In 1973, the Chilean military ousted Salvador Allende, the first and only freely elected Marxist leader, from the presidency. The generals formed a Junta to reorganise Chilean society and would stay in power for seventeen years, thereby forming one of the longest-standing military dictatorships in Latin America, a region that experienced a wave of such right-wing military dictatorships during that period. The Junta promised a new Chile, and that vision was to be implemented by means of a programme of violence against political opponents. The dictatorship, which spanned from 1973 to 1990, was especially bloody and cost more lives than any other event in Chile in the twentieth century.¹

The Chilean military used all means possible in the persecution and silencing of its opponents and opposition at large. Yet in contrast to other authoritarian experiences, the Chilean dictatorial period showed a peculiar development. After an aggressive coup in 1973 and its violent aftermath, during which almost 3000 people were killed in summary executions or made to disappear, growing international pressure and the diplomatic intervention of the United States forced the military government to change its repressive strategies.² As of 1977, the Chilean government replaced its strategy of destroying the political opposition with a strategy of containment: «A policy of containment meant that there would be great fluctuations in the intensity of repression, depending on the degree to which the opposition mobilised.»³ It also meant a change regarding who was in charge of carrying out repression, shifting from the secret police to the ordinary police force, the carabineros. As of 1978, repression was increasingly tied to abuses stemming from crowd-control efforts. This does not mean that the secret police was no longer active or that there were no more cases
of gross human rights violations, but on the whole, cases of abductions by state agents and summary executions tended to decrease, while cases of arrests and deaths after public disturbance tended to increase.

The first years of authoritarian rule were also characterised by the complete absence of political opposition, and an informational and cultural blackout. Political dissent was highly dangerous, and the few active left-wing organisations were persecuted and public opposition figures were sent into exile. The available information – circulating on television and in the few daily newspapers – was either controlled by or favourable to the regime. This situation persisted without major changes until 1976. A change in the socio-political environment was perceptible by 1979, however. As repression decreased, independent media and civilian organisations flourished.4

It was in this context that rumours came to widely fluctuate and were used as a sinister means of manipulation by the regime. Nonetheless, the case we study in this article provides an interesting example of the importance of public scrutiny for checking authoritarian power. We focus on an episode that occurred in September of 1983, when residents of working-class neighbourhoods in southern Santiago were led to believe that they would be attacked by the populace of the surrounding area. The rumour spread quickly and kept a vast section of the city sleepless due to the fear that homes might be burned down or looted. While collective panic reigned for almost three days, priests of the local parishes, grass-roots and civilian organisations quickly mobilised to contain the spread of the rumours and disarticulate the fear and distrust that had been produced among the local residents. In the following weeks, the participation of state agents in the propagation of the rumours was nationally exposed through the major independent news outlets. Finally, important national figures took advantage of the episode’s public exposure to condemn the rumour strategy and the regime’s policies as a whole. The case provides a rich account for understanding the political use of misinformation and the importance of independent information sources for controlling state abuses.

What, then, is a rumour? Although there are basically two ways of approaching the phenomenon – one communicative, the other psychological – scholarship has not produced a viable definition as of yet.5 Historians, media experts and social science scholars, however, have identified its meaningful characteristics. Rumours, this much is


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clear, are a form of often informal – but not always – oral communication whose truth or value cannot be verified, and whose sources cannot be checked. In contrast to gossip, rumours are not centred on individuals but rather on events and objects. Like other ways of informal communication, rumours transmit messages that are unauthorised and spontaneous, and the information more often than not concerns troubling events or facts. The scarcity of exact information about an event or a putative event helps a rumour to spread because of the uncertainty and anxiety it creates. Fear caused by economic or political uncertainty, for example, breeds rumours.

Rumours can take hold of people’s imaginations and displace reality. They become a reality of their own making in a process of social interaction and communication. This occurs because they cannot be easily checked or verified. Indeed, a rumour does not need to be verified. It is sufficient that the information could be true, that it has a certain degree of credibility for it to be passed on. And yet in order to be believed, it depends on who is spreading the rumours and who has the authority to speak. Depending on the context, rumours may affect individuals or collectives. In the latter case we may refer to Allport and Postman and «rumour publics», that is groups of people who are susceptible to particular narratives that change dynamically as the information is passed on. In oral transmission – but also in other forms of communication – content is strengthened or levelled. Rumours, however, inherently cause processes of verification or falsification. This checking may lead to the end of a rumour. Indeed, the longevity of a rumour depends on its credibility, which might be shattered by new rumours or consolidated information.

Manfred Bruhn has recently attempted to classify rumours according to their distinct forms of dissemination. One category concerns the use of rumours as a manipulative device to influence the public or a community. Indeed, rumours have often been used as instruments and were strategically planted by autocratic rulers who have certain, clearly defined aims. Rumours have thus been used as discreet forms of governance for purposes of manipulation. A dictatorship’s goal to achieve total control can be facilitated through communication based on rumours. In addition, there are numerous examples of rumours being employed as a means of propaganda.

Empirical historical research has demonstrated that dictatorships are a perfect breeding ground for the dissemination of these kinds of narratives because of the constant fear and uncertainty that prevails in the absence of the rule of law. In dicta-

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9 Kapferer, Gerüchte, 61–81.
11 The East German dictatorship proved its mastery of this kind of strategy: S. Pingel-Schliemann, Zersetzen. Strategien einer Diktatur, Berlin 2002.
12 For a case study, see F. Altenhöner, Kommunikation und Kontrolle. Gerüchte und städtische Öffentlichkeiten in Berlin und London 1914/1918, München 2008.
torships, rumours can easily spread because the lack of free and trustworthy information and media coincides with the need for information. In these contexts, rumours are substitutes for other more reliable forms of information. Dictators have frequently used rumours to legitimate violence and repression. Rumours have proven to be an ambivalent weapon, however, because they tend to have a life of their own, once unleashed, and can thus work against the original intentions. The dysfunctional aspects of this specific form of the use of rumours will be of further interest to us in the following.

