GlobalResearch
Center for Research on Globalization

“Operation Condor”: The CIA’s Secret Global War Against Latin America’s Left

By Branko Marcetic
Global Research, December 04, 2020
Jacobin 30 November 2020

Region: USA
Theme: History, Intelligence

Forty-five years ago, under a cloak of secrecy, Operation Condor was officially launched: a global campaign of violent repression against the Latin American left by the region’s quasi-fascist military dictatorships. The US government not only knew about the program — it helped to engineer it.

***

In Buenos Aires, a former Chilean general returns home, opens his garage door, and is blasted thirteen feet in the air when his car explodes, incinerating his wife. A conservative opponent of the country’s military dictatorship and his wife take an afternoon walk on the streets of Rome and are swiftly gunned down. On a rainy autumn morning, a car blows up in the middle of Washington, DC’s Embassy Row, killing two of the three inside: a leader of Chile’s opposition in exile and his newlywed American friend.These were just some of the most prized scalps claimed by Operation Condor, officially inaugurated forty-five years and two days ago. With South America in the grip of military dictatorships and rocked by the same kinds of social and political movements that were demanding change all over the world in the 1960s and ’70s, a handful of the continent’s governments made a pact to work together to roll back the rising tide of “subversives” and “terrorists.”What followed was a secret, global campaign of violent repression that spanned not just countries, but continents, and featured everything from abduction and torture to murder. To say it was known about by the US government, which backed these regimes, is an understatement: though even this simple fact was denied at the time, years of investigations and document releases since then mean that we now know the CIA and top-ranking US officials supported, laid the groundwork for, and were even directly involved in Condor’s crimes.

Zooming out, Condor was hardly some uniquely shocking case of anticommunist paranoia spiraling out of control. As its connections to anticommunist terror in Europe have become clearer, it looks more like a particularly successful example of the covert war the US national security state had set into motion all over the world against democracy and the Left, a war that saw it get into bed with fascists and that, in some cases, arguably constituted genocide. It was the system working exactly as intended, in other words, and a stark reminder of the lengths the global centers of power will go to keep things the way they are.

World War Three

The middle of the twentieth century saw a flourishing of people’s movements in Latin America that threatened to upend the rigid hierarchies of the hemisphere: feminist and workers’ movements, movements for indigenous rights, peasant-led movements for agrarian reform, and leftist movements, to name a few. Naturally, they had to be

stopped.Until then, Washington-backed juntas and dictatorships had successfully kept a lid on such social change, or simply overthrew whatever governments those movements succeeded in forming. Such changes, after all, directly threatened not just the power and privileges of the region's long-standing elite, but Western business interests, too. So it was that, at the prodding of US-owned corporations like Chase Manhattan, Anaconda Copper, and Pepsi, former corporate lawyer and then-president Richard Nixon backed the military overthrow of Salvador Allende's democratically elected socialist government in 1973, and its replacement by a vicious dictatorship under General Augusto Pinochet.But for the region's paranoid leadership, even their internal campaigns of terror were not enough. So, in 1975, the governments of Chile, Argentina, Bolivia, Paraguay, and Uruguay secretly met in Santiago, Chile, and agreed to work together to spy on and track "suspicious individuals" and organizations "directly or indirectly linked to Marxism." Before long, Brazil, Peru, and Ecuador joined up, too. The information-gathering initiative was dubbed "Condor," in honor of the national bird of several of the participants, including the host country.

Despite what the minutes stated, this was no mere surveillance pact. What Operation Condor meant in practice was that the state kidnappings, torture, and murder that had run roughshod over the remaining pockets of dissent within these countries would now go beyond their national borders. If you were a leftist or anyone else the government saw as a threat, then escape, exile, and even asylum would no longer save you. There was nowhere to hide.

"Argentina was still a democracy at the time, and was a safe haven for many leftists who had been forced out of several countries in the Southern Cone," says New York University associate professor Remi Brulin. "Suddenly, they realized that was not safe anymore."

