1-15-2016

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Chilean Radio-Show Caller Admits Role In Post-Coup Executions, Disappearances

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Category/Department: Chile
Published: 2016-01-15

A former Army conscript’s chilling and shockingly public confession has provided a rare peek beneath the shroud of secrecy that even now, decades after Chile’s return to democracy, surrounds the rampant human rights abuses committed by the military regime of Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990).

Guillermo Reyes Rammsy, as he was later identified by police, delivered the troubling testimony Dec. 9 in an unlikely forum, a popular call-in radio program called El Chacotero Sentimental. The show is hosted by Roberto Artiagoitía, better known as “El Rumpy,” and features guests who share personal anecdotes, often regarding amorous adventures or infidelities.

Reyes, 62, began his more than 20-minute conversation with El Rumpy talking about an old flame—“La Italiana,” he called her—from his days as a teenage “hippie.” His tale soon took a dark turn, however, as he recalled being drafted for military service and, in the months after the 1973 coup that ousted leftist President Salvador Allende (1970-1973), participating in multiple executions of political prisoners, including, he claimed, La Italiana’s husband.

“The first time I cried. But the lieutenant was saying: ‘Good soldier, good soldier, brave soldier.’ Then pow-pow, again. The second time, I liked it. I enjoyed it,” Reyes explained. “It was evil, but you ended up liking it, and that drove you crazy. You fought against that feeling.”

The former conscript described how he and his colleagues took several prisoners out into “la pampa” (the countryside) and not only shot them, but used dynamite to do away with their remains. “Poof. There was nothing left, not even their shadow,” he said. “Have you heard where the disappeared are? Nobody has told you where the disappeared are… Well, it’s because they aren’t. They are totally disintegrated. Nothing remained.”

News of the shocking radio confession spread quickly and prompted a police investigation that resulted in Reyes’ arrest, two days later, at his home in the region of Valparaíso, west of Santiago. A judge charged Reyes in the murders of two specific prisoners—Freddy Taberna Gallegos and Germán Palominos Lamas—but is allowing him to remain under house arrest pending further investigation.

Taberna and Palominos, active members of Allende’s Partido Socialista (PS), were among an estimated 2,500 people swept up during and after the military overthrow, on Sept. 11, 1973, and sent to a desert prison camp near Pisagua, in the northern Tarapacá region. They were tried by military councils of war and executed in October and November 1973. Taberna’s body was never found. Palominos’s remains were located in a mass grave in 1990, the year Pinochet stepped down.

Truth commissions organized after Chile’s return to democracy found that the Pinochet regime killed more than 3,000 people (a third of them are still classified as missing) and tortured some
29,000 (NotiSur, Oct. 9, 2009). Tens of thousands were forced into exile, including current President Michelle Bachelet (2006-2010, 2014-2018), who is serving her second non-consecutive term.

**Caso Quemados**

Decades later, the legacy of those abuses continues to haunt Chile, all the more so because of the many unsolved mysteries that remain. Rights groups accuse the military of maintaining a “pact of silence” that, unless it is broken soon, threatens to bury the truth forever. Some of the perpetrators of those abuses have already died, taking their secrets to the grave. Pinochet himself died in December 2006 (NotiSur, Jan. 5, 2007). His most notorious henchman, secret-police chief Manuel Contreras, died last year (NotiSur, Aug. 28, 2015).

The sense of urgency—that the country is in a race against time to uncover its hidden secrets—adds to the significance of the Chacotero Sentimental confession. Some observers see Reyes’ testimony as a sign that the military’s wall of secrecy may finally be breaking down, especially since it came just six months after revelations by another former Army draftee, a witness to the so-called Caso Quemados (case of the burned people), made headlines in Chile and abroad.

Caso Quemados dates back to 1986 and involved a pair of then-teenage activists—Carmen Gloria Quintana, a university student, and Rodrigo Rojas, a photographer and Chilean national who had taken up residency in the US—who had a fateful run-in with soldiers during a pro-democracy demonstration in Santiago (NotiSur, July 7, 1987). Quintana, who barely survived the ordeal, claims the soldiers doused the pair in gasoline and intentionally lit them on fire. Rojas died as a result of his injuries.

Military officials told a different story, presenting the teenagers as troublemakers who accidentally set themselves aflame. In late 2014, however, ex-conscript Fernando Guzmán officially challenged those claims, telling investigators that soldiers did, in fact, torch the young activists. The testimony was made public in July 2015 and prompted a judge to arrest a dozen former soldiers, including the commander of the patrol, Pedro Fernández Dittus, who has since been released pending trial.

Declassified US government documents published shortly afterwards by the Washington, DC-based National Security Archive suggest that Pinochet knowingly buried a Chilean police report that was compiled after the incident and pointed to Army involvement. “The Chilean government, following Pinochet’s lead, is trying to publicly brand Rojas and Carmen Quintana … as terrorists, supposedly victims of their own Molotov cocktails,” a secret 1986 briefing to then-US President Ronald Reagan read.

‘We were boys’

Reyes’ confessions have prompted rights groups and some political leaders to urge even greater transparency by the military. Sen. Isabel Allende, the daughter of ex-President Allende and current head of the PS, promised her party’s support in the ongoing Reyes investigation and praised Minister Mario Carroza—the judge who charged Reyes—for responding so quickly to the case. “We strongly believe these pacts of silence ought to be broken and that, sooner or later, the people who have information should hand it over,” she told reporters.

President Bachelet made a similar statement last year shortly after news of Guzmán’s Caso Quemados testimony broke. “Enough with the silence,” she said. “There are people who known
the truth about many cases that are still unresolved. Chile asks them to follow the example of the conscript Fernando Guzmán, to help repair all the pain.”

The cases have also sparked a debate over ways that authorities might encourage more military cooperation, particularly by ex-conscripts. Political analyst Marta Lagos suggested to the Associated Press (AP) recently that Chile could perhaps choose 20 former draftees and, in exchange for information, guarantee them legal immunity. Others say there should be an even broader amnesty for dictatorship-era draftees, who were forced into military service and were themselves the victims, in some cases, of human rights abuses. During his conversation with El Rumpy, Guillermo Reyes defended his actions by saying he was “obliged,” that his superiors would have killed him had he not followed orders. Some media accounts of the confession described Reyes as sounding “unrepentant.” But Juan Fernando Mellado, president of the Corporación Nacional para la Integración de los Derechos Humanos a los ex Conscriptos de 1973-1990, an association of former draftees, told the AP that he can very much relate to Reyes. “We were boys, 17, 18 years old, from the poorest communities in the country,” he said. “We were subjected to aberrant brutality. I back and corroborate what Reyes Rammsy said. There was no choice. Everyone had to do anything they could to save themselves.”

Mellado added: “The ex-conscripts that are still around have a lot of information about the aberrations that occurred during the military dictatorship, but they should change the laws regarding how [the draftees] are judged, because like what happened in this case, when someone confesses, he ends up arrested and tried.”

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