

# The Modern Records Centre's Chile Collections as a Space for Memory and Recognition

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## Abstract

Exiles occupy a marginal status within the field of Transitional Justice. Chileans who fled the Pinochet dictatorship have had limited access to public and official platforms to share their experiences. The MRC's efforts in gathering, digitizing and disseminating materials relating to Chilean exile demonstrate how non-state and international archives can provide alternative and meaningful pathways for acknowledgment and symbolic redress.

**Keywords:** exile; Chile; archives; memory; transitional justice

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## Introduction

Through this short survey of the Warwick Modern Records Centre's (MRC) Chile collections, its related public engagement work, and our own related research, we suggest that archives may be viewed as spaces for memory and recognition. Our research on Chilean exiles in the United Kingdom has highlighted the importance of the MRC collections beyond the immediate UK context. Exiles often have a marginalized status within formal Transitional Justice processes. Within Chile, official archives have been largely used as evidence to develop formal Transitional Justice mechanisms, mostly recognizing and documenting human rights abuses committed by the Pinochet Regime, such as forced disappearances, executions, and torture. Exiles may be acknowledged as witnesses of human rights crimes, but there is a certain hierarchical logic to victim recognition that has resulted in less attention being paid to exile. The Pinochet regime was keen to suggest that refugees lived a 'golden exile' (Sznadjer and Roniger, 2019; Wright and Oñate Zúñiga, 2007), minimizing the upheavals of forced expulsion from Chile and thus victims' experiences of trauma and suffering. For some, exile may also involve a sense of 'survivor guilt'. Finally, exiles are frequently marginalized by the state-centred approach prevailing in Transitional Justice, whereby redress is believed best articulated in the territory where abuses were committed.<sup>i</sup> The work of the MRC in collecting, digitizing and disseminating materials relating to Chilean exile, as well as its involvement in exhibitions related to resistance in Chile, demonstrates the extent to which non-state and international archives may create spaces for memory which articulate individual historical experiences and offer routes towards their due recognition.

## The MRC's Chile Collections

The MRC holds several collections of relevance to Chileans' lived experience of repression and exile. It houses the archive of the UK office of World University Service (WUS), thanks to the late Dr Alan Phillips.<sup>ii</sup> WUS was centrally involved in providing support and educational opportunities to Chilean scholars and students tortured, imprisoned, and expelled from their country in the years after the 1973 coup d'état. Within special collections such as the Margaret Stanton Papers and the wider collections relating to trade unions is a significant amount of material relating to the various UK-based solidarity campaigns in support of persecuted Chileans. With funding from the Institute for Advanced Study at Warwick, the MRC digitized portions of this material and made it available globally, including to important Chilean institutions such as the Museum of Memory and Human Rights in Santiago, which lacks strong documentary evidence of the international support for Chilean resistance to the coup (see **Figure 1**).<sup>iii</sup>

This collaborative exchange helps to combat the vulnerability of memory archives in post-dictatorship contexts and underscores the importance of collections with an international focus. What, for us in the UK, might seem familiar sources are valuable to our partners overseas, and the MRC holdings help to fill gaps in Chilean institutional memory in the wake of repression.