While Condor officially lasted only a few years, the region's governments had long collaborated in less formalized ways to stamp out their political opponents. According to the Database on South America's Transnational Human Rights Violations, between 1969 and 1981, such cross-border operations claimed at least 763 victims of atrocities ranging from kidnapping and torture to outright murder, nearly half of them Uruguayan, close to a quarter Argentine, and 15 percent of them Chilean. Most of these atrocities took place in Argentina, which saw 544 cases, with Uruguay a distant second at 129.

As explained in a 1976 report by Harry W. Shlaudeman, Richard Nixon's assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs, South American officials like Uruguay's foreign minister Juan Carlos Blanco Estradé ("one of the brighter and normally steadier members of the group") saw themselves as fighting a "Third World War," with "the countries of the southern cone as the last bastion of Christian civilization." Having come to power "in battle against the extreme left," he noted, these repressive governments had "their ego, their salaries, and their equipment-budgets" inextricably wrapped up in this concept.

The result was a stream of often stomach-churning crimes. The typical Condor operation might go something like this: once a target was identified, a team — made up of nationals from one or more member countries — would find and surveil the individual, before a second team snatched and spirited them away to a secret prison, sometimes in the country they'd been found, sometimes elsewhere. There they would be held and tortured, including beatings, waterboarding, mock executions, electrocution, rape, and worse, sometimes for months on end. In some cases, family members were kidnapped and tortured, too, or even stolen from them, for no reason beyond sadism. According to the database, there are at least twenty-three cases of the kidnapping of victims' children, passed off to their killers to

be raised as their own.

Few survived, though more often than not, the exact fate of those who were taken isn't clear. They were simply never heard from again. On occasion, survivors brought back word about the disappeared, such as witnesses who remembered Jorge Isaac Fuentes Alarcón, a sociologist arrested while crossing the Argentina-Paraguay border and accused of being a courier for the far-left Chilean group MIR. The stories were never pretty. Those witnesses later testified that they'd seen Fuentes arrive at the Villa Grimaldi death camp in Santiago covered in scabies, with one victim-turned-collaborator-under-duress recalling that he was chained in a doghouse full of parasites, mockingly referred to as "pichicho" (street dog).

Yet such testimony also spoke to the resilience of the human spirit and the sense of solidarity that knitted such leftist groups together. Fuentes was in good spirits, witnesses said, and bucked up other prisoners by singing. One young prisoner recalled how Patricio Biedma, another arrested MIR member, had been a father figure for him in prison, teaching him how to survive. Biedma's wife and three children never learned what became of their loved one.

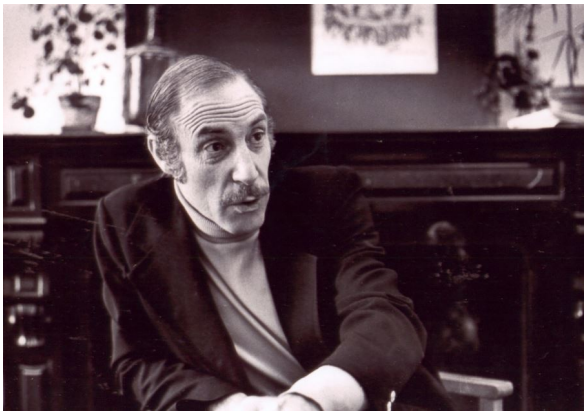
Though Condor ostensibly targeted "guerrillas" and "Marxists," the people of South America learned early on and in an especially brutal way what US protesters and law-abiding Muslims would learn after the Bush years: that such malleable terms can be stretched to mean almost anyone.

"Operation Condor pursued many types of political opponents, including congressional representatives, former ministers, human rights advocates (including people in Amnesty International), constitutionalist military officers, peasant leaders, unionists, priests and nuns, professors and students," says J. Patrice McSherry, professor emerita of political science at Long Island University and author of *Predatory States: Operation Condor and Covert War in Latin America*. "Condor targeted not only the Left, but also the center-left and other democratic sectors that were fighting to demand their rights and make more inclusive the elitist democracies of the era."

"First, the aim was to stop terrorism," one operative from the Department of National Intelligence (DINA), Chile's feared secret police, explained. "Then possible extremists were targeted, and later those who might be converted into extremists." Or, as one Argentine general put it: "First we will kill all the subversives; then we will kill their collaborators; then their sympathizers; then those who are indifferent."

