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Communism and human rights in Pinochet's Chile: the 1977 hunger strike against forced disappearance

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the activism of a specific subset of Chilean communist women – those whose loved ones were abducted and who mobilised to demand justice – against the Pinochet dictatorship. It focuses on a well-organised and well-publicised hunger strike inside the United Nations headquarters in Santiago, Chile, which denounced the dictatorship's use of forced disappearance. It argues that these women's prior political experience and contacts enabled them to organise demonstrations and make successful human rights claims in a changing global environment. In so doing, this article expands and re-politicises the cast of protagonists of the human rights revolution of the 1970s.

KEYWORDS

Communist party; communism; human rights; social protest; Latin America

On the morning of Tuesday, 14 June 1977, an unusually large number of seemingly unrelated visitors entered the headquarters of the Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA) in the United Nations (UN) building in Santiago, Chile. They approached the entry gate every five minutes in small groups of two or three under different pretexts. The visitors raised suspicions, and the guards eventually began denying them entrance. The 24 women and two men who managed to enter the building under false pretences met in the hall at 9.30am and displayed a 10-metre banner that read 'For Life, for Peace, for Liberty – We Will Find Them!'[1] Sola Sierra, who secretly transported the banner in her purse and acted as the leader of the group, told the guards and UN officials who approached them that they were relatives of *detenidos desaparecidos* – people who had been illegally detained by state agents and whose whereabouts were unknown. An experienced communist cadre forced to denounce human rights violations after the abduction and disappearance of her husband, Sola Sierra announced to her impromptu audience that they were declaring a hunger strike inside the UN building to force the government to provide information about their relatives' fates and, also, acknowledge hundreds of other cases of forced disappearance in Chile. For 10 days, these 26 hunger strikers captured the attention of the international community

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[1]The banner's quote, and most of the information about the 1977 ECLA hunger strike discussed in this article, comes from the documentation held in Fondo Familia Ortiz Rojas (hereafter FFOR), Centro de Documentación del Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos (hereafter CEDOC-MMDH). Part of this documentation can be consulted online: http://www.archivomuseodelamemoria.cl (accessed 1 January 2017). This fascinating documentation has also been used by visual artists, who built an interesting website: http://archivohuelga1977.cl (accessed 1 January 2017).

and the global media, transforming forced disappearance into an unavoidable issue for the Chilean government.

This was one of the first demonstrations of its kind during the Pinochet dictatorship, the longest and most brutal such government in traditionally democratic Chile. It was carried out by members of the Association of Relatives of the Detained Disappeared (Agrupación de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos, AFDD). Under the umbrella of, first, the ecumenical Pro-Peace Committee and, then, the Catholic Church's Vicariate of Solidarity, the AFDD brought together hundreds of relatives of *detenidos desaparecidos* without regard to political affiliation or religious creed. Priests, social workers, and lawyers offered them support to cope with their grief, file *habeas corpus* petitions, and write letters to the authorities. Starting in 1977, collective protests like the ECLA hunger strike complemented the legal actions and information-based tactics favoured by the religious leaders of the Vicariate of Solidarity and most human rights activists elsewhere in the world.[2] Communist women were crucial in organising these demonstrations. As Carmen Vivanco remembered with pride in an in-depth interview several years later:

> We, the communist women, and also some [male] comrades, would say: 'We have to go to the streets every day for people to know about the *detenidos desaparecidos*.' Some would say back: 'But what is it that you want, for all of us to end up in jail?' They were afraid. We communists weren't afraid to take the streets.[3]

Engaging in hunger strikes, chaining themselves to public buildings, and making pilgrimages to where the remains of some *detenidos desaparecidos* had been found – all these demonstrations crystallised into a powerful repertoire of contention, which helped delegitimise the Pinochet dictatorship. As Steve Stern has cogently argued, actions of this kind helped build 'key emblematic memories that defined the meaning of Pinochet's Chile.'[4]

This article examines the activism of a specific subset of Chilean communist women, namely, those whose loved ones disappeared during the Pinochet dictatorship and joined the AFDD to demand justice and truth. It uses the 1977 ECLA hunger strike as a lens for studying the transformation of a small organisation of relatives of victims into an emblem of the struggle for human rights and democracy in Chile. I show that personal and political networks allowed the Communist Party of Chile (PCCH) to control the non-partisan AFDD, and I argue that the resources, skills, and contacts of politically experienced communist women like Sola Sierra and Carmen Vivanco helped make the AFDD so successful. As this article will demonstrate, communist women played leading roles in these 'ten days that shook the world,' to quote an open letter written shortly after the end of the ECLA hunger strike, 'the most pacific and most extreme of all kinds of strikes.'[5] These women organised a series of high-profile protests and pushed for a more proactive public stance on the denunciation of human rights abuses within the Vicariate of Solidarity in the second half of the 1970s, a period when few civil society organisations dared to speak openly

[2]On the AFDD, see Antonia García, *La muerte lenta de los desaparecidos en Chile* (Santiago: Cuarto Propio, 2011); Hernán Vidal, *Dar la vida por la vida. La Agrupación Chilena de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos. (Ensayo de antropología simbólica)* (Minneapolis: Institute for the Study of Ideologies and Literature, 1982). On the role of public demonstrations in the human rights repertoire, see Margaret Hagan, 'The Human Rights Repertoire: Its Strategic Logic, Expectations and Tactics,' *The International Journal of Human Rights* 14, no. 4 (2010): 559–83.

[3]Quoted in José Miguel Varas, *Los tenaces* (Santiago: Lom Ediciones, 2010), 84.

[4]Steve Stern, *Battling for Hearts and Minds: Memory Struggles in Pinochet's Chile, 1973–1988* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 237.

[5]Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos, 'Carta abierta,' 4 July 1977, FFOR, Colección 26, Ítem 4, CEDOC-MMDH.

against the regime. For the communist members of the AFDD active during these dark years, the ECLA hunger strike became a sort of 'founding myth,' which gave them a sense of cohesiveness and purpose.

I understand human rights as the core concept of a relatively recent and historically contingent ideology contending that every person is inherently entitled to some inalienable fundamental rights, regardless of status or location. Human rights first gained international attention in the late 1940s, thanks to the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but the field of human rights did not spring up solely from this declaration. In fact, with the exception of a brief wave of public awareness in the late 1940s and early 1950s, human rights discourse remained marginal until the 1970s, when transnational non-governmental organisations (NGOs) used it to denounce authoritarian governments and the Carter administration made it a staple of American foreign policy. Whereas the UN's Universal Declaration sought to realise rights within the framework of the sovereign state, the human rights activists of the 1970s came to envision these rights as a way to protect the individual against the predations of the state, questioning traditional understandings of sovereignty. This was truly a revolution.[6]

Chile played an important role in the growth of the global human rights movement in the 1970s. On 11 September 1973, a military coup brought to a violent end Salvador Allende's ambitious experiment in democratic socialism. The newly established dictatorship detained thousands of Allende supporters, hundreds of whom were summarily executed. Chilean politicians and foreign observers were particularly concerned about the indiscriminate use of torture, which human rights organisations denounced and documented. Solidarity committees and groups against torture sprang up across Europe and the Americas in the ensuing years. According to Patrick William Kelly, who has studied the growth of the global human rights consciousness in the wake of the coup, 'Chile, more so than any other country, remapped the terrain of human rights activism.'[7] This small country's contribution to the human rights movement should not be confined to the issue of torture, however. Chile also played an important role in the growing global interest in forced disappearance, perhaps second only to Argentina. The secret abduction of political opponents had been used by other governments elsewhere, even systematically, but these crimes had rarely led to significant and sustained global outrage, in part because it is very difficult to document and fight against secret abductions. The importance of Chile's Vicariate of Solidarity or Argentina's Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo is hard to overstate. Demonstrations like the one analysed in this article pushed the limits of the emergent human rights field and contributed to the inclusion of forced disappearance in the list of crimes that most concerned the international community.