Our main question is thus how rumours are used under dictatorial conditions and what kind of context is necessary for them to flourish. What means did the Chilean regime employ to disseminate and lend credibility to the rumours it created? In addition, we will explore how communities react to threatening rumours. What strategies did people develop to counteract the socially destructive power of rumours? What was the role of media and the significance of social networks? In the remainder of this article we address these issues in a description of the rumours that spread throughout southern Santiago in September of 1983. We then discuss the elements that configured the credibility of the rumour and analyse the role independent media and civilian organisations played in controlling the rumour and exposing the tactics employed by the military government.

1. Chile 1983

*Studying Rumours in Authoritarian Settings*

The historical study of rumours is largely dependent on the access historians have to adequate sources. Since their democratisation, Germany and Russia have made extensive disclosures of the archives of the repressive apparatus of the GDR and the Soviet Union. Wherever there is an absence of such archives, the systematic study of the political use of rumours is highly problematic. Since rumours are largely based on the informal transmission of information, usually word of mouth, the traces and consequences of such a phenomenon are not openly available for historical reconstruction.

In Chile, the return to democracy has not led to full archival disclosure of intelligence services documents. Historians studying Chile therefore lack a corpus of documents comparable to that of other authoritarian regimes. Some traces of rumour placement can be found unsystematically in diplomatic correspondence. For example, in a confidential memorandum sent from the United States Embassy in Santiago to the State Department in March 1983, the diplomatic legation states that Chilean lawyer Fabiola Letelier presented a habeas corpus writ regarding the circulation of false rumours through the national press. An embassy official who spoke

14 US Embassy Santiago, Fabiola Letelier and two others file preventive habeas corpus writ over false rumors in the media, Confidential Memorandum to US State Department, Santiago, March 1983, Museo de la Memoria Documentation Center.
with Letelier claimed that the rumour episode «had been initiated by the Central Nacional de Informaciones (CNI), while admitting she had no proof of her claim». Although the rumours appeared in the media, it is only through this sort of document that a historian can link the information appearing publicly with a defamation campaign, and thus effectively reinterpret news information as rumour.

This may explain the lack of historical studies on rumours in Chilean historiography. In this sense, this article, to our knowledge, is one of the first to approach this subject within the Chilean authoritarian period. The case study to follow is primarily based on press sources. The interesting quality of these sources is that they are vehicles of information and products of historical processes. We thus not only use them to extract information on the dynamics of rumour placement with political ends, we also analyse the sources as actors in the historical process. This is largely related to the fact that the military regime did not have exclusive control over the production and circulation of information at the time during which the discussed episode occurs.

The National Protests and the Margins

As the Chilean regime prepared to celebrate a decade in power in 1983, unrest was growing across the country. The neoliberal economic policies implemented by the military regime, in combination with changes in international markets and increasing oil prices, generated an economic downturn. Its consequences became visible by 1982 as unemployment, and high prices, and bankruptcies became the most pressing issue towards the end of the year. Trade and labour unions began exerting public pressure and staging demonstrations in order to force the government to adopt measures that would mitigate the effects of the crisis. In April 1983, the Confederación de Trabajadores del Cobre (Chilean Copper Workers’ Union), which represented one of the most important productive sectors of the Chilean economy, called for a national protest on 11 May. From that date forward, the economic recession turned into a political crisis for the regime, as thousands of Chileans took to the streets, staging what came to be known as the First Day of National Protest. The year 1983, the year Pinochet had intended to be a tribute to a successful decade in government, thus became the year of widespread discussion about the end of the military rule.

The massiveness of the public response to the 11th of May protest surprised both the government and the demonstrators. The regime reacted quickly, however, and worked out a strategy to confront the political crisis, which consisted in negotiating with the more moderate and right-wing sectors, and applying selective repression to the more radical and marginal sectors. Trade unions were rapidly appeased and the government announced special subsidies and assistance programmes for agriculture,
transport and small businesses. The regime also opened up a dialogue with political party leaders and made promises of short-term political liberalisation which effectively distracted and divided the political opposition. By contrast, severe repression was applied in the poorest sectors of Santiago. On 14 May, for example, after the first protest was over, the regime deployed the secret police and the uniformed police, the carabineros, across Santiago’s working-class neighbourhoods in order to conduct massive raids under the pretext of looking for delinquents. Between one and three o’clock in the morning, all males over fourteen years of age were pulled out of their homes and forced to stand and wait for twelve hours during identity checks. While the men were outside, the women and children were inside, watching their houses being searched and their belongings destroyed.17

The military government was effective in dividing the opposition. By July 1983, trade union sectors had been completely demobilised, while the political parties struggled to find common strategies and to form a unified front in negotiating with the regime. Labour unions had proven their weakness, and political party leaders assumed the role of leading the negotiations. As the opposition leadership became divided, the middle classes tended to react with restraint to the following calls for protest. These events transformed the residents of Santiago’s peripheral neighbourhoods into unlikely protagonists. Every time a national day of protest was declared, the night would light up in flames as residents of working-class neighbourhoods would cut off the source of electricity to cause blackouts and set barricades on fire to keep security forces away from their homes.

