

Commemorating September 11, 1973: Britain Secretly Helped Chile's Military Intelligence After Pinochet Coup

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As the Pinochet regime rounded up and murdered its political opponents after the 1973 coup, a UK Foreign Office propaganda unit passed material to Chile's military intelligence and MI6 connived with a key orchestrator of the coup, newly declassified files show.

The UK government [assisted](#) Chile's military intelligence in the aftermath of the brutal 1973 coup against elected president Salvador Allende, newly declassified files show.

The assistance was authorised by the Information Research Department (IRD), a secret Foreign Office propaganda unit which worked closely with Britain's secret intelligence service, MI6.

The IRD had long seen Allende as a political threat. As *Declassified* previously [revealed](#), throughout the 1960s, the unit had sought to prevent Allende from ever becoming president through election interference and covert propaganda operations.

After Allende was elected in 1970, the IRD's distribution of propaganda material became "strictly limited", with the British embassy having fewer reliable contacts in the Chilean government.

This all changed after the coup.

In January 1974, the IRD began to "extend the distribution" of its material, which was now passed "to the Chilean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government information organisations" and, crucially, the dictatorship's "military intelligence" services.

At this time, Chile's security forces - including the country's intelligence apparatus - were [responsible](#) for massive human rights violations, including the widespread use of torture as

a political weapon.

The UK government was under no illusions about this. As Foreign Office official Christopher Crabbie [noted](#) three months after the coup in December 1973, “I do not think that anyone seriously doubts that torture is going on in Chile”.

Reliable figures [indicate](#) that, between 1973 and 1988, Chilean state agents were responsible for over 3,000 deaths or disappearances and tens of thousands of cases of torture and political arrests. This was in a country which, in 1973, had a population of only 10 million people.

‘Hearts and Minds’

The nature of the information passed to Chile’s military intelligence remains unclear, though the files suggest it may have included material for use in propaganda, research reports on left-wing activity, and even manuals on domestic security operations.

For instance, newly declassified files show how the UK government secretly helped the Chilean authorities to develop a counter-insurgency strategy, using techniques refined during Britain’s colonial interventions in Southeast Asia.

The idea for such assistance was first raised during the visit of British navy chief Sir Michael Pollock to Chile in late November 1973, two months after the coup.

The timing of Pollock’s visit was “politically tricky”, noted the British ambassador in Santiago, Reginald Secondé, since there was “much critical attention” being given “to the Chilean Government’s treatment of their political opponents”.

However, there were “two frigates and two submarines for the Chilean Navy under construction in British yards” – an arms deal worth around £50m – and “this was not a moment to prejudice the historic tradition of Anglo-Chilean naval friendship”.

In Santiago, Pollock and Secondé met with a number of regime officials, including navy chief José Toribio Merino Castro, defence minister Patricio Carvajal Prado, and foreign minister Ismael Huerta.

With Huerta, the British officials spoke about the UK government’s “hearts and minds” campaign in Northern Ireland, a counter-insurgency strategy inspired by Britain’s war in [Malaya](#) (1948-60).

Huerta “seemed impressed with the concept”, and Secondé “later twice heard him muttering to himself ‘hearts and minds’”.

Subsequent meetings were held between Secondé, British information officer Tony Walters, and Captain Carlos Ashton, the director of overseas information in Chile’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Like Huerta, Ashton was “very receptive to the idea that this kind of approach to Chilean security problems might be the right answer”, and requested “details of what practical measures a ‘hearts and minds’ exercise would involve”.

Counter-insurgency Advice

Ashton's request for assistance was forwarded to Rosemary Allott, the head of the IRD's Latin American desk.

In a letter dated 15 February 1974 and marked 'secret', Allott agreed to provide the Chilean regime with counter-insurgency advice, but limited this to material on Britain's past colonial interventions.