Unfortunately, too much emphasis on the United States and international NGOs has blinded scholars to the local dimensions of the surge in human rights denunciations in Chile

[6]On the 1970s as a revolutionary decade in the history of human rights, see Kathryn Sikkink, 'Human Rights, Principled Issue-Networks, and Sovereignty in Latin America,' *International Organisation* 47, no. 3 (1993): 411–41; Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010); Jan Eckel and Samuel Moyn, eds., *The Breakthrough: Human Rights in the 1970s* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

[7]Patrick William Kelly, 'The 1973 Chilean Coup and the Origins of Transnational Human Rights Activism,' *Journal of Global History* 8 (2013): 166. On the importance of Chile in the growth of the human rights movement, see also Patrick William Kelly, '"Magic Words": The Advent of Transnational Human Rights Activism in Latin America's Southern Cone in the Long 1970s,' in *The Breakthrough*, eds. Eckel and Moyn, 96–8; Jan Eckel, '"Under a Magnifying Glass": The International Human Rights Campaign against Chile in the Seventies,' in *Human Rights in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 321–41.

and other parts of the developing world. In relation to Latin America, the best of the scholarship written in English has for the most part been confined to alliances crafted by American statesmen and human rights activists in the United States, a handful of whom came from the region.[8] In the case of Chile, for example, this scholarship has focused its attention on the fascinating trajectory of human rights activists like Christian Democratic lawyer José Zalaquett, who worked as a legal advisor in the Pro-Peace Committee, fled into exile in the United States, and made a name for himself in Amnesty International.[9] True, NGOs like Amnesty International and transnational activists like Zalaquett played a major role in the growth of a global human rights consciousness.[10] And true, the importance of the US in shaping the human rights field is undeniable.[11] But we need to expand the cast of protagonists if we are to understand the multi-layered origins of the so-called human rights revolution of the 1970s. Even within the same organisation, like Amnesty International or, as this article shows, the AFDD, activists denouncing human rights crimes had different motives and pursued different goals. As Jan Eckel has argued, the human rights revolution was far from homogeneous.[12]

Equally important, we also need to re-politicise these protagonists, especially the mothers, wives, and daughters of *detenidos desaparecidos* who seized on the novel language of human rights in the 1970s. In order to avoid state repression and garner international support, these women used traditional notions of womanhood that cast them as apolitical or above politics. Paradigmatic of this depoliticised narrative is the romanticisation of the origins of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, the most iconic organisation of relatives of human rights victims in Latin America. According to the dominant framing, a dozen, non-political Argentinean women came together spontaneously to protest the disappearance of their children in front of the presidential palace on 30 April 1977, after which they began holding weekly marches and attracting a larger group of non-political women. Only then, the story goes, these women developed a political consciousness. However, as the evidence of the Mothers' protests seems to suggest and the ECLA hunger strike so clearly shows, demonstrations in authoritarian regimes needed to be well organised, and citizens with prior political experience were particularly well positioned to organise demonstrations and make successful human rights claims. In the case of Chile, where communism had an important tradition of organising, the contribution of communist women to the human rights struggle was particularly significant. This is an important point. The contribution of pro-Soviet, Old Left activists to the growth of the global human rights movement has been grossly under-appreciated. When discussing the left's contribution to the human rights

[8]See, e.g. James Green, *We Cannot Remain Silent: Opposition to the Brazilian Military Dictatorship in the United States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Guilhot, *The Democracy Makers*; William Michael Schmidli, 'Human Rights and the Cold War: The Campaign to Halt the Argentine "Dirty War,"' *Cold War History* 12, no. 2 (2012): 345–65; Sikkink, 'Human Rights.'

[9]In their perceptive review of the historical transformation of the field of international human rights, Yves Dezalay and Bryant Garth use Zalaquett's biography to illustrate how the structure of the field moved increasingly close to US power. Yves Dezalay and Bryant Garth, 'From the Cold War to Kosovo: The Rise and Renewal of the Field of International Human Rights,' *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 2 (2006): 238–39. Stressing the transnational flows underpinning the human rights movement in the 1970s, Kelly persuasively maintains that Zalaquett represents the advent of a new protagonist in world politics: 'the transnational human rights activist.' Kelly, 'The 1973 Chilean Coup,' 185.

[10]See, e.g. Ann Marie Clark, *Diplomacy of Conscience: Amnesty International and Changing Human Rights Norms* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Tom Buchanan, 'The Truth Will Set You Free: The Making of Amnesty International,' *Journal of Contemporary History* 37, no. 4 (2002): 575–97.

[11]See, e.g. Tony Evans, *US Hegemony and the Project of Universal Human Rights* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996); Guilhot, *The Democracy Makers*.

[12]Jan Eckel, 'The Rebirth of Politics from the Spirit of Morality: Explaining the Human Rights Revolution of the 1970s,' in *The Breakthrough*, eds. Eckel and Moyn.

movement in the 1970s, the scholarship has focused almost exclusively on American liberals, European social democrats, Eurocommunists, and New Left groups.[13]

The Marxist left's adoption of the discourse of human rights, and what this meant for political activists like Sola Sierra and Carmen Vivanco, are complicated issues. Scholarly literature depicts a disillusioned left giving up on its revolutionary ideals and embracing a minimalist utopia, sometimes timidly and sometimes wholeheartedly.[14] This is usually read as a compromise, if not a betrayal. However, as some scholars have noted, left-wing activists who took up human rights issues in Latin America often had resilient political identities and remained loyal to their principles while engaging in human rights activities.[15] Sola Sierra and Carmen Vivanco never gave up on their maximalist ideals, much less experienced an ideological U-turn. They understood their role in the denunciation of human rights abuses in very political terms, and they thought of themselves first and foremost as communists. The way they saw it, by denouncing human rights violations in Chile they were contributing to delegitimising an abhorred right-wing dictatorship and promoting a new, hopefully socialist, future. Their use of the human rights rhetoric might have been instrumental, even disingenuous, but this did not make it less compelling.

Organising a hunger strike

The 1977 ECLA hunger strike was organised by a small number of communist women, outside the institutional channels of the AFDD and the Vicariate of Solidarity. The idea seems to have come from one of the PCCH's *células* – underground and highly compartmentalised three-person units back then – active in the AFDD, which eventually contacted party members outside the AFDD to carry out specific tasks for the successful completion of the operation. Organising a hunger strike that involved several dozen participants was no easy feat. The organisers worried that without perfect execution, the feared National Intelligence Directorate (Dirección de Inteligencia Nacional, DINA) would discover their plan. The organisers contacted relatives of *detenidos desaparecidos* whom they considered trustworthy and asked them whether they would be willing to participate in a hunger strike at a place and on a date to be announced. Most of them answered positively, and a sympathetic doctor – contacted thanks to party networks – examined them to determine whether they were physically able to endure the rigours of a hunger strike.

Political considerations factored in the group's selection of trustworthy hunger strikers. Between 11 September 1973 and 14 June 1977, the Pinochet dictatorship abducted and disappeared roughly 1150 people. The number of *detenidos desaparecidos* who belonged to the PCCH was similar to that of those who belonged to the Revolutionary Left Movement (MIR) or the Socialist Party (PS), the relatives of which all converged in the AFDD.[16] Notwithstanding the variegated composition of the AFDD, all those who struck in June 1977 had some sort of link to the PCCH. Thirty-three of the 34 *detenidos desaparecidos* about

[13]See, e.g. Eckel, 'The Rebirth of Politics'; Moyn, *The Last Utopia*.

