

The Pinochet coup and the death of Charles Horman

Barry Grey
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Among the thousands who were seized, tortured and murdered in the first days of the Pinochet dictatorship, following the US-backed coup of September 11, 1973, were two US citizens, Frank Teruggi and Charles Horman.

Several years ago a series of documents concerning US complicity in the coup were released under the Freedom of Information Act. These include a telegram from US Ambassador David Popper to Secretary of State Henry Kissinger dated February 11, 1974. The telegram reports a meeting between Assistant Secretary of State Jack Kubisch and Chile's foreign minister General Huerta on the controversy surrounding the execution of the two Americans. Kubisch notes that he is raising the issue 'in the context of the need to be careful to keep relatively small issues in our relationship from making our cooperation more difficult.'

(Another document, dated October 1, 1973, is a situation report from a US Naval attaché in Chile, Patrick Ryan, who refers to September 11 as 'our D-Day,' and says the coup was 'close to perfect.')

The 'relatively small issue' of Charles Horman's death was the subject of a 1978 book by Thomas Hauser entitled *The Execution of Charles Horman, an American Sacrifice*, which became the basis for the 1982 film *Missing*. Both recount the attempt of Charles's father, Edmund, and Charles's wife, Joyce (called Beth in the film) to enlist the aid of American officials in Santiago in determining the fate of their disappeared loved one. To the horror of Ed Horman, a business executive from New York, it becomes increasingly clear that State Department and embassy officials are concerned not with the fate of his son, but rather with concealing US complicity in his murder.

Charles Horman, a 31-year-old Harvard graduate with

left-wing sympathies, became one of tens of thousands of workers and intellectuals named on death lists drawn up in the period of the coup, with the assistance of US intelligence operatives, because he 'knew too much.' On the day of the overthrow of Allende, September 11, and for several succeeding days, he chanced to be in the town of Viña del Mar, a seaside resort a few miles from Valparaiso, the base for the American military and intelligence forces who planned the coup and the bloodbath that followed.

Horman carefully noted his conversations with US military and intelligence officials in Viña del Mar in order to document the US role in the coup. Shortly after his return to Santiago, on September 16, his apartment was ransacked and he was seized by Chilean troops. It was later established that Horman was taken to National Stadium and executed on September 19.

The Hormans subsequently filed suit for wrongful death, but it was eventually dismissed because the CIA refused to release the relevant files. The film *Missing* won the Golden Palm award at the 1982 Cannes Film Festival, and Jack Lemmon, who played Ed Horman, was awarded the prize for best actor. The director Costa-Gavras won an Oscar for best screenplay based on material from another medium, and *Missing* gained Oscar nominations for best picture, best actor and best actress (Sissy Spacek in the role of Charles's wife).

Some, however, were not so pleased. Ray Davis, the senior US Military Group officer in Chile at the time of the coup (Captain Ray Tower in the film), filed a \$60 million libel suit against Costa-Gavras and Universal Studios. The suit was dismissed on summary judgment in 1987.

The case of Charles Horman is one of the important political, and human, questions surrounding the 1973

coup that have been pushed into the background over the past quarter century. These issues are once again emerging. This writer telephoned Elizabeth Horman, Charles's mother, to get her reaction to the arrest of the Chilean dictator.

When I explained that the *World Socialist Web Site* was planning to publish a comment raising the question of Henry Kissinger's complicity in the repression that claimed the life of her son, she said, 'You've really put your finger on it.'

Mrs. Horman did not wish to speak at length, but what she did say bears repeating:

'I lost my beautiful son. To have his murderer walking around in luxury ... I'm very happy that is no longer the case. Pinochet's son says his father did not commit genocide. But Pinochet's son is alive. Mine is not. I consider that genocide.'

See also:

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