Though this was supposed to be justified by the dire threat of left-wing violence, it's hard to take such a threat seriously today. Not only were the Condor governments targeting individuals who were peaceful or unconnected to any revolutionary movements, but those movements had largely been defeated or even given up on armed struggle. As Shlaudeman put it to Henry Kissinger in 1976: "Both terrorists and the peaceful left have failed. This is true even in the minds of studious revolutionaries." Fernando Lopez has argued that the regimes "grossly overstated the threat posed by the revolutionary movements" so they could go after their real target: the opposition in exile, who drew global sympathy and solidarity, and isolated the Condor governments internationally.

Image on the right: Orlando Letelier, killed by a car bomb in Washington, DC, in 1976. (The Transnational Institute)



Their plans weren't confined to the continent. Twelve of the victims of cross-border operations came from countries outside of the region, including the UK, Italy, France, and the United States, while some of the most high-profile targets were assassinated in European countries, making Condor not just a transnational operation, but a global one. As exiled left-wing and moderate opponents of Pinochet's dictatorship planned to campaign for diplomatic isolation of the country, he plotted to take them out.Agents of DINA planned attacks in Portugal and France, and tried repeatedly to kill Carlos Altamirano, general secretary of the Socialist Party of Chile: once in Mexico, when they showed up too late; several times in Paris, when they were foiled by French intelligence; and once in Madrid, where the attempt failed. Bernardo Leighton, the founder of Chile's Christian Democrat Party, may not have been a radical — he opposed much of Allende's program — but he was guilty of meeting with Socialist leaders to form an opposition front of exiles against the regime. He survived a gunshot to the back of the head in Rome, but was left with permanent brain damage, ending his opposition activities.While Pinochet took a leading role, the targets weren't just Chilean. Scotland Yard prevented the assassination of Uruguayan senator Wilson Ferreira Aldunate in London, while then-representative Edward Koch, later to become mayor of New York City, was warned by then-CIA director George H. W. Bush that there was a threat on his life, thanks to his successful amendment to end US military aid to Uruguay. In Buenos Aires, two Uruguayan legislators and two activists were kidnapped in the early morning and later found with shots to the head in a car left under a bridge. Meanwhile, as journalist John Dinges has pointed out, a slew of seemingly natural deaths in a few short years of opponents in exile of the continent's various dictatorships raises further suspicions.

Perhaps the most famous victim of Condor was Orlando Letelier, Allende's former ambassador to the United States. After being detained and tortured by the regime following the coup, diplomatic pressure allowed Letelier to escape and eventually return to Washington, DC, where he soon became one of the most visible and influential members of Chile's opposition to exile. Set up in the heart of American power and hobnobbing with US officials and their families, Letelier led a successful legislative campaign to ban US arms sales to Chile, lobbied against a $63 million investment by a Dutch company into the country, and fiercely criticized Pinochet's free-market economic reforms.

All of it made him a marked man. In 1976, two DINA agents entered the United States on passports from Paraguay, a fellow Condor member, and with the help of two exiled Cuban anti-communists, rigged a bomb to Letelier's car that detonated right on DC's Embassy Row, killing him and one of his two American passengers. Until September 11, 2001, it would remain the worst act of foreign terrorism on US soil.

The Dirty Work

For years, the official story was that the US government learned about Condor roughly around the same time as everyone else, in 1976. In fact, through declassifications, firsthand testimony, and the work of historians, we now know that this program of state terror had been sanctioned, facilitated, and encouraged by the US government.Contrary to its denials at the time, a CIA report produced for Congress in 2000 would admit that "within a year after the [1973 Chilean] coup, the CIA and other US government agencies were aware of bilateral cooperation among regional intelligence services to track the activities of and, in at least a few cases, kill political opponents" — a "precursor" to Condor. Consider, too, that Manuel Contreras, the ruthless DINA chief knee-deep in Condor, was a (at one point, paid) CIA asset from 1974 to 1977, despite an internal 1975 report finding him "the principal obstacle to a reasonable human rights policy within the junta."For decades, speculation has abounded about just how unintentionally oblivious segments of the US government really were to the Letelier operation specifically. Despite being repeatedly alerted to the DINA agents' attempts to enter the United States, and its suspicious nature, the CIA did nothing. A mere five days before they killed Letelier, Kissinger backpedaled an order for US ambassadors in a handful of the Condor countries to express the US government's "deep concerns" over the reported plans of overseas assassination. Earlier that year, Pinochet had personally complained to Kissinger about Letelier's activities, in a conversation in which Kissinger assured the dictator that "we are sympathetic with what you are trying to do."