[14]See, e.g. Guilhot, *The Democracy Makers*; Kelly, 'The 1973 Chilean Coup'; Vania Markarian, *Left in Transformation: Uruguayan Exiles and the Latin American Human Rights Network, 1967–1984* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Moyn, *The Last Utopia*.

[15]Winifred Tate, *Counting the Dead: The Culture and Politics of Human Rights Activism in Colombia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

[16]These figures are based on the reports of truth commissions established in the 1990s and 2000s, complemented with information gathered by the Vicariate of Solidarity and the AFDD.

whom the 26 hunger strikers demanded information were communists. Carlos Carrasco, the only one who belonged to a different political party (the Popular Unitary Action Movement, or MAPU), was the son of a communist mother, Norma Matus, who participated in the ECLA hunger strike to represent her son. Matus's case points to the importance of the hunger strikers' own political affiliation. It is uncertain whether all the hunger strikers belonged to the PCCH, but certainly the great majority of them did.[17]

The strikers planned and staged the hunger strike as a non-political demonstration in defence of justice and human dignity, but some of the participants have expanded on the organising and strategising that went into the effort. These participants stress the political underpinnings and the secrecy of the operation. To quote Sola Sierra, one of the strike's leading organisers, in a 1983 interview published abroad: 'The protest was carefully prepared, all security measures were taken. There were only a few of us women who knew what type of protest it would be, [and] where and when it would take place.'[18] María Estela Ortiz, another of the strike's leading organisers, added in a recent oral-history interview:

> We worked with people who played a decisive role in helping us enter [the UN building], and other people played a decisive role in checking our health … and we operated underground, I mean, everything was done outside the Vicariate. We met in other places, [and] only those who formed part of the 'one-two-three' knew about it,[19]

the term 'one-two-three' referring to the PCCH's basic organisational three-person unit. Hunger strike co-organiser Ana González explained the rationale behind the secrecy in another oral history interview and recalled how they contacted other participants:

> We were in a dictatorship, so things were very dangerous. If we went around telling everyone, things wouldn't have worked … So, we went around asking with the greatest secrecy: 'Hey, would you be willing to participate? But you can tell no one, no one.' Maybe it was a mistake not to tell everyone, but circumstances demanded it.[20]

Documentary evidence confirms these women's recollections. Personal letters written from inside the UN building to AFDD members outside the building suggest that the communist organisers of the strike kept both the functionaries of the Vicariate of Solidarity and the members of the AFDD who belonged to other political parties uninformed until the very last minute. A letter sent by the aforementioned Ana González from inside the building to fellow AFDD members Apolonia Ramírez, Ulda Ortiz, and Pamela Pereira reads:

> Isabel (the exotic assistant [*sic*]) and Pamela will [by now] have understood all the affection I showed them on Monday. My heart was breaking because I could not tell you about our decision … Only my total conviction that it was the best thing to do kept me quiet. I think you will understand.[21]

While communists Apolonia Ramírez and Ulda Ortiz contributed to the organisation of the strike from the beginning and remained outside the UN building to coordinate the

[17]On Norma Rojas's case, see Rosario Rojas et alter, eds., *Memorias contra el olvido* (Santiago: Amerinda Ediciones, 1987), 179–80; Eliana Bronfman and Luisa Johnson, eds., *De enterezas y vulnerabilidades. 1973–2003. Hablan los mayores* (Santiago: Lom Ediciones, 2003), 145–51.

[18]Quoted in Iván Ljubetic, *Sola Sierra: Una imprescindible* (Santiago: El Pan Nuestro, 2000), 68–9.

[19]Quoted in Verónica Troncoso, 'Lenguaje y archivo: Exploraciones performativas, visuales y sonoras del archivo Huelga de hambre en la CEPAL, 1977,' in http://archivohuelga1977.cl/investigacion/proceso-de-investigacion-y-puesta-en-montaje/ (accessed 1 July 2016).

[20]Interview with Ana González by María Eugenia Camus, Santiago, 16 April 2009, Proyecto 100 Entrevistas, CEDOC-MMDH.

[21]Ana González to Apolonia Ramírez, Ulda Ortiz, and Pamela Pereira, undated [June 1977], FFOR, Colección 23, Ítem 13, CEDOC-MMDH. The letter is not signed, but the most likely author is Ana González.

logistics, Pamela Pereira – an important AFDD leader who belonged to the PS – and Isabel – a member of the Vicariate of Solidarity staff – only found out about the strike on the Tuesday when it began.

Let me discuss Sola Sierra's and Carmen Vivanco's cases to highlight the significant political experience of the women who organised the hunger strike and their embeddedness in party networks. Sola Sierra joined the AFDD in December 1976 after the disappearance of her husband, and presided over it from the time the organisation had its first regular elections in 1984 until her death in 1999. She only abandoned the AFDD momentarily, in 1980, to work in the Chilean Human Rights Commission (Comisión Chilena de Derechos Humanos), a recently created NGO led by Christian Democrats, which the PCCH wanted to strengthen and influence. By the time of the ECLA hunger strike, Sierra already had long experience as a political activist. Young communist and family friend Sergio Villegas had invited Sierra to the PCCH's youth wing in 1957 following the explicit request of her mother, a card-carrying communist, and Sierra's talent soon earned her recognition: in 1959, she attended the Seventh World Festival of Youth and Students in Vienna, Austria; in 1961, she did a three-month course for cadres in Santiago, where she met her future husband Waldo Pizarro. Pizarro went on to do a one-year course for cadres in Moscow in 1962 and then came back to marry Sierra. The power couple continued to rise in the hierarchy. By the time of the 1973 coup, Pizarro led San Miguel's regional committee and Sierra held a post in Santiago-Capital's regional committee, two of the PCCH's most important regional bodies.[22]

Like Sierra, Carmen Vivanco was the daughter of a communist parent – an illiterate worker who made Vivanco's brother read the communist press to him. Vivanco joined the PCCH sometime in the early 1940s. By 1944 she was in charge of women's affairs in Antofagasta's regional committee, where she met her future husband, youth secretary Oscar Ramos. Vivanco and Ramos married in 1946. They both suffered political imprisonment in the late 1940s, when President González Videla turned against communism. Vivanco and her husband continued to be active in the PCCH in the following decades. Vivanco's deep embeddedness in party networks led to the disappearance of several of her relatives during the Pinochet dictatorship, in August 1976: her brother, her sister-in-law, her husband, her son, and a nephew. Interestingly, before becoming a national icon of the struggle for human rights and democracy, Vivanco was already a sort of communist icon. Vivanco and her husband, for example, were featured in the communist magazine *Vistazo* in a 1958 piece tellingly titled, 'This is What a Communist Marriage Looks Like.' The piece portrayed Carmen and Oscar as an ordinary couple and as average communist members, while at the same time narrating their misadventures during the González Videla years. Yet Vivanco and Ramos were far from average communists. Both were full-time, professional revolutionaries, something that the magazine chose not to mention.[23]

Staging a hunger strike

The ECLA hunger strike was well timed and staged. It took place at a moment when powerful states and international organisations were already paying close attention to

[22]Ljubetic, *Sola Sierra*. See, also, Comisión Nacional de Solidaridad to Comité Exterior, undated [1980], Archivo del Comité Exterior del Partido Comunista de Chile (hereafter ACE-PCCH), File C050, Instituto de Ciencias Alejandro Lipschutz (hereafter ICAL).

