

# 2018

## H-Diplo

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Article Review  
No. 790  
5 September 2018

Article Review Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse  
Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

**Alfonso Salgado. "Communism and Human Rights in Pinochet's Chile: The 1977 Hunger Strike against Forced Disappearance." *Cold War History* 18:2 (2018): 169-186. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2017.1404988>.**

URL: <http://tiny.cc/AR790>

Review by **Paul R. Katz**, Columbia University

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Alfonso Salgado's new *Cold War History* article opens onto a dramatic scene. It was the morning of 14 June 1977, and 24 women and two men had just made their way into the headquarters of the United Nations' Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA) in Santiago, Chile. They were members of the *Agrupación de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos* (AFDD, or Association of Relatives of the Detained-Disappeared) linked to the Chilean Communist Party (PCCH), and collectively, they had lost 34 relatives to forced disappearance since General Augusto Pinochet's seizure of power in September 1973. Once inside the building, the group unfurled a banner reading "For Life, For Peace, For Liberty—We Will Find Them!" and announced that they would neither leave nor eat until the government had accounted for their loved ones (169). While their relatives' status would not ultimately be clarified, the hunger strike which unfolded over the next ten days would nonetheless place disappearance squarely on the international agenda and would turn the strikers into "an emblem of the struggle for human rights and democracy in Chile" (170).

In analyzing this formative moment, Salgado sets himself an ambitious task: to prove that "pro-Soviet, Old Left activists" made major though "grossly under-appreciated" contributions to the development of the Chilean human rights movement (172). The article reveals that he is up to the challenge. Drawing on research conducted for his 2016 dissertation, Salgado uses the 1977 ECLA strike to show that PCCH militants played a key role in the formulation of human rights appeals at a time when the politics of opposition to South American state violence were far from settled.<sup>1</sup>

In so doing, Salgado helps to fill a substantial gap in the scholarly literature. In the past decade, a number of historians have written accounts of the South American Left's exposure to and transformation by global

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<sup>1</sup> Alfonso Salgado, "Exemplary Comrades: The Public and Private Life of Communists in Twentieth-Century Chile" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2016).

discourses of human rights.<sup>2</sup> These studies, which tend to center on the experience of Latin American exiles in Europe or North America, have been joined by a body of scholarship in international history which, departing from Samuel Moyn's *The Last Utopia*, sees the 1970s as the origin point for a new brand of transnational human rights activism freed from the concept's prior subservience to state sovereignty.<sup>3</sup> While most research in this vein has focused on the U.S. and Western Europe, Patrick William Kelly's new book *Sovereign Emergencies* comprehensively extends this line of analysis to Chile, Argentina, and Brazil.<sup>4</sup> Kelly and others cast left-wing activists, who saw their condemnations of state violence as blows against imperialism and in favor of socialist revolution, as "maximalist" precursors to the more "minimalist" visions of bodily integrity that would come to global dominance by the end of the decade.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, several new English-language works by Latin American scholars complicate this picture by focusing on left-wing anti-repression activists operating in the region itself.<sup>6</sup> These works, Salgado's article among them, present leftist militants as political innovators, not objects of transformation, and they consider Communist praxis as a significant input to the development of new forms of transnational activism, rather than their predecessor.

The principal strength of Salgado's article is its careful treatment of the internal politics of the Chilean human rights movement. This depends on his skillful use of a variety of sources, including press reports, memoirs, interviews by other authors, and documents from the PCH itself. Particularly notable are two collections housed at Santiago's Museum of Memory and Human Rights: the papers of Allende's last minister of justice, Sergio Insunza, and those of the Ortiz Rojas family, whose father, Communist historian Fernando Ortiz Letelier, was disappeared in December 1976.<sup>7</sup> Documents from this second collection, including telegrams

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<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Vania Markarian, *Left in Transformation: Uruguayan Exiles and the Latin American Human Rights Networks, 1967-1984* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Marina Franco, *El exilio. Argentinos en Francia durante la dictadura* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2008); Luis Roniger, James Naylor Green, and Pablo Yankelevich, eds., *Exile and the Politics of Exclusion in the Americas* (Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge: the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Patrick William Kelly, *Sovereign Emergencies: Latin America and the Making of Global Human Rights Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> Kelly, *Sovereign Emergencies*, 8.

<sup>6</sup> Aldo Marchesi, *Latin America's Radical Left: Rebellion and Cold War in the Global 1960s*, transl. Laura Perez Carrara (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Jorge González-Jácome, "The Emergence of Revolutionary and Democratic Human Rights Activism in Colombia Between 1974 and 1980," *Human Rights Quarterly* 40:1 (February 2018): 91-118.

<sup>7</sup> Centro de Documentación, Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos, Fondo Familia Ortiz Rojas, Item 00000011-000049-000003, Personal data of Fernando Ortiz Letelier.

received by the strikers and a 34-page diary from inside the ECLA building, lend remarkable depth and texture to Salgado's account.