But worse, evidence uncovered by figures like McSherry and Dinges suggest the US government wasn't just aware of the crimes of Condor, but directly involved in them.

Archival documents show the CIA, FBI, and even US embassies providing intelligence and names of suspects to the Condor governments, with both hemispheres looking into suspects on their home turf at the other's behest. That included Fuentes, the results of whose interrogation (including the names he gave up) the US embassy in Buenos Aires relayed to Chilean police. Contreras himself later insisted, in court and to reporters, that the CIA had been involved in both the murder of Letelier and Carlos Prats, the former Chilean general blown up in Argentina a year before Condor's founding, and that he had given the FBI documents proving his claims in 2000.There is strong evidence that US officers played a key role in the 1973 murder of two Americans, journalist Charles Horman and student Frank Teruggi, in the days that followed the coup, and that US intelligence was surveilling them. A 1979 Senate report stated that as early as 1974, the CIA had warned local authorities in France and Portugal about incoming Condor assassinations and discussed setting up a Condor headquarters with DINA in Miami — a move it rejected at the time but proceeded with a few years later with the Argentinians.McSherry later found yet another damning document, this one a 1978 cable from the then-US ambassador to Paraguay. The cable reported that Condor governments "keep in touch with one another through a US communications installation in the Panama Canal Zone" ("CONDORTEL"), using it to "co-ordinate intelligence information among the Southern cone countries." This was just two years after Shlaudeman informed Kissinger of the "paranoia" of South American governments, who were increasingly targeting "non-violent dissent from the left and the center left" and "nearly anyone who opposes government policy," and after the US embassy in Buenos Aires warned Kissinger that Argentinian security forces, in collaboration with neighboring governments, were involved in brutal "excesses . . . often involving innocent people."

Image below: Henry Kissinger with President Richard Nixon, 1970.

In fact, it was precisely those at the very top, like Kissinger, who gave their approval to the Condor governments' plans. Upon being told by Brazil's newly installed dictator Emílio Garrastazu Médici in 1971 that the South American country was planning to help overthrow Chile's elected socialist government, Nixon offered money and aid for the effort, telling him the two governments needed to work together to "prevent new Allendes and Castros and try where possible to reverse these trends." It was during those meetings, according to a later memo, that Nixon asked Médici for support "in safeguarding the internal security and status quo in the hemisphere," which one general read as a request for Brazil to "do the dirty work."

Kissinger himself infamously told the foreign minister of Argentina in June 1976, in between repeatedly assuring him the US government hoped for the new junta's success: "If there are things that have to be done, you should do them quickly."

Behind the Throne

But the US government's role in the birth of Condor went well beyond diplomatic winks and nods.The methods and strategies employed by Condor operatives had their roots in the US training that Latin American militaries received through vehicles like the notorious School of the Americas (SOA), which aimed to pass on the battlefield and counterinsurgency lessons the US military had learned over its past decades of war-making. The SOA's "graduates" eventually comprised one of every seven members of the DINA command staff, after learning the very things they would soon become feared for in their home countries: assassination, extortion, coercion against family members, psychological manipulation and the use of drugs, and torture techniques, including electrocution and even the specific, sensitive nerve points it could be applied to — just to name a few.Before Condor, the earliest laboratories for this training were Guatemala and Vietnam. Guatemala saw around 200,000 people killed between the 1954 coup and 1996, many of them victims of, first, a US-led assassination and paramilitary war program in the 1950s, and, through the 1960s, a counterinsurgency program that featured bombing, kidnapping, torture, and murder of "communists and terrorists" — the first instance of mass disappearances in Latin America, and all taught and facilitated by US security forces.

