

## *State Terror and International Human Rights In Latin America*

Stern, Steve J. *Battling for Hearts and Minds: Memory Struggles in Pinochet's Chile, 1973-1988*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006. 576 pp.

Stern, Steve J. *Remembering Pinochet's Chile: On the Eve of London 1988*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006. 247 pp.

Wright, Thomas C. *State Terrorism in Latin America: Chile, Argentina, and International Human Rights*. Boulder: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.; 2007. 267 pp.

Moniz Bandeira, Luiz Alberto. *Formação do Império Americano: Da Guerra contra a Espanha à Guerra no Iraque (The American Empire Formation: From the War against Spain to the War in Iraq)*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Civilização Brasileira, 2005. 851 pp.

*It is dangerous to be right when the government is wrong.*

---Voltaire

For those of us who lived under Latin America's bureaucratic authoritarianism during its pinnacle in the decades of the 1970s, '80s, and '90s, after almost one decade of the return to democracy, memories of the atrocities committed and arbitrary arrests are not easily forgotten or erased. The atrocities committed by the military regimes in power in Latin America for almost three decades produced an unprecedented human rights crisis and a culture of fear. The State, the modern *Leviathan*, charged with the responsibility to protect and serve, is the same State that systematically violated the human rights of millions of people, who are still suffering today. Many innocent individuals, as the four books under review show, disappeared or vanished without trace. Indeed, according to Steve J. Stern, Pinochet's Chile pioneered a new technique of repression in the Latin American context: systematic "disappearance" of people (Stern, xxii).

The bureaucratic authoritarian regimes, which came to power in Argentina, Chile, and Brazil, were committed to eradicating the political left in their countries, which they perceived as a severe threat to the status quo and the privileges of the elites, led in some cases to the formal suspension of constitutional guarantees, and in others to extra-official but equally effective suppression of civil and political rights (Wright, 18). Stern also calls our attention to the fact that the mystique of the Cuban Revolution gave impetus to the idea that youthful rebels and activists could indeed produce a major rupture with an unjust status quo, even against the wishes of the United States, and that their revolution could open the door to a bright future (Stern, 16). Furthermore, according to this vision, as stated by Stern, the workers, peasants, urban poor, ethnoracial outcasts, and progressive sectors of youth and the middle and professional classes constituted the large social majority—the "pueblo" constantly marginalized and frustrated by Latin America's tragic and exploitative history but now on the verge of redemption (Stern, 16).

The military response to this rise of expectations among the "pueblo" was swift and brutal leaving no question that any attempt to revert or threaten the status quo and the privileges of the elite would be dealt harshly. The revolution of *empanadas con vino tinto* [the revolution of red wine and empanadas] despite Allende's project of peaceful revolution through election and constitutionalism found its ardent critics in the military establishment under the leadership of General Augusto C. Pinochet.<sup>1</sup> The military's mission, as the savior of Chile's democracy and its institutions, was to "salvage the country" (Wright, 53). According to Wright, in an October speech, Augusto C. Pinochet, army commander in chief and leader of the military junta that ousted Salvador Allende in 1973, claimed "in messianic tones that the coup had been God's work, and he [Pinochet] committed himself to the heroic struggle to carry out a moral cleansing in order to extirpate the root of evil from Chile" (Wright, 53). As Stern points out, the repression in Pinochet's Chile was large in scale and layered in its implementation. In a country of only 10 million people in 1972, individually proved cases of death or disappearance by state agents (or persons in their hire) totaled about 3,000; torture victims run in the dozens of thousands; documented political arrests exceed 82,000; the exile flow amounts to about 200,000 (Stern, xxi).

As all four books under review show many Chileans could not believe that their government was able of such violence towards its citizens. Chileans truly believe in the ideas of Chilean *exceptionalism*, that is, of a country singular in the Latin American context, because it was essentially democratic, civilized, and respectful of law and institutions, notwithstanding deep conflicts and social problems—competed with ideas of the apocalypse (Stern, 13-14). For many Chileans, their society was too civilized, too law abiding, too democracy (Stern, xxii). In fact, while giving a speech at the Plaza de la Constitución, Allende supporters shouted: “!A cerrar, a cerrar, el Congreso Nacional!,” “!Mano dura, presidente!,” “!Gobierno y pueblo armado, jamás serán aplastado!”<sup>ii</sup> President Allende, the eloquent speaker, raised his hand and told his supporters:

The pueblo must understand that I have to remain loyal to what I have said. We will make the revolutionary changes within pluralism, democracy, and liberty, which will not mean tolerance for subversives nor for facists...I know that what I am going to say will not be to the liking of many of you, but you have to understand the real position of this government. I am not going--because it would be absurd—to close the Congress. I am not going to do it. But if necessary I will send a legislative proposal to convene a plebiscite (Stern, 19).

The September 11<sup>th</sup> coup d'état was not only an act of God to extract the “*cancer*” out of Chilean society, according to the *junta*, but also an event that had the blessing of the United States and the support of its powerful Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. Concerning the democratic election of socialist Allende to the presidency, Kissinger is purported to have said:

I don't see why we need to stand by and watch a country go Communist due to the irresponsibility of its own people (Stern, 22).

Furthermore, when the *Newsweek* magazine reported that there were some 2,700 dead bodies in the coroner's office in Santiago, Kissinger, again in his traditional hedonistic mannerism, is purported to have said:

I agree that we should not knock down stories that later prove to be true, nor should we be in the position of defending what they're doing in Santiago. But I think we should understand our policy—that however unpleasant they act, the government [Pinochet's government and the junta] is better for us than Allende was (Moniz Bandeira, 322).

