.

'Chile: the other September 11' is an excellent introduction to those interested in learning more about this atrocity, and also provides vital historical representations for those already aware of the events of that fateful day.

'Chile: the other September 11,' may be ordered from [Ocean Press](#).