This action created a ring of fire around Santiago and put pressure on the regime to devise tactics for suppressing the unrest. Over the three days of protesting in August 1983, the government deployed 18,000 troops to take control of these areas of Santiago. The final toll of the unrest was 27 people killed and nation-wide condemnation of the regime for having unleashed the army on the civilian population. The repression did not control the popular agitation, and the city’s margins went up in flames again on 8 September, the fifth day of national protest. The disconnection between the opposition leadership, the middle classes and working-class sectors would become visible as both protest and repression continued in Santiago’s periphery for several days after residents from other sectors had returned home. Since outright repression failed to reign in the popular sectors, the regime attempted to divide the lower classes by putting a rumour into circulation.

«They’re coming! They’re coming!»

Between the night of 11 September and the next morning, tension was at its peak, as vast sectors of southern Santiago waited for an attack that in the end never came.

A rumour had spread like wildfire in the previous days throughout Santiago’s poorest neighbourhoods. The story claimed that the inhabitants of the surrounding shanty towns would attack them and burn their houses down: «For most of the residents, the information was credible and self-defence planning began. Their most valuable possessions were put away, tents were set up in yards, where they kept watch with wives and children, waiting for the threat to materialise. Many soaked the walls of their shacks with water to prevent them from catching fire so easily. Others gathered water, or nailed their windows shut, or ran to warn their relatives.»

That night, people saw fires in the distance, and some houses were stoned. The police was nowhere to be found, and groups of unknown men threw stones at cars and mugged whoever came by. In the Villa O’Higgins, the residents kept watch in trenches made up of branches, stones, cans and construction material, waiting for an attack from the neighbouring población, San Gregorio. In some neighbourhoods, residents would make rounds, carrying improvised spears made of sticks with knives tied to their ends. In the pitch-black night which resulted from the blackouts, voices would cry out «They’re coming! They’re coming!» And although no one saw or heard anything, collective panic would then break out, and everyone would run home seeking protection. In one población, a neighbour tried to warn the others: «They’re burning ten houses over there! And it’s the people from La Victoria!» This situation was repeated in several neighbourhoods throughout Santiago and continued in some places for the next two days.

The panic, however, was neither spontaneous nor unsubstantiated. In the days prior to the widespread fear, state agents had been working in concert to plant and spread the information. In the población Pedro Opazo, for example, municipal workers arrived on 10 September to meet with the local Junta de Vecinos (neighbour council) and invite them to organise their defence. The next day, on 11 September, carabineros came by and informed them that the residents of La Victoria were preparing to burn their property.

In another case, the president of the Santa Adriana council claimed to have heard the news from the carabineros that groups of shanty town dwellers were going to burn their homes. He was also told that the groups were organising at a neighbouring parish. In Villa O’Higgins, the Junta de Vecinos’ president called the local delegates to a meeting – for the first time in ten years – and informed them that the residents of San Gregorio were planning an attack. Carabineros drove by many neighbourhoods

20 The word población could be roughly translated as «neighbourhood», although it does not fully correspond. Poblaciones are usually formed in urban areas as the result of land seizures by rural and urban poor as a form of resolving housing deficits. In this article we use población, neighbourhood and shanty town synonymously. «Informe Especial: ¿Qué ocurre en las poblaciones?», in HOY (21–27 September 1983), 12.
21 «Terror en las poblaciones», 2.
22 «Pobladores: Vivimos horas de terror», 7.
to alert and help organise people. They told the residents to wear white armbands – to distinguish themselves from the attackers – and to arm themselves with chains and sticks.\textsuperscript{26} Finally, this sort of information was also supplemented by the circulation of leaflets. Santa Olga, for example, had been covered with pamphlets saying they would be attacked by residents of the Santa Adriana and José María Caro shanty towns.\textsuperscript{25} As night fell, the frightened residents waited, sleepless and expecting the worst.

Why Did the Rumour Work?
This episode raises a series of questions – especially considering that many of the people who believed the rumour had family or friends in the neighbouring area. As one resident recognised, «we've been living together for over ten years, and have never had any problems; we have friends in the vicinity».\textsuperscript{26} Then why did the local residents take the rumours seriously? Likewise, much of the information was passed on by the police, who in the previous months had been responsible for all kinds of abuses against them, by municipal workers known to be pro-regime, and by the local representatives of the \textit{Juntas de Vecinos}, who were actually designated by the regime to occupy these positions and were known for being traitors. Why then did the residents believe the rumours despite the reputation of the people who had spread them?

We consider two elements as having been important for the success of the propagation of the rumour: 1) its placement in areas that had been critically affected by state policies and actions; and 2) the creation of a strained atmosphere in the days that immediately succeeded the spread of the rumour.

1) In their preliminary studies on rumours in the 1950s, Allport and Postman introduced the idea of «rumour publics», which designated the «constituencies of people who are susceptible to particular narratives and who may be actively engaged and interested in passing on and discussing rumours».\textsuperscript{27} This idea emphasises that a rumour is not only the collective interpretation of ambiguous information, but that there is information that is important for and applies to a specific group. In our case, the target group for the rumour was the urban poor, who are characterised by living under strained conditions with little access to reliable information.