[23]'Así es un matrimonio comunista,' *Vistazo*, 22 July 1958; Interview with Carmen Vivanco by Patricia Collyer, Santiago, 21 April 2009, Proyecto Cien Entrevistas, CEDOC-MMDH; Varas, *Los tenaces*, 71–86.

human rights abuses in Latin America and were starting to focus on forced disappearance in particular. The principled position of a number of European countries, especially Nordic countries, had already forced the UN to create an Ad-Hoc Working Group to monitor the human rights situation in Chile. Thus, a propitious international context helped the ECLA hunger strike gain greater news coverage than it would otherwise have had and facilitated the emergence of the *detenido desaparecido* in the world's collective imagination. Amnesty International, for example, had been discussing mysterious disappearances in Latin America and the developing world since the 1960s, with special emphasis since 1973, but the first usage of the Spanish term *detenidos desaparecidos* in this organisation's annual reports dates from 1977, in reference to Chile – and not, for example, Argentina.[24]

The declaration of the ECLA hunger strike on 14 June 1977 coincided with the opening of the annual General Assembly of the Organisation of American States (OAS) in Grenada, where the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights was about to discuss charges against Chile. The United States, led by the recently elected President Jimmy Carter, campaigned for a strongly worded resolution on human rights in this meeting. Amid mounting criticism, the Chilean representatives in the OAS announced that the government had just exchanged communist Jorge Montes for 11 political prisoners from East Germany. The military junta publicised Montes's release and presented him as Chile's 'last political prisoner,' thus denying the detention of any other missing persons. This ploy to divert attention achieved some success. As one would expect, the news of Montes' release was widely covered in the Chilean pro-dictatorship press, but, interestingly, it also received quite a lot of attention abroad.[25]

By timing the protest to coincide with the General Assembly of the OAS and staging it in the building of an international organisation with the prestige of the UN, the hunger strike immediately gained attention beyond Chilean borders and seized the attention of journalists and human rights activists in the Global North. The strikers chose the UN strategically, as is apparent from their public statements and demands. The strikers presented their demands not to Pinochet but to UN Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim, even though their demands were addressed to both. They asked that the cases of missing persons be cleared up, that an international commission to investigate be set up and allowed to enter the country, and that no reprisal be carried out against those who had participated in the strike. The strikers' statement with demands, which relatives of victims outside the UN building distributed to international news agencies, appealed directly to the international community, symbolised by the UN, and to public opinion: 'We declare this hunger strike

[24]Amnesty International, *Amnesty International Report 1977* (London: Amnesty International Publications, 1977), 130–3.

[25]See, e.g. 'Last Prisoner, Chile Says,' *New York Times*, 19 June 1977; 'Chile is Said to Free Communist in Return for 11 East Germans,' *New York Times*, 19 June 1977; 'Chilean Swap,' *Observer*, 19 June 1977; Franklin Jordan, 'Chilean in Swap Deal,' *Guardian*, 20 June 1977; 'E. Germans Hail Arrival of Chilean,' *Guardian*, 21 June 1977; 'Chile Frees Communist Prisoner In Exchange With East Germany,' *Washington Post*, 19 June 1977; 'U.S. Tie Cited in E. German Swap,' *Washington Post*, 20 June 1977; 'Pinochet Says Prisoner Release Shows Chile Returning to Normal,' *Washington Post*, 21 June 1977; 'Chile and East Germany Exchange 12 Prisoners,' *Los Angeles Times*, 19 June 1977; 'East Germans Stifle Facts of Montes Release,' *Los Angeles Times*, 20 June 1977. For a similar exchange of prisoners, see Olga Ulianova, 'Corvalán for Bokvsky: A Real Exchange of Prisoners during an Imaginary War. The Chilean Dictatorship, the Soviet Union, and US Mediation,' *Cold War History* 14, no. 3 (2014): 315–36.

before national and international public opinion.'[26] International public opinion reacted vigorously. Excerpts from the strikers' statement were quoted in newspapers around the world, and some important newspapers reported regularly on the progress of the strike.[27] Chilean exiles and sympathetic foreigners held demonstrations of support in several capital cities in the Americas (e.g. Mexico City, San José, and Washington, D.C.) and Europe (e.g. Paris, Stockholm, and Geneva), which in turn increased the coverage of the ECLA hunger strike.[28]

The UN building also offered the strikers a degree of protection that public spaces in Chile at the time did not. The building's extraterritorial status allowed relatives of *detenidos desaparecidos* to interact directly with the UN and bypass the Chilean government. The UN eventually chose to side with the hunger strikers and negotiate with the Chilean government on their behalf, but it is clear that UN officials did not feel entirely comfortable in this position. In fact, after the end of the strike, the prospect of another demonstration in UN headquarters kept both Chilean diplomats and UN officials worried for some time. When talking to Chilean opposition leaders concerned about human rights violations, for example, Under-Secretary-General of the UN for Political and General Assembly Affairs, William Buffum, let them know that he understood the strikers' plea for international support yet preferred discretion, or, put differently, 'what he clearly suggested was that he was willing to help but that he hoped that no more hunger strikes would take place inside United Nations headquarters.'[29]

Surviving a hunger strike

Entering the UN building in Santiago and undertaking a hunger strike there was an achievement in itself. The strikers were well aware of the risks they were taking when entering the building – if expelled, they would be easy prey for the police or, worse, the DINA – but they seem to have expected a positive response from ECLA's Executive Secretary, Enrique Iglesias. Unfortunately, Iglesias happened to be abroad, which forced them to interact with UN officials Manuel Balboa and Daniel Blanchard. When stating their intentions to start a hunger strike inside the UN building, the would-be strikers encountered fierce opposition from Blanchard, who demanded that they leave the building's premises immediately.[30] The strikers stood their ground. At about 1.30pm, Balboa and other UN officials in Santiago decided to momentarily accommodate the strikers in a conference room and secure the building's perimeter to avoid the DINA from entering, as military troops were beginning to surround the area. At 9.20pm, Balboa received a 'very urgent and confidential' cable from

[26]Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos, 'Documento', 14 June 1977, Fondo Sergio Insunza (hereafter FSI), Colección 21, Ítem 19, CEDOC-MMDH.

[27]The *New York Times*, for example, reported on the strike's beginning (16 June), development (22 June), and conclusion (24 June). '30 in Chile Continue Sit-In at UN Office Demanding Data on Missing Relatives,' *New York Times*, 16 June 1977; 'Waldheim Responds,' *New York Times*, 16 June 1977; '28 in Chile Continue Sit-in at UN Office in Protest over Missing Relatives,' 22 June 1977; 'Hunger Strike Ends in Chile,' 24 June 1977. Several other important newspapers in the United States and Europe reported on the strike. See, e.g. 'Chilean Protest seeks Missing-Person Probe,' *Washington Post*, 16 June 1977; 'Chilean Promise Ends UN Sit-in,' *Washington Post*, 24 June 1977; 'Chileans end Hunger Strike,' *Chicago Tribune*, 24 June 1977; 'Waldheim to Visit Chile,' *Guardian*, 19 June 1977; 'Chili,' *Le Monde*, 25 June 1977.

[28]See, e.g. 'Protest on Chile Continues,' *New York Times*, 19 June 1977; 'Chileans Stage Protest in Geneva,' *New York Times*, 24 June 1977; '5 in 5th day of Hunger Strike at UN Office,' *Washington Post*, 23 June 1977; 'Chilli,' *Le Monde*, 22 June 1977; 'Des parents de personnes détenues au Chilli font la grève de la faim,' *Le Monde*, 24 June 1977; 'Chilli,' *Le Monde*, 28 June 1977.

[29]Sergio Insunza, 'Minuta,' 3 August 1977, FSI, Colección 12, Ítem 17, CEDOC-MMDH.

[30]Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos, untitled, undated [late July 1977], FSI, Colección 21, Ítem 39, CEDOC-MMDH.

UN officials abroad instructing him to tell the strikers to abandon the building.[31] Again, the strikers refused to move. They slept on chairs that night, taking shifts for guard duty. Tensions eased in the following days, especially after Iglesias returned to the country on Thursday, 16 June, and the strikers ended up sleeping in camp beds. They even developed emotional ties with some UN officials, guards, and doctors. One of the strikers, who kept a handwritten diary of the events, mentioned for example 'a small fat guy who at first emphatically denied us the stay in the UN, but who gradually became part of the team that visited us every day.'[32] The personal safety of the hunger strikers would again become a concern once they agreed to lift the hunger strike and leave the building. Not long after the end of the strike, secret service agents paid visits to several of the strikers' homes. The agents claimed to be investigating the abductions denounced by the strikers, but they seemed much more interested in investigating the organisation of the strike and intimidating those who had participated in it.[33]

Activists who engage themselves in hunger strikes and other types of high-risk actions need to conceive of themselves as historical agents capable of inducing change through their actions. The documentation produced by the ECLA hunger strikers suggests that some of them, if not all, shared such a conception of self. When celebrating the first week of the strike inside the UN building, for example, one of the hunger strikers delivered a speech that evoked the day when they had entered the building as historically significant. She claimed that they all had overcome fear through determination because they knew that their actions, no matter how small might sound, were relevant: 'every one of us knew on the inside that this was an incredibly important task.'[34] She explained to her hungry audience that the relevance of their strike lay on the fact that it went beyond their own personal tragedy: 'It wasn't my husband or yours who needed this protest action, but hundreds of Chileans who suffer because of these disappearances.'[35] The speaker understood not only the public significance of demonstrations of this nature but also their transformative power on a personal level, and she tried to inspire the rest of the strikers: 'May this strike temper us, [may it] transform us as human beings.'[36] She conveyed the transformative power of collective action even more explicitly in the speech's last sentence, building upon the slogan the strikers had already agreed on: 'The pain of hunger is nothing compared to the pain of losing the one we love, and that's why we are better [people] today, because we have devoted ourselves to a cause.'[37]

The wording of the speech is telling. Many of the Spanish terms quoted and translated above, like *compañero* (either comrade, partner, or husband), *acción* (action or protest), *tarea* (task), and *causa* (cause), were common currency among Chilean communists. The political underpinnings of many of these words may pass unnoticed to the untrained eye, but some of them can be traced even to the Soviet Union. Consider the verb *templar* (to

[31]Unsigned cable to Manuel Balboa, 14 June 1977, FFOR, Colección 23, Ítem 6, CEDOC-MMDH.

[32]Unknown author, untitled, 14–24 June 1977, FFOR, Colección 26, Ítem 3, CEDOC-MMDH. Unfortunately, this 24-page diary is unsigned. It is a great source to understand the events inside the UN building from the perspective of the strikers.

[33]Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos, 'Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos denuncian amenazas de la DINA,' 18 July 1977, FSI, Colección 21, Ítem 9, CEDOC-MMDH. Similar documents can be found in FSI, CEDOC-MMDH.

[34]Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos, 'Celebración 1 semana entrada', undated [22 June 1977], FFOR, Colección 23, Ítem 12, CEDOC-MMDH.

[35]Ibid.

[36]Ibid.

[37]Ibid. Communist striker Aminta Traverso had previously come up with the strikers' slogan: 'The pain of hunger is nothing compared to the pain of losing the one we love.'

temper) as an example. Seldom used in spoken Spanish this way, the verb drew on Soviet metallurgical metaphors. It had become common among Spanish-speaking communists thanks to the broad diffusion of Nikolai Ostrovsky's socialist realist novel *How the Steel Was Tempered*, incidentally, one of Sola Sierra's favourite novels.[38] As the following paragraphs suggest, communist beliefs and motivations underpinned the decision of these women to strike and endure hardships.

The strikers' sense of mission was reinforced by the support they received from outside the UN building. Engaging in a hunger strike inside the UN headquarters meant cutting some ties with the outside world. Therefore, the strikers brought a radio that picked up stations from Chile and other places to follow the effect of the strike first-hand. The significance of this radio for the strikers can be glimpsed from the handwritten diary quoted above, although the diary suggests that news on the radio could be either encouraging ('At 13.30 Radio Chilena read a wire from UPI informing about our action, [and] we feel excited') or discouraging ('17:15. We listen to an announcement from Radio Portales that informs about the event in a totally distorted way').[39] The most reassuring news usually came from abroad, especially from the Soviet international broadcaster Radio Moscow, which from 1973 to 1988 broadcast a daily programme in Spanish called 'Listen Chile!' The author of the handwritten diary put it like this, perhaps fearing her journal would be seized: 'After coming back [from a walk], we listened to the greatest news programme. You get what I mean,' adding then parenthetically: 'Listen Chile.'[40] Media access allowed the strikers to know that their demonstration was having an impact, and therefore fulfilling its purpose. Starting on Friday, 17 June, the strikers had access to some newspapers as well. Also important were the telegrams of support that streamed into the UN building. The author of the handwritten diary mentions the collective reading of these telegrams in eight diary entries, describing them as 'encouraging' and 'comforting.'[41]

In addition, the authorities allowed the strikers to exchange letters with AFDD members outside the UN building. These letters stressed the enormous support the strike was gathering, both in Chile and abroad. One of these letters, whose goal was 'to lift your spirits in this heroic struggle,' ended: 'I guess that you must know that all around the world they are following this matter very closely. There are four hunger strikes in solidarity, in several countries.'[42] The correspondence brings to the fore the growing sense of community among AFDD members, often informed by political understandings of comradeship. 'You have no idea how much I've missed you!!!,' began Ana González's above-mentioned letter to Apolonia Ramírez, Ulda Ortiz, and Pamela Pereira, her 'Sisters in joy [and] pain, sisters in the struggle to free our people.'[43] Another AFDD member who helped with the logistics outside the UN building, and who described herself as a woman who 'feels proud to share this terrible pain with you,' compared those inside the building to communist martyr Margarita Naranjo: 'You have re-enacted with bravery and under more difficult

[38]Ljubetic, *Sola Sierra*, 34.
[39]Unknown author, untitled, 14–24 June 1977, FFOR, Colección 26, Ítem 3, CEDOC-MMDH.
[40]Ibid.
[41]Ibid. I myself found hundreds of telegrams sent to the UN headquarters in Santiago. See these telegrams in FFOR, Colección 25, CEDOC-MMDH. The Vicariate of Solidarity received several hundred more. See reference to these telegrams in Sergio Insunza, 'Relación del viaje a Chile del Batonnier Pettitit', undated [early August 1977], FSI, Colección 118, Ítem 3, CEDOC-MMDH.
[42]'Filma' [?] to Isolina Ramírez, 19 June 1977, FFOR, Colección 23, Ítem 28, CEDOC-MMDH.
[43]Ibid.

circumstances Margarita Naranjo's courageous act.'[44] Naranjo, as Chilean communists knew, had died of starvation during the fiercely anti-communist González Videla administration, in the late 1940s, when she staged a hunger strike to bring her husband back from political confinement. The rhetoric of fraternity and comradeship, the expressions of admiration, and the references to communist heroines – all reinforced the strikers' sense of mission and their willingness to strive against the odds.

Narrating a hunger strike

Did the international community know that communists were responsible for the ECLA hunger strike, and, if so, did this affect its response? These are important questions. After all, the Pinochet dictatorship drew upon its traditional anti-communist rhetoric when responding to the strike. This Manichean rhetoric linked human rights denunciations to a campaign against Chile led by so-called 'international Marxism,' a catch-all term that discredited political opponents as Soviet pawns. To quote from a 14 June statement by the authorities, widely published in the pro-dictatorship Chilean press: 'These events have been perfectly organised and are part of a political advertising strategy executed by groups and individuals that public opinion can easily identify, which seek our country's condemnation in the OAS.'[45] On 21 June, the government stressed the anti-Chilean motives of the strikers' allegations, 'maliciously put forward with the sole aim of harming Chile and thus facilitating the disruptive actions of those who, whether from inside or outside the country, are seeking to subject it to foreign dictates.'[46] By using this nationalist and anti-communist rhetoric, which conflated the government with the nation, the authorities found some support in Chile, but they failed to respond to international public outcry.

By contrast, the ECLA hunger strikers seized on the novel language of human rights and used it quite effectively to garner international support. The strikers' initial statement with demands, which noted political journalist Tom Wicker described as a 'remarkably non-ideological document' in the *New York Times*, presented the strike as a peaceful demonstration in defence of justice and human dignity.[47] Interestingly, however, this long, carefully worded statement did not use the term 'human rights' explicitly, although it included several references to the 'law' and to certain 'rights.' Its rhetoric can be best described as 'humanitarian,' due to its emphasis on 'human dignity' and its moral critique of the 'inhumane actions' carried out by the military government. The participation of two men in the hunger strike arguably precluded the strikers to fully embrace the gendered rhetoric of other humanitarian protests, but the strikers' statement did include some gender-laden motifs (for example, when denouncing aggressions against 'the elderly mother of a *desaparecido*' and the 'adolescent daughter' of another one) and made ample rhetorical use of the universal legitimacy of the family to garner sympathy.[48] Later statements would continue

[44]Unsigned letter to 'muchachas,' undated [June 1977], FFOR, Colección 23, Ítem 15, CEDOC-MMDH.

[45]Quoted in 'Protesta en Sede de NU en Santiago,' *El Mercurio*, 15 June 1977. On the regime's anti-communist rhetoric, see Miguel Rojas, *El dios de Pinochet. Fisonomía del fascismo iberoamericano* (Madrid: Taller Mario Muchnik, 2007); Verónica Valdivia, "'¡Estamos en guerra, señores!" El régimen militar de Pinochet y el "pueblo," 1973–1980,' *Historia* 43, no. 1 (2010): 163–201.

[46]Quoted in UN General Assembly, 'Report of the Economic and Social Council,' 27 June 1977; copy consulted in FSI, Colección 22, Ítem 14, CEDOC-MMDH.

[47]Tom Wicker, 'A Small Gain in Chile,' *New York Times*, 24 June 1977.

[48]Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos, 'Documento,' 14 June 1977, FSI, Colección 21, Ítem 19, CEDOC-MMDH.

to use to these compelling motifs, and the term 'human rights' would eventually pop as well, albeit sparingly.[49]

Notwithstanding the relative absence of the term 'human rights' in the strikers' statements, the ECLA hunger strike was covered as a human rights issue from the very beginning, especially abroad. On 16 June, for example, the *Washington Post* described the strike as 'the first public protest by Chileans inside the country over alleged violations of human rights by the military government,' thus imbuing it with even greater meaning.[50] The UN seems to have contributed to this rhetorical emphasis. It could even be argued that the UN translated the strikers' demands into the lexicon of human rights. Mediating between the strikers and public opinion, for example, UN officials informed about the events in the following terms on 15 June: 'Yesterday morning (14 June) a group of 25 people entered the ECLA building in Santiago, Chile, and informed that they would remain there until certain petitions regarding human rights in Chile are fulfilled.'[51] Later on, UN officials justified their decision to side with the strikers in the following terms: 'They [the strikers] looked to the United Nations and to the United Nations declaration on human rights as a last resort for help.'[52] The strikers knew the language of human rights before entering the UN building, but they only seem to have learnt of its true potency while striking and interacting with UN officials. In fact, the strikers' most explicit reference to the legalistic human rights discourse came several weeks after the end of the strike, in another letter addressed to Waldheim: 'This clamour is of an eminently humanitarian nature and conforms to the fundamental principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We all have the right and the duty to demand this declaration be enforced in our country.'[53]

Needless to say, the strikers never alluded to their relatives' political affiliation, much less to their own. But the government's anti-communist rhetoric did put the strikers and their supporters in a difficult position, forcing them to downplay any political motivations. In Europe, Zalaquett's communist twin Sergio Insunza stated in a speech concerning the ECLA hunger strike that '[n]either "international communism" nor "the manoeuvres of bad Chileans abroad" are responsible for the international isolation of the Junta,' but rather the Junta's own 'horrible crimes, which do not find parallel in the history of Chile or that of the contemporary world.'[54, 55] Communist leaders were aware of the potentially negative impact of associating the ECLA hunger strike with communist activism, and they acted cautiously while spreading the strikers' message abroad. The exiled PCCH leadership, for example, was careful to issue a statement supporting the hunger strike only after the Popular Unity coalition – to which the PCCH, the PS, the MAPU, and other political parties belonged – had issued a similar statement, thus echoing 'the recent statement of the Executive Committee

[49]See, e.g. the statement quoted in '28 in Chile Continue Sit-in at UN Office in Protest over Missing Relatives,' *New York Times*, 22 June 1977.

[50]'Chilean Protest seeks Missing-Person Probe,' *Washington Post*, 16 June 1977.

[51]Quoted in 'Comunicado de prensa en la NU sobre huelga de hambre,' *La Segunda,* 16 June 1977.

[52]Quoted in 'Chilean Promise Ends Sit-in,' *Washington Post*, 24 June 1977.

[53]Unsigned letter to Kurt Waldheim, undated [July 1977], FFOR, Colección 23, Ítem 38, CEDOC-MMDH.

[54]Insunza's trajectory after the 1973 coup is not unlike that of Zalaquett, although he resettled on the other side of the Berlin Wall and has not attracted the same degree of scholarly attention. Insunza fled into exile in East Berlin in early 1974, where he joined the International Association of Democratic Jurists and participated in the foundation of the International Commission of Enquiry into the Crimes of the Military Junta in Chile. By 1977, he was spending most of his time gathering information about human rights abuses in Chile and lobbying the UN Ad-Hoc Working Group.

[55]Sergio Insunza, untitled, undated [late September 1977], FSI, Colección 20, Ítem 10, CEDOC-MMDH. The speech is not signed, but the most likely author is Sergio Insunza.

of the Popular Unity in exile, calling for a great international mobilisation in support of those relatives [of *detenidos desaparecidos*] in hunger strike.'[56]

I would argue that the strikers managed to avoid partisan identifications and thus broadened the strike's impact abroad, but that the depoliticised language of humanitarianism and human rights did not fool the relevant actors negotiating the strike settlement. To start with, it should be noted that the Chilean authorities would have inferred, sooner or later, that PCCH members were behind the strike. As explained above, the *detenidos desaparecidos* about which the strikers' demanded information were almost all communists, a coincidence that would not have gone unnoticed by the DINA. The strikers were aware of this dilemma, and they tried to keep the names of their relatives and their own names secret for as long as possible. Unfortunately for the strikers, the authorities quickly realised the political underpinnings of the strike. According to the strikers, a member of the U.S. Embassy in Santiago told them after the end of the strike that a UN official

> … had approached the Chilean Armed Forces to tell them that the strike had been carried out by the Communist Party, and that this account [of the events] had a negative impact in the results that the Secretary General of United Nations expected from the Government of Chile.[57]

The strikers suspected the aforementioned Daniel Blanchard: 'We are certain that Mister Blanchard told the same thing to some diplomatic friends whom we trust.'[58] It is not entirely clear whether Blanchard is to blame, but this piece of evidence suggests that the main actors negotiating the settlement – the Chilean government, the US State Department, and the UN – they all knew of the political affiliation of the strikers, and that this made an agreement more difficult.