The Pinochet's military regime and the junta under his leadership in order to justify its massive crackdown on Allende supporters and the emerging crusade against Marxism announced on September 17 the discovered of *Plan Z* and later it printed the *White Book of the Change of Government in Chile* to make its case (Wright, 53). The Plan Z, as Steve J. Stern has pointed out, constituted a classic misinformation campaign. It was the work of both the military and secret police masterminds (Stern, 47). According to Stern:

Plan Z purportedly contemplated a massive assassination of leaders in the military, politics, and civil society, coordinated with assaults on specific police and military sites and on infrastructure targets. The process would eliminate organized opposition, secure additional arms, create an environment of chaos and civil war, and enable the conspirators to impose a dictatorship (Stern, 42).

The Plan Z as well as the White Book was widely distributed not only at home but also abroad in an attempted to legitimize the brutality and inhumane actions taken by the Pinochet's regime. As Wright has pointed out, “the White Book used assorted documents, photographs of arms caches, and bold claims in an attempt to convince the world that Allende government, aided by Cuban operatives, had planned to assassinate top military and oppositions political figures” (Wright, 53).

Although I have only partially highlighted some of the important themes discussed in the four books under review here, they each with its unique theoretical approach make a larger contribution to the literature on human right and state atrocities in Latin America. For example, Thomas C. Wright offers an exploration of the reciprocal relationship between Argentina and Chile and human rights movements, demonstrating how state terrorism in these countries strengthened the international human rights lobby and how, in turn, that more powerful lobby ultimately helped bring repressors to justice. *State Terrorism*

*in Latin America* examines the impact of state terrorism on human rights in Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s. It also looks at the legacies of state terrorism that continue to affect Latin America today, especially its (un)rule of law and lack of judicial accountability. Wright's *State Terrorism in Latin America* is highly recommended for anyone interested in Latin American history or International Studies. This book can also be used in a course such as Universal Justice. The views expressed by both oppressed and oppressors are chilling and bone breaking bringing to the imaginary the brutality and inhumane treatment metered out against anyone suspected of being a subversive, which Argentina's General Videla described as those "we do not consider Argentine" and who hold "ideas contrary to our western, Christians civilization" (Wright, 106).

Steve J. Stern's books *Remembering Pinochet's Chile: On the Eve of London 1988 (Book One)* and *Battling for Hearts and Minds: Memory Struggles in Pinochet's Chile, 1973-1988 (Book Two)* is part of a trilogy. *Remembering Pinochet's Chile: On the Eve of London 1988 (Book One)*, according to the author, is written as a short introduction especially for general readers and students. Its main purpose "is to put human faces on the major frameworks of memory that came to be influential in Chile, while also providing a feel for memory lore and experiences silenced or marginalized" (Stern, xxx). Stern's theoretical approach to the study of Pinochet's Chile is guided by an approach to memory which relies on two influential ideas. The first invokes the dichotomy of memory against forgetting (*olvido*). According to the author, "memory struggles are struggles against oblivion. This dichotomy is pervasive in many studies of collective memory in many parts of the world and not without reason. The dialectic of memory versus forgetting is an inescapable dynamic, perceived as such by social actors in the heat of their struggles" (Stern, xxvi-xxvii). The second influential idea in Stern's memory approach focuses on what the author calls the "Faustian bargain." That is, "amnesia occurs because the middle classes and the wealthy...developed the habit of denial or looking the other way on matters of state violence" (Stern, xxvii). The Chilean elite accept moral complacency as the price of economic comfort. As the primary beneficiaries of the Pinochet's regime economic miracle and the "Chicago Boys" neoliberal economic model, the elite were willing to overlook some of the brutality and inhumane actions of the regime in power. Stern does not buy into completely that the elite accept moral complacency. Instead he argues against that interpretation of his trilogy and contends that dissent is partial. As he points out, "what I am arguing for is study of contentious memory as a process of competing selective remembrances, ways of giving meaning to and drawing legitimacy from human experience. The memory-against-forgetting dichotomy is too narrow and restrictive" (Stern, xxvii).

Luiz Alberto Moniz Bandeira without a doubt is today's Brazil most influential thinker in the history of international relations. His books are a mandatory reading in Brazil's Itamaraty, the Brazilian's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In *Formação do Império Americano: Da Guerra contra a Espanha à Guerra no Iraque (The American Empire Formation: From the War against Spain to the War in Iraq)*, Moniz Bandeira examines two of the most important processes of the twenty-first century: the internationalization and globalization of capitalism under the hegemonic control of the United States and the rise of, what the author calls, ultra-imperialism. Moniz Bandeira, in his 851 pages book, shows that the United States are the greatest beneficiary of the internalization of international relations. He argues that the national sovereignty of other nations is not a "blank check" but only that of the United States. He quotes Ambassador Richard N. Hass to illustrate his point:

Sovereignty is not absolute. It is conditional. When states violate minimum standards by committing, permitting, or threatening intolerable acts against their own people or other nations, then some of the privileges of sovereignty are forfeited (Moniz Bandeira, 27).

Well written and rich in detail, Moniz Bandeira's book is a tour de history. I highly recommend the book under review for anyone interested in Latin American history, International Studies, or World History in general.

*By José de Arimatéia da Cruz, Armstrong Atlantic State University*

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<sup>i</sup> *Empanadas* are sold everywhere in Chile. It is a traditional small pie stuffed with meat, cheese, or shrimp evoking the ingredients of Chilean popular celebrations.

<sup>ii</sup> “!A cerrar, a cerrar, el Congreso Nacional!” (Let’s close, let’s close, the National Congress); “!Mano dura, presidente!” (A tough hand, president!); “!Gobierno y pueblo armado, jamás serán aplastado!” (Government and people armed, will never be crushed!).