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Tanya Harmer. "Fractious Allies: Chile, the United States and the Cold War, 1973-76."

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Reviewed by **Mary Helen Spooner**, journalist and author

Tanya Harmer's "Fractious Allies: Chile, the United States and the Cold War, 1973-76" raises questions that are too often overlooked in the discussion about Chile and the U.S. She notes that much of the focus has been on the Nixon administration's immorality in supporting the military dictatorship, and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's belief that this support was in the U.S. national interest. But what was the view from Chile, and just how well did this bilateral relationship work in practice?

The late Chilean dictator General Augusto Pinochet was a relative newcomer to the Cold War and not among those Latin American military officers courted by the United States and trained at the School of the Americas or other U.S. military institutions. "Intriguingly, when Chile's armed forces seized power on September 11, 1973, U.S. officials doubted their determination to hold on to it," Harmer writes. "In the months leading up to the coup, the Nixon administration had derided the Chilean military's disunity and its hesitation to relinquish its traditionally constitutional role, questioned whether it would act, and worried that it would not withstand left-wing resistance if it did" (113). As Henry Kissinger told Kristian Gustafson, "We did not know Pinochet, and when he [became the army chief of staff], we thought he might be someone favorable to Allende."¹ The American ambassador to Chile, Nathaniel Davis, observed that on the day of the coup Pinochet was "the last of the principal actors to assume his place."² And Harmer cites a declassified U.

¹ Kristian Gustafson, *Hostile Intent: U.S. Covert Operations in Chile 1964-1974* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, Inc., 2007), 214.

² Nathaniel Davis, *The Last Two Years of Salvador Allende* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), 240.

S. National Security Council document written three days after the coup that described Pinochet as a “possible influence within the junta for restoring civilian rule at an early date ”(120). The Nixon administration, along with many others, seriously underestimated Pinochet’s personal ambition; the General quickly consolidated his control over the country, building a lethal secret police agency that reported only to him, and manipulating his position from one of four junta members to that of Supreme Leader of the nation. Along the way he eliminated not only Chilean leftists and political dissidents but potential military rivals as well.

Even if Pinochet had not been as close to the United States as some of his military colleagues, he could not have been unaware of U.S. efforts to destabilize Salvador Allende’s socialist government and this must have added to his perception of the country as an unreliable partner. Harmer asks to what extent right-wing regimes used anticommunism as a way to extract aid and support. Pinochet and other Chilean officials expected something like a Marshall Plan from the Nixon administration, but what to critics seemed like a generous amount of aid [including a \$24 million loan for wheat purchases, 48 per cent of the U.S. “Food for Peace” grants to Latin America plus \$237.8 million from the Inter-American Development Bank] (109-110) was not nearly enough to satisfy the military regime.

Harmer observes that the “so-called Chilean economic ‘miracle’ of future years was still a long way off” (124) and that the country’s foreign reserves had dwindled from nearly \$400 million at the start of the Allende government to \$12.9 million at the time of the coup. In addition, the price of copper—which comprised 80 percent of Chile’s export revenues—had halved while the country had to import 72 percent of its oil. Chile kept the copper mines that had been nationalized under Allende in state hands, but agreed to pay the mines’ previous American owners and International Telephone & Telegraph (ITT) over \$450 million in compensation. She quotes a CIA memo describing “a slowly tightening noose around a country that is fighting for economic survival” and observes that “the early haphazard shock measures to try and solve these situations had not brought about conclusive results” (124-125).

Another factor in this fractious relationship was the country’s longstanding border issue with Peru, which had lost its southernmost territory to Chile during the War of the Pacific and was ruled by a leftwing army officer, General Juan Velasco Alvarado. Velasco’s dealings with the United States were tense at times, and his government formed closer ties with Cuba and the Soviet Union. Peru began substantial arms purchases from the Soviet Union in 1973, over the next twelve years purchasing over \$1.6 billion in arms.³ For Pinochet, Peru represented an almost perfect geopolitical nightmare: a threatened invasion by well-armed Marxists. But the Nixon administration did not view the Velasco

³ Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive II: The KGB and the World* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), 64.

government in the same way it did the Allende government, and Harmer notes that Peruvian officials imposed strict limits on the number of advisors from Cuba and the Soviet Union that were allowed into their country. U.S. skepticism regarding what the Chilean military believed was a clear and present danger exasperated regime officials. Worst of all was Senator Ted Kennedy's amendment to the 1974 Foreign Assistance Bill cutting off military assistance to Chile. Tentative suggestions by Nixon administration officials that the regime might help its case in Washington by releasing political prisoners such as former Allende cabinet ministers were met with angry defiance.

The Pinochet regime's new best friend may have been Brazil, whose own military government had played a role in the 1973 coup and was a more natural ally than "democratic, liberal and political unstable Washington" (123). Brazil gave Chile credits worth \$135 million barely six weeks after the coup and promised future help for the country's armed forces. Then there was Operation Condor, a campaign of repression against and assassination of leftists and political opponents by Southern Cone military regimes. Chilean victims included Pinochet's former army commander, General Carlos Prats, who was killed in 1974 with his wife in a car bombing in Buenos Aires, and Allende's former Defense Minister and Ambassador to the United States Orlando Letelier, also murdered in a car bomb explosion alongside an American co-worker in Washington. An FBI investigation and a subsequent U.S. extradition request for the Director of the regime's intelligence service and two other security agents resulted in more defiance. A heated exchange with the American ambassador George Landau suggests that deep down Pinochet was always more of a nationalistic dictator than an anticommunist ally. Pointing to the Chinese ambassador, he told Landau that Chile "was not married to the United States" and could seek backing from China or even the Soviet Union. "They would help. They would do anything to hurt you." When Landau asks Pinochet if he really meant that he would align his government with the Soviet Union, he answered, "Absolutely! I would do it to protect my country."⁴

Harmer points to a growing consensus among scholars that Washington's influence in Latin America during the Cold War was more limited than it seemed initially and certainly less than many left-wing critiques have maintained. Carlos Altamirano, who held the presidency of Chile's Socialist Party during the Allende government, told a symposium at Princeton University in 1998 that while U.S. involvement had great importance, "I personally do not think the U.S. was the primary cause of the coup in Chile."⁵ Harmer suggests that more research is needed from a non-U.S.-centered perspective to fully understand Cold War alliances. Her article is a very valuable addition to scholarship on Chile, and I hope that in the future she will analyze the Pinochet

⁴ Taylor Branch and Eugene Propper, *Labyrinth* (New York: The Viking Press, 1982), 577.

⁵ Paul Sigmund, editor, "Chile 1973-1998: The Coup and Its Consequences," PLAS Cuadernos, Number 3m Program in Latin American Studies, Princeton University, 16.

regime's relationship with the administrations of Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan as well.

Mary Helen Spooner is the author of *Soldiers in a Narrow Land: the Pinochet Regime in Chile* (1994) and *The General's Slow Retreat: Chile after Pinochet* (2011), both published by the University of California Press. She is currently working on a book about Cuban health care.

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