Running parallel to this was the CIA-led Phoenix Programin Vietnam, in which US forces financed, directed, and oversaw a campaign of assassination, terror, and torture carried out by South Vietnamese locals against the Viet Cong and, especially, their civilian sympathizers. The resulting atrocities didn't stop the Phoenix experience from informing the training manuals for future Condor operatives.

Besides this, the United States also laid the groundwork for Condor by instigating and formalizing a unified, anti-communist front among the powerful Latin American militaries. The US government had been warning its commanders about the communist menace since at least 1945, with US money, arms, and training soon following. This escalated after the 1959 Cuban revolution, with President John F. Kennedy issuing the internal defense and development (IDAD) doctrine encouraging military repression in the region, and the Conference of American Armies (CAA) held annually from 1960 on. As one 1971 state department cable later outlined, "it is especially desirable that such neighboring countries as Argentina and Brazil collaborate effectively with the Uruguayan security forces and where possible we should encourage such cooperation."

Like the SOA and US telecommunications networks, the CAA was a piece of the hemisphere's wider US national security structure that eventually became the skeleton for Condor. The CAA's charter defined its member armies' mission as "protect[ing] the continent from the aggressive action of the International Communist Movement," and early meetings revolved around many of the hallmarks of Condor: fighting "communist aggression," intelligence-sharing on subversives, and systems of schools, telecommunication networks, and training programs for this purpose. In one 1966 meeting, Argentina's military dictator floated the creation of "an intelligence center coordinated among Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay," while seven years later, the head of Brazil's army suggested to "extend the exchange of information" among attendees to "struggle against subversion."

The United States then took a leading role in establishing the post-coup dictatorships' spy agencies who provided the foot soldiers of Condor, including Paraguay's La Técnica, Brazil's SNI, and, of course, DINA. Contreras would later charge that the CIA officers sent down to do the honors actually "wanted to remain in Chile, in charge of the principal DINA posts," an idea Pinochet nixed.

While sanctioned by its security forces and high-ranking officials, US involvement sometimes elicited objections, even horror from those lower down. The US embassy in Argentina warned Kissinger in 1976 that the "kind of counterviolence" employed by the country's dictatorship "could eventually create more problems than it solves" and that "many who formerly supported the govt [sic] have been alienated by its tolerance of excesses on the part of the security forces — often involving innocent people." It echoed the more unabashed outrage of one Guatemalan embassy official in 1968, who asked: "Is it conceivable that we are so obsessed with insurgency that we are prepared to rationalize murder as an acceptable counter-insurgency weapon?"The more information we learn only deepens US government complicity. This year's revelation that the Swiss encryption company Crypto AG was secretly a CIA front that gave the agency a back door to the encrypted communications of the governments that used it suggests the US government was likely aware of what Condor members were up to in real time. Condor countries had, after all, built their entire communication network around Crypto AG's hardware."There Are No Rules"

That the US government was behind a secret, continent-wide campaign of political terror and repression speaks to the paranoia of the country's elites, inflamed by the rising power of the Soviet Union and the movements they viewed as manipulable by it. As the 1954 Doolittle Report put it, when "facing an implacable enemy whose avowed objective is world domination by whatever means . . . there are no rules in such a game," "acceptable norms of human conduct do not apply," and "long-standing American concepts of 'fair play' must be reconsidered."No wonder the blood-soaked officials of Condor countries saw kindred

spirits in their US counterparts. “The only thing separating us is our uniforms, for the men of the armies of America, I believe, have never before understood one another as we do at this moment,” the commander of Uruguay’s joint chiefs told a 1975 CAA meeting. “There exists a coordination among the armies of the continent to combat and impede Marxist infiltration or whatever other form of subversion.”What this meant in practice is that the US government got in bed with not just authoritarians and dictators, but even out-and-out fascists.

