

1979

## Fernando Alegría's *The Chilean Spring*

Victor M. Valenzuela

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### Citas recomendadas

Valenzuela, Victor M. (Primavera 1979) "Fernando Alegría's *The Chilean Spring*," *Inti: Revista de literatura hispánica*: No. 9, Article 16.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.providence.edu/inti/vol1/iss9/16>

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Fernando Alegría. *The Chilean Spring*. Translated by Stephen Fredman. Pittsburgh. Latin American Literary Review Press. 1980. 160 pp.

The military coup which overthrew the Allende Government in Chile in 1973 cannot be ignored nor forgotten. Of the many novels which have been written about, *The Chilean Spring* (El Paso de los Gansos) stands out as the most accurate in depicting in a documentary style the human and political happenings of those days.

In this work Fernando Alegría, an outstanding Chilean novelist and poet who was in Chile at that time, has condensed the destruction of a traditionally democratic small nation, the assassination of its legally elected president and the imposition of terror, fear and death on thousands of its citizens. No one could believe that this could happen in Chile. «The experts» writes Alegría, «wanted to believe that they (the USA) would never grossly intervene in a country such as Chile. But, how can our country stop them? Can one halt the beast by brandishing one's history, prestige and pride?» (p. 105). But it was done. «The multinationals and their allies within the Chilean oligarchy unleashed a virulent policy of economic destabilization and terrorism» (p. 2), says Alegría. Add to this fact, continues the author, that the monied reactionaries who sabotaged Allende; they didn't plant their farms, they bought dollars and hid them, closed their factories and their businesses, went on strike at the hospitals and the courts and, with the Supreme Court in the forefront, protected the most tightly run terrorist movement in the world, while *El mercurio* defended them and spoke well of the Americans who closed all source of credit to Allende outside Chile.» (p. 110).

The protagonist of *The Chilean Spring* is Cristian Montealegre, a photographer, who was shot while he was in Santiago because he was accused of conspiring against the military junta. He left letters and a diary which, according to the author, he received «directly from his mother» and which Alegría uses as a basis for *The Chilean Spring*. It is through these fictionalized documents that the author is able to provide a variety of perspectives and to encompass in depth the historical and human reality of the events that took place during and immediately after the coup. What is described in this novel seems to be a series of nightmares, since it is difficult to believe that these events did, in reality, take place during those horrible days. «I must write these lines,» says Cristian, «without hate. What happened is a great misfortune, but I refuse to judge anyone. The details will be known and history will arrange them» (p. 64). Some of the details to which Cristian refers are: «On the road to San Antonio striking truckers hide in the bushes counting their buckshot and setting their nail traps; commandos who blow up the pipelines and the high

voltage towers take position and aim» (p. 28). «Two truckloads of soldiers were blown up with sticks of dynamite thrown from a building» (p. 13). «Through the camera, while taking a shot, I watch a man fall. Some kids try to help him, but there is nothing they can do. An ambulance comes, but when they see he's dead, they leave» (p. 9). Also, to these horrors add the daily killings and torturing in the National Stadium, or the clubbing of the singer Victor Jara in the face with a gun butt while later soldiers cut off his hands and kill him.

«I shrunk from the violence of those days» writes Cristian, «and the concealed cruelty of those nights. In the morning a few bodies would be found in the middle of the block, on some roof or next to the curb, usually in places where they would be noticed». And he adds «Marcelo and I went to the morgue and took some pictures, awful scenes fixed in a chilling instant. The relatives would show up in black, stare at the lists in terror, hand over papers, fill up their coffin and depart with tears streaming down their faces» (p. 132). Cristian thinks that «Both sides are engaged in a fratricidal struggle that will not end for a generation» (p. 11). Later, he comments: «A whole nation was escaping and another one was chasing it, shooting at close range. Listen carefully and you'll hear the running dialogue between the blindfolded and the executioners, feel the electric shock raised to the testicles and vaginas, the alternating current between the Brazilian and the CIA, the broken fingers and backs. The country is a victim of hit-and-run in the dark, a bleeding face to the pavement» (p. 137).

From the point of view of Luz Maria, his wife, Cristian was: «a mounted angel, who rode up and down the streets of Santiago carrying a cross, collecting photographs of those who fell or escaped or died, saving some graphic proof for an editorial room in another world... On the street, Cristian captured the real meaning of what happened» (p. 158).

*The Chilean Spring* is a powerful and moving novel. It is a testimony of man's inhumanity to man and from the human and historical point of view this work will, in the future, be an undisputed source of consultation of the fatidic events which took place on and after September 11, 1973.

**Victor M. Valenzuela**  
**Lehigh University**