

## READING 2

### *The Years Before the Dictatorship*

After nearly three hundred years of colonial rule, Chile won its independence from Spain in 1817. Roughly from that time until 1973, when the coup struck down Salvador Allende Gossens, the country was ruled, with few exceptions, by civilian governments. A modern constitution was approved in 1925, providing a clear basis in law for democracy. While economic and social tensions often roiled under the surface, the various groups remained committed to majority rule—class and political differences never resulted in an all-out civil war.

In 1970 the presidential incumbent, Eduardo Frei Montalva, who had held office for six years, lost the support of the middle class as he failed to cope with demands for social reforms. This opened the door to Allende's Popular Unity coalition (known as UP, the abbreviation for *Unidad Popular*). After a tight race, Allende, an avowed socialist, prevailed. While Allende remained committed to a peaceful transition to socialism, he also sought to deepen democracy in Chile (traditionally, this presidential democracy was heavily controlled by the business and agricultural elites). He believed that the duty of democratic societies was to ensure the well-being of all citizens and that the poor must take an active role. In a speech delivered to a rally in Santiago in the spring of 1972, Allende declared that under socialist leadership Chileans finally experienced



Used by permission of Marjorie Agosin.

**Arpillera 2: Created by Violeta Morales to commemorate Salvador Allende, who instituted far-reaching policies in support of Chile's poor.**

... a most authentic political democracy, a pluralist democracy, in government and opposition. . . . Today the people have united to defend this authentic freedom, because we have reaffirmed, expanded and deepened the individual, political, collective and social freedoms. Let this be heard and not forgotten: in this country there is not one political prisoner . . . not one journalist jailed for his ideas. . . . In this country there is a total freedom of the press and information and we have the utmost tolerance and respect for all creeds.

These liberties are greater than ever in the history of Chile. . . . But these liberties, though fundamental, are not sufficient. We also want economic freedom for Chile and each Chilean. . . . Chileans will be truly free when we are rid of ignorance, unemployment, exploitation, hunger and moral and physiological misery.<sup>1</sup>



**Supporters of Allende's socialist ideas of democracy, which involved a redistribution of wealth and ensured liberties such as freedom of the press, line the street.**

Despite the incessant hostility of opposition newspapers, Allende saw to it that their freedom of speech was never threatened during his time in office.<sup>2</sup> He also confronted large disparities in income because, he argued, poverty undermined basic democratic values and inhibited creativity.<sup>3</sup> In a speech given on the first anniversary of his inauguration, Allende reflected on his party's democratic vision:

That is why we have been gaining power; we have been incorporating deprived groups and sectors. We have been concerned with strengthening democracy and expanding liberties through the redistribution of income and economic liberation.

This government wants an authentic democracy and complete freedom for all Chileans. Democracy and freedom are incompatible with unemployment and lack of housing, the lack of culture, illiteracy and sickness. How is democracy strengthened? By creating more jobs, giving better wages, building more homes, providing the people with more culture, education and better health.<sup>4</sup>

To address these issues, Allende drew up ambitious plans. These included nationalizing mines and industries, donating expropriated<sup>\*</sup> land to poor agrarian laborers, mandating low prices for food staples, and increasing the minimum wage. Other measures were taken to ensure better housing and education for the poor.

Students, middle-class professionals, factory workers, and peasants had come together in support of a candidate who had for many years been deemed unelectable. Many believed they had witnessed the birth of a new form of Chilean politics. For poor women such as Violeta Morales and Viviana Díaz Caro, Allende came to represent the possibility of sustained employment, decent housing, and public

---

\* *Expropriation* is the act of seizing privately owned property and giving it to others. Typically this means taking land from the rich and giving it to the poor. The process is often forceful, though the original owners may be paid for their lost property. During his rule, Allende attempted to expropriate lands held for generations by the agrarian elite (though the process was never completed); he also seized parts of Chile's rich mines, which largely benefited foreign companies.

healthcare services for children and adults. One Chilean wrote, “People believed that paradise was around the corner. There was an explosion of passion, a drunken binge of ideas.”<sup>5</sup> Around the world, progressive groups watched with excitement as Allende’s *via Chilena*—a peaceful and democratic revolution—unfolded.

