

University of Warwick – WUS Programme for Chilean Refugees

The broader refugee experience in the UK

1. The groundwork for the reception of refugees from Chile after the military coup of 11 September 1973 was done by Chile Committee for Human Rights, the Chile Solidarity Campaign and the Joint Working Group for the Resettlement of Refugees from Chile in the UK and Academics for Chile. A huge amount of lobbying was done on the basis of the information collected mostly from the Committee for Peace (later the Vicaría de la Solidaridad) set up by the churches in Santiago.

Campaigning and lobbying were sorely needed because:

- Under the orders of the British Ambassador Reginald Secondé, the gates of the British Embassy in Santiago were shut and guarded so no refugees could seek asylum there.
 - The Tories said openly that they did not want communists to come here.
 - The Home Office was antagonistic – all along. Visas were delayed and Alex Lyon, Junior Minister at the Home Office at the time let slip that applications were being checked by the CIA before any answer was given.
2. The British Council for Aid to Refugees (BCAR) was reluctant to receive Chileans.

The BCAR was run by a Lithuanian aristocrat in exile (Nora Morley-Fletcher) who was unable to accept the idea of helping people whose reasons for fleeing were because they were socialists or even members of the Communist Party. However, others in the BCAR such as Nancy Rice Jones were staunch allies and did their best to help.

3. The BCAR was therefore amenable to our setting up the Joint Working Group for the Resettlement of Refugees because it let them off this hook.

The JWG was run by Gordon Hutchison and Ann Browne on very little money – though they did receive a small sum from the Home Office. It was able to be effective only because of the large solidarity network of 60 local Chile Committees set up through the CSC and CCHR. These committees bombarded the Home Office with letters and also often arranged the reception of the refugees in their area. Almost all of the 3,000 or so refugees who eventually came to the UK came through the JWG.

Some reflections:

- a) We witnessed an amazingly high level of generosity and commitment among the people of these local committees who ranged from quite militantly left wing trade unionists, members of the British Communist Party members of many different churches.

What motivated them?

- Humanitarian considerations – torture in Chile and stories about camps such as Dawson Island and the military base at Pisagua in the desert.
- Political sympathy for a socialist experiment brought about by a democratic process (at that time the Labour Party was a good deal more left wing than it is now, the Communist Party had a strong foothold in the labour movement and there were various small socialist or Trotskyist parties.

Was it the political context that made it relatively easy to motivate people to take part in the Chile campaign and the reception of refugees from Chile?

- b) Most people who did receive the refugees had never been to Chile or anywhere in Latin America. The contacts often had a lasting impact – cases where families who received Chileans are still in touch with them. Many of the people who arrived had been ‘adopted’ as political prisoners by individuals or groups working with the CCHR. They had been able to get out through Decreto Ley 504 through which their prison sentence could be commuted into one of exile.
- c) The support we received from Judith Hart and the ODA was exceptional. The central government was in general unwilling to do much more than pass the buck to local authorities.
- d) The Chileans were predominantly middle class people who knew how to find their way to embassies in Santiago and had contacts who helped them to leave but later on more workers and campesinos arrived from neighbouring countries to where they had fled, especially Peru and Argentina.
- e) The refugees did not have an easy time: because they were traumatised by the experience of the military coup and also often very homesick, because the sectarianism among the different political parties in Chile persisted when they arrived in the UK which meant that they were often unnecessarily isolated and because many of them were burdened by such a sense of guilt at having left that they refused even to learn English as that might have indicated that they were here to stay. However, most of them did, in the end, take advantage of opportunities offered to them and many became involved in local solidarity or human rights groups.
- f) When things improved in Chile and resettlement grants were given, many Chileans who went back had a tough time there as well, partly because of their children’s unwillingness to be there and the difficulty they found in settling down and partly because of the considerable resentment felt on the part of the Chileans who had remained in Chile and who regarded those in exile as having had privileged access to educational opportunities as well as having avoided the fear and horror that they had suffered for years under the dictatorship.
- g) It would be interesting to know to what extent the experience of the exiled Chileans has had an impact on the political, cultural and academic life of Chile. Many of the politicians who held posts after the return to democracy in 1989 had spent a period in exile and there were music groups such as the Inti Illimani, actors (supported by a solidarity group in Equity) and artists who

went back having lived in the UK or other places in Europe often for many years.

- h) Has there been a comparable campaign of this sort in the UK since? Have there been movements that have been modelled on the CSC and CCHR and WUS?

I would like to end by remembering with great affection and gratitude some of the members of the Chile Campaign who are no longer with us: Leo Pyle who was a dear friend from Academics for Chile who also helped us to set up the CCHR . Leo was a man of huge integrity and he had a wonderful sense of humour; Ann Browne who was such a down to earth, and committed worker in the JWG, a delightful companion and a steadfastly loyal friend; Christine Whitehead and Nigel Hartley who did so much for WUS, Dudley Seers who played a prominent role in Academics for Chile and, of course Judith Hart whose support was essential to the success of the whole endeavour.