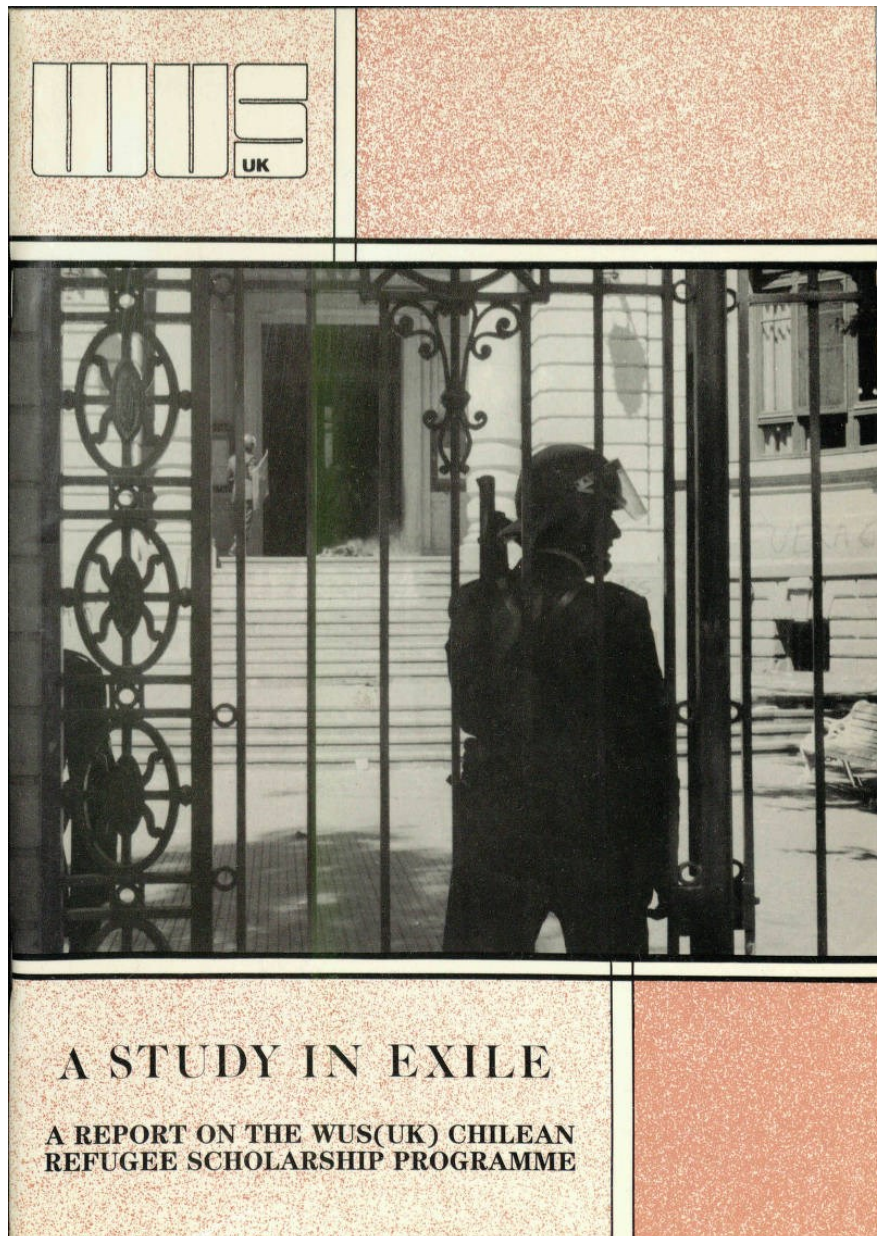
Figure 1: Chile Solidarity Campaign briefing pack, MRC (601/R/24/70).



The MRC's WUS papers consist largely of reports and official papers, and as such they are a vital supplementary resource to the Home Office records regarding Chilean refugees held in the National Archives at Kew Gardens. They also complement the Refugee Council Archive at the University of East London. The MRC's WUS holdings evidence the changing role of refugee support work within the political and social context of late-twentieth-century Britain. They include measures to support refugees' settlement in new communities, educational grants and course completions statistics, and a comprehensive 1986 report, titled *A Study in Exile* (see Figure 2), which reviewed the WUS Chile programme.<sup>iv</sup> These documents provide vital context for our current oral history project on first- and second-generation Chilean experiences of exile in the UK.<sup>v</sup> Nevertheless, there are limitations to archives such as that of WUS when it comes understanding the experience of repression and exile. Personal files relating to the individuals supported by WUS were, with a few exceptions, not offered for deposit. Some former refugees, who often may still not be aware of the precise mechanisms by which their lives were saved through the provision of visas to the UK, would like to fill gaps in

their individual stories, but are unable to locate the relevant documents.<sup>vi</sup> We are thus delighted that our oral history of Chilean exile in the UK will in due course become part of the MRC collection. This not only secures information on the lived experience of forced displacement and settlement for future researchers and the public, but more importantly validates both the individual experiences of those who contributed interviews and a wider focus on informal and diverse routes for redress.

*Figure 2: World University Service report, A Study in Exile (MRC 717/CH/6/1/9)*



## **From Individual and Collective Experiences to Exile Agency**

Contrary to the denunciatory objectives of most official archives of dictatorship-era abuses amassed in Chile, which have focused on gathering empirical evidence of human rights violations, our research explores the long-term emotional impact of forced exile on victims' everyday lives. Transitional Justice often has recourse to the power of storytelling as a form of reparation (Hackett and Rolston, 2009; Clark, 2022). Hence, Slaughter (1997) has argued that the 'voice' should be a central focus in international human rights law. However, storytelling has largely been restricted to specific questions that have consigned to the margins more complex stories, notably a lack of questioning regarding survivors' feelings in Transitional Justice processes. As Clark notes, the emotional legacies of human rights abuses are thus often neglected in Transitional Justice, and we need storytelling spaces which facilitate the articulation of more complex and even 'messy' stories (Clark, 2022). We have thus strived to view our project interviews as conversations and emotional encounters rather than moments for fact-finding. By attending to exiles' own reflexivity about the passage of time, given that our interviews were in many cases conducted fifty years after the Chilean coup and resulting territorial displacement, we can begin to move from the micro data of individual stories to the construction of a meso-level narrative about memory, emotion and informal redress through archive-building. This opens up the possibility of a form of Transitional Justice from below since, in the absence of formal state processes, it permits individual pathways towards recognition and offers interviewees the agency to forge their own mechanisms of repair. The construction of an oral archive, and its conservation in the MRC, can begin to provide an alternative form of recognition which is not shaped by top-down Transitional Justice structures, but emerges from the voices of those who tell their stories within it.

