

Using the Modern Records Centre as an Undergraduate

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Abstract

The Modern Records Centre holds material from the Chile Solidarity Campaign and that which relates to the experience of Chilean refugees in the aftermath of the 1973 coup d'état which overthrew Salvador Allende. In this critical reflection, I will discuss my experience of using the Modern Records Centre as an undergraduate participating in the EUTOPIA Legal History Connected Learning Community (CoLeCo). This reflection aims to share my experience of using a digitised archival collection to research the experience of refugees who fled to the UK and to gauge the differing levels of support for this group. This reflection should enable a greater understanding of the benefits that digitised archival collections have for undergraduate students.

Keywords: Chile; Modern Records Centre; undergraduate research; digitised archives

Attending 'The MRC at 50' celebratory symposium in September 2023 was, for me, the culmination of work undertaken as part of the EUTOPIA Legal History Connected Learning Community (CoLeCo). CoLeCos aim to increase collaboration with partner universities across Europe. In the academic year 2022-23, the Legal History CoLeCo brought together students from Vrije Universiteit Brussel, CY Paris University, the University of Ljubljana, the University of Warwick, and Nova Lisboa University. Each year, a theme related to legal history is chosen and students from these universities undertake research projects connected to that theme. In 2022-23, the Legal History CoLeCo theme was 'Labour Migration'. Students presented the progress of their research either in-person or online at a peak event, involving a work in progress workshop, hosted by the University of Ljubljana in March. Then, in June, students created blog posts for an online exhibition to present the outcomes of their research. It was as part of this project that, during my first year studying history at the University of Warwick, I researched the experience of Chilean refugees following the 1973 *coup d'état*. This subject was relevant to the 'Latin America: Themes and Problems' module I was studying at the time and was particularly apposite since 11 September 2023 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the coup. On 11 September 1973 members of the Chilean armed forces overthrew the democratically elected Socialist government of Salvador Allende (1970-1973). The *coup* was followed by the establishment of a military junta (1973-1974) and subsequently a dictatorship under Augusto Pinochet (1974-1990). State repression by the Pinochet regime precipitated a significant humanitarian crisis and an estimated 200,000 Chileans fled the country (**Wright & Oñate Zúñiga, 2007: 31**). Around the anniversary in September 2023, newspapers contained articles referring to 'the other 9/11', demonstrating the continued awareness of the impact of the coup and its implications (**Guardian, 2023**).

The Modern Records Centre has a digital collection of material under the title 'Chile Solidarity' about the UK-based movement of solidarity with Chilean victims of the Pinochet regime. With the encouragement of Dr Rosie Doyle, who runs the EUTOPIA Connected Learning Community Legal History project at Warwick, those of us who participated looked at documents held by the MRC. The availability and accessibility of documents in the 'Chile Solidarity' collection online influenced my decision to focus on the experience of Chilean refugees to the UK. Through reading the digitised letters and memorandums from groups such as trade unions, it was possible to track significant fluctuations in UK governmental support towards these refugees. It was clear from the information in these documents how attitudes changed significantly between the initial Conservative government (1970-1974), then a Labour administration

(1974-1979), and finally the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979. The Conservative government in 1973 had opposed Allende's government, and the British ambassador to Chile was even given instructions not to shelter Chileans seeking help at the embassy (**Perry, 2021**). However, with the new Labour government in 1974, there was the implementation of a foreign policy that included an arms embargo against Chile and a refugee programme for those fleeing the dictatorship (**Livingstone, 2018: 2**). These policies were overturned following Thatcher's election in 1979, with the former Prime Minister later referring to Pinochet as a 'friend of Britain' (**Livingstone, 2018: 2**). The digitised collection, which included material related to the World University Service, also provided an insight into the role of academia in the reception of Chilean refugees. Previously, this was not an aspect I had researched as I had paid greater attention to the debates within the UK government and protest groups such as the Chilean Solidarity Campaign. As a result of further research, it was revelatory to learn about the role of academics and universities in the UK in allowing Chilean students to leave Chile. The Chilean regime interfered in academia through the appointing of academic authorities and intervening in research and grants (**Perry, 2021**). These issues in the academic sphere led to the establishment of the WUS (UK) Chile Scholarship programme in 1974 which helped 900 students over a ten-year period (**World University Service, 1986: 4**). The collection also demonstrated that concerns with the plight of Chileans were not limited to UK cities, but also existed within smaller towns. One of the most enlightening documents was an 'Appeal for help on behalf of Chilean refugees in Leamington' which was about fundraising for Chilean refugee families who were living in the town (**Leamington Chilean Refugee Committee, 1978**). Although the significance of this document to understanding the response in the UK was perhaps not fully appreciated by the EUTOPIA students in other countries, it was a revelation for me. I was intrigued that the UK response to the *coup* was not limited to large cities as so often happens with global events. It demonstrated the importance of the MRC as a source of information on local, as well as national and international history.

The research I undertook as part of this project was certainly not comprehensive, but it was an opportunity to be guided by archival material, which was not something I had experienced previously as an undergraduate student. The main focus of the presentation that I gave to the other EUTOPIA students, and the blog post that I wrote for the Legal History CoLeCo online exhibition, was on the use of these sources (**Belcher, 2023**). A significant benefit for students using the MRC online 'Chile Solidarity' collection is that it is a relatively small, digitised collection. A first-year undergraduate student might feel intimidated by archival collections due to a lack of experience but the digital access to material

that the Modern Records Centre provides, takes away that concern. An advantage of the digital collection for my research was that, even outside of term time, it was possible to access the material I required to work on my research. The manageable size of the digitised collection was another positive and that meant I was not overwhelmed by the number of sources on the topic. There were documents from a number of sources on the topic of 'Chile Solidarity', from trade unions to campaigning groups, but not so many that that an undergraduate would become burdened by trying to sort through them under the time constraints imposed by the requirements of their degree. I was consequently able to share the work I completed with other students in the EUTOPIA community, and hopefully inspire some of them to consider the benefits of looking at collections such as those of the Modern Records Centre (**ibid**). The experience I gained through participating in the EUTOPIA project and using archival material has had a positive impact on the rest of my studies as I am now more confident when using archives. Consulting the MRC digital collection has been an invaluable learning experience and I hope to continue to use these skills as I move through my degree.

Attending the 'The MRC at 50' celebratory symposium was a challenging but important opportunity. It allowed me to share the perspective of an undergraduate student with little experience of using the Modern Records Centre, and to highlight the benefits of digitised collections. The chance to reflect on my experience of using the centre has been valuable for considering how I can use my newly acquired skills moving forward in my degree. The opportunity also demonstrated the breadth of the records that the centre holds, from the National Cycle Archive to the Amnesty International Archive and, of course, the World University Service Collection.

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Nia Belcher is an undergraduate student in the Department of History at the University of Warwick. She has participated in the EUTOPIA Legal History Connected Learning Community (CoLeCo) in 2022-23 and 2023-24.



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Modern Records Centre

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