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**Unraveling the pain -  
Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos, Santiago de Chile**

*September 11 for many of us signifies only one thing. For Chileans, however, the date has a rather different history, as it marks the beginning of the era of the military junta that lasted from 1973 to the year 1990. The Museum of Memory and Human Rights in the capital city Santiago seeks to highlight this troublesome time in the country's history, and unravel its events from the point of view of those who did not welcome it.*

### **From the coup d'état to the junta**

In the year 1970, after several attempts, Salvador Allende (1908–1973) of the socialist coalition Unidad Popular was elected President of Chile. As the first democratically-elected Marxist president in South America, he pursued to improve the living conditions of the less privileged. His socialist program included a land reform and the nationalization of important industries such as copper mining.

Allende's radical politics also sparked criticism both inside and outside Chile. The march of socialism in Latin America during the tensions of Cold War raised concerns especially in the United States. Finally, following a severe constitutional crisis, president Allende was overthrown by the military 11 September 1973. The United States supported the violent military coup and the Commander-in-Chief of the army, Augusto Pinochet (1915–2006), who became the president of the military junta established after the coup.



Bombing of the Presidential Palace. Source: Biblioteca del Congreso Nacional.  
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The permanent exhibition of the museum opens with a room taking the visitor to September 11 through varied interactive and audiovisual materials. The visitor may watch and listen to a journalist reporting live the bombing of La Moneda, the Presidential Palace, truly sensing the astonishment of the journalist as the day progresses. Another impressive piece is the last speech of president Allende to the people of Chile right before his suicide and the takeover of the Palace. A voice is also given to the friends of Allende witnessing his death and its aftermath. In their interviews they recall the feelings of fear and uncertainty, as they witnessed not only a friend dying, but people openly celebrating the event and embracing the non-socialist future.

## **Meaning of memory**

Right after the coup, Chile suddenly became a dangerous country for known left-wing activists and their families. As the junta began to establish its power, many of those activists who did not flee abroad were captured or killed. One of the most well-known victims was the acclaimed artist Víctor Jara, killed within days of the coup. It is estimated that over 3000 people went missing, and were presumably killed by the junta.

Describing this bloody part of the Chilean history is where the aim of the museum is at its clearest. After decades of official silence on the human rights violations committed by the junta, the museum seeks to give a voice to its victims. The part of the exhibition dedicated to the persecution of the junta's opponents includes official documents and drawings of children, but also highly detailed descriptions of torture together with actual torture devices and interviews of the victims. At the center of the museum one finds a memorial, a wall several storeys high and covered with portraits, dedicated to the victims of the junta.

In addition to the voices of the victims, the museum highlights the resistance that was present within Chile. The exhibition includes videos, artwork and other pieces that describe the resistance movement determined to undermine the power of the junta in the 1970s and 1980s. Finally, the number of the opponents of Pinochet had grown so large that they could not be ignored by the government. The democracy was re-established in Chile in 1990, and the reign of Pinochet was officially over.

## **The controversy**

When the Museum of Memory and Human Rights first opened its doors in 2010, 40 years after the military coup, the way the museum chose to treat the era of the junta and Pinochet sparked much controversy. Many critics claimed that by focusing only on human rights violations, it ignored completely the positive effects that were direct consequences of overthrowing the socialist power. Worry was also raised that the decision not to include the years 1970–1973 when Allende was in power also makes it impossible for the visitor to understand the problems that preceded and lead to the coup.



With its eye-catching architecture and experiential content, Museo de la Memoria y Los Derechos Humanos has become one of Santiago's main attractions. Picture: Suvi Karila

The concerns raised by the critics include some valid points. The museum is highly unisonous and as such does not offer explanations for the events that took place in 1973. The supporters of Pinochet only have a voice via the supporters of Allende, most of who suffered greatly. A visitor is left wondering: who were the supporters of Pinochet and what kinds of experiences do they have of the era?

On the other hand, the museum is very open in its objectives and does not claim to be anything else. Its stated mission is to "allow dignity for victims and their families, stimulate reflection and debate and to promote respect and tolerance in order that these events never happen again". Having visited the museum on several afternoons seeing school classes and tourist groups study its collections, I am left to believe that on many aspects, in this moment of history, the museum fulfills its duty. However, in the future, one inevitably wishes to witness a more complex take on the subject.

## TO READ:

- Leskinen, Auli (2013): Petojen aika. WSOY.
- Picture source: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Golpe\\_de\\_Estado\\_1973.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Golpe_de_Estado_1973.jpg)
- For more information about the museum visit <http://www.museodelamemoria.cl/>.

The author is a doctoral candidate of cultural history at the University of Turku. Her master's thesis dealt with the history of human rights and atheism in the philosophy of Ernestine L. Rose (1810–1892). She visited the museum in December 2013.