Despite high expectations and plenty of revolutionary rhetoric, the mood of the country soon soured and pressure from both left and right threatened the new programs. Allende’s supporters demanded that he accelerate the pace of social reforms, while these same plans provoked protests from conservatives, including big landowners, large and small business owners, and the military.<sup>†</sup> Despite promises of peaceful reforms, many feared a Soviet-style communism, with a tyrannical government trampling on human rights and private property. The opposition’s newspapers and radio stations spread rumors of armed revolution, calling on volunteers to arm themselves and patrol wealthy neighborhoods. Adding to this growing sense of crisis were empty grocery store shelves, violent strikes, and skyrocketing prices. By the middle of 1973 the national economy was in shambles.

Mired in Cold War politics, the administration of United States President Richard Nixon anxiously followed the

events unfolding in Santiago. American politicians feared that a socialist government would tip the balance of power in Latin America, giving the Soviet Union a clear advantage—they decided the time had come to undermine Allende’s presidency.<sup>6</sup> In 1975 the United States Senate appointed a committee to investigate the United States’ involvement in Chile. Although it found no evidence that the CIA was directly involved in the coup that overthrew Allende, the committee concluded that the United States sponsored anti-Allende propaganda, backed his political rivals, promoted plots to overthrow the government, and suspended almost all foreign aid to the struggling regime.<sup>7</sup>

In response to mounting chaos, Chilean right-wing organizations, which played a major role in the destruction of the civil order, demanded that the army intervene to restore order. Suburban right-wing women who opposed Allende organized the dramatic “March of the Empty Pots,” parading through Santiago while banging their empty cooking pots to protest food shortages. These women, later among Pinochet’s most outspoken champions, taunted the soldiers sent to police the march, threw corn at them while calling them chickens, and prodded them to take over the government.<sup>8</sup> In spite of elections held in March 1973 that showed unmistakable support for Allende’s programs, high-ranking military officers decided that Chile was ripe for a military takeover. On September 11, 1973, they acted.

---

† During Allende’s presidency, impatient laborers took matters into their own hands and seized agrarian property. In towns, workers organized and took over several factories. For more information about factory takeovers and the tension between Allende and his left-wing supporters, see Peter Winn, *Weavers of Revolution: The Yarur Workers and Chile’s Road to Socialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

## **“ESTADIO CHILE,” VICTOR JARA’S LAST POEM, SEPTEMBER 1973**

Victor Jara was born in a small, rural town outside Santiago. His family was poor and belonged to the many that fought for Allende’s election in the hope for vast economic reforms. Jara, who became one of Chile’s most beloved folk artists, devoted his music to industrial workers, peasants, and the poor residents of Chile’s shantytowns (many of the arpilleristas came from these overcrowded neighborhoods). His lyrics carried a message of hope to ordinary Chileans and attempted to capture their daily hardships and political aspirations. When Allende was elected, Jara became a devoted supporter of the new regime. Shortly after the coup, Jara was arrested and was taken to the Stadium of Chile (hence the name of the following song), where he was tortured and killed. Prisoners at the stadium reported that Jara scribbled this last poem on a piece of paper just before his death and that a friend smuggled it out. The poem, which was later translated into English by Joan Jara, Victor’s wife, describes and comments on the conditions in the stadium in the days following the coup. The stadium is now called Estadio Victor Jara.

