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UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON PROFESSOR WRITES BOOK ON CHILE DURING AUGUSTO PINOCHET REGIME

DAYTON, Ohio — When choosing a topic for their book, some writers are impelled by intellectual curiosity, others by creative whimsy. Then there are those fueled by fury.

Mark Ensalaco falls into the last category.

Ensalaco, an associate professor of political science at the University of Dayton, was in Chile in 1991 when 128 civilian bodies in 108 coffins were unearthed — alleged victims of former dictator Augusto Pinochet’s regime. Some, obviously, were buried two to a coffin.

“When Gen. Pinochet was asked about the bodies, he smiled and quipped, ‘How very economical.’ This is the type of cruel, sadistic and cynical man we’re dealing with,” recalls Ensalaco, author of the just-released book Chile Under Pinochet: Recovering the Truth (University of Pennsylvania Press, $45). The book can be ordered at amazon.com

Already in Chile and conducting research on the country’s transition to a democracy and the National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation — formed to provide an account of human rights violations committed by the Pinochet regime — Ensalaco switched gears. He would still write about this Latin American country’s political process and the human rights organization, but the book’s main focus would be on Pinochet’s reign (1973-95).

“I realized then that a book about Chile’s negotiated return to democratic rule would not be complete without examining the human rights atrocities committed during the Pinochet dictatorship,” explains Ensalaco, director of the international studies and human rights studies programs at the University of Dayton.

After further research, he also realized that a complete account of the Pinochet regime in English, and available to students, scholars and the general reader, had never been written.

“I wrote the book with the conviction that students of Chilean history, Latin American politics, political violence and human rights would benefit from a book about a tragic phase in the history of this important Latin American nation,” says Ensalaco, who also serves as

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executive director of the Inter-American Forum of Human Rights-USA, a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization dedicated to human rights in South America.

The 83-year-old Pinochet was thrust into the international spotlight last year when he was arrested while vacationing in London, after a Spanish judge filed charges against him for torturing political opponents during his rule. Pinochet's attorneys are appealing a recent ruling by a London magistrate that he be extradited to Spain to face the charges.

As does Ensalaco throughout his book, international human rights organizations and Chilean citizens maintain that Pinochet was complicit in the "enforced disappearance" of thousands of Chileans and an unknown number of foreign nationals.

For his research, Ensalaco heavily relied on documented records, mostly from human rights organizations such as the truth and reconciliation commission, Amnesty International and the United Nations Human Rights Commission. Testimony in U.S. congressional hearings and Pinochet's own memoirs also were resources for the book.

Then there were the interviews of victims and family members of victims ("... whom, of course, are also victims of Pinochet," Ensalaco reminds).

He will forever recall a meeting with Sola Sierra, whose husband, a high-ranking political opponent of Pinochet, disappeared in 1976. Sierra, who passed away in June, was president of the Association of the Families of the Detained and Disappeared.

"Sola Sierra put a human face on the tragedy," Ensalaco says."She told me that she would imagine seeing her husband walking down the street, even though she knew rationally that he was dead. She also said it was common for the victims' families, even after years, to still lay out their clothes and set a plate for them at Christmas. 'This is the anguish of absence,' she told me."

While the Pinochet regime is not nearly world history's most ruthless — "In terms of sheer numbers, it's small scale." — Ensalaco says, it makes for an edifying case study of how dictatorships are created, perpetuated and, ultimately, overthrown.

"I wanted to give the reader an understanding of how repressive regimes function," Ensalaco says. "This is an anatomy of how repression actually happens, how it unfolds — and its deliberate campaign of terror. I tell how it happened, who's responsible and who has suffered."

Ensalaco also hopes the reader will understand how political polarization can lead to coups, such as the one orchestrated by the Chilean military in 1973.

"What the (Pinochet) military did was unconstitutional and reprehensible," Ensalaco says. "But I'm also critical of the government of President Salvador Allende (the leader overthrown during the coup). It's a fact that certain leftist groups under his leadership were also - more -