This episode in state-sponsored repression and fear mongering represented a new form of social control, directed against a population that had taken the worst toll under the dictatorial rule. Since 1973, the urban poor had suffered greatly as a result of governmental policies and actions. The neoliberal policy of the military regime liberalised trade and introduced incentives for the export sector. As a consequence,

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{24} «Pobladores: Vivimos horas de terror», 6.
\textsuperscript{25} «Poblaciones: En el epicentro de la protesta», in: \textit{Análisis} (27 September – 11 October), 21–22.
\textsuperscript{26} «Informe Especial», 13.
\textsuperscript{27} P. Stewart / A. Strathern, \textit{Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rumors, and Gossip}, Cambridge 2004, 43.
\end{footnotesize}
the nation’s industry began to collapse, taking with it the workplaces it had provided. In Santiago, industrial employment declined by 23 per cent between 1973 and 1980. As the crisis hit, jobs for low-qualified workers became scarce, and unemployment rose nationally to 28.5 per cent by November 1982 and reached 32 per cent in Santiago by March 1983. In addition, the regime drastically reduced social spending. This put pressure on the poorest sectors by limiting their access to health, education and housing. Since 1973, social expenditures decreased steadily, declining from almost 26 per cent of the GDP in 1972 to 14 per cent in 1981. Government spending on housing and urbanisation projects – one of the areas particularly relevant to the urban poor – dropped from 21 per cent of the total public social expenditures in 1974 to only 9 per cent in 1981. The total square meters of new construction in the public sector declined from 201,000 in 1974 to 25,000 in 1982.

Repression was also especially severe concerning the urban poor. Particularly representative of this situation is the fact that between «1973 and 1990, at least 52.3 percent of all officially recognised victims of state-perpetrated torture, killing, and disappearance were working class people». Furthermore, besides being victims of outright human rights violations, the urban poor were subjected to massive raids and forced displacements, and they suffered the harshest repression during the days of protest. As Pierre Dubois, the French priest of La Victoria parish, critically observed: «On the days of protest, as if it were a competition, carabineros discussed who should be the one to beat this or that poblador. And they also told the residents «we’re going to kill you all, kill you like rats.» Overpopulated houses, widespread poverty, prolonged blackouts, discrimination, and police abuse and brutality thus created a breeding ground for violence.

2) In addition, in the same manner that the rumours were actively planted by state agents in Santiago’s marginal neighbourhoods, actions were also taken to help the threats materialise on the announced dates – or at least to make them believable for the pobladores. As one article recalls, fear spread rapidly «throughout the overpopulated area. [...] And a series of external elements augmented this collective phenomenon. The darkness of the night, the simultaneous blackouts that affected some sectors, the
sound of gunshots and sirens, or the shooting of flares observed in other sectors, contributed to create a sensation of insecurity and imminent danger.»\textsuperscript{36}

On several occasions, unidentified civilians were seen or heard during the blackouts. In Las Delicias, for example, unknown people stoned the houses and shouted: «We’re from La Victoria and we came to stone you because you didn’t come with us to the funeral of Miguel Zabala.»\textsuperscript{37} In La Victoria, young men wearing white armbands were seen stoning houses.\textsuperscript{38} Armed civilians appeared in some poblaciones and shot at the houses.\textsuperscript{39} During the blackouts, the children had to sleep on the floor to be protected from the gunshots.\textsuperscript{40} A priest from La Granja declared that during the morning hours, «the people were awakened by unknown individuals who declared the houses would be attacked by civilians from other neighborhoods or shanties (...), they acted in a peculiar way and wore strange clothing, prepared for action, with their sneakers and faces darkened with shoe polish.»

The actions of these unknown civilians also supported the information that had spread days earlier. The people in San Gregorio, for example, were told that Los Peumos would attack the Villa O’Higgins, and that they should go and help them as soon as a flare went off. While the San Gregorio residents stood watch on the days of the announced attacks, «four men wearing ski masks appeared and threw something which did not go off».\textsuperscript{42} If we consider that the people of Villa O’Higgins, for their part, were told to expect an attack by the San Gregorio residents, one can only speculate about what the outcome of the event might have been had the flare gone off and had the latter come to the rescue of the former.

Carabineros also actively contributed to exacerbating the fear on the days of the announced attacks. As a resident of the Santa Adriana shanty declared, in the early hours of the morning, «the carabineros went from house to house, telling the people they had to get up because three thousand people from La Victoria were coming to burn our homes».\textsuperscript{43} In Lo Hermida, people saw the police throwing chains at the power lines in order to cause blackouts.\textsuperscript{44} The state of confusion generated by the urgent, direct orders given in the middle of the night created the conditions for collective panic, as people were confronted with situations of imminent danger they did not know how to respond to.

\textsuperscript{36} «Pobladores: Vivimos horas de terror», 6.
\textsuperscript{37} «Poblaciones: En el epicentro de la protesta», 22.
\textsuperscript{38} «Terror en las poblaciones», 2.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{40} «Informe Especial», 13.
\textsuperscript{41} «Informe Especial», 13.
\textsuperscript{42} «Poblaciones: En el epicentro de la protesta», 21.
\textsuperscript{43} «Informe Especial», 13.
\textsuperscript{44} «Informe Especial», 6.
2. The Role of the Media and Civilian Organisations in Restoring Public Confidence

Dispelling rumours is not an easy task. When inaccurate information has spread across vast areas by word of mouth, the work involved in correcting the information can be arduous. The task can seem impossible if one considers that the rumour was planted by the state, which can rely on the resources and the infrastructure necessary for spreading and certifying the rumour, such as the police, municipal workers and pro-regime media outlets. In our case, however, the existence of a dense network of organisations functioning at the national and local level, and their relations to independent media, made it possible to control the rumour in the affected areas and to publicly expose the regime’s strategy at the national level. This organisational network played a crucial role in downplaying the propagation of rumours in authoritarian Chile. The following section describes this organisational infrastructure and the actions taken during the rumour episode at the local and national level.