Salgado draws on these sources to underscore the significant role that Chile played in growing global attention to forced disappearance. Since its first large-scale deployment in Guatemala a decade before, forced disappearance — that is, kidnapping political opponents, torturing and killing them in secret, and then denying state responsibility for or knowledge of their fate — had become increasingly central to the repressive campaigns at the heart of Latin America's Cold War.<sup>8</sup> Approximately 1150 Chileans were disappeared between September 1973 and the start of the hunger strike in June 1977. While forced disappearance would reach its apex in neighboring Argentina following that country's 1976 military coup, in the middle years of the 1970s, less was known about disappearance in Argentina than in Chile, where the core of the AFDD had begun to consolidate in 1974. Pluralistic in composition, by 1977 the AFDD was supported by the Catholic Church's Vicariate of Solidarity. Its members had come to the group from across the Old and New Left, with ties to the PCCH, *Partido Socialista* (Socialist Party), and *Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria* (Movement of the Revolutionary Left) in roughly equal measure.

Unsurprisingly, the group was riven by political divisions. Its iconic 1977 hunger strike was not a joint effort involving militants linked to all three left-wing organizations, nor did it entail collaboration with the even broader membership of the Vicariate. Instead, Salgado reveals, planning for the strike was initiated in secret, likely by an underground three-person PCCH unit operating within the AFDD, and plans were held strictly in reserve in an effort to keep them from the National Intelligence Directorate, DINA.

When facing the outside world, the militants behind the strike made no mention of their Communist Party links, instead employing “the novel language of human rights...to garner international support” (180). While their list of demands did not use the exact phrase “human rights,” it was deliberately nonpartisan and “humanitarian” in its framing, to the point that a *New York Times* reporter deemed it a “remarkably non-ideological document” (181).

Yet while this humanitarian appeal was effective in the international press, it failed to deceive those responsible for negotiating an end to the strike. The junta, the U.S. State Department, and the UN all knew that the strikers were affiliated with the PCCH. Indeed the very words that those who were fasting used to give meaning to their action “were common currency among Chilean communists” (178). Salgado underscores the point through his analysis of one organizer's statement in a speech, a week into the occupation of the ECLA building, that she hoped the strike would “temper us” and “transform us as human beings” (179). Rarely employed in this way in spoken Spanish, the verb “to temper” (*templar*) had entered the lexicon of South American Communists by way of the metallurgical metaphor underlying Soviet realist writer Nikolai Ostrovsky's *How the Steel Was Tempered* (1934), a favorite of one of the main organizers of the

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<sup>8</sup> Beyond Guatemala and Chile, forced disappearance was used systematically by the Brazilian military to eradicate the Maoist-inspired Guerrilha do Araguaia in 1974 and was formally internationalized in late 1975 through the establishment of the U.S.-supported regional intelligence network, Operation Condor, which joined the security forces of Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Bolivia, and Brazil. See J. Patrice McSherry, *Predatory States: Operation Condor and Covert War in Latin America* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

strike.<sup>9</sup> For those on both sides of the ensuing negotiations, then, the ECLA hunger strike was an unambiguously Communist undertaking.

The adoption of a human rights-compatible framing, Salgado makes clear, implied no loss of political meaning for the strikers of the PCCH. “These women needed to learn the depoliticised, universal language of human rights in order to garner support abroad,” Salgado concludes, “but they did not need to give up their communist beliefs. They engaged in human rights activities *because of*, not in spite of, these beliefs,” and they did so “without renouncing their illiberal political ideology” (186).

Nor did they abandon their prior methods. To the contrary, the 1977 hunger strike represented the application of a tactic long employed by left-wing political prisoners and their supporters across the region, the history of which deserves greater attention than it receives in Salgado’s article. While Salgado briefly references the 1947 hunger strike of Chilean Communist Margarita Naranjo, whose resulting death was memorialized in Pablo Neruda’s *Canto General*, this reviewer would have been eager to know more about prior uses of the practice by the Chilean Left, as well as its connection to contemporaneous actions in nearby countries.<sup>10</sup> To take just two examples, in 1972 and 1973, Argentine revolutionaries organized a series of hunger strikes to denounce conditions aboard the Buque-Cárcel Granadero, a ship docked in the Port of Buenos Aires and used to house political prisoners in the final years of the military-led “Revolución Argentina” (1966-1973).<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, Brazilian detainees and their revolutionary supporters led a coordinated wave of similar hunger strikes beginning in the early 1970s and continuing throughout the campaign for general amnesty that closed the decade.<sup>12</sup>

Placing the post-1973 actions of the Chilean Old Left in a regional frame would further highlight the tactical innovation at the heart of the 1977 ECLA hunger strike. The Argentine and Brazilian hunger strikes referenced above personally involved the political prisoners whose abusive treatment they had sought to ameliorate, either as strikers or as first-person witnesses. This was not possible in the case of disappearance, yet by 1977 new opportunities for denunciation had begun to emerge. As Salgado notes in passing, just two years before the ECLA hunger strike, the United Nations’ (UN) Economic and Social Council had chartered the Ad Hoc Working Group on Chile. Much of the energy of this group, and of the non-governmental organizations that collaborated with it, was devoted to the question of forced disappearance. This meant hearing and amplifying the testimonies of surviving relatives, a task similarly at the heart of the UN Working

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<sup>9</sup> Nikolai Ostrovsky, *How the Steel Was Tempered* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1952).

