

THREE KEY POINTS ABOUT THE VALECH REPORT*

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When they can be read from a historical perspective, the Rettig Report, the Table for Dialogue and the Report on Political Imprisonment and Torture will form a massive and, fortunately detailed, tableau about what happened in Chile during one of the most violent periods in its history. By then there will be no one to say that they are “unbalanced” or “taken out of context”, because what they deal with is exactly that, the fact that there was no equilibrium during those years, or the vision necessary to warn that no circumstances would justify a similar outbreak of violence in the future.

What things does the Report add about torture apart from the fact that there are 27,000 proven testimonies? An effort of synthesis throws light on the following political conclusions:

1. THE VIOLENCE WAS INSTITUTIONAL

In the same way that the Rettig Report showed that the greatest number of deaths was produced between September and December 1973, so the Report on Torture registers a 67.4% of the cases in the same period. It is a confirmation —an obvious one if you like— that the Military Junta applied the maximum amount of violence during the 90 day period in which they took control of the country and wiped out resistance.

What is not so accepted, but is equally obvious, is more than one thousand dead and over 18,000 tortured in those few months met their fate at the hands of “agents of the State” from different ranks and levels: from an ordinary policeman in a village to a sophisticated officer of the General Staff, from a private detective to a military strategist considering himself to be at war.

The significance of this is that all the forces, military and police, were well trained, or at least conditioned, to apply extreme force to their prisoners

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and very badly trained to appreciate their real level of danger. Today it is totally evident that the military regime overestimated the fighting capacity of those who they considered enemies, an error which is not acceptable nowadays from a professional in the Forces.

But this error deserves to be called institutional and in no way individual. And the practices that derive from it are also. Even more: the fact that torture continued in the following years, in a more selective manner and at the hands of specialist organizations, does not eliminate the institutional aspect because these organizations counted on the approval of their commanders and on the systematic rejection of all the public accusations against them.

And so, is there nothing that can explain all this? Political polarization, the climate of hate, the Cold War? In part.

Nevertheless, a substantial part has to be found in the culture of a total lack of respect for human rights in which the Armed Forces were educated until well into the 80's. We must not forget that the mere expression "human rights" got up the noses of the generals of the 70's, put anyone who mentioned it under suspicion and was the favourite joke of an admiral which many found funny. Did the torturers believe that their victims would never have the capacity of denouncing them?. Did all those who violated defenceless women think that the crime was less because the women were from the Left?

What the recent report reveals is the disdain for the rights of person was not just operating in a void: it was operating in a space filled with a contrary culture, one of violence made legitimate by "the right to power". Not only could they disregard anyone who demanded their human rights: they could punish them for it.

Two consequences come out of this analysis: excessive violence was used by each and every one of the institutions of the Armed Forces and the Police and its origin stems from the poor education people received in the theme of individual rights (including those in war).

While those actually in charge continue to deny that we are talking about institutional practices here, they also cannot assure us that they will take the second step, which is to modify the education the institutions receive. This has been understood firstly by the Police Investigations Department and then by General Juan Emilio Cheyre, who added a public act to his recognition of institutional responsibility in order to show the Army's commitment to the culture of human rights.

2. THE COURTS AND THE PRESS RELINQUISHED THEIR ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

Chilean society came to September 1973 with their ethical standards in tatters.

The opposing sides thought in solutions that contemplated the total defeat of their adversary and it is neither possible nor just to say that if the Left had won, things would have been different. But history is what happened not what might have been.

Enthroning the military, the civilian authorities tended to line themselves up alongside them in the sense that they had “saved” the country. First was the Supreme Court and, just behind them, the whole of the Judiciary. In its actions backing the nascent regime, the judiciary abandoned its ethical principles and above all its professional duties. Its systematic rejection of accusations of abuse —and of the basic principle of habeas corpus— not only increased people’s danger but also demonstrated a state of moral abdication that has no precedent in Chilean history.

Once passed the initial stages, did the Court do anything to stop the violence? We will never know. In its efforts to maintain the appearance of its tutelage over the detention centres, it might have contributed to a reduction in numbers of those who were submitted to torture. But it did nothing to end it and several of its leaders gave objective encouragement (“the desaparecidos are dead scared of me”) to the sense of eternal impunity that those who directed the violence felt they had.

