

'Foreigners of this Kind': Chilean Refugees in Ireland, 1973-1990

By Claire Healy



Patio 29, a mass grave in Santiago de Chile's main cemetery (2006). Forensic examiners in the 1990s found 126 bodies buried in Patio 29's unnamed plots
(AP Photo/Santiago Llanquín)

In the midst of 1970s Ireland, a country considered homogenous and mono-cultural, a small group of South Americans made their home, under a United Nations-sponsored programme of resettlement. Long before the era of mass migration to the country, beginning in the 1990s, but long after the first migrants sought refuge in Ireland in the seventeenth century, Chileans fleeing the aftermath of the Pinochet coup travelled to the island. This article examines the background to the settlement, the circumstances of their arrival, and the consequences of the move.

The first significant group of refugees to seek asylum in Ireland were the French Huguenots. Over 200,000 Huguenots left France in the late seventeenth century in the wake of widespread persecution and the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, which had granted them religious liberty. About 10,000 settled in Ireland, while 50,000 settled in England, and these French Protestants are said to have coined the term 'refugee' in the English language. These forced migrants gradually settled in the country, learned the language and intermarried with the Irish population.

Just two decades later, in 1709, the Irish House of Commons authorised the settlement of Protestant Palatines in Ireland. The Palatines were fleeing the conflict with the French in their homeland in the Palatinate (Pfalz) in present-day Germany. Over 3,000 Palatines moved to Ireland in that year, the majority of whom settled on the estate of Lord Thomas Southwell in Rathkeale, County Limerick. Similarly to the group of Chilean refugees who settled in Ireland over 250 years later, over half of the Palatine refugees were dissatisfied with the refuge provided in Ireland and re-emigrated to North America.

Few migrants sought refuge in Ireland during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and in the aftermath of the Second World War, the Irish government was reluctant to accept European refugees. The

Department of Justice particularly opposed the resettlement of Jewish refugees in the state. [1] In 1956, Ireland acceded to the Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, which had been ratified by the United Nations in 1951. The policy of accepting programme refugees in Ireland, despite its initial limited scope, was conceived of as an international response to crisis situations. The Convention defined a refugee as any person who,

owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. [2]



Residents Against Racism (RAR) protest in Dublin, 2005 (Indymedia)

Under the terms of the 1951 Convention, this was to apply only to European people who were refugees because of events that had taken place prior to 1951.

The same year that Ireland signed up to the Convention, a group of 530 Hungarian refugees fleeing the Soviet invasion of Hungary were accepted into the country and accommodated in an army camp in Knockalisheen, County Clare. Many more Hungarian refugees received asylum in other European countries, and, curiously, also in Chile. [3] The Irish government made scant provision for their resettlement, beyond providing accommodation, food and 'pocket money,' [4] and considered their residence in Ireland to be temporary. Like the Palatines before them, the vast majority of the Hungarians in Ireland ultimately resettled in the USA and Canada. In 1966, the Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees extended the right to seek asylum to all nationalities, without geographical or chronological limitations. [5] However, there was no significant refugee migration to Ireland until the 1970s.

On the eve of Salvador Allende's ascent to power in Chile in 1970, the country was beset by chronic economic difficulties such as inflation and unequal income distribution. During his time in power, Allende implemented a policy known as 'la vía chilena al socialismo' involving the nationalisation of certain industries, reform of the healthcare system, agrarian reform and the redistribution of farms, and a programme of free milk for children. A visit by Cuban dictator Fidel Castro to Chile in late 1971 and rampant inflation in 1972 elicited domestic and international criticism for Allende's administration. This was compounded by a series of industrial strikes and a fall in exports. In June 1973, a tank regiment led by Colonel Roberto Souper led a violent but unsuccessful coup attempt. In August of the same year, the Chilean Chamber of Deputies accused the Allende administration of unconstitutional acts and encouraged the military leadership to reinstate the constitutional order.

On 11 September 1973, the Chilean military led by Commander-in-Chief Augusto Pinochet overthrew Salvador Allende's socialist government. Allende made his final radio speech to the people at eleven o'clock that morning, concluding with the words:

¡¡Viva Chile!! ¡¡Viva el pueblo!! ¡¡Vivan los trabajadores!! Estas son mis últimas palabras y

tengo la certeza de que mi sacrificio no será en vano. Tengo la certeza de que por lo menos será una lección moral que castigará la felonía, la cobardía y la traición. [6]

A short time later, Allende died in the presidential palace, 'La Moneda,' which was bombed and burnt to the ground. [7] The Congress was dissolved and the National Stadium converted into a concentration camp for thousands of prisoners. All political activity was declared 'in recess.' [8] The coup initiated a spate of kidnapping, detention, torture and killing of Chileans by the state. Because of the secrecy surrounding such activities, and the fact that the locations of bodies were frequently concealed from their families, victims of this state terror became known as 'detenidos-desaparecidos (detained-disappeared).' [9]