Noam Chomsky has pointed out the parallels between fascist thought and the “national security doctrine” that drove the Latin American dictators’ repression, with its belief in the preeminence of the state over the individual and of permanent war. But US officials noticed it, too. As Shlaudeman noted, the Latin American dictatorships were driven not just by anti-Marxism, but by a nationalist “developmentalist” ideology in which military establishments partnered with technocrats to deliver industrialization.

“National developmentalism has obvious and bothersome parallels to National Socialism,” he wrote. “Opponents of the military regimes call them fascist. It is an effective pejorative, the more so because it can be said to be technically accurate.”

These parallels were more horrifyingly clear in the militaries’ treatment of dissidents. As figures like photographer João de Carvalho Pina and historian Daniel Feierstein have noted, the overcrowding, starvation, tortures, and general dehumanizing treatment of prisoners by the Condor dictatorships bore obvious similarities with the conditions of Nazi concentration camps.

But it went beyond mere parallels. Argentine camps were suffused with Nazism: decorated with swastikas and portraits of Hitler, recordings of Nazi speeches ringing through facilities, prisoners painted with swastikas and forced to yell “Heil Hitler,” with especially sadistic tortures reserved for Jewish captives. Escaped former Nazis had, after all, been welcomed into Latin American military dictatorships, including the former head of Gestapo in Lyon, Klaus Barbie. Wanted in France for unspeakable crimes, Barbie instead resettled in Bolivia, teaching torture and repression to military officers across the continent, before eventually helping organize the country’s 1980 “Cocaine Coup” and taking up a role in the military dictatorship that followed.

Ex-fascists “infiltrated various sectors of the Argentine Society,” Argentine journalist Tomás Eloy Martínez explained. “It would be useful to ask whether it is only a coincidence that the use of torture attained such heights of cruelty and sophistication. We should continue to ask ourselves whether or not the appearance of concentration camps, mass graves, and hundreds of bodies floating in Argentine rivers after 1974 is merely coincidental.”

This connection to European fascists links Condor to another secret, continent-wide anti-communist initiative: the NATO-led stay-behind program in Europe, the most famous of which was Operation Gladio in Italy. Like Condor, the stay-behind armies were a US-devised and US-backed network of local right-wing paramilitaries, meant to activate in case of communist invasion or simply electoral victory, and who, in the meantime, carried out a campaign of assassinations, destabilization, and general political violence in their home countries. And like Condor, they employed current and “former” fascists, usually in direct alliance with the countries’ high-ranking security forces.

The connections between the two programs were numerous. Before helpingBarbie escape to

South America, the US government used him as a stay-behind recruiter in Europe. CIA officials like Vernon Walters and Duane Clarridge cut their teeth on Eurasian stay-behind operations before overseeing right-wing repression south of the border.

It was the Gladio-linked neofascist organization Avanguardia Nazionale, contracted by DINA, that carried out the failed attempt on Bernardo Leighton's life. DINA agents and even Pinochet himself met in advance of the assassination with its leader, Stefano Delle Chiaie, who later worked for DINAand, he claimed, helped create it, before going to serve alongside Barbie in Bolivia's coup government. Delle Chiaie also happened to meet personally with Pinochet just days before the Chilean dictator formalized the creation of Condor, and he arrived in Chile to get to work shortly thereafter.

Image on the right: Licio Gelli, member of the far-right Italian masonic lodge Propaganda Due (P-2). (Wikimedia Commons)

Particularly notable was the powerful fascist businessman Licio Gelli ("I am fascist and will die a fascist," he once proclaimed), grandmaster of the right-wing Italian Masonic Lodge, Propaganda Due (P-2), whose members spanned virtually every segment of the Italian establishment, including future prime minister Silvio Berlusconi. Gelli and P-2 worked closely with the CIA and the Gladio network to manipulate Italian politics, "carefully ensuring that the Communist party should never emerge," as he explained in 2008. Through the 1970s, he and the lodge pulled double dutyin Argentina, inserting themselves into the highest levels of business and government in the country, with Gelli "a key mover in the development of the continuity between democracy and state terrorism over the period that spans from 1974 to 1981," as sociologist Claudio Tognonato wrote.There is, in other words, more than a hint, as McSherry has argued, that "US forces transferred the stay-behind model to Latin America" in the form of programs like Condor. As the Pentagon Papers revealed, the US government had already done so in another Cold War theater, Vietnam, where in 1956 it tasked a special forces unit "with the initial mission of preparing stay-behind organizations in South Vietnam just below the 17th Parallel, for guerrilla warfare in the event of an overt invasion by North Vietnamese forces."But the evidence also hints at something darker: at a "global anti-Marxist agreement," in the words of the court testimony

of Michael Townley, the DINA agent behind the Prats, Leighton, and Letelier assassinations.

