



Impunity, Human Rights, and Democracy: Chile and Argentina, 1990-2005

By Thomas C. Wright

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Universal human rights standards were adopted in 1948, but in the 1970s and 1980s, violent dictatorships in Argentina and Chile flagrantly defied the new protocols. Chilean general Augusto Pinochet and the Argentine military employed state terrorism in their quest to eradicate Marxism and other forms of "subversion." Pinochet constructed an iron shield of impunity for himself and the military in Chile, while in Argentina, military pressure resulted in laws preventing prosecution for past human rights violations. When democracy was reestablished in both countries by 1990, justice for crimes against humanity seemed beyond reach.

Thomas C. Wright examines how persistent advocacy by domestic and international human rights groups, evolving legal environments, unanticipated events that impacted public opinion, and eventual changes in military leadership led to a situation unique in the world—the stripping of impunity not only from a select number of commanders of the repression but from all those involved in state terrorism in Chile and Argentina. This has resulted in trials conducted by national courts, without United Nations or executive branch direction, in which hundreds of former repressors have been convicted and many more are indicted or undergoing trial.

Impunity, Human Rights, and Democracy draws on extensive research, including interviews, to trace the erosion and collapse of the former repressors' impunity—a triumph for human rights advocates that has begun to inspire authorities in other Latin American countries, including Peru, Uruguay, Brazil, and Guatemala, to investigate past human rights violations and prosecute their perpetrators.

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Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #4126566 in Books
- Published on: 2014-12-10
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.00" h x .50" w x 6.00" l,
- Binding: Hardcover
- 206 pages

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Review

"Human rights are a universal matter. Anyone coming from a national or transnational perspective will gain insights from [the author's] fair, balanced, and informed understanding. . . . This is an extraordinary synthesis of a very complex series of historical events." (Iván Jaksic, Director, Bing Overseas Studies Program in Chile, Stanford University)

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THOMAS C. WRIGHT is Distinguished Professor of History, Emeritus, at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. His many previous books include *State Terrorism in Latin America: Chile, Argentina, and International Human Rights* and *Latin America in the Era of the Cuban Revolution*.

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