Civilian Organisations and Media in Dictatorial Chile

By the time the protests began, and the episode discussed in this paper had already occurred, Chilean civil society was on the course to recovery. The first organisations that took up the work of defending people affected by political persecution were the Comité Nacional de Ayuda a los Refugiados (CONAR) and Comité de Cooperación para la Paz en Chile (COPACHI), both created within the first weeks following the coup. These were ecumenical committees formed by members of the Protestant and Catholic Churches and the Rabbi of the Jewish Community who had complementary responsibilities. Since Chile had served as a haven for people affected by political persecution in Latin America and Spain throughout the twentieth century, and especially after the Brazilian coup in 1964, there were an important number of political refugees that needed to be relocated once the military Junta took power. CONAR’S task was thus to shelter and facilitate the relocation of these non-Chilean political refugees, ultimately helping 4442 people leave the country between October 1973 and February 1974.45 COPACHI, on the other hand, was founded to help the nationals who were negatively impacted by the new regime. As their founding statement declared, the Committee was created to provide material and legal assistance to people affected by «the existing situation» and to gather information on «irregular actions occurring which severely harm people’s dignity».46 By 1974, COPACHI had 24 offices working across the country and a staff of over 200 people, including lawyers, social workers and doctors.47


46 Comité de Cooperación para la Paz en Chile (COPACHI), «Comunicación del Comité de Co-


By 1975, CONAR had dissolved, and the Foundation of Christian Churches for Social Aid (Fundación de Ayuda Social de las Iglesias Cristianas, FASIC) took its place.48 FASIC’s first objective was to help political prisoners leave the country, after the dictatorship approved the commutation of exile for prison sentences. Over time, FASIC expanded its work in migration to include a «social department» in charge of providing economic and social assistance to the lower classes, and a «medical and psychiatric programme» designed for treating victims of physical and psychological abuse by the regime.49 In 1976, COPACHI was dissolved and the Vicaría de la Solidaridad (Vicariate of Solidarity, Vicaría in the following), under the control of the archdiocese of Santiago, was established in its place.50

The Vicaría played an important role in the legal defence and the documentation of human rights violations. But it also became a major coordinating authority through its zones department, which established intense organising work at the grass-roots level, and its labour and rural departments, which became a gathering space for the scattered workers’ unions. By 1983, the zones department had helped set up 963 solidarity organisations, consisting of unemployment cooperatives, workshops, dining halls for children and other subsistence organisations, with about 55,000 people participating in their activities. By 1986, these numbers had risen to 2500 organisations and 81,000 people.52 FASIC took over this work in Valparaiso due to the local bishop’s refusal to allow the Vicaría to have a local branch. The labour and rural departments provided the unions with legal and technical assistance. This initial work helped the coordination of labour and rural workers’ unions regarding the formation of what later became the Coordinadora Nacional Sindical (National Labor Union Coordinator), the Unión Democrática de Trabajadores (Democratic Worker’s Union) and the Confederación Nacional Campesina (National Rural Workers’ Confederation).

FASIC and the Vicaría also became an important basis of support for spawning new organisations. The families of victims of state repression formed their first associations with the guidance and support of both FASIC and the Vicaría. The Agrupación de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos (Association of Relatives of Missing Persons) and the Agrupación de Familiares de Presos Políticos (Relatives of Political Prisoners) were the most relevant in the first phases. Two important spin-off organisations were also formed in 1978 and 1980. The first was the Comisión Chilena de Derechos Humanos (Chilean Human Rights Commission, CCHDH), which formed its own legal department, documentation centre, and base-level coordination. The Comité de Defensa de los Derechos del Pueblo (Committee for the Defence of the People’s

51 Ibid., 156–160.
Rights, CODEPU), created by former lawyers of the Vicaría, soon followed and had departments for legal council, mental health and base-level coordination. Both organisations cultivated extensive relations with political parties and developed close relations to and supported the creation of grass-roots organisations across the country. CCHDH, for example, had established regional offices in 31 cities and had formed approximately 80 base committees by 1984, 70 per cent of which were located in Santiago.\textsuperscript{52} CODEPU, on the other hand, had representations in three provinces, and four new regional branches were in formation by October 1983.\textsuperscript{53}

The creation of independent media followed a similar trend. The lead was taken in 1976 by the bulletin \textit{Solidaridad}, a bi-monthly magazine edited by the Vicaría and distributed through Santiago's parishes. It made information available on the national situation, human rights violations and the work of unions and social organisations. The weekly magazines \textit{Hoy} and \textit{Análisis} began circulating the next year. They quickly became influential media sources due to the quality of their articles and the defiant tone they assumed against the dictatorship. \textit{Apsi} began as a magazine dedicated exclusively to international news, although editorial work emphasised the democratisation processes going on in the world, and began publishing local news by 1980. That same year, CODEPU began editing its own bulletin, which promoted the work of the organisation and contained information on relevant political issues.

The creation of these organisations and media outlets throughout the 1970s shaped a landscape that differed greatly from the early years of the dictatorship. Not only were these organisations important promoters of collective organisation and agents for criticising the regime's policies, but they served as centres for canalising and distributing information. As early as 1973, COPACHI had begun compiling information on human rights violations and abuses committed by the regime. This work was carried on more effectively by the Vicaría, and its staff lawyers were in charge of verifying and organising information for distribution among embassies, local media, the courts and the regime. CCHDH also produced a monthly report on human rights violations that was more comprehensive than that of the Vicaría and was also amply distributed to national and international organisations.

The work of gathering information was possible through the vast networks that these organisations cultivated. First, they all had extensive relations with each other through the cooperation of their legal teams and other collaborative projects. Second, FASIC and the Vicaría could count on the network of churches, communities and priests to which they were organically related, although this was always subject to the affinity of the individual priests and to the work of these organisations. Third, the


staff of these organisations consisted mostly of members or former members of opposition political parties, thus creating ties to the networks formed by political activists. Fourth, the work of these organisations helped create strong ties to the peripheral neighbourhoods of Santiago through the implementation of projects and the personal relations developed through their efforts. Finally, these organisations developed fluid relations with the opposition media sources and could count on an outlet for information when necessary. In sum, as the case at hand testifies, the existence of this growing network of organisations functioning at different levels made it possible to control the rumour locally in the affected areas and to publicly expose the regime’s strategy at the national level.