## **Public Engagement as Recognition**

The MRC has supported two public exhibitions on Chilean exile. The first, *Crafting Resistance: The Art of Chilean Political Prisoners*, organized by former refugee and WUS scholar Gloria Miqueles with Prof. Jasmine Gideon of Birkbeck, University of London, ran in October and November 2017 and focused on craftwork and objects created by prisoners while in detention in Chile (see Figures 3-5). The exhibition's central concern was to challenge the image of prisoners as 'passive victims' and demonstrate how individuals retained a 'degree of agency despite the horrific circumstances' in which they found themselves.<sup>vii</sup> This craftwork, loaned by the Chilean community in the UK, provides important evidence of strategies for supporting mental health and wellbeing during traumatic

experiences. The show created strong emotional resonances among those who viewed it and raised awareness of the story of Chilean refugees with a UK public. Visitors were impressed by the power of the exhibits as evidence of resistance to suffering, and their ability to convey how, in the worst of circumstances, people access their ability to be creative. For MRC archivist Liz Wood, who facilitated the exhibition, ‘the help that I was able to provide during the ‘Crafting Resistance’ project is something that I am most proud of in my working life’. Offering delayed recognition of the hardships Chileans suffered, she expressed the hope that the MRC display ‘showed a continuation of some of the solidarity that they received from WUS and other quarters when they were able to leave Chile’.

*Figure 3: Santiago Bell, Cristo Inconcluso (wood)  
(Reproduced with permission from Jimmy Bell; photograph Tennysons’ Photography).*



Figure 4: *Crafting Resistance: Collection of Badges belonging to Hernando Fernández-Canque, with jeans worn by Sheila Cassidy in the foreground.*  
(Reproduced with permission from Hernando Fernández-Canque; photograph Tennison's Photography).



Figure 5: *Crafting Resistance: Blouses by Cristina Zamora (foreground) and Gloria Miqueles (background).*  
(Reproduced with permission from Cristina Zamora and Gloria Miqueles; photograph Tennison's Photography).



The second MRC exhibition, *Chile 50 Years On: Solidarity and Resistance*, was held in 2023 to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the military coup in Chile and displayed important documents and posters from the MRC's collections. This show, curated by MRC archivist Naomi Shewan, was organized in conjunction with a seminar on Chilean memories of resistance which brought together first-generation Chilean exiles in the UK, second-generation children of former refugees and social actors responsible for supporting both the Chilean refugee effort in the 1970s and 80s and refugees in the UK today. This combined initiative was aimed at ensuring that, despite the passage of time, the Chilean exile story continues to be heard by new audiences and, in addition, that it is framed intergenerationally. Through its exhibition work, the MRC acts as a nodal point for communities who have a conflicted relationship with their own nation state.

## Conclusion

Archives are much more than repositories of documents, and the MRC's Chile collections illustrate the extent to which they can be living spaces of memory and recognition. Transitional Justice mechanisms often focus only on actions within the national territory where human rights abuses occurred. Non-state repositories can supplement this by offering meaningful routes towards recognition and symbolic redress. They can support activities that deepen and extend the social and intergenerational reach of understanding and reveal the agency of victims as actors in their own work towards reparation.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> The recent Colombian Truth Commission is an exception in this regard, devoting a portion of its work to refugees and exiles from violence; see <https://comisiondelaverdad.co> [Accessed: 15 February 2024].

<sup>ii</sup> Phillips was a Physics alumnus of the university who went on to be General Secretary of WUS(UK) during the period when it was most involved in assisting Chilean refugees. More information on WUS(UK) is available at its centenary website: <https://wus.org.uk> [accessed 9 February 2024].

<sup>iii</sup> See <https://wdc.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/chile> [Accessed: 9 February 2024].

<sup>iv</sup> Online at: <https://wdc.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/chile/id/1045/rec/3> [Accessed: 23 February 2024].

<sup>v</sup> The project, 'Voices of Humanitarianism: British Responses to Refugees from Chile', was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. It involved 58 interviews. The data gathering phase was conducted in 2022 in both the UK and Chile.

<sup>vi</sup> Confidential files that have been deposited are currently open only to the named individuals to whom they relate and can be consulted by special request.

<sup>vii</sup> Exhibition notes, *Crafting Resistance: The Art of Chilean Political Prisoners*, Modern Records Centre, 30 October-17 November 2017.