

An answer to Pinochet's defenders

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Because of our extensive coverage of the issues surrounding the arrest in London of Gen. Augusto Pinochet, the *World Socialist Web Site* has become the target of angry e-mail from the ex-Chilean dictator's supporters.

Given the political pedigree of these correspondents, it is hardly a surprise that political crudity on the one hand and rhetorical gangsterism on the other characterize their messages. This site has no intention of providing such apologists for fascist mass murderers with a platform.

Nonetheless, the arguments employed in these messages are worth analyzing, if only in order to understand the socio-political layer that provided a domestic base of support for the US-backed dictatorships that dominated Latin America for the better part of two decades.

The case put forward by these defenders of the Chilean military butcher rests on three fundamental theses. The first, made with angry declamations of Chilean nationalist pride, is that Spain's extradition request and the United Kingdom's arrest order constitute unwarranted and unacceptable interference by foreign powers in the sovereign affairs of the Chilean nation.

The second is that Pinochet's crimes were no greater than the supposed crimes of those he killed, and people who accuse him of violating human rights ignore the fact that there was "a war going on" in Chile at the time of the September 1973 coup. Some of the former dictator's defenders go so far as to denounce his arrest as a human rights violation, placing it on a par with the treatment meted out by the Chilean military to left-wing workers, students and intellectuals 25 years ago.

Finally, Pinochet's Chilean backers argue that whatever the general may have done, his actions are justified by the "economic miracle" wrought by his policies in Chile.

Chileans must be left to "choose our own history," writes one correspondent, in a typical expression of the national sovereignty argument. He vows that he and like-minded reactionaries will never "surrender our dignity so that others come and dictate how we should solve our problems."

There is no hint that the writer has any sense of the irony involved in cloaking the defense of Pinochet in the mantle of Chilean nationalism and the right of small nations to self-determination. Some of the ex-dictator's loyalists go so far as to denounce British and Spanish actions in the language of anti-imperialism, harking back to the crimes of Spanish colonialism and the role of British imperialism on the continent. One correspondent invokes Chile's "aborigines who fought for 400 years against the Spanish until being exterminated," as evidence of the "freedom-loving" heritage that supposedly animates the defenders of Pinochet.

That Pinochet was in London because of the intimate ties he forged with British imperialism and, in particular, its military establishment is apparently lost on these born-again nationalists. As the only Latin

American head of state to support the British war against Argentina over the Malvinas Islands, the dictator earned the undying gratitude of the British ruling class and, in particular, the longtime Tory leader Margaret Thatcher, who frequently hosted him for tea.

As for Spain, Pinochet was a great proponent of Chile's Spanish heritage, by which he meant monarchy, feudalism and Franco fascism. There is no indication the butcher of Santiago was overly troubled by the fate of the aborigines.

Pinochet's entire career was rooted in the intervention of a major imperialist power in the internal political and economic affairs of Chile. He was the mediocre product of a military establishment forged through the work of the Pentagon in training a generation of Latin American officers for counterrevolutionary operations against their own people.

Chile was one of the Latin American countries that sent the greatest percentage of its officers to training courses at places like the US Army's School of the Americas, where they were instructed in counterinsurgency tactics, indoctrinated in anticommunism and taught interrogation and torture techniques that would later be developed and refined on a grand scale.

During the Allende regime, even as the Nixon administration was actively working to wreck the country, squeezing it, as the US president instructed then-CIA director Richard Helms "until it screamed," the US military continued to maintain the closest relations with the Chilean army.

Beginning in the 1960s, the country was the scene of intense operations by the CIA aimed at preventing the coming to power of a leftist government. The Christian Democrats under Eduardo Frei, the father of the country's current president, were financed in large part with CIA money.

As the coup approached, millions of dollars in CIA funds were dispensed to Allende's right-wing opponents, subsidizing the antigovernment press and financing protests by small businessmen, including the crippling truckers strike. Other funds and logistical support went to fascistic groups like Patria y Libertad, which was to provide shock troops for Pinochet's death squads after the coup.

The idea that Pinochet is a victim of foreign meddling in Chilean affairs is absurd. He and his cannibalistic dictatorship were the creatures of prolonged US political, economic and military intervention in Latin America. Again and again Chilean working people were prevented from "choosing their own history" by Washington, working in tandem with the local ruling oligarchy and its military.

As for the indignation of the general's defenders over Spain's "extraterritorial" assertion of its legal right to try Pinochet, at least two points should be made. The first is the extraterritorial reach of Pinochet's state terror. He didn't concern himself about national boundaries in pursuing a war of extermination against his enemies.

The Chilean political police, DINA, dispatched assassins to Argentina, Italy and the US, where they carried out the car bomb murder of former Allende minister Orlando Letelier and his American assistant Ronni Moffet. Chilean security forces became intimately involved in repressive operations in neighboring Latin American countries and routinely killed foreign citizens caught in Chile, including scores of Spanish citizens, giving rise to the present case against the ex-dictator.

