

# Declassified documents expose UK's involvement in Pinochet's 1973 coup

Thomas Scripps  
13 September 2023

Declassified government papers have further exposed British imperialism's support for General Augusto Pinochet's murderous September 11, 1973 coup against President Salvador Allende in Chile.

Pinochet led a military overthrow of the democratically elected government and began a 17-year reign of terror, torturing and murdering tens of thousands of workers and left-wing organisers, driving hundreds of thousands into exile and implementing brutal free-market policies. His operation crushed a revolutionary movement of the Chilean working class and rural poor which had impelled a wave of nationalisations and threatened to spread across South America.

There were two factors which contributed to the success of the counterrevolution. The most critical was the role played by Allende himself and his Stalinist and Pabloite supporters in politically and literally disarming the working class.

The second was the extensive support and direction given to Pinochet by world imperialism. The United States was the leading player, but the UK was also heavily involved. Its actions in Chile in the 1960s and 70s are an example of the violently counterrevolutionary role played by British imperialism around the globe throughout its history—continued, even with its more limited resources, to this day.

During the 1964 and 1970 elections in Chile, the UK's Information Research Department (IRD)—a psy-ops unit under the Foreign Office but working closely with MI6—sought to manipulate the media and sway influential figures in the country against Allende. *Declassified UK*, the investigative news site headed by Mark Curtis, explained in a 2020 article, the IRD “provided US officers with a list of Chilean journalists who could produce desirable content.”

The exposure in 2018 of the Integrity Initiative—a network of trusted journalists, academics, politicians and military officials throughout Europe run by the Institute for Statecraft—proved the Foreign Office's continued use of the same tactics today.

IRD operatives in Chile also collected information on left-

wing and trade union activity, shared with the US government, and developed close connections with institutions which would serve as centres of opposition to an Allende government. In the words of one of its officers, Elizabeth Allott, the department had “very close contacts with specialist officials in the [Chilean] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [redacted], and certain student organisations. As elsewhere in Latin America we can cover areas closed to the Americans.”

After the coup, the IRD began sharing information with “the Chilean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government information organisations” and “military intelligence” services, directly implicating British government officials in Pinochet's repression.

*Declassified UK* also reports on the UK's contribution to the regime's counter-insurgency strategy, noting that the idea “was first raised during the visit of British navy chief Sir Michael Pollock to Chile in late November 1973, two months after the coup.”

Allott provided three books plus a “Manual of Counter Insurgency Studies” to government officials three months later, placing British imperialism's vast experience in subjugating the people of its colonial possessions at the disposal of the Pinochet's junta. “The Fight Against Communist Terrorism in Malaya”, a “Review of the Emergency in Malaya (1948-57)” and “two booklets on the Philippines insurrection” followed.

British operations in Malaya (now Malaysia and Singapore) included using starvation as a weapon of war—killing livestock and spraying Agent Orange—extrajudicial killings like the Batang Kali massacre, herding hundreds of thousands of civilians into concentration camps, torture, collective punishment and deportations. The war was begun and waged for its first three years by Labour Prime Minister Clement Attlee.

Britain's collaboration with the Chilean dictatorship continued in full knowledge of the atrocities being carried out by Pinochet's torturers and executioners. The UK's ambassador to Chile Reginald Secondé reported how “The

extent of the bloodshed has shocked people,” but commented coldly of the repression, “the lack of political activity is, for the time being, no loss”.

In fact, Pinochet was celebrated for reversing the losses suffered by British business interests under the Allende government. Secondé told the Foreign Office, “most British businessmen... will be overjoyed at the prospect of consolidation which the new military regime offers,” with executives, at Shell in particular, “all breathing deep sighs of relief.”

Among the most important British interests was copper, for which it relied on Chile’s exports. Price increases since Allende’s election and US sanctions were costing the UK an extra £500,000 a year.

Secondé summarised, “this regime suits British interests much better than its predecessor... The new leaders are unequivocally on our side and want to do business, in the widest sense, with us”.

A substantial part of that business was UK arms exports. In 1966, Labour Defence Secretary Denis Healey had established the Defence Sales Organisation with the aim of “ensur[ing] that this country does not fail to secure its rightful share of this valuable commercial market.” The Heath Conservative government (1970-1974) acted on this imperative, ensuring Pinochet took delivery of eight Hawker Hunter fighter jets before being turfed out of office and pledging to honour ongoing contracts worth £50 million.

The declassified files show British defence officials plotting, “in due course to make the most of the opportunities which will be presented by the change in government”.

These plans were interrupted by the working class for a period. James Callaghan, foreign secretary in Harold Wilson’s Labour government (1974-76), approved the pending delivery of two Leander Class frigates, two Oberon submarines, the refitting of a destroyer and of Hawker Hunter engines, and several smaller projects. But the government was forced to refuse to enter any new contracts. Workers at the Rolls-Royce factory in East Kilbride delayed the shipment of refurbished jet engines for years.

With the Thatcher government taking power in 1979—the closest ideological allies of Pinochet, sharing his admiration for the ultra-free-market economists the “Chicago Boys”—arms shipments to Chile restarted in earnest, and have continued since. The dictator paid regular friendly visits to Thatcher in Britain.

Besides its commercial interests, the UK shared with the US and all the imperialist powers a powerful political desire to see the revolutionary movement in Chile made a bloody example of.

In the two years prior to the coup, four states of emergency

had been declared in Britain in response to a revolutionary wave of industrial action—a fifth was in place at the time of the coup itself. Only a few months later, Heath’s Conservative government would be toppled by the working class, requiring the Labour Party to restore stability through a series of targeted concessions. A section of the ruling class had been making preparations for Britain’s own military coup.

Secondé said approvingly of the popular movement in Chile, “the final seal of failure has now been put on this experiment by the Chilean armed forces,” with “obvious advantages”.

Significantly, the ambassador also noted disadvantages. Namely, that the events would lead the working class to conclude that no peaceful, parliamentary transition to socialism would be allowed by the ruling class. Stalinism and Pabloism—a national-opportunist tendency which had emerged within the Trotskyist Fourth International—played a politically devastating role in preventing this critical lesson, and the related conclusion of the need for an independent vanguard party of the working class, from being drawn and acted upon.

The British ruling class remained a good friend to Pinochet to the end. During a visit by Pinochet to the UK in 1998, a Spanish court issued an international arrest warrant charging him with human rights violations. After a two-year wait in which Pinochet lived in luxury in London, Labour Foreign Secretary Jack Straw contrived a way to refuse Pinochet’s extradition on grounds of ill health, allowing him to return to Chile. He died almost seven years later with 300 charges pending. Straw was praised by Thatcher as “a very fair man.”

Labour’s actions were an expression of its total acceptance of Thatcherite politics and disconnect from any past connections with the working class through which popular hostility to the Chilean dictatorship had made itself partially felt.

More recent *World Socialist Web Site* articles have drawn attention to the sharp contrast between the UK’s refusal to extradite the mass murderer Pinochet and its eagerness to imprison and extradite the exposé of war crimes and human rights abuses, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange. Now, as then, the British ruling class is drenched in the blood of imperialist plots.



To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**