

Conquistadors tumble as indigenous Chileans tear down statues

Wednesday 6 November 2019, by [BLAIR Laurence](#) (Date first published: 5 November 2019).

Mapuche protesters in south launch attacks on symbols of Spanish colonial rule and distant government in Santiago

As peaceful protesters and rioters alike have [thronged the streets of the Chilean capital of Santiago](#) to protest against inequality and state repression, a string of no less symbolic blows has also been struck 650km (400 miles) to the south.

In the urban centre of Temuco, hooded demonstrators lassoed a statue of a 16th-century Spanish conquistador last week and [yanked](#) it to the ground.

Cheering bystanders – many wearing the traditional ponchos and headbands of the [indigenous Mapuche people](#) – stamped on the bronze effigy of Pedro de Valdivia and hammered it with wooden staffs.

In the city of Concepción – which Valdivia found in 1550 – a crowd toppled another bust of the Spanish coloniser, [impaled](#) it on a spike, and barbecued it at the feet of a statue of his historical nemesis, the Mapuche chieftain Lautaro.

In the nearby town of Collipulli, a bronze of General Cornelio Saavedra – notorious for leading the bloody 19th-century “pacification” of the Mapuche heartland – suffered a [similar](#) fate.

Most dramatically of all, a statue in Temuco of the Chilean founding father Diego Portales (1793-1837) was [decapitated](#), and his head hung from the arm of a statue of the Mapuche warrior Caupolicán – now also holding the Mapuche flag, or *Wenufoye*.

The statues have been targeted amid [the worst outbreak of political unrest in Chile](#) since the end of Augusto Pinochet’s dictatorship, after what began as a protest over subway fares transformed into a nationwide uprising demanding dramatic changes to the country’s economic and political system.

The attacks on symbols of Spanish colonial rule have provoked a war of words recalling [debates in the US over monuments to Confederate generals](#), or [in the UK regarding prominent statues of slavers and imperialists](#).

Conservative Chilean commentators have [branded](#) them acts of vandalism and the work of “professional agitators”. Others describe an organic – if overexuberant – desire to challenge established historical narratives.

“These are actions of a very potent symbolism, in rejecting an official version that has falsified and grossly airbrushed our history,” said Pedro Cayuqueo, a Mapuche writer and [historian](#). “There’s something far deeper going on.”

The toppling of statues also reflects deep modern-day grievances felt by the Mapuche, who were [absorbed into the Chilean state at gunpoint](#) 150 years ago.

Chile's largest native people – [comprising](#) 10% of the national population of 17 million – has chafed under a far-off central government ever since.

Unequal land ownership, deforestation, pollution and limited political representation were entrenched by the brutal 1973-90 Pinochet regime.

“We Mapuche have been questioning [the economic model and social contract](#) inherited from the dictatorship since the day after the return to democracy,” Cayuqueo added.

This discontent regularly spills over into violence. Radical Mapuche groups have [firebombed](#) more than 900 targets, often ranches and timber trucks, since 2011, claiming 20 lives.

Chile's militarised police force, have [killed](#) about 15 Mapuche since 1990. The fatal police [shooting](#) of an unarmed Mapuche farmer named Camilo Catrillanca, a year ago – and the attempted cover-up that followed – provoked widespread, lingering fury.

Demonstrators in the capital have carried Catrillanca's image and waved the *Wenufoye*, but it is unclear how much the average protester relates to indigenous issues.

“The Mapuche flag cannot only be seen as symbol in favour of the Mapuche cause,” said Kenneth Bunker, a Chilean political scientist, “but also as an anti-system emblem.”

Working-class Chileans share Mapuche scorn for a distant economic and political elite, but are mainly angered by low wages and pensions, poor public healthcare and high school fees, Bunker added.

Still, Mapuche activist groups – who [marched](#) together in Temuco last week – are hoping that [near-unanimous](#) support for rewriting Chile's Pinochet-era constitution will provide a window of opportunity.

Chief among their objectives is for [Chile](#) to become a “plurinational state” like neighbouring Bolivia, granting native peoples greater political autonomy, and their languages and customs official status.

Such demands are shared by smaller aboriginal groups like the Diaguita, an Andean desert people with some 90,000 self-identified descendants. Protesters in the northern city of La Serena likewise felled and burned a statue of the conquistador Francisco de Aguirre in late October, [replacing](#) it with an image of “Milanka”, a Diaguita woman.

Laurence Blair

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P.S.

The Guardian

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Here we are with our annual appeal for the ESSF solidarity fund. We’ve already used almost all of our resources for 2019, and we need to prepare for 2020.

Over the last 12 years, ESSF has built unique solidarity relations in Asia. The calamitous situation in many countries is going to get worse. On October 29th, *Nature Communications* reported on a new study suggesting that the rise in sea levels will claim three times more victims than previously thought; mostly in eastern Asia. [1].

In the face of the increasingly urgent needs, **we are determined to increase the number of our donors, recognising that no donation is too small.** The number of donors is politically important. Each new donor is a confirmation of our solidarity with those facing disasters, a welcome encouragement. And taken together, “small” donations have enabled us to provide significant support to grassroots initiatives.

If you can contribute large sums, all the better! But do not give up the solidarity fund because you would judge the amount of your contribution too insignificant. Our minimum solidarity commitment is €500 – that’s only 10 donations of €50. A basic standard bank transfer to our partners amounts to €1,000 – that’s only 10 donations of €100.

ESSF works on a completely volunteer basis. **It means that 100% of the donations received are actually transferred to our partners abroad.** The costs related to these transfers are mostly bank charges and reduced to a minimum (less than 5%).

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The conditions under which our partners act are increasingly difficult: martial law in Mindanao, extreme violence in social relations in Bangladesh, the rise of aggressive Islamism in Indonesia (particularly targeting women and LGBT +), crossfire Special Services and Fundamentalists in Pakistan ... So we need to fully consider the issue of the security of our partners.

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We ask you to join us by making a donation – small or large – one-off or regular to the ESSF Permanent Solidarity Fund.

We warmly thank all those who are renewing their donations, as well as all those joining us for the

first time!

Pierre Rousset and Adam Novak
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We keep you regularly informed via our website of the situation and use of the solidarity fund.

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41467-019-12808-z>