Pinochet never acquiesced to the establishment of an international commission to investigate disappearances in Chile, although he did agree to investigate the disappearances of the relatives of the 26 hunger strikers and promised not to retaliate against the 26 themselves. As Wicker noted, these were 'minor gains.'[59] Wicker and others argued, however, that the hunger strike's outcome suggested 'at least some sensitivity on the part of General Pinochet to world opinion about his violations of human rights' and pushed President Carter to refuse the 'new agricultural loans to Chile that are now being consider in the State Department.'[60] These million dollars loans, already approved by Congress, had provoked a sharp dispute within the Carter Administration, and the hunger strike led the State Department to defer action for 30 to 60 days 'to see what changes might develop in the human rights situation in Chile.'[61] As is often the case with protests and demonstrations, the impact of the ECLA hunger strike in public policy and international relations is difficult to assess.

The ECLA hunger strike's most important achievement may actually lie in linking the fate of the Chilean *detenidos desaparecidos* to that of the global human rights movement.

[56]Partido Comunista de Chile, '¡Apoyar la valerosa acción de los familiares de desaparecidos en Chile!', 16 June 1977, FSI, Colección 21, Ítem 3, CEDOC-MMDH. For the Popular Unity coalition's statement, see Unidad Popular, 'Declaración de la Unidad Popular en torno a la huelga de hambre iniciada por familiares de desaparecidos,' 15 June 1977, FSI, Colección 21, Ítem 4, CEDOC-MMDH.

[57]Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos, untitled, undated [late July 1977], FSI, Colección 21, Ítem 39, CEDOC-MMDH.

[58]Ibid.

[59]Tom Wicker, 'A Small Gain in Chile,' *New York Times*, 24 June 1977.

[60]Ibid.

[61]Quoted in 'US Defers Two Loans to Chile, citing Human-Rights Situation,' *New York Times*, 29 June 1977. See, also, Don Oberdorfer, 'U.S. Defers Aid to Chile As Human Rights Lever,' *The Washington Post*, 29 June 1977; 'State Dept. Defers $11 Million in Loans to Chile and Welcomes Exiled Argentine,' *Los Angeles Times*, 29 June 1977; 'Human Rights Issue Snags Poverty Aid,' *Chicago Tribune*, 29 June 1977.

Trips abroad contributed to this. Shortly after the end of the ECLA hunger strike, small AFDD delegations began travelling to denounce forced disappearance in Chile. The first of many trips took place in September 1977, motivated by the concerns of the international community regarding the abductions denounced by the ECLA hunger strike. The communists Ana González and Ulda Ortiz and the socialist Gabriela Bravo visited New York, Washington, Toronto, Geneva, Paris, Rome, and other cities. Solidarity groups, Chilean exiles, and human rights activists helped make this journey possible. They organised public events and private meetings with leaders of influential organisations – from the UN and the Red Cross to the Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches – and sympathetic states, including members of the US State Department. In these events and meetings, these perspicacious women used the language of human rights frequently and forcefully, indeed, much more frequently and forcefully than they had done during the ECLA hunger strike itself.[62] A second trip followed in 1978. The communists Sola Sierra and Carmen Vivanco, the socialist Pamela Pereira, and the MIR member María Isabel Ortega travelled to Europe and the United States denouncing forced disappearance. Sola Sierra had by then become skilled at using the language of human rights, but this did not prevent her from using this opportunity to do political work and, following party instruction, transmit a secret message to the PCCH's exiled Central Committee.[63]

Disrupting a non-governmental organisation

The ECLA hunger strike took place at a critical conjuncture within the AFDD itself. The majority of AFDD founders were relatives of MIR members, more often than not MIR members themselves, and the organisation had followed their lead until then. MIR members like María Isabel Ortega, Cecilia Radrigán, and Norma Rojas played a crucial role in the early years of the AFDD, but they lost the leadership of this organisation in 1977, when Sola Sierra, Carmen Vivanco, and other communist women took the initiative away from them and began to dictate the line.[64] The relationship between the PCCH and the MIR had been fraught since the creation of the latter in 1965. From the very beginning, the MIR positioned itself to the left of the PS and the PCCH, declaring its intention to be the 'Marxist-Leninist vanguard' of the working class and the oppressed masses and criticising the traditional parties of the Chilean left for their reformism and bureaucratism. The relationship between the MIR and the PCCH did not improve during the Allende years. The MIR tacitly supported yet openly criticised the administration for its timidity, putting most of the blame on the PCCH. The PCCH responded in kind. The coup led to mutual recriminations, each party interpreting the events through its own lens.[65]

The origins of the AFDD can be traced to the last months of 1974, but the organisation only acquired a more formal structure in 1975. The AFDD grew exponentially that year,

[62]See, e.g. their speeches in 'Three Chilean Women: Gabriela Bravo, Ana González, and Ulda Ortiz' (New York: National Chile Centre, 1978).

[63]Ljubetic, *Sola Sierra*, 69–70.

[64]On the origins and transformation of the AFDD, see Manuel Bastías, *Sociedad civil en dictadura. Relaciones transnacionales, organizaciones y socialización política en Chile (1973–1993)* (Santiago: Ediciones Alberto Hurtado, 2013), 180–92; Lucía Sepúlveda, *119 de Nosotros* (Santiago: Lom Ediciones, 2005), 347–48; Vidal, *Dar la vida por la vida*, 100–7.

[65]On the MIR, see Eugenia Palieraki, *¡La revolución ya viene! El MIR chileno en los años sesenta* (Santiago: Lom Ediciones, 2014); Cristián Pérez, *Vidas revolucionarias* (Santiago: Editorial Universitaria, 2013); Sergio Salinas, *El tres letras. Historia y contexto del Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (MIR)* (Santiago: Ril Editores, 2013).

going from 75 members in March to 323 members in December.[66] The public outrage generated by the Colombo Operation, a failed cover-up operation, likely contributed to the growth. The DINA's pretence tried to deny the abduction and murder of 119 political activists by circulating the false news that they had died due to infighting between competing factions of the MIR in Argentina. In response, on 5 August 1975, AFDD members organised a church service with 119 empty chairs in the Basilica of Lourdes, in Santiago, to honour their memory and denounce the cover-up. This ceremony is always mentioned in the AFDD's institutional histories, although its significance is often downplayed.[67] These histories prefer to date the beginning of the demonstrations that led to the AFDD's fame in June 1977, with the ECLA hunger strike. Interestingly, the histories of those years written by people linked to the MIR point to the 1975 ceremony as the first important public demonstration against the dictatorship. In a way, the 1975 ceremony serves as a counter-founding myth for the MIR members who left the AFDD after 1977.[68]