As news of the coup in Chile reached the Republic of Ireland, a group of Irish people formed to lobby for the acceptance of a quota of refugees from the South American country. The group had the support of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, who was then encouraging governments all over the world to accept those seeking refuge from the fallout of Pinochet's coup. Ireland and Luxembourg were the only



Cuban postage stamp commemorating Allende's death
(www.en.wikipedia.org)

remaining members of the European Union that had not accepted Chilean refugees. Local support was also provided by Amnesty International and the Irish Order of the Franciscans. The Irish government of the time agreed to admit just twelve families under a special programme for refugees. The requests of Chileans for refuge were to be granted on the basis that they would otherwise have been imprisoned or suffered human rights violations because of their political beliefs. [10] Unlike the Hungarians in 1956, the Chileans were to be considered permanent settlers rather than temporary refugees. [11]

Unfortunately, relatively little is known about this group, as some of the files relating to the incident have been mislaid in government archives. [12] The one file that does remain originated in the Department of the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) and was released to the public in 2005. It is entitled 'Resettlement in Ireland of refugees from Chile' and is dated February to April 1974. Although a government memorandum indicated support for the project from all departments, the Fine Gael T.D. (member of parliament) and Minister for Justice Patrick Cooney voiced his reservations in relation to the settlement of the Chileans, stating that Ireland was not as 'cosmopolitan' as other Western European countries and that 'the absorption of even a limited number of foreigners of this kind could prove extremely difficult.' [13] Cooney substantiated his views by referring to the previous resettlement of Hungarian refugees in Ireland, claiming that they had 'failed to settle down' and had eventually re-emigrated to other countries. [14]

The most significant reason for the minister's reluctance, however, is revealed in the same letter, where Cooney stated that most or all of the group were refugees because they were Marxists, and that a significant proportion were 'activists.' He feared that they would engage in political agitation soon after their arrival in Ireland; 'they will not change their outlook on arrival in this country.' [15] He suggested that such left-wing activists would pose a far greater problem for Ireland than for other Western European countries because of the existence in Ireland of 'a relatively large and well-organised subversive group towards whom such persons could be expected to gravitate.' [16] Cooney proposed some form of screening programme to

vet potential refugees. [17] This forced migration of refugees from Chile to Ireland was further complicated by Cooney's suggestion that some of the refugees were in fact non-Chileans who had sought refuge in Chile because it had a communist president. [18]

The Irish state played a minimal role in facilitating their settlement in the country, and for security reasons, the event received muted publicity due to the danger of releasing their names to the Chilean media. The resettlement was privately financed by the Committee for Chilean Refugees in Ireland and by religious groups. [19] The Chileans who had arrived seeking refuge in Ireland were housed in local authority houses in Shannon, County Clare, and in Galway and Waterford, and were allocated places on AnCo training schemes. [20] Many received training in metalwork. [21] After two years, the Committee for Chilean Refugees in Ireland ceased to provide direct aid to the community, ostensibly to promote personal autonomy. [22] It was only in 1977, three years after the arrival of the group in Ireland, that provisions were made for teaching the English language to adult refugees, and even at that stage, only two hours' tuition per week were provided. [23]

In response to a parliamentary question in early 1977, a representative for the then Minister for Foreign Affairs, Garret FitzGerald, stated that the minister 'maintained an active interest in the welfare of the Chilean refugees in Ireland and the efforts made on their behalf.' [24] At that time, there were twenty-three Chilean heads of family living in Ireland; a total of ninety-four people. However, the representative underlined the fact that the Department of Foreign Affairs was not directly involved in providing assistance to the Chileans. Local and national authorities were providing assistance to the group and 'considerable progress has been made towards their integration here.' Nevertheless, three years after their arrival in Ireland, the Chileans who had settled in Galway were reported to be experiencing continuing difficulties in finding suitable employment. [25]



Protest against deportation by Chilean refugees in Canada, 1998
(*Gunther Gamper*)

Little is known about the daily lives and achievements of the group during their residence in Ireland. Some are known to have continued third-level studies at Trinity College in Dublin. [26] One Chilean refugee, Maite Deiber, whose husband had been arrested and 'disappeared' during the unrest in Chile, went on to become conductor of the Trinity College Singers in Dublin in 1978. [27] Very few of the 120 or so Chilean refugees who arrived in Ireland in the early 1970s remain in the country. They experienced serious difficulties in finding employment in Ireland due to a lack of targeted language or training programmes to facilitate their integration into the labour market. [28] In the late 1980s, the Chilean government announced an amnesty for Chileans abroad who had been exiled by the coup, and many of the refugees returned.



