

The Story of Chile

By JOSEPH M. SINNOTT

Conquest and Settlement

MAGELLAN was the first European to touch the shores of Chile, in 1520; but the first real exploration of that land was undertaken fifteen years later by Diego de Almagro, Pizarro's partner in the conquest of the Incan Empire.

Almagro, as with most Spaniards of that period, was spurred by the lust for gold. When the Indians spread the story that "the country southward"—none other than Chile—was rich in gold, they lied deliberately, hoping to rid their country of the greatest number of Spaniards. Excited by these good reports, Almagro and his company of five hundred men undertook an expedition to Chile, and suffered untold hardships in lonely mountains, burning deserts and swollen rivers. They enslaved whatever Indians they encountered, and left in their wake the bodies of some ten thousand of the unhappy natives.

But gold was nowhere to be found. Bitterly disappointed, Almagro returned to the North. On his return to Cuzco, he became embroiled in the politics there, and ended by being decapitated.

About three years later, one of Pizarro's favorite officers, Pedro de Valdivia, disclosed to his chief a desire to conquer Chile, and asked to be officially named his lieutenant there. Great was Pizarro's surprise at this request, because Chile had lost so much prestige after the ill-fated Almagro expedition. But Valdivia pledged his extensive estates in an effort

to raise funds to finance the expedition, and he managed to muster one hundred and fifty men. The company carried with them materials that would be useful for colonizing the new country—grain, domestic animals and tools.

The Chilean Indians, embittered by their experience with Almagro, received the new explorers with displeasure. They concealed their possessions and made every effort to induce the conquistadors to give up their venture. But Valdivia kept pushing southward. Halfway down the country he founded a city which he called Santiago of New Extremadura. Within a month he formed a *Cabildo*, or municipality, the officials appointed by himself.

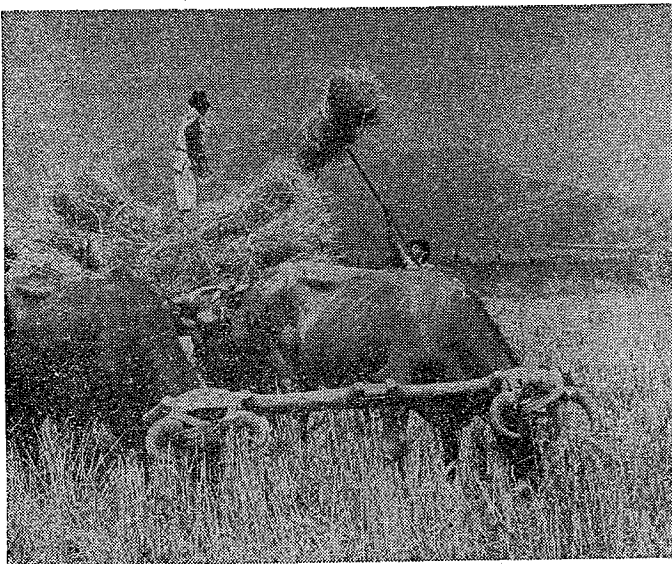
Valdivia at once applied himself to developing his dominion. But scarcely had work begun when the overworked Indians showed signs of hostility. Overnight they rebelled and all but destroyed Santiago. It was a complete disaster for the Spaniards, but the Indians were finally driven to the mountains. And while the city was painfully being reconstructed, the invaders had to live with weapons in hand day and night.

In time, Valdivia received reinforcements from the North and was able to send out parties to scatter the Indians. Other towns were founded and fortresses built to consolidate the gains already made. After thirteen years of exploration and strife, it seemed that the Indian rebellion was at last quelled. There were now about a thousand Spanish settlers, mostly engaged in washing gold, sowing grain and rearing livestock. The conquered Indians were put to work in the mines and farms. The conquest seemed complete—but it was not. The powerful and brave tribe of Araucanians suddenly revolted and overwhelmed the Spaniards. They succeeded in capturing Valdivia and put him to a cruel death.

"Victory or Death" was the motto of the Araucanians, and the Spaniards were never able to completely conquer them. The next two hundred and fifty years is largely a record of warfare between this invincible tribe and the Spaniards. This perpetual conflict discouraged the cultivation of the land, the building of roads and the general development of the country; even the mines had to be abandoned.

