

Chile: In Memory of Carlos and Pinochet's "Caravan of Death". Assassination of Political Prisoners Endorsed by Kissinger

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September 11, 1973.

We are commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Military Coup.

*Important **testimony of how political prisoners were killed.***

Henry Kissinger was behind the coup. "Intimo amigo del General Pinochet"

Every dawn, during my daily walk to the foothills of the Andes, I pass by the Tobalaba Aerodrome, a facility that caters to a wide variety of private aircraft. For most residents of La Reina, the Santiago neighborhood where my wife and I have a home, this is an attractive and benign open space in a congested city, a guarantee that no skyscraper will blur the skyline. For me, in a year marking the 50th anniversary of the coup against the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende, that airport arouses less affable feelings.

It was from there, just weeks after the military uprising of September 11, 1973, that a huge Puma helicopter took off, crammed with Chilean army officers on a mission entrusted to

them by General Augusto Pinochet to ensure that Allende supporters who had already been given light sentences by local military courts in the south and north of the country were summarily executed. Among the 97 political prisoners killed by what came to be called the Caravan of Death was a friend of mine, a young communist named Carlos Berger.

Image: Carlos Berger with his wife Carmen Hertz.



Carlos and I had been colleagues at the state publishing house, Quimantú, which published popular magazines and millions of books at very low prices. I remember him as handsome and serious and sometimes mischievous, but above all I remember his intense commitment to the peaceful revolution that Allende had inaugurated when he won the presidency in 1970. The last time we met, Carlos told me, with overflowing emotion, that his wife, Carmen Hertz, had given birth to a son, Germán, who would grow up, he added, in a country without exploitation, without injustice. Carlos himself was leaving Santiago to run a radio station in Calama, known as the Mining Capital of Chile. He could not have known that this move to the north of the country would mean, at the age of thirty, his death sentence.

Despite not having offered violent resistance to the coup, he was sentenced to 70 days in prison, a sentence that had been commuted to a fine.

He was then about to be released when the Caravan of Death arrived in that Puma helicopter, with a lethal result: on October 19, Carlos and 25 other political prisoners were loaded, hooded, onto a truck that was lost in the wastelands of the Atacama Desert, where their guts were eviscerated with corvos before they were shot at point-blank range. The mutilated corpses were buried under the anonymous sands of that place, the driest in the world.

Years later, this tragedy would claim new victims. Carlos' parents, Julio and Dora, ended up committing suicide. As for Carlos' remains, his widow Carmen had to wait until 2014 for a mock funeral to be held, when forensic scientists identified some small human fragments found in a dune as belonging to the missing husband.

Last year, Carmen, a well-known human rights activist and now a member of Congress, co-sponsored a bill that funds the construction in front of the entrance to the Aerodrome of a Memorial commemorating the human rights violated there.

Because it was not only the site from which the Caravan of Death departed. Other Puma helicopters were later used to dispose of political prisoners who had died under torture by throwing them into the sea.

The military tied railroad tracks to the dead, so that they would sink into the Pacific Ocean and their mangled bodies would not be able to accuse the murderers. A cruel and effective way for them to remain eternally “disappeared”. And that is why the monument, austere and imposing, will exhibit in front of the Aerodrome a row of raised branches, crying to the sky against the flights of death. It is expected that the law, already approved in the Lower House (88 in favor, 49 against, 15 abstentions – let’s note these numbers), will soon be ratified by the Senate.

One more way to remember what happened and that it should never happen again.

Not everyone, however, is happy with the Memorial. A group of La Reina residents has started a campaign to prevent the monument from being erected. They are filled with fear, they say, that the site will become a point of conflict and unrest. Social networks warn that it will foment violence, that mobs will come to paint graffiti on the walls, to build barricades, to loot stores. Although there is not a single instance of such violence occurring in front of the many human rights memorials scattered across the country, that has not deterred those who suggest that it would be better to move the monument to another part of the city. Out of sight, out of mind?

Image: Proposed monument for the disappearances



It would not even be worth mentioning such protests in a lonely Chilean neighborhood if it were not representative of something more serious. This attempt to inflame citizens against a memorial for human rights victims is one more skirmish in a larger and more protracted national battle for memory that has been intensifying as the 50th anniversary of the coup approaches. The question Chileans will inevitably have to answer throughout this year is how do we want to remember that day in September 1973 when the Presidential Palace was bombed and Salvador Allende died along with the democracy he defended?

There are two main answers to that question.

The government of President Gabriel Boric, a charismatic thirty-seven year old former student leader and ardent admirer of Allende, is organizing a series of activities and commemorations that will culminate on September 11.

The emphasis will be on Memory and Human Rights as a way of guaranteeing a future where a dictatorship is inconceivable, especially for the new generations who did not live through the endless nightmare of terror suffered by their elders. The key, therefore, is to educate young people who are increasingly skeptical that democracy can respond to their frustrations and anxieties.

The stakes are high.

Like so many countries around the world, Chile is in crisis. Rampant crime, waves of immigrants, economic insecurity, drought and forest fires, political polarization, quasi-environmental hatred, are fertile ground for the rise of authoritarian populism, nurtured by a nostalgia for the days when a strongman ruled Chile and there was order in the streets.

To inoculate against new forms of tyranny, it is not enough to remember the atrocities of the past, the railroad tracks that burden us, but it is equally necessary to encourage anew the popular belief that a different and better Chile is possible, the kind of dream that fueled Allende's peaceful and democratic revolution.

It is also a way for Boric, whose government has yet to recover from the resounding defeat of a progressive Constitution last year, to change the narrative and retake the initiative, reminding people how many excessively wealthy politicians and businessmen who call themselves democratic benefited from Pinochet's seventeen years of dictatorship, how many were and remain his accomplices.

Remembering that Pinochet's roots -say, that original sin- does not suit the right wing that is viciously opposing the leftist Boric. Its leaders prefer the 50th anniversary to be an occasion to leave the past behind -a denialist attitude whose persistence and obstinacy is proved by that 42% of the representatives of the Congress who chose not to approve the Aerodrome memorial. If the past is to be remembered, they say, what must be kept in mind is their trauma, the mistakes and disorder of the Allende years, how the desire for a socialist society led to insurmountable divisions that forced the Armed Forces to act. The "excesses" (the assassination of Carlos Berger?) are to be deplored, but Chile needs to learn once again the basic lesson of the coup: If we persist in demanding too much change, the result will be disastrous. And virulent. Boric must be careful not to try to push for overly radical reforms.

These two visions will clash throughout this year, as they have done for the last five decades.

In Chile, as in the rest of the world, the way a nation understands its most traumatic past is constantly determining its deepest identity, the kind of future it imagines for its children.

I cannot predict how my country will emerge from this search for an elusive unity, a consensus about who we really are.

I hope that, in that process, the dead will not be absent.

I hope that Chileans can hear the voice of Carlos Berger demanding, from the dark night he inhabits, that we remember him and, with that gentle and fierce memory, we can create a world where no child like Germán grows up without a father, no father like Julio and no mother like Dora dies of pain and despair, no widow like Carmen has to remember him through a monument.

It would be the best recognition and legacy of Carlos and so many other brothers and sisters whose lives were cut short after the coup: may his memory be a spur to unite us and not to separate us, may we be able, as a nation, to defeat the fear, hatred and blindness that prevent us from doing justice to the living and the dead.

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