

DINA: Pinochet's Directorate for Murder and Torture

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"There are three sources of power in Chile: Pinochet, God and DINA." — Chilean intelligence officer, [remarks](#) to a US military attaché, 1974

Decree 521 of the Chilean government of June 18, 1974, was a chilling moment in the country's convulsed history. With the state now in the pathologically disturbed hands of a military dictatorship steered by coup leader and usurper **General Augusto Pinochet**, the measure saw the creation of the Dirección de Inteligencia Nacional (DINA), the clandestine agency responsible for a good share of the mutilations and murders that came to typify the Cold War atrocities of the period.

DINA was, [according to the decree](#), created for "the purpose of producing intelligence collection requirements for the formulation of policies, plans and adoption of measures required for the security and development of the country". The initial impression is a military wing bureaucratically inclined, dedicated to the mundane task of producing "intelligence collection requirements; for the formulation of policies, plans and adoption of measures required for the security and development of the country."



Three secret articles supplied the bloody spears to what reads like a superficially benign enterprise, a fact [revealed](#) in 1975 by José “Pepe” Zalaquett, a lawyer and member of the human rights organisation known as the Committee for Peace. DINA would run as a clandestine police force empowered to conduct surveillance, initiate arrests, torture detainees and liquidate individuals deemed hostile to the regime both within and outside its borders.

Pinochet and Kissinger (1974)

On August 8, 1975, the US Ambassador to Chile, **David Popper**, [drinks the usual Cold War draught](#): the country positively teams with dangerous left-wing types who, while being necessarily done away with for reasons of security, are being done so in circumstances of dissimulation and deception. The cable to Washington is dismissive of death and duly cognisant of deception on the part of the Pinochet regime:

“We conclude that reports describing deaths of disappearances of 119 Chilean extremists outside of Chile are probably untrue, though most or all concerned are probably dead. Most probable explanation we can piece together for what will probably remain something of a mystery is that GOC Security Forces acted directly or through third party, planted reports in obscure publications to provide some means of accounting for disappearance of numerous violent leftists.”

The cable notes disinformation reports that “60 Chilean extremists had been killed outside of Chile as a result of internal purges in extremist groups arising out of conflicts over money, ideology, etc.” There is even a nodding acceptance that a publication running material on the deaths in question, the Argentinean magazine *Lea*, is one “obscure”, probably running for one issue, and “may have used false publishing address, and appears to be tied to Lopez Rega and Right-wing Argentine groups.” Even at the time, this account was found by such reports as John Dinges of *Time* magazine to be false.

In October 1975, the directorate’s overly enthusiastic director, **Colonel Manuel Contreras**, sought to harmonise efforts between his various secret police counterparts in Latin America in efforts to eliminate designated dissidents and leftwing targets. They included Paraguay, Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil and Bolivