

Title:

Augusto Pinochet, President of Chile, born 1915

Word Count:

454

Summary:

After seizing power in a bloody CIA-backed coup, General Augusto Pinochet ruled Chile with a rod of iron for two decades, during which human rights violations became the norm of Chilean life.

Keywords:

augusto,pinochet,chile,president,leader,military

Article Body:

After seizing power in a bloody CIA-backed coup, General Augusto Pinochet ruled Chile with a rod of iron for two decades, during which human rights violations became the norm of Chilean life.

Hailing from an upper-middle class background, Pinochet entered the military academy in Santiago at the age of 18, graduating three years later as a second lieutenant. By 1968 he had risen to the rank of brigadier general.

In 1970, Salvador Allende, a Marxist, became president of Chile with the backing of the Christian Democrats, and began restructuring Chilean society along socialist lines. In the process he expropriated the US-owned copper-mining companies, alienating the US government and foreign investors. He further annoyed Washington by establishing relations with Cuba and Communist China, which the United States did not recognise at that time. As a result, America imposed tough economic sanctions and the CIA spent millions of dollars destabilising the Allende regime, much of it going into Pinochet's pockets.

By 1972, the Chilean economy had collapsed. With no foreign investment, production had come to a standstill. There were widespread strikes, inflation, food shortages and civil unrest. With the backing of armed forces, Pinochet staged a military coup on 11 September 1973. It was bloody even by Latin American standards. The navy seized the key port of Valparaiso, while the army surrounded the presidential palace in Santiago. Allende refused to step down. When the palace was overrun a few hours later, he was found dead. It appears that he shot himself rather than face inevitable torture and execution.

A junta took over and declared marital law. Those who violated the curfew were

shot on sight. Pinochet was named president two days later. He broke off relations with Cuba - Nixon had staged his famous rapprochement with China by then - and moved against Allende's supporters. Some 14 000 would be tried and executed or expelled from the country, while Pinochet claimed he was only trying to 'restore institutional normality' of Chile.

In June 1974 Pinochet assumed sole power, with the rest of the junta relegated to an advisory role. Under Pinochet's tyrannical rule, it is estimated that 20 000 people were killed and torture was widespread.

While Pinochet continued to maintain tight control over the political opposition, he was rejected by a plebiscite in 1988. He eventually stepped down in 1990 after immunity from prosecution in Chile. He stayed on as army chief of staff. However, during a shopping trip to London in October 1998, he was arrested on a Spanish warrant charging him with murder. He was later accused of torture and human rights violations. For 16 months, he fought his extradition through the British courts, and then in January 2000, Home Secretary Jack Straw decided that he was too ill to stand trial and sent him back to Chile.