Coming Full Circle

Though Condor has long been over, its language and practices continue to echo today.According to Brulin, it was with the ascent of Ronald Reagan from 1981 onthat the bellicose political discourse around terrorism that had suffused the Condor countries infected the United States, with Reaganite "anti-terror" rhetoric initially focused on Central America. As the years passed, its spirit continued to haunt US politics, even as the focus shifted to the Middle East."Everything the US has been saying after 9/11 is something Reagan is saying about Central and South America in the 1980s, and what US officers are saying to Latin American dictators in the 1950s and 1960s," says Brulin. "And always based on the same lie: how strong the enemy was, and what we are doing about them, which in the real world is using death squads."

Of course, it wasn't just discourse. It's impossible to talk about the details of Condor without thinking of the "war on terror" launched by George W. Bush nearly twenty years ago.

"We witnessed the use by US counterterrorist forces of disappearances, cross-border renditions, torture, secret 'black sites' located in other countries, and so on, approved by civilian authorities," says McSherry. "All of these methods characterized Operation Condor."

"There have been other manifestations of Condor-like practices that have taken place and are taking place in the decades since," says Francesca Lessa, who is researching the crimes of and accountability for Condor at the University of Oxford. "If you think about the practices of clandestine rendition in the war on terror, for example — those have all of the hallmarks of what Condor used to be in Latin America several decades earlier."

Even the torture employed by Condor operatives, such as threatening to kill or rape loved ones, squalid conditions forcing total dependence on one's captors, and simulated drowning, was in many cases exactly the same as the techniques used by US forces against accused terrorists and taught to Latin American forces by US officers decades before that.

As the "war on terror" progressed, we've seen some of the hallmarks of Condor operations increasingly turned on the domestic US population. This is particularly so with Donald Trump, who, sometimes to the enthusiastic applause of liberal politicians, has repeatedly railed against socialists and other domestic enemies, and more recently engaged in a range of behavior that would be familiar to the victims of Condor: law and order rhetoric, threats to declare dissidents terrorists, and massively overstating the power of the groups he opposes. Perhaps more alarmingly, street kidnappings and other counterinsurgency tactics have now apparently become legitimate elements of domestic law enforcement under his presidency.

Ironically, this has happened at the same time that the perpetrators of Condor and its member governments have increasingly found themselves facing justice, exposing more about its workings in the process. While impunity held fast in the hemisphere as late as the 2000s, campaigns and legal efforts by survivors and victims' families have changed all that, assisted by a vast and incriminating archival paper trail created, ironically, by the program's highly organized and transnational nature.

According to the numbers compiled by Lessa in her Operation Condor project, since the 1970s, there have been forty-four criminal investigations into Condor-related crimes across eight countries. Those include not just Condor member nations, but Italy, France, and the

United States, too.

Twenty-eight of these investigations have concluded with at least an initial sentence, says Lessa, which have seen 118 defendants convicted for crimes against 213 victims. Those include the twenty DINA agents tried for Condor activities in 2018, the 2016 conviction of eighteen former Argentine military officers for their participation in Condor, and Contreras himself, who was sentenced to 526 years in prison in 1995 and died in jail two decades later. By Lessa's count, there are currently two ongoing trials and twelve investigations at the pretrial stage.

In a rare bit of real-world poetic justice, it is now the *perpetrators* of Condor who seem to have nowhere to hide. Years of pressure from those pushing for justice were given a boost by Pinochet's arrest and nearly two-year-long detention in London, whose warrant was based partly on a Condor crime, and which firmly established that individuals really could be prosecuted for crimes against humanity regardless of where they were, where the crimes were carried out, and the nationality of everyone involved. Though he escaped extradition, it opened the door to his 2004 indictment in Chile, which in turn paved the way for further attempts at retroactive justice for the dictatorship's crimes.

