

# Struggle for Memory Continues 50 Years After Chile Coup

September 11, 2023



Political prisoners in Chile's national stadium after the coup

Today marks 50 years since the civil-military coup led by General Augusto Pinochet in Chile. Fifty years since the bombing of the seat of government at "La Moneda," fifty years since air force planes strafed the skies, fifty years since rows of military tanks filled the streets of Santiago, fifty years since uniformed soldiers and police were deployed to torture, shoot and disappear anyone committed to change in Chile.

To this day, images of these events continue to reverberate and paralyze us with the horrors and crimes of the State terrorism imposed by the dictatorship, which lasted until 1990, and radically transformed Chilean society.

According to official numbers from Chile's Ministry of Justice and Human Rights, during 17 years of dictatorship, 40,175 people were persecuted, tortured, executed and disappeared. Of these, it is believed at least 3,200 were executed and disappeared. To date, only 307 have been found and identified.

Where are our dead? This basic question remains unanswered. There is no justice, only impunity. Our wounds are still open.

## **The silencing of memory**

I was born in 1987, three years before the dictatorship ended and the "democratic transition" began. On March 11, 1990, Pinochet handed the presidential banner over to Patricio Aylwin, who was elected President of Chile. Pinochet stepped down as president, becoming the Commander in Chief of the Army, thus assuming a role as "protector" of the Institutional Bases of the State through his

leadership of the armed forces, as enshrined in the 1980 Constitution.

During the first decade after the dictatorship, virtually no one I interacted with spoke about what had taken place in the years previous. Not in my home, nor in the homes of relatives or friends. This history was not taught in schools: after 1979 history as taught in schools ended abruptly in 1970. There was no need to tell an official history, or to recover the narratives of those close to us who had lived through it. The past was silenced in hopes it would be forgotten.

The first two transitional governments followed the logic of silencing memory that was implemented during the dictatorship, and not just in education. From the outset, these governments were criticized for promoting reconciliation and national unity policies in a context in which criminals of the dictatorship went unpunished and enjoyed benefits and prestige in the armed forces and the police. So it was that the so-called unity and reconciliation contributed more to the maintenance of impunity and the silencing of memory than to truth and justice.

## **Denialism, relativism and justification**

It wasn't until I was a 15-year-old high school student in Santiago that I learned what happened during the dictatorship in Chile. I remember a persistent effort on the part of our teachers to stick to an interpretation that tended to neutralize history and justify the coup. According to this telling, Salvador Allende was an idealist responsible for a terrible economic and social crisis. We were taught that though Pinochet's "military regime" committed crimes and disappeared people, it also imposed a new economic model that saved the country from crisis.

Twenty years later, that crude narrative continues to resonate. It is one of several provocative discourses the right wing is once again emphasizing in public debate, charging the atmosphere as Chileans prepare to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the coup d'état. The right wing, represented by the Renovación Nacional, Unión Demócrata Independiente, Evópoli and Republican parties, has introduced denialist and relativist discourses and even justified the coup in an attempt to minimize the dictatorship and promote a liberal and hyper-capitalist state. Together, these parties enjoy a representative majority in both the Senate and the Constitutional Convention.

On August 23, after 19 years of legal proceedings, Chile's Supreme Court convicted former agents of Pinochet's secret police for crimes of torture and sexual violence in the clandestine prison and torture center known as the "Venda Sexy" (now the Iran Memory Site 3037). That same day, in a clear example of denialism, Congresswoman Gloria Naveillán, a former Republican Party activist, suggested political sexual violence during the dictatorship "is part of urban legend."

Then there are revisionists such as constitutional assembly member Luis Silva. "One should not simplify or reduce, in all seriousness, those 17 years to human rights violations, I think in doing so, we deprive ourselves as Chileans of a balanced understanding of our history," Silva said on May 31. In his version of history, the dictatorship was required in order to restructure the state and restore economic stability.

There are yet other supporters of the dictatorship who justify the coup. A motion presented August 22 by right-wing parties involved the endorsement and reading of the August 22, 1973 resolution declaring Allende's government unconstitutional. Last month's motion was adopted by the House of Representatives.

For their part, the government and the ruling parties have refuted and denied the actions and speeches of the right wing, in a context in which they have framed the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the coup and the beginning of the dictatorship without euphemisms. But in its

attempt to set out a progressive reading of Chile's history, Gabriel Boric's government has appeared weak in the face of the country's powerful right.

## **The fight for memory**

The discourses surrounding the 50th anniversary of the coup d'état in Chile remind us that the struggle for memory is a permanent exercise. It is not just a matter of reacting to the barbarities expressed by the powerful that rule the tribunes, or trying to refute each of their points. In fact, to do so is a trap that forces us into the logic of their terms.

Instead, fighting for memory implies a process of recovery and the reconstruction of stories of struggles and resistances that do not appear in official history, that have not yet been told from the perspective of the defeated, and that can play a role in building the emancipatory possibilities in the present.

Memory is alive. Our memories are embodied and help inform our praxis and forms of active resistance. Living memory contrasts with the kind of memory that fits neatly into dominant and hegemonic discourses, or that is crystallized in specific locations, which can then become spaces of institutionalization and whitewashing, as has taken place with some memorial sites.

This is what the Collective of Women Survivors in Permanent Resistance called out in a statement it published at the beginning of September: it matters *what* is remembered. There is no room for neutral memory, for memory that sanitizes torture centers, for patriarchal memory that invisibilizes disappeared women detainees and survivors, for memory that expropriates struggle, or that puts itself at the service of the accumulation of capital. Quite the contrary.

This is why the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the coup in Chile is itself a site of struggle. This fight survives as life is breathed into the memory of struggle and organization through vigils for our dead and those who fought against the dictatorship, and into actions and protest against impunity and state crimes.

We must continue to remember so that no one is forgotten, so that no face is forgotten, and so that our experience is not forgotten.

*First published by Ojalá.*