There are five thousand of us here  
in this small part of the city.  
We are five thousand.  
I wonder how many we are in all  
in the cities and in the whole country?  
Here alone  
are ten thousand hands which plant seeds  
and make the factories run.  
How much humanity  
exposed to hunger, cold, panic, pain,  
moral pressure, terror and insanity?  
Six of us were lost  
as if into starry space.  
One dead, another beaten as I could never have believed  
a human being could be beaten.  
The other four wanted to end their terror—  
one jumping into nothingness,  
another beating his head against a wall,  
but all with the fixed stare of death.  
What horror the face of fascism creates!  
They carry out their plans with knife-like precision.  
Nothing matters to them.  
To them, blood equals medals,  
slaughter is an act of heroism.  
Oh God, is this the world that you created,

for this your seven days of wonder and work?  
Within these four walls only a number exists  
which does not progress,  
which slowly will wish more and more for death.  
But suddenly my conscience awakes  
and I see that this tide has no heartbeat,  
only the pulse of machines  
and the military showing their midwives' faces  
full of sweetness.  
Let Mexico, Cuba and the world  
cry out against this atrocity!  
We are ten thousand hands  
which can produce nothing.  
How many of us in the whole country?  
The blood of our president, our compañero,  
will strike with more strength than bombs and machine guns!  
So will our fist strike again!

How hard it is to sing  
when I must sing of horror.  
Horror which I am living,  
horror which I am dying.  
To see myself among so much  
and so many moments of infinity  
in which silence and screams  
are the end of my song.  
What I see, I have never seen  
What I have felt and what I feel  
Will give birth to the moment . . . .<sup>9</sup>

## CONNECTIONS

---

1. What did Allende's party stand for? How important is freedom of speech for democracy? How important is freedom from persecution and fear?
2. How did Allende seek to deepen democracy in Chile? What economic conditions did he consider necessary for a just and vibrant democracy? Why did his plans fail? How could they have succeeded?
3. Why did Chile's conservative elites oppose Allende's plans for Chile? What did they fear?
4. Under pressure from the political right and left, Allende's regime collapsed into chaos and violence. What are the legitimate ways to express disagreement and dissent in a democratic regime?
5. Victor Jara's poem begins with taking count of the people imprisoned in the stadium after the coup:

There are five thousand of us here  
in this small part of the city.  
We are five thousand.  
I wonder how many we are in all  
in the cities and in the whole country?

Who is the "we" that Jara is describing?
6. What words and phrases does Jara use to describe the abuses of the dictatorship? What does he suggest was lost?
7. Jara uses the word *fascism* to describe the dictatorship. What does the term mean? What other regimes were called fascist?

---

1 Salvador Allende, "Here Are Assembled the People of Chile (1972)," quoted in *Salvador Allende Reader: Chile's Voice of Democracy*, ed. James D. Cockroft, trans. Moisés Espinoza and Nancy Nuñez (New York: Ocean Press, 2000), 149–50.

2 Lisa Baldez, *Why Women Protest: Women's Movements in Chile* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 102–3.

3 Allende, "Here Are Assembled the People of Chile," *Salvador Allende Reader*, 149–50.

4 Salvador Allende, "First Anniversary of the Popular Government (November 4, 1971)," *Salvador Allende Reader*, 119–20.

5 Pamela Constable and Arturo Valenzuela, *A Nation of Enemies: Chile Under Pinochet* (New York: Norton, 1991), 25.

6 Peter Kornbluh, *The Pinochet File: A Declassified Dossier on Atrocity and Accountability* (New York: New Press, 2003), 79–152. This book documents the United States' involvement in Chile's politics during the regimes of Allende and Pinochet.

7 The committee was headed by Senator Frank Church (a Democratic senator from Idaho). See "Church Report: Covert Action in Chile 1963–1973," United States Department of State website, <http://foia.state.gov/Reports/ChurchReport.asp#A.%20Overview:%20Cover%20Action%20in%20Chile> (accessed February 13, 2007).

8 Baldez, *Why Women Protest*, 81. The opposition claimed the march showed that Allende's regime had lost its legitimacy (particularly among women). Allende's supporters claimed that the march had been organized by right-wing extremists and insisted that the rich women who joined the march had never known a moment's hunger and certainly had never cooked in the pots they clanged.

9 Victor Jara, "Estadio Chile," quoted in Joan Jara, *An Unfinished Song: The Life of Victor Jara* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1984), 250–51.