"The Pinochet case in 1998 was indeed critical in galvanizing international justice efforts in South America and beyond," says Lessa. "But if the preexisting demand and justice efforts had not been there even before, the Pinochet case might not have been enough on its own."

The reverberations were felt beyond Chile. Pinochet's arrest and the investigation of Argentine military officials in foreign courts spurred a raft of new cases and even arrests and indictments in Argentina over Condor-era crimes, leading to the 2003 annulment of the country's amnesty laws, used to protect human rights abusers for decades. A year later, an Argentine court declared that the statute of limitations didn't apply to human rights crimes, in a case that concerned the 1974 murder of Carlos Prats.

Students from the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (formerly School of the Americas) and students from the Naval Small Craft Instruction and Technical Training School conduct a joint assault on a simulated narcotics camp during a field training exercise. US Navy photo

Transnational repression has given way to borderless justice, it seems. The year 2019 alone saw Adriana Rivas, Contreras's former secretary and allegedly one of DINA's "most brutal

torturers," arrested in Australia (her extradition to Chile was approved last month), while a former Uruguayan naval officer was sentenced to life in prison in Italy over his role in Condor. The most recent sentence was handed down just days ago, with four former Argentine security personnel convicted for a slew of crimes, including the kidnapping and detention of two young children, privy to their mother's torture and later abandoned in a public square in Chile.All the while, we continue to learn more about the once-shadowy program. In 2019, the US government released tens of thousands more pages worth of previously secret files relating to Argentina's dictatorship during the Condor years. Among the revelations: that in September 1977, "representatives of West German, French, and British intelligence services had visited the Condor organization secretariat in Buenos Aires . . . to discuss methods for establishment of an anti-subversive organization similar to Condor."With veterans of France's brutal counterinsurgent wars in Algeria and Vietnam having passed on their own training and experience to their Latin American counterparts, perhaps one day we will find out that the "global anti-Marxist agreement" Condor was a part of was even broader than once thought.

A History Rewritten

As typically recounted, the story of the twentieth century goes something like this: after briefly uniting to defeat fascism, the United States and the Soviet Union turned the rest of the century into a clash of ideologies, one that always threatened to erupt, but never quite did, into outright great-power war. With nary a shot fired, free-market capitalism won out, thanks to the hearts and minds won by the power of television, cheeseburgers, and convenient home appliances.But programs like Operation Condor cast that history in a very different light. With them in mind, that triumph looks intensely violent — one in which the US government swiftly allied with autocrats and even fascists to attack democracy and brutally put down people's movements of all kinds the world over, lest their goals of a more just, egalitarian world threaten Western strategic and business interests. And with that economic system now sputtering under the weight of several crises, the repressive measures long reserved for the rest of the world are becoming more visible at home, as an agitated US public turns ever more unruly in the face of their own long-declining living standards.It's an episode especially relevant to the post-Trump era, where agencies like the CIA have successfully rebranded as defenders of democracy and liberal values against impending fascism. It reminds us of the unvarnished, well-organized brutality that lies behind the global order Trump and his predecessors inherited, a sometimes neo-fascist brutality engineered and led by those same agencies to protect elite power and business interests.

A well-founded fear of fascism and democracy's subversion will remain a key part of US political discourse well beyond Trump. Examining the legacy of Operation Condor should prompt us to think about which institutions in American life have been most hostile to democracy and, when the time calls for it, eager to align with fascists. But it's also a reminder that, in the face of popular struggle, even this violence has a shelf life, and impunity doesn't last forever.

*

Note to readers: please click the share buttons above or below. Forward this article to your email lists. Crosspost on your blog site, internet forums. etc.

Branko Marcetic is a Jacobin staff writer and the author of Yesterday's Man: The Case

Against Joe Biden. He lives in Toronto, Canada.

Featured image: Augusto Pinochet and Henry Kissinger in 1976. (Archivo General Histórico del Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores)