**Countering the Rumour at the Grass-Roots Level**

The first reaction to the rumours came from the exchange of information in the common spaces of everyday life. As one resident put it: «We have been talking in the stores, at the bus stops, with neighbours; we know many of them (residents of other poblaciones) because we’re relatives, or have friends, because we’re work colleagues, or play (soccer) in the same clubs, and the truth is, as many neighbours agree, this seems to be an offensive (from the government) to stop the protests and people’s discontent.» The pobladores thus took advantage of the places where people from a particular area came together to compare and contrast the information received from authorities. The mobilisation of these kinship networks was the first step taken to put an end to the sleepless nights. The second step was the mobilisation of local organisations to evaluate the information and denounce the government’s attempts to manipulate the population.

The importance of the existing grass-roots organisations is twofold. On the one hand, they provided their activists with a nuanced perspective on everyday situations, because they had access to information and contacts through the different relations they established with other grass-roots or national organisations. One resident, for example, questioned the carabineros’ version, which stated that the looters were organising in a neighbouring parish. He was a member of the Lo Sierra local Human Rights Committee, which was active in the parish mentioned and formed part of a nation-wide network of base committees affiliated to the Chilean Human Rights Commission: «Imagine what effect a rumour like that can have, considering the shanties are all next to each other. It means panic in women and children. [...] Talking with the neighbours, we believe this (the spreading of rumours) has only one intention: to cause distrust among pobladores.»

On the other hand, grass-roots organisations also had the capacity to mobilise activists and their symbolic capital in controlling the unrest. The local priests and
Christian communities, for example, were active in mobilising locally to limit the spread of fear amongst neighbours. They denounced the rumour strategy internally through the channels provided by the church hierarchy and made public statements criticising the actions of the state. In the poblaciones Santa Olga and Santa Adriana, the Christian communities and the local priest made public statements claiming the accusations against them were false. Later, they were joined by the Christian community of José María Caro in calling all residents to «not let themselves be fooled by these planned schemes».

The población La Victoria, the product of a squatter’s movement in the mid-1960s, was a highly organised community and strongly influenced by the Chilean Communist Party. Its reputation as a socially unstable area was widely known in Santiago, and the regime took an active part in demonising it as a refuge for criminals and thugs. It was probably for this reason that La Victoria residents were blamed for the attacks during the spread of the rumours. Other reputed «dangerous» poblaciones – José María Caro, Santa Olga and San Gregorio – were also accused by state agents of being neighbourhoods of suspected attackers.

La Victoria residents, like other accused communities, prepared a statement in which they called upon residents to reflect on who could have the resources to have pickups at their disposal to distribute pamphlets and spread the rumours. In their statement, they held the carabineros responsible for spreading the rumours and denounced the actions of unknown civilians that created a sensation of fear. The statement was also signed by the local priest, father Pierre Dubois. Similarly, the local José María Caro Human Rights Committee issued a statement denouncing the actions of strangers to incite the looting and stoning of homes, and praised the reaction of the neighbours to repel these activities. They also proposed forming neighbourhood committees to promote solidarity, unity and greater organisation amongst pobladores. Finally, the Coordinator of Popular Organisations of the East Zone condemned the government’s attempt to incite violence.

Undoubtedly, the most important unintended consequence resulting from the propagation of rumours was the formation of the Coordinadora Multipoblacional (Multi-neighbourhood Committee). On 13 September, two days after the panic had spread, 146 grass-roots leaders from the 25 poblaciones of southern Santiago held their first meeting, which resulted in the formation of a coordinating authority that grouped together most of the grass-roots organisations in the area. This organisation covered the southern area of Santiago almost entirely and acted as a zoning coordinator that supported the metropolitan and national organisations to which many of the


grass-roots organisations belonged. Their first stated objective was «to put an end to this problem of the rumours about mutual attacks between pobladores». It was further proposed that they should later move on to confronting the other problems faced by Santiago’s lower classes, such as unemployment, housing and education.\textsuperscript{63} As a consequence, the president of the Metropolitan Coordinator of Pobladores, Eduardo Valencia, concluded that the regime’s plans had backfired: «People not only understood what the regime was «up to», but it helped unify the pobladores, not only in their own neighbourhoods, but also in the form of multi-neighbourhood coordinators.»\textsuperscript{64}

Grass-roots organisations thus played an important role in controlling the spread of rumours at the local level. Despite the efforts of state agents and pro-regime media to confirm the information of the attacks, the areas affected by the planted rumours were aided by the mobilisation and information networks provided by existing base-level organisations. As we shall discuss in the next section, these grass-roots organisations played a crucial role in transmitting information on the national level, and national civilian organisations, the church and national media took up and amplified the details of the 11 September 1983 episode in the following weeks.

\textit{Rumour Deconstruction and Denunciation at the National Level}

On 14 September, the influential pro-regime daily \textit{El Mercurio} published a cover story on the case of the attacks entitled «Pobladores ask for protection to avoid vandalism». Among other things, the article made the case that the alleged rumours were true by quoting the mayor of the La Florida municipality, who had also been designated by the regime. He informed the provincial governor that the residents of Villa O’Higgins had gone three nights without being able to sleep because of the threats made by strangers. He also explained that nothing had happened because neighbours had properly organised themselves to defend their property.\textsuperscript{65} In the article, however, there were no references regarding the efforts of municipal workers or carabineros to spread the information, or to help the neighbours defend themselves from the attacks. The article thus played on the common themes that the dictatorship had cited in praising itself: the provision of security and order.