Early Government

The autocracy and corruption of the Spanish government in ruling Chile, from Valdivia's time on, sowed the seeds of distrust and hatred toward Spain among the Chilean colonists. The country was ruled in the following manner: A Governor was appointed by the King of Spain, usually for life. When these rulers were not engaged in warfare with the Araucanians they turned to the pursuit of gold; hence the material progress



Courtesy of Grace Line

HARVESTING WHEAT IN CHILE

of the country was slow indeed. Under the Governor was the "Royal Audience," consisting of a president, four judges and two attorney-generals. The members of the Royal Audience were always of Spanish birth, appointed more for favoritism than ability. The Audience also acted as a sort of House of Lords over Chilean municipalities. Members were forbidden to hold commercial dealings or intermarry with the colonists. In the cities, the *Cabildos*, or Municipal Council, consisted of the Mayor and six councillors or aldermen. The officials purchased their positions at annual public auctions. One can imagine the corruption that prevailed in these old Chilean cities.

From the very first there was considerable friction between the Municipal Councils and the Royal Audience. Fortunately, however, so abundant were the resources bestowed by nature on Chile that even bad government could not completely stifle the development and progress of this favored land.

Chile is divisible into three distinct regions as far as climate and products are concerned. The Northern zone is almost tropical. It is a region of steppe-like plains and pampas that gradually rise to the base of the Andes, enriched to an incalculable extent with minerals. In this district are the famous nitrate deposits, found nowhere else in the world in such abundance. The central zone is temperate. It is eminently adapted for agriculture and includes the largest towns and commercial centers. Wheat, maize, olives, fruits, and wines that compare favorably with those of France and Spain, are among the products of this region. The Southern zone in Chile is densely wooded. It is rich in coal and iron and is famous for its sheep farms and fisheries. The climate of Chile generally, though varying greatly from the dry tracts of the North to the cold rains and winds of the extreme South, may fairly be described as temperate.

Such was the land which the courageous Spanish pioneers presented to their King—a land flowing with inexhaustible riches and which merely require labor, capital and good government to tap. Chile would have doubtlessly developed more rapidly were it not for the tyrannical government imposed upon the land. The exorbitant levies, the suppression of literature and the general neglect of the land by the Crown had a bad effect upon both morale and production.

The Spaniards brought to Chile their system of *Repartimientos* and *Encomiendas*. The land assigned to a conqueror was called a *Repartimiento*, and the natives who dwelt on the land were *Encomiendas*, being commended to the care of the owner. The Governors could give these concessions to their more favored companions, subject to the approval of the King. The King of Spain was master of all the conquered territories and their inhabitants. While the system of *Repartimientos* and *Encomiendas* was supposed to be only a temporary proposition, the concession lasting only for the lifetime of the grantee, it was usually converted into an indefinite

heritage, since the heirs usually gave proof of "services" which made them worthy of the inheritance. Some of these estates were tremendous, covering whole valleys.

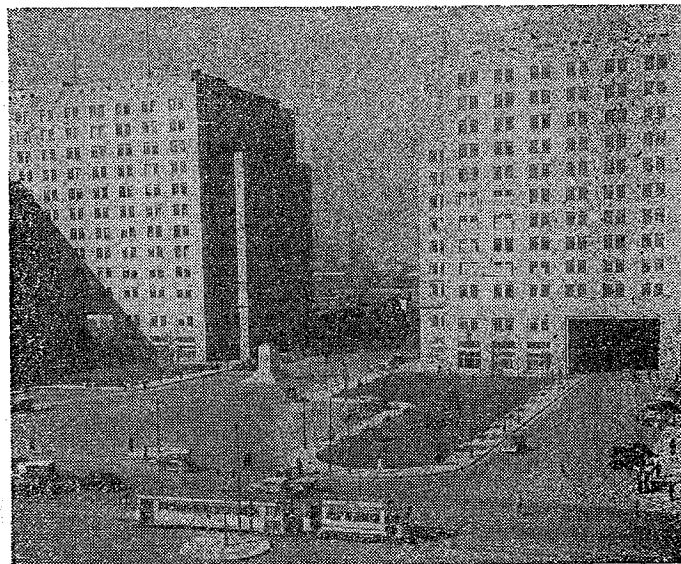
The one spark of humanitarianism during those days came from the Jesuits—the only religious branch independent of the influence of the Spanish Crown. Even at that early period the Jesuits boldly proclaimed the equality of the Spaniard and Indian, provided the latter became a Roman Catholic.

The enslaved Indians, seeing how important it was to obtain the protection of the powerful "black robes," rapidly embraced Christianity. Their women intermarried with the Spanish settlers and soldiers and laid the foundation for what is today the Chilean people.

For a time the Jesuits were able to mitigate the miseries of the Indian slaves. But they remained slaves, and the economic competition of this unpaid labor became a serious menace to the poor Spanish immigrants and ex-soldiers who rapidly sank to the level of the Indians. In all countries where free workmen exist side by side with slaves, as with the poor whites of our own Southern states before the Civil War, the tendency is for the landless workmen to sink to the economic level of the slaves.