"In view of the delicate political considerations involved", Allott wrote, "it would be best to confine, at this stage at least, the material we send you of insurgencies of the past, rather than those currently preoccupying HMG" such as Northern Ireland.

The Pinochet regime was soon issued with three books on British counter-insurgency strategy, alongside a "Manual of Counter Insurgency Studies".

Allott also tracked down "various official reports on Malaya" including "The Fight Against Communist Terrorism in Malaya", the "Review of the Emergency in Malaya (1948-57)", and "two booklets on the Philippines insurrection".

Britain's military [campaign](#) in Malaya involved the "resettlement" of over 500,000 civilians, aerial bombardment, and an intensive propaganda operation.

Embassy officials [suggested](#) that they were teaching Chilean officers "tactics of tolerance and magnanimity". However, brutal repression often lay behind the UK government's rhetoric about "winning hearts and minds", and the Chilean authorities were only sharpening their repressive techniques.

None of the material given to the Pinochet regime was "for attribution to HMG". This meant that the Chilean authorities could use the information but not source it to the UK government.

The extent to which Britain's advice was acted upon remains unclear; the Pinochet regime was certainly not lacking in support from the CIA.

Nonetheless, it is clear that Britain agreed to share its colonial policing methods with the Chilean junta, with the goal of stabilising Pinochet's regime against [domestic opposition](#).

MI6 in Chile

Evidence of British assistance to Chile's intelligence services raises further questions about what Britain's own secret intelligence service, MI6, was doing in Chile.

In 1972, MI6 officer David Spedding was [attached](#) to the British embassy in Santiago - his only foreign posting outside of the Middle East throughout his career.

This was not Spedding's first visit to Chile. As a postgraduate student at Oxford University during the mid-1960s, Spedding had spent his gap year in Santiago and found work as an assistant in the British embassy's press office.

Spedding's first role in the diplomatic service was thus in the same British embassy that had been directing covert propaganda operations against Allende throughout the 1960s. The job

[gave](#) him “an entrée into SIS [MI6]”, historian Nigel West [noted](#).

Spedding remained in Chile until September 1974. He was subsequently [made](#) responsible for MI6 operations across the Middle East, and would go on to become MI6 chief between 1994 and 1999.

‘Our Relationship with Admiral Merino’

Spedding’s name rarely appears in declassified Foreign Office files on Chile.

Yet in one [file](#), dated 4 December 1973, Spedding informed the Foreign Office that 2,800 civilians and 700 armed forces personnel had been killed during and after the coup.

“In order to protect our relationship with Admiral Merino”, Spedding noted, “we would not like these figures to be quoted, at least for the time being”.

Admiral Merino was one of the key orchestrators of the 1973 coup. He was head of the Chilean navy in September 1973, and remained in post until the fall of the dictatorship in 1990. Merino [claimed](#) responsibility for convincing Pinochet to join the coup.

One of Spedding’s roles, then, was to ensure close collaboration with the Chilean junta by covering up its responsibility for massive political repression and human rights violations.

The MI6 station in Santiago was only [closed down](#) in 1974 amid the UK Labour Party’s return to government.

It would not be surprising if MI6 played a supporting role to the CIA’s covert operations against Allende during the early 1970s. It was recently [revealed](#) that the Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS) had “opened a base in Santiago to assist in the US Central Intelligence Agency’s destabilisation of the Chilean government” in 1971.

Britain’s secret assistance to the Pinochet regime was consistent with the UK government’s position on the coup.

The Conservative government under Edward Heath had [welcomed](#) the coup and [rushed](#) to give diplomatic recognition and arms to the Chilean junta, with the Foreign Office noting that it had “infinitely more to offer British interests than the one which preceded it”.

The coup against Allende inaugurated a 17-year dictatorship under General Augusto Pinochet, who only left office in 1990.

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John McEvoy is co-directing a forthcoming documentary investigating Britain’s hidden role in the death of Chile’s democracy and rise of the Pinochet dictatorship. You can support the film’s production [here](#).

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