When, after years had gone by, some members of the Judiciary realised that all this was irregular, it was already too late: the Supreme Court itself had been co-opted by the regime and its members intentionally and carefully selected.

And afterwards? One thing: the fact that this period of the courts has been as distressing as their insistence that they couldn’t do anything different from what they did. There is nothing to be learned from that line of defence.

Something similar happened with the “4th estate”, the press. Its professional rules had been corrupted in the previous years and didn’t get better after the coup. The massive and ruthless punishment that was meted out to the press of the Left was received indifferently by the Right, who gave themselves to the service of official versions and epithets of war, with an inertia that was totally contrary to the ethics of their profession. If every medium of communication drew up an inventory of what they failed to do

during these years, the result would be a mournful record of deaths and sufferings that could have been avoided.

In the same way as the courts, when the major players in the media began to wake up to their duties of responsibility and impartiality in the 80's, it was already too late. The DINA and the CNI had infiltrated the editorial staff and the business of doing favours for the secret service or the police had become routine. It was so deeply entrenched that, in several cases, some of these practices live on today.

Out of all the civil institutions, the only ones that had the lucidity, from the first, to act against the violence were the churches. Without their risky but determined intervention, the figures could be even worse than the ones we know about. And even here, their behaviour wasn't all the same. Only the Catholic Church, led by Cardinal Raul Silva Henríquez and his successors, had the tenacity to stay the course, even when other churches—especially the Evangelicals—were looking for the opportunity to ingratiate themselves with the regime and gain new converts.

3. THE CIVILIANS ADDED FUEL TO THE FLAMES

A little bit of order isn't a bad thing for an analysis: no Chilean older than 35 years of age can say that they didn't know roughly what the report has now revealed in detail. A certain hypocrisy abounds especially in all the declarations of surprise. The report will be novelty for the young and a shock for those who study Chapter 5.

The extension of the Chilean tragedy is reflected in its massive numbers, which mean that in each family and every home during those years, even indirectly, there dwelt a victim's testimony—sometimes unheard or maybe rejected. This is also what explains the fact that so many people linked to the military regime can show that they helped someone who was being hunted or who was a prisoner. These are facts and if they assuage people's bad consciences, then good for them.

But in the world of civilians political ethics was also pulverised. In the same way that many people were assassinated with the enthusiastic support of civilians (the Rettig Report), so many of the tortured owed their misfortune to the generalised practice of accusation and informers at the beginning of the regime. The silence of the surviving political parties (including the Christian Democrats who maintained this policy until 1976) transformed itself into objective complicity for that type of behaviour. In the months that followed, the most sombre aspect of civilian participation was

the total lack of regard for the rights of others, the same as the military. Besides proudly denying the persistence of institutional violence —as if we were dealing with an act of patriotism— there were many, too many, leaders willing to justify it, including with the use legal arguments.

None of them contributed anything towards moderating the violent conduct of those who were acting in the shadow of the State, and many added fuel to the flames by using rhetoric about a “mission”. We mustn’t forget that, in 1978, it was civilian groups who organised “popular opinion” in rejecting the interference of the United Nations....in the subject of human rights!. After 1978 there were practically only civilian ministers in charge of public order and, obviously, torture decreased: but there are still more than 3,600 cases registered. As a consolation prize it’s both poor and bitter.

So finally: many soldiers who served during the dictatorship today feel that they are being incriminated in events that they were not directly responsible for. And, in fact, there are those who prefer to simplify things and dump the dead and the tortured at the feet of the Armed Forces.

But both of these have somewhat narrow, if not culpable, visions. What the report on torture and previous documents demonstrate is that Chile lived through a terrible era, of which nobody can feel proud, especially the “victors” of those days and that this same era was characterised by a collective rejection of social morality, from which only a handful of heroic and single persons can be excluded. What we need to do now is to reconstruct, from within, a programme of ethics for the institutions so that so much suffering would not have been in vain. □