Chilean Ambassador Alberto Yoacham presents the 'Pablo Neruda Medal of Honour' to the Irish rock star Bono, for his contribution to music and humanitarian causes, 23 September 2004 (AP photo/ John Cogill)

Relations between Ireland and Chile are naturally influenced by the activities of Irish migrants in the region during the nineteenth century. While the most significant migration of the twentieth century between the two countries was the small-scale movement of programme refugees between Santiago and Dublin during the 1970s, during the twenty-first century Ireland is likely to be the destination for many more Chilean immigrants. On being awarded an *Honoris Causa* Doctorate by the University of Chile in 2004, the Irish President Mary McAleese commented on the continuing potential for cooperation between the Republics of Ireland and Chile: 'No es casual que Bernardo O'Higgins sea conocido como El Libertador. Estuvo entregado al espíritu de la libertad iluminada. Es mi convencimiento que Irlanda [...] cuenta con un socio legítimo en la República de Chile, con el cual estamos destinados a trabajar más estrechamente a fin de propagar aún más los frutos de ese espíritu de libertad a lo largo de América Latina y el mundo.' [29]

However, aside from the resettlement project in 1974, from the 1960s to date, Irish governments have remained remarkably silent in relation to dirty wars and 'disappearances' in Latin America, in contrast to many of the country's European neighbours. Although many victims of forced disappearances in Chile and Argentina had Irish names, - and therefore obvious Irish ancestry - diplomatic and consular services consistently refused to get involved. [30]

Most of the Chileans living in Ireland today are on short-term work permits or have married Irish people and settled here. In 2002, there were a total of eight Chileans working in Ireland on work permits and one Chilean architect on a work authorisation issued by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. By 2004, this number had increased to twenty Chileans on permits and two professionals on authorisations, and further increased to twenty-four Chileans working in Ireland on work permits and one engineer on an authorisation in 2005. In 2006, however, just five work permits for Chileans were renewed, and six new permits and one authorisation were issued. [31]

Trade between Ireland and Chile has been growing significantly, and was valued at just under 74 million in 2002, a fourfold increase since 1990. Ireland is represented in Chile by an honorary consul, and general diplomatic representation is handled by the Irish embassy in Argentina. The Embassy of Chile in Ireland opened on 1 July 2002, and in October of the same year, the first ever resident Chilean ambassador in Dublin, Alberto Yoacham, presented his credentials to the President of Ireland.

In the years that followed the settlement of the Chilean refugees, many more people arrived in Ireland seeking refuge under UNHCR programmes, including Vietnamese (1979-2000), Iranian (1985), Bosnian (1992-2000) and Kosovar (1999) people in search of safety and freedom from persecution. Ireland is one of only seventeen countries in the world with a programme of refugee resettlement. In mid-2005, the Irish Minister for Justice announced that Ireland was to significantly increase its annual refugee resettlement quota from 10 cases - equating to about forty people - to 200 people per year. In light of the fact that Ireland recognised 966 asylum seekers as



Romanian refugees in Ireland, 2001 (<http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2001>)

refugees and received about 70,000 immigrants during 2005 alone, [32] the resettlement quota remains modest. The implementation of further increases, however, seem likely, as Ireland continues to adapt and develop its policies for the settlement of those who seek refuge on the island.

The twentieth-century settlement of refugees, and indeed other immigrants, in Ireland is a topic that has thus far received little attention in the field of academic research. This is despite the implications of Ireland's history of immigration for the future of the country. The examination of the small-scale settlement of these South Americans seeking refuge in the country may prove informative with regard to future resettlement projects, and sheds light on a little known connection between Ireland and Chile.

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Notes

[1] Ward, Eilís, 'Ireland and refugees/asylum seekers: 1922-1966' in: Lentin, Ronit (ed.). *The Expanding Nation: Towards a Multi-Ethnic Ireland: Proceedings of a Conference Held in Trinity College Dublin* (Vol. I. Dublin: The Irish Times, 1998), 41.

[2] Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, adopted 28 July 1951 by the United Nations Conference of Plenipotentiaries on the Status of Refugees and Stateless Persons convened under General Assembly resolution 429 (V) of 14 December 1950. Ch. 1, art. 1, A (2).

[3] UNHCR Records of the Central Registry, 20/HUN/IRE Statistics - Hungarian refugees in Ireland 3 April 1957; 20/HUN/CHILE Statistics - Hungarian refugees in Chile 30 December 1958.

[4] Ward, 'Ireland and refugees/asylum seekers,' 41.