The response from opposition media came in the following weeks when four consecutive in-depth articles were published in the most widely circulated opposition magazines. The first articles came in the last days of September in the weekly edition of \textit{Hoy}. The magazine published an extensive article on the living conditions of Santiago’s lower classes and the ill treatment they received from the police forces during the days of protesting. The article dedicated a small section to the rumour episode which it entitled «Machiavellian Phantoms», alluding to the deception and manipulation of the people for political ends. More detailed accounts of the rumour episode

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{63} «Pobladores: Vivimos horas de terror», 7.
\item \textsuperscript{64} «Poblaciones: En el epicentro de la protesta», 22.
\item \textsuperscript{65} «Pobladores piden protección para evitar vandalismo», in: \textit{El Mercurio} (14 September 1983), A12.
\end{itemize}
were published the following week in editions of *Solidaridad* and *Apsi*, which dedicated complete articles to denouncing the role of the police in the incidents, questioning the intentions of the regime in applying such a tactic and emphasising the role of local organisation in countering the rumours. They also extensively quoted the reactions of different relevant figures, such as the vicar of Santiago’s southern zone, Bishop Camilo Vial, and the opinions of a well-known psychiatrist who worked for FASIC. Finally, on 12 October, *Análisis* published the most critical article on the episode, highlighting that the spreading of rumours was an attempt to control what had become the «epicentre» of the protests. It also discussed the role the interior minister had played in inciting violence by calling the people to organise in self-defence against the demonstrators, and it revealed how pro-regime media had been instrumental in the diffusion of false information.\textsuperscript{66}

The opposition media therefore played an important role in exposing the actions of state agents in the rumour campaign and in keeping the matter at the centre of attention for at least another month after the events were over. But their task did not end there. As we have hinted, opposition media not only played a crucial role by actively – and selectively – making information about the episode available to public scrutiny, it also served as an intermediary between relevant figures involved and the public. The different actors not only used this outlet for discussing the issue at hand, i.e. the facts surrounding the rumour episode, they also took the opportunity to condemn the regime as a whole.

The lead was taken in this respect by the Catholic Church, and representatives from every level of its hierarchy issued public statements. As noted in the previous sections, local priests were direct witnesses to the abuses committed against the pobladores and their living conditions and they served as channels of communication with the Catholic hierarchy and its institutions. The media also quoted them extensively as certified informants. Thus Father Dubois of La Victoria was able to denounce the «absurd and deceitful scheme» the police helped carry out,\textsuperscript{67} and Father Hernán Correa of the La Acensión del Señor parish could openly state that the whole rumour episode was probably a deliberate action to prevent the unity of the pobladores who had demonstrated during the previous days.\textsuperscript{68} The Jesuit liberation theologist Ronaldo Muñoz framed the protests as a response to the permanent state of deprivation and violence that the working classes were forced to endure. In the face of the «unemployment, hunger, repression against organisation, frustration and lack of opportunity [...], we view the «terror campaign» as an attempt to destroy the only thing they (the pobladores) really have: the solidarity between them.»\textsuperscript{69}

**CONFERRE**, a national organisation grouping together more than 200 congregations and 8000 members of the Catholic Church, publicly condemned the rumour

\textsuperscript{66} «Poblaciones: En el epicentro de la protesta», 22.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{69} «Pobladores: Vivimos horas de terror», 7.
campaign by stating that it «was destined to provoke fear and confrontation between pobladores».70 The statement also included a plea to the carabineros, asking them to uphold their mission to protect the people instead of repressing them and spreading violence. CONFÉRRE also criticised the Chilean secret police, the CNI, whose agents would act without identification or accountability, and they accused the television stations and other mainstream media of silencing the repression against the pobladores. Finally, the church hierarchy confronted the issue through the auxiliary bishop of Santiago and vicar of the southern zone, Camilo Vial. He stated that the news that pobladores were planning to attack each other was completely false and qualified the government’s rumour campaign as «diabolical» and «monstruous».71 His declaration also included an evaluation of the social situation of the poblaciones as «complex and extremely difficult» due to unemployment, hunger and insecurity.72

FASIC and CODEPU also intervened in condemning the rumour campaign through their more public figures. FASIC usually did not participate institutionally in public campaigns since its legal status was dependent on the Methodist Church. There was not only the risk of being proscribed, but of inciting a conflict between the Methodist Church and the regime. Fanny Pollarolo, the head of FASIC’s mental health department, thus spoke to Solidaridad as a psychiatrist and specialist on human behaviour. She attributed the rumour campaign to «mass manipulation techniques» and «psychological warfare», and noted that the carabineros’ participation in spreading the rumours gave them credibility.73 Her assessment concluded that the authority’s participation in the episode generated the suspicion that society’s «ethical frameworks have been destroyed».74 Although Pollarolo was quoted as an expert on human conduct, her appearance should not be taken lightly. Besides being an important figure in FASIC, she was also one of the Chilean Communist Party’s relevant figures and a leading member of the Popular Democratic Movement, a coalition formed by communists and socialists in order to unify the left’s position within the opposition and against the regime.