<sup>10</sup> Pablo Neruda, *Canto General* (Mexico: Talleres Gráficos de la Nación, 1950).

<sup>11</sup> Fundación Pluma, Subject: Buque Cárcel Granaderos, <http://fundacionpluma.info>; Ariel Eidelman, “El buque-cárcel Granadero y los presos políticos, 1972-1973,” VI Jornadas de Sociología de la Universidad Nacional de La Plata, Facultad de Humanidades y Ciencias de la Educación, Departamento de Sociología, La Plata, 2010, <https://www.aacademica.org/000-027/162.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Centro de Documentação e Memória, Universidade Estadual Paulista, Fundo ASMOB, Caixa 93: Denúncias, Apelos e Manifestos; Arquivo Público do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Fundo DOPS/RJ, Dossiê 263: Greve de Fome; Janaina de Almeida Teles, “As denúncias de torturas e torturadores a partir dos cárceres políticos brasileiros,” *Interseções* 16:1 (June 2014): 31-68.

Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, created in February 1980 with an eye to Argentina.<sup>13</sup> International interest in forced disappearance, PCCH activists understood, thus entailed new opportunities to bring attention to state violence; in order to seize them, these militants would need to take fresh approaches to the longstanding tactics of the Left.

Salgado's analysis leaves little doubt that further research into the Left's engagement with human rights is of critical importance if we are to gain a fuller picture of anti-dictatorial activism in 1970s South America. This is the case even in countries where the Left's influence on human rights is less immediately apparent, such as Argentina, to which Salgado gestures briefly in his introduction. There, as Argentine historian Natalia Casola has shown, the Communist Party-linked *Liga Argentina por los Derechos del Hombre* (Argentine League for the Rights of Man) was instrumental in the creation of *Familiares de Detenidos y Desaparecidos por Razones Políticas* (Relatives of Those Detained and Disappeared for Political Reasons), a pluralistic organization roughly parallel to Chile's AFDD.<sup>14</sup> *Familiares* was born in early 1976 in the offices of the Liga, where the group continued to meet as the soon-to-be iconic *Madres* (Mothers) and *Abuelas* (Grandmothers) of Plaza de Mayo took shape over the course of 1977. Many *Madres* and *Abuelas* report having separated from *Familiares* specifically in order to avoid the danger of association with left-wing militants. Yet as Casola has demonstrated, it was the contact between these less politically inclined mothers and the seasoned activists of *Familiares* and the Liga that enabled the Plaza de Mayo groups to organize quickly and effectively under extraordinarily adverse circumstances. Furthermore, Casola's research on the efforts of the Argentine Communist Party to support refugees from Pinochet's Chile suggests that the anti-repressive activism of the Old Left extended across the region, following channels still uncharted by scholars.<sup>15</sup>

Salgado's article begins to map one of them, bringing nuance and depth to a subject that has long been difficult to approach. This owes to the decisions of many activists on the Left, who have quite sensibly sought to present themselves in ways that obscure their own political militancy and that of their disappeared relatives. At the same time, the lion's share of the scholarship on the period has focused on organizations in the global North and the Latin Americans who worked deliberately in the terms they proposed. Fortunately this situation is now beginning to change. Indeed, Salgado's article models the sort of scholarship that can help us to reconstruct the politics of the 1970s as they were lived by Marxist militants within, across, and beyond the countries of the Southern Cone. As such it deserves a wide readership among scholars of modern Latin America, the rise of human rights, and the global Cold War.

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<sup>13</sup> Kelly, *Sovereign Emergencies*; Steven Jensen, *The Making of International Human Rights: The 1960s, Decolonization, and the Reconstruction of Global Values* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), especially ch. 8, "The Presence of the Disappeared."

<sup>14</sup> Natalia Casola, *El PC argentino y la dictadura militar. militancia, estrategia política y represión estatal* (Argentina: Imago Mundi, 2015). See also, Nadia Tahir, *Argentine: mémoires de la dictature* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires Rennes, 2015).

<sup>15</sup> Natalia Casola, "Los camaradas. La colaboración del PCA con el exilio del comunismo chileno," in María Eugenia Horvitz and Carla Peñaloza, eds., *Exiliados y desterrados del Cono Sur de América 1970-1990* (Santiago: Erdosain, 2016): 163-180.

## H-Diplo Article Review

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