After the expulsion of the Jesuits in 1767, the Indians lost their best friends and lapsed again into hopeless misery. They worked under the lash and were branded with the owner's sign.

The colony struggled along and managed to flourish despite the recurring earthquakes and plagues, and the depredations of Indians by land and pirates by sea. But the pressure of the Spanish yoke was becoming more and more unendurable. The colonists wanted free trade with other nations; they wanted to have Spanish-Americans eligible equally with



Courtesy of Grace Line

PLAZA IN SANTIAGO

Spaniards to all positions and employments, and to have elected councils in place of the corrupt *Cabildos*. Then, too, there was the burning question of the tithes. The King, besides his "royal fifth" of all the produce, appropriated a large portion of the tithes destined for the Church. He farmed out these tithes in large lots to wealthy speculators who re-farmed them to smaller bidders, all seeking to profit from their purchases.

Under all these exactions, tithes and impositions, the Chilean peasantry suffered severely.

The Blow for Independence

At that time all the land of Chile belonged to less than three hundred persons. About half the landowners held the best estates, which they sublet to tenants at what would now be termed rack-rents. In addition, the landowners formed combinations to rule prices in the markets. Their control was complete, and the people were exploited thoroughly.

At first the aim of Chile, and of the other Spanish-American colonies, was to obtain redress of these grievances from Spain. But the Declaration of Independence of the English colonies that now form the United States stirred the Chileans, and antagonism toward the Spanish Crown grew apace.

In 1791, the Irish-born Ambrosio O'Higgins became the Governor-General of Chile and Field-Marshal of the Army. He made peace with the Araucanians, improved the condition of the slaves, built new cities and gave an impetus to trade.

Meanwhile, Napoleon invaded Spain and set up Joseph Bonaparte as King of Spain and the Spanish dominions. The Chileans were opposed to the Napoleonic régime, which they thought would be permanent, and this served to increase the friction. A strong Home Rule party arose. At a meeting on September 18, 1810, the birthday of Chilean Independence, it was resolved that an Administrative Council be elected, with governing powers—the *Junta Provisional*. The first Congress was held—significantly enough—on July 4 of the following year, and it accomplished many reforms. Slavery was abolished, free trade decreed, purchased offices were done away with and elective offices established.

The Spanish Royalists, fearing the loss of property and power, cast their lot with Bonaparte and opposed with force the new régime. Bernardo O'Higgins, son of the Governor-General, commanded the loyalist troops, but was defeated after a bitter struggle in which the sterling calibre of the native troops was tested and established. O'Higgins fled to Argentina and there joined forces with General San Martín, the "Hannibal of the Andes." In 1817 they re-entered Chile and completely overthrew the Royalists. O'Higgins was then appointed "Supreme Dictator." He at once organized a navy to protect the long coastline, and invited the Scotch naval hero, Lord Cochrane, to become Vice-Admiral of the fleet.

England was the first country to recognize Chilean inde-

pendence, with the result that British trade with the young republic grew by leaps and bounds.

Bernardo O'Higgins retired with honors in 1823, and ten years later the Chilean political constitution, which remained practically unaltered until quite recently, was adopted.

Industrial Development

The development of Chile in the eighteen-fifties was rapid. Railways and banks were built, laws codified on the plan of the Code Napoleon, public education established, and Welsh and Scotch sheep farmers were attracted. Santiago was embellished with many public buildings. Although Chile was engaged in many wars throughout the nineteenth century—with Spain, Bolivia and Peru—she made consistent progress in the arts of peace. Shortly after the overthrow of the would-be dictator, Balmaceda, in 1891, and the settlement of the boundary dispute with Argentina through the mediation of Great Britain, international capitalists were attracted to Chile by the huge nitrate deposits. Since that time Chile has loomed large in the world of finance.

English capitalists opened the coal mines in the South and the nitrate mines in the North. They built the railroads and guided the construction of the excellent Chilean navy. England may be said to have played a most important part in the evolution of modern Chile, having acted as banker, engineer and promoter.

A little later, a tide of European immigration swept over the country, bringing French, Italian and German agriculturists. The latter formed large colonies and under their auspices agriculture developed rapidly, many products being added to the export list.

World War I disrupted the economy of Chile and turned its thoughts from Europe to the United States. American capital did not tarry long in seizing the opportunity. Under the leadership of Braden and the Guggenheims, the vast copper resources of Chile were tapped. Manufactured goods from the United States flowed into the markets and more friendly relations were established with the "Colossus of the North." Large loans were contracted. The "dance of the millions" had begun.