The conflict between PCCH and MIR members of the AFDD intensified during the last months of 1976 and the first half of 1977. Most relatives of communist *detenidos desaparecidos* had come to the Vicariate of Solidarity in search for help sometime in 1976. After destroying the leading bodies of the MIR and the PS, the DINA, in collaboration (and sometimes conflict) with the Comando Conjunto, targeted the PCCH from September 1975 to December 1976. Altogether, secret service agents abducted and tortured hundreds of communists during this 16-month period. Over 120 of them, mostly middle- and high-ranking communists, were never released. Hence, hundreds of women who had ties to the PCCH – mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters of these communist *detenidos desaparecidos* – flooded into the AFDD, altering its balance of power.[69] The tension between the PCCH and the MIR resulted in the formation of two main groups of relatives of *detenidos desaparecidos* within the AFDD. In practice, and according to a pro-communist scholar who interviewed several AFDD members in 1981, the antagonism led to 'the parallel existence of two Associations of Relatives of the Detained Disappeared. The critical point of this parallelism took place during the first hunger strike, started on 14 June 1977.'[70]

As explained above, the organisers of the ECLA hunger strike acted unilaterally, without consulting first with non-communist AFDD members or the religious leaders of the Vicariate of Solidarity. It is not easy to understand how the events outside the UN building unfolded, but the correspondence between AFDD members inside and outside the building suggests that the ECLA hunger strikers had already garnered the support of the Vicariate of Solidarity by the end of the week of 13–19 June. An undated letter (most likely written before Monday, 20 June) from outside the UN building listed 'some concrete examples of solidarity' with the strike, among which was the following: 'in the Association's assembly,

[66]Corporación Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación, *Informe de la Comisión Nacional de Verdad y Reconciliación. Volumen I, Tomo 2* (Santiago: Andros Impresores, 1996), 973–4.

[67]See, e.g., Agrupación de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos, *20 años de historia de la Agrupación de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos de Chile. Un camino de imágenes… que revelan y se rebelan contra una historia no contada* (Santiago: La Agrupación, 1997), 15–17; Mireya García, *Agrupación de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos* (Santiago: AFDD, 2002), 13, 15.

[68]See, e.g. Sepúlveda, *119 de Nosotros*.

[69]On the repression of communism in late 1975 and 1976, see Rolando Álvarez, *Desde las sombras. Una historia de la clandestinidad comunista (1973–1980)* (Santiago: Lom Ediciones, 2003), 119–48; Fernando Villagrán, *En el nombre del padre. Historia íntima de una búsqueda. Vida, clandestinidad y muerte de Víctor Díaz, líder obrero comunista* (Santiago: Catalonia, 2013), 157–96.

[70]Vidal, *Dar la vida por la vida*, 105.

we received the Cardinal's support, as well as that of the functionaries of the Vicariate.'[71] There are few sources regarding the discussion that AFDD members from different political parties had during the development of these events, but I would venture that the communist women who remained outside the UN building, like Apolonia Ramírez and Ulda Ortiz, had some convincing to do. Internal discussions about public activities were usually quite political in nature, and AFDD members from different political parties occasionally quarrelled about which cases to include in petitions and pamphlets. The Vicariate of Solidarity seems to have played a mediating role in these events, persuading the two AFDD main groups to agree to work together.

The PCCH eventually came to dominate the AFDD. It counted with several dozen experienced cadres and an even greater number of non-affiliated wives of communist *detenidos desaparecidos* who sided with the party, since relatives tended to group themselves according to the political affiliation of their loved ones. The PCCH made significant efforts to organise these women and advised many of them to join the ranks of the party. By 1980 the party had 82 party members active in the AFDD in Santiago, organised in 16 different células and other party bodies.[72] This allowed the PCCH to act as a caucus within the AFDD and exert greater influence. The transition from a MIR-led AFDD into a PCCH-led AFDD was not easy for members of the MIR. AFDD and MIR member Herminia Antequera recalled in an oral-history interview:

> There was a series of detentions of communist activists in 1976. Their families didn't want to work with us, but the Vicariate forced them to integrate themselves into what we had already organised. However, in the elections of the Association of Relatives of the Detained-Disappeared, they acted as a horde. Many people from their side who didn't participate regularly came to vote, and that's how they stole the leadership positions from us forever.[73]

Notwithstanding these conflicts, the PCCH and the MIR did find some common ground in the defence of human rights in the late 1970s, and this common ground led to a more congenial relationship between both parties during the 1980s. On 15 August 1977, for example, the Popular Unity coalition and the MIR leadership signed an agreement in exile to promote coordinated actions in several areas, including the defence of 'human rights, especially through the denunciation of abductions and disappearances.'[74] Most MIR members seem to have left the AFDD sometime during the dictatorship – some channelled their activism through paramilitary operations, others abandoned activism altogether – but a few remained active in the AFDD throughout the dictatorship and broke apart only after the return to democracy, in 1992, when they helped establish a parallel organisation tellingly called Association of Relatives of the Detained Disappeared – Founding Line.[75]

Concluding remarks

Let me conclude this article by briefly mentioning the investigative trip of French lawyer and Paris batônnier Louis Pettitit, who visited Santiago a month after the end of the ECLA

[71]Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos [outside UN building] to Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos [inside UN building], undated [June 1977], FFOR, Colección 23, Ítem 10, CEDOC-MMDH.

[72]Comisión Nacional de Solidaridad to Comité Exterior, undated [1980], ACE-PCCH, File C050, ICAL.

[73]Quoted in Sepúlveda, *119 de nosotros*, 348.

[74]Unidad Popular and Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria, 'Declaración conjunta U.P. y MIR', 15 June 1977, FSI, Colección 132, Ítem 9, CEDOC-MMDH.

[75]Sepúlveda, *119 de nosotros*, 347–8, 431.

hunger strike and held conversations with the strikers, other AFDD members, union leaders, lawyers, politicians, religious figures, and state authorities concerning the situation of human rights in Chile. According to Insunza, who wrote a detailed report on Pettitit's trip after talking with him and his trip companion (a French communist lawyer), 'Pettitit was surprised by the decisiveness, firmness, and courage of the women [who participated in the ECLA hunger strike] and he is convinced that they are willing to fight until the end.'[76] Pettitit got this impression after talking with about 20 of the hunger strikers on the evening of Wednesday, 27 July. His conversation with Estela Ortiz and a few other strikers later that evening, while dining with some French hosts, confirmed his first impression. Two days later, on Friday, 29 July, Pettitit had the chance of talking with an even greater number of AFDD members during a meeting in the headquarters of the Vicariate of Solidarity. The report noted: 'You could clearly distinguish the group who had participated in the hunger strike – more dynamic and combative – from the rest of the relatives.'[77]

The 1977 ECLA hunger strike was a crucial event in the transformation of a disparate group of well-trained communist women into a tight-knit group of purposeful victims' rights activists, whose humanitarian plea resonated with the burgeoning human rights movement. These women needed to learn the depoliticised, universal language of human rights in order to garner support abroad, 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 ended up speaking – and, eventually, mastering – the novel language of human rights without renouncing their illiberal political ideology. By studying this event in depth, this article has argued for the need to expand and re-politicise the cast of protagonists of the human rights revolution of the 1970s. If we accept that the denunciation of human rights abuses in Pinochet's Chile played an important role in this momentous revolution, then we have to factor communism in. Paradoxical as it may seem, hard-core communists in the Global South contributed to the growth of the movement that heralded the demise of the Soviet Union.

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[76]Sergio Insunza, 'Relación del viaje a Chile del Batonnier Pettitit', undated [early August 1977], FSI, Colección 118, Ítem 3, CEDOC-MMDH.

[77]Ibid.