[5] Protocol relating the Status of Refugees, adopted by the General Assembly in resolution 2198 (XXI) of 16 December 1966. Art. 1 (2-3).

[6] 'Long live Chile!! Long live the people!! Long live the workers!! These are my final words and I am certain that my sacrifice will not be in vain. I am certain that this will at least be a moral lesson that will serve to punish treachery, cowardice and betrayal.' Allende Gossens, Salvador, 'Mensaje al país' (Santiago: Biblioteca Nacional de Chile, 1973). Available at: <http://www.memoriachilena.cl/mChilena01/temas/dest.asp?id=allendemensajelpais> (accessed 13 September 2006).

[7] Memoria Chilena, 'Bombardeo del Palacio de la Moneda' (Santiago: Biblioteca Nacional de Chile, n.y.). Available at: <http://www.memoriachilena.cl/mChilena01/temas/dest.asp?id=allendepalacio> (accessed 13 September 2006).

[8] Adapted from: 'Chilean Coup of 1973' in *Wikipedia - the free encyclopedia* on http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chilean_coup_of_1973 (accessed 1 August 2006).

[9] Bachelet, Michelle, 'Declaración del Día Nacional del Detenido Desaparecido' (Palacio La Moneda, Santiago, 30 August 2006). Broadcast available at: <http://www.presidencia.cl/> (accessed 13 September 2006).

[10] 'Chilean Political Refugees' in: *Dáil Éireann*. Questions. Oral Answers. Vol. 296 (27 January 1977).

- [11] O'Doherty, Caroline. 'Chilean Refugees Feared as Communists.' *The Irish Examiner* (3 January 2005).
- [12] Ward, 'Ireland and refugees/asylum seekers,' 41.
- [13] 'Resettlement in Ireland of Refugees from Chile' (February - April 1974) National Archives of Ireland, 2005/7/445, S 19123.
- [14] O'Doherty, 'Chilean Refugees Feared as Communists.'
- [15] 'Resettlement of Refugees Raised Deep Security Fears.' *The Irish Independent* (3 January 2005).
- [16] Maguire, Siobhan, "Marxist" Chileans Denied Asylum.' *The Times* (London, 2 January 2005). Cooney is referring here to the Irish Republican Army (IRA).
- [17] 'Resettlement in Ireland of Refugees from Chile,' (NAI).
- [18] Maguire, "Marxist" Chileans Denied Asylum.'
- [19] Ward, 'Ireland and refugees/asylum seekers,' 43.
- [20] AnCo was the precursor to FÁS, the Irish state's training and employment authority.
- [21] Fanning, Bryan, Steven Loyal and Ciarán Staunton. *Asylum Seekers and the Right to Work in Ireland* (Research on behalf of the Irish Refugee Council, Funded by the Combat Poverty Agency Dublin, July 2000), 74.
- [22] Ward, 'Ireland and refugees/asylum seekers,' 43.
- [23] Nolan, G., 'The Education of Refugee Children' (Unpublished M.Ed. thesis. Dublin University College Dublin, 1997), 90.
- [24] 'Chilean Political Refugees' in: *Dáil Éireann Questions*.
- [25] *Ibid.*
- [26] *Ibid.*
- [27] <http://societies.csc.tcd.ie/~singers/conductor/conductor.html> (accessed 1 August 2006).
- [28] Ward, 'Ireland and refugees/asylum seekers,' 43.
- [29] 'It is not for nothing that Bernardo O'Higgins is known as The Liberator. He was dedicated to the spirit of enlightened liberty. It is my belief that Ireland [...] has a genuine partner in the Republic of Chile, with whom we are destined to work ever more closely in order to disseminate the fruits of that spirit of freedom ever more widely throughout Latin America and the world.' 'Address by the President of Ireland, Mary McAleese at the University of Chile,' (22 March 2004).
- [30] Thanks to Edmundo Murray for his comments on this subject.

[31] Irish Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. *Work Permit Statistics* (2006). <http://www.entemp.ie/labour/workpermits/statistics.htm> (accessed 17 July 2006); *Ibid.*, 'Working Visas and Work Authorisations' 2000-2006. Private correspondence with DETE.

[32] Irish Refugee Council, 'Irish Asylum Statistics' (July 2006); Quinn, Emma. *Policy Analysis Report on Asylum and Migration: Ireland Mid-2004 to 2005* (edited by European Migration Network, Dublin: European Commission DGJFS and DJELR Ireland, 2006), 5. Statistics recently released by the Central Statistics Office in Dublin show that immigration during the year ending April 2006 increased further, to 86,900 people. Central Statistics Office, 'Population and Migration Estimates, April 2006' (Dublin: CSO, Sept. 2006).

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