Secondly, the assertion that Chile should be left to handle its own affairs ignores the fact that the country is ruled under a constitution forcibly imposed upon it by Pinochet himself. The dictator took care to ensure that no trial could ever be held in Chile for his crimes and he awarded himself the post of “Senator for life,” giving him immunity from any attempt by his victims to bring him to justice.

What of the claim that Pinochet’s counterrevolutionary violence was provoked by the “crimes” of the Chilean left and was justified because there was “a war going on?”

The events of September 1973 had every appearance of a war. Airplanes bombed La Moneda, Chile’s White House; tanks and combat troops took over the streets; and machine-gun fire raged throughout the Chilean capital for days. The new regime imposed a state of siege and declared martial law. The military carried out the roundup, imprisonment, torture and execution of tens of thousands of militant workers, left-wing intellectuals, peasants and students in every corner of the country.

If this was a war, however, only one side fought it. Estimates of the executions carried out by the military regime during its first year range as high 50,000. Where are the supposed victims on the other side? What comparable roundups, killings and torture took place under the Allende government?

The soldiers and officers who were killed in September 1973 were the ones who refused to go along with the coup or sought to alert the government and the people of the planned bloodbath. Several of the latter were turned over by the Allende regime itself, which sought to curry the favor of the military commanders until the last moment.

The fascist ideology of the Pinochet regime, reflected in the language of his defenders, started from the premise that the country was at war against foreign aggression, justifying the use of any and all military means. The “foreign” enemy invoked by the military was the “Marxist cancer,” or “red leprosy,” which had to be cut out of the nation. This was a war fought principally in Chile’s shantytowns and factories against an enemy that remained—thanks to the counterrevolutionary policies of the dominant leaderships in the working class, particularly the Communist Party—almost entirely unarmed.

The comparison of Pinochet’s detention in London to the crimes for which he has been indicted by the Spanish prosecutor is almost too contemptible to answer. Let us simply pose some pertinent questions:

Has anyone at the general’s posh London clinic attached electrodes to his testicles, as was routinely done to Pinochet’s prisoners in the prison camps set up throughout Chile? Has he had his eyes gouged out or his fingernails ripped off? Have the British authorities attempted to send hungry rats up his anus or drown him in barrels of excrement and vomit? Have they cut out his tongue or burned him alive? If so, we would have to acknowledge that something similar to the treatment meted out to the victims of his dictatorship has befallen the aging general.

We would not wish such atrocities on any human being, even a mass murderer like Pinochet. But the attempt to drum up sympathy for the

ex-dictator based on his supposed suffering in detention is nothing short of obscene.

By all accounts, Pinochet is being cared for in a facility that is well beyond the means of 99 percent of the British population. He has continuous access to his lawyers, Chilean government officials and his own family. How does this compare to the suffering of his victims, whose families still search for the “disappeared,” not knowing where or how they died, or ever seeing justice meted out to their murderers?

Finally there is the thesis that whatever Pinochet did, it is justified by Chile’s “economic miracle.” This is perhaps the most deeply felt basis for defending the ex-dictator on the part of Chile’s ruling class and the privileged middle class layer which has amassed unprecedented wealth thanks to the violent suppression of the working class. This argument boils down to a declaration by a thin and egotistical layer of Chilean society that it could care less how many died or what political rights were sacrificed, as long as it can afford new homes, imported cars and frequent shopping trips to New York and Miami.

Financial circles internationally have for years portrayed Chile as a model for development. Rarely, however, do those who tout the nation’s economy examine how the country’s growth rates were prepared through mass murder and the destruction of the living standards and basic rights of the Chilean workers.

The military dictatorship carried out the most sweeping program of privatization and deregulation seen in any country in the world. Health care, social security, pensions and education were all placed on the auction block, while corporate income tax was abolished. In the first decade of military rule, the unemployment rate rose to 20 percent, while more than 40 percent of the population fell below the official poverty line.

Today Chilean workers are among the most exploited in the world. Part-time and temporary jobs and contract labor are the norm, with most workers putting in 48-hour weeks. Children are compelled to seek employment as early as possible. By 1992 only 2.5 percent of the population had more than seven years of formal education, a third as many as in Argentina and half the number in Brazil or Mexico.

But the dictatorship’s destruction of the social conditions and organizations of the working class created unparalleled opportunities for foreign capital and the Chilean bourgeoisie to enrich themselves. The result is one of the most socially polarized economies in all of Latin America.

This is the real source of the vitriolic defense of Pinochet expressed in the e-mail of his Chilean defenders. Behind the blowhard nationalism, the insults and the expressions of indignation lies the fear of a social elite that its own fate is bound up with that of the general. If this can happen to him, they ask themselves, how safe are our own wealth and privilege? Who is to say that the working class and the oppressed masses will not recover from the bloodbath of 1973 and once again enter on the road of revolution?

Whatever the judicial and political authorities in London and Madrid ultimately decide about the ex-dictator, these are questions that will not go away.



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