After the war, the wave of revolution and reform that was sweeping the world was also felt in Chile. There were aspirations for more popular government and greater justice in the distribution of wealth. This urge led to the election of Arturo Alessandri, in 1920, the protagonist of social reform. He made great progress until the Army grew restive and finally revolted in 1924. After a year of turbulent political changes, the reform element again gained the ascendancy, and the Reform Constitution was adopted. This was strengthened by the Reformist Drive from 1925 to 1931 under General Ibanez.

The world-wide depression struck a serious blow at Chile's economy. After a period of great unrest, Alessandri, who

seemed to have the confidence of the people, was recalled in 1932. He found many serious problems to be faced—widespread unemployment, a deficit in the public treasury and a huge foreign debt. Typhus fever came with the general spread of poverty. Lack of social discipline was helping along the unrest. As usual, there was the resort to inflation, with a resultant rise in the cost of living, from which the proletarian class suffered most. The cost of daily necessities tripled in five years, but wages did not rise correspondingly.

The Popular Front

In the election of 1937 the Conservatives obtained a triumph, chiefly by buying votes. But in the following year most of the liberals and radicals united to form a left wing Popular Front, similar to the French model. They chose as their candidate Pedro Aguirre Cerda, a former associate of Alessandri. The Conservatives selected Gustavo Ross. Each of these candidates, incidentally, belonged to the group of Chilean millionaires. General Ibanez also injected his candidacy along Nazistic line, with the backing of the two hundred thousand Germans in Chile and their numerous sympathizers. Cerda won by a small majority. Thus Chile was to have the first Popular Front government in America.

The new administration promptly undertook its program for social betterment. It proposed to increase national production, improve the status of the common people, provide for internal security and defense, reorganize public education, reduce the price of food, and make extensive appropriations for roads, public housing and other social projects.

Unfortunately, progress was checked by the disastrous earthquake of 1939, which destroyed cities, tens of thousands of lives, and millions of dollars of property. To rehabilitate the country, President Cerda asked Congress for appropriations. The proposal called for an increase in income, inheritance and corporation taxes, falling mostly on the wealthy class. But the rightist element in Congress was able to shift the burden by securing a loan of twelve million dollars from the Export-Import Bank of the United States, and by increasing the internal taxes and control over economic enterprises of foreign ownership.

The outbreak of World War II caused more discontent, with strong Nazi elements under Ibanez becoming troublesome. The rightist element took advantage of the unrest to impede the government's attempt to break up the great estates, and hamper the assistance to Jewish and Spanish refugees.

Uniformly supporting a wider Pan-American policy, Chile, in common with other Latin-American countries, has accepted military and other missions from the United States and has further cooperated in the defense of the Western Hemisphere. The government has been taking measures to protect the country from further Nazi infiltration.

About the middle of last November, President Cerda was suddenly stricken with a severe illness, and within a fortnight "Don Tinto," as he was called, the beloved friend of the workingman, was carried to his rest, amid great demonstration of grief.

Chile's new president, elected February 1st of this year, is Juan Antonio Rios. He was the Popular Front candidate, and his opponent was General Ibanez. Chile, like Argentina, has until recently been cautious about breaking with the Axis. But under Rios, it is certain that she will completely avow the policy of Pan-American solidarity and cooperation against the Axis.

The Problem

In their long and valiant struggle for freedom, the Chilean people have at last been able to secure a popular government. But the social and economic problems remain far from solved. Despite the great development of the country, it is just as difficult for the average citizen to make a living as it was a century ago. Ninety per cent. of the four-and-a-half million people of Chile live in the utmost destitution, and this scourge of poverty brings with it disease, suffering and premature death. Despite vigorous educational efforts, it is a shocking fact that seventy-five per cent. of the boys who appear for compulsory military training cannot read or write.

Superimposed on this mass of struggling humanity are Chile's one hundred families who control the land and the natural resources with which the country is so amply endowed. These families, with their local henchmen and international colleagues, are the real masters of Chile. Time and again the toiling masses have revolted against this leadership; time and again they have been crushed.

Democracy cannot be a progressive and functioning reality in a country where the great majority of people are poverty-stricken and illiterate. They must be educated—but it is well-nigh impossible to enlighten people who are sunk in the depths of poverty and despair. Therefore their economic status must be raised concomitantly—their standard of living must be improved so that their minds may be open to reason and learning.

When the writer was first in Chile, some years ago, he noticed that many people wore white patches of plaster on their temples. Inquiry revealed that this was the local cure for headache. Further investigation disclosed that many cures were undoubtedly effected by this means, but that once the patches were in place no one ever stopped to consider the cause of the headache. The social and economic legislation in Chile has been like that; they have been applying political patches. What Chile really needs is an application of effort toward removing the fundamental causes of the ills that beset that splendid country.