On the other hand, CODEPU acted judicially by making a constitutional plea to induce the impeachment of Chilean Interior Minister Sergio Onofre Jarpa.75 The petition was based on Jarpa’s calls for self-defence in the days prior to the fifth national protest, and although it was not specifically related to the rumour campaign, the writ was directed against one of the elements that sustained it. The only weekly newspaper that reported on this information was Análisis, which had close ties to CODEPU, since the magazine’s director was also a member of CODEPU’s directory. Despite the fact that the outcome was not favourable for the petitioning lawyers, they

72 Ibid.
73 «¿Usando el arte de la desintegración?», in: Solidaridad 164 (September 1983), 7; «Poblaciones: En el epicentro de la protesta», 22.
74 «¿Usando el arte de la desintegración?», 7.
75 «Poblaciones: En el epicentro de la protesta», 20.
recognised it was «positive that the (constitutional) court agreed to proceed with the accusation and issue a sentence on the [...] content of the presentation». By the time the last article on the rumour campaign had appeared, Santiago had already witnessed the sixth national day of protest. The climax of the event was a massive rally – the first to be held in ten years – that was organised by PRODEN (Project of National Development) and CODEPU. There was a turnout of almost 100,000 people. The main speaker at the rally was Fabiola Letelier, the executive secretary of CODEPU who was also the main sponsoring lawyer of the writ presented against Minister Jarpa.

3. Conclusion

The case we have presented here shares many of the typical traits of rumour placement under dictatorial conditions. The «rumour target audience» we have described was especially susceptible to these narratives due to the extreme poverty and anxiety in the shanty towns. Because of the high efficiency of oral communication structures within these communities, the rumour spread rapidly and easily. Participants in these communicative networks repeated the message and, by way of repeating it, enhanced its credibility. Those who either actively participated in planting the rumour or passively heard and believed it shared a common characteristic: all were potentially affected by its content. Generally speaking, fear, violence and devastation were a perfect breeding ground for the rumour to cause people to distrust their neighbours, even though they were living under the same pressure. The Chilean regime had all the necessary resources at hand to spread its rumour and made good use of these. Informants, official police and carabineros lent the rumour force and credibility. Special agents were employed to heighten anxiety by means of mock attacks taking advantage of the obscurity of the night and artificial blackouts.

The Chilean case, however, was also exceptional in that the communities which were being subverted by regime agents had some leeway to react and had allies with communicative skills and outlets that went far beyond the local level. In that respect, we should recognise that, compared to European-style totalitarian dictatorships, the Chilean regime left some space for anti-regime voices, mostly due to its susceptibility to international pressure and to the activities of transnational human rights movements. Social organisations and networks were thus able to produce bonds of solidarity; these go a long way in explaining the unusual strength of the reaction against the regime’s subversive strategy of rumour placement. Church and political figures involved were able to use the few but powerful channels of free speech to voice and publish their own version of events and to dispel the disruptive power of the rumour. In the end, the effectiveness of this sort of social control by the military government was greatly jeopardised by the existence of relatively strong independent media and

76 «Acusación Constitucional contra Jarpa», in: Boletín Codepu (October 1983), 27.
civil organisations who were able to gather and verify information. Indeed, the case presented here can be seen as an example of the dysfunctional power of rumours – an aspect which still remains to be studied in a systemic manner.

Rumour Propagation as a Form of Social Control.
A Case from Dictatorial Chile

The following article discusses the role of media and civilian organisations in down-playing the role of rumour propagation in the Chilean dictatorship. After outright repression failed to control popular unrest during the national protests that took place between 1983 and 1984, the military regime attempted to keep people inside their homes by playing on their fears and prejudices. We focus here on an episode that occurred in September 1983, when residents of a working class neighbourhood were led to believe that they would be attacked by the populace of the surrounding area. After the protest was over, the actions of state agents and unknown civilians in propagating the rumour were publicised through the opposition press and widely condemned by relevant national figures. In the end, the effectiveness of this sort of social control by the military government was greatly jeopardised by the existence of relatively strong independent media and civil organisations with considerable resources for gathering and verifying information. In this article, we not only discuss how the rumour was propagated and why it worked, but also consider the question why rumour placement as a policing strategy finally failed to produce its intended effects in the late dictatorial period.

Die Verbreitung von Gerüchten als Spielart sozialer Kontrolle.
Eine Fallstudie aus dem diktatorischen Chile

Militärregierung erdachte Form der sozialen Kontrolle wirkungslos machten. Sie verfügten über beachtliche Ressourcen, die ihnen sowohl das Sammeln als auch die Überprüfung zahlreicher Informationen gestattete. Im vorliegenden Aufsatz soll erörtert werden, wie Gerüchte verbreitet wurden und aus welchen Gründen dies teilweise gelang, aber auch, warum das Gerücht als strategisches Kontrollmittel letztendlich scheiterte bzw. die beabsichtigten Wirkungen in den späten Jahren der Diktatur verfehlte.

La propagation de rumeurs comme forme de contrôle social.
L’étude d’un cas au Chili dictatorial

L’article suivant analyse la manière dont les médias et les organisations civiles ont minimisé le rôle des rumeurs propagées dans la dictature chiliennne. Après l’échec de la répression ouverte qui devait garantir le contrôle des révoltes populaires de 1983 et 1984, le régime militaire essaya d’inciter les gens à rester à leur domicile, tout en jouant sur leurs peurs et leurs préjugés.

Nous nous concentrons ici sur un épisode survenu en septembre 1983, lorsque l’on tenta de faire croire aux habitants d’un quartier ouvrier que la populace des environs les attaquerait. Une fois les protestations terminées, cette politique mensongère fut divulguée dans la presse de l’opposition et vigoureusement condamnée par d’influentes personnalités. Au final, ce furent les médias relativement indépendants et les organisations civiles qui rendirent cette forme de contrôle social totalement inefficace. Ils disposèrent d’importants moyens qui leur permirent de rassembler et de vérifier quantité d’informations. Cet article souhaite non seulement analyser comment la rumeur fut diffusée et pour quelles raisons cela fut possible, mais tente également de comprendre pourquoi la rumeur échoua en tant que moyen de contrôle stratégique, c’est-à-dire pourquoi elle fut, dans les dernières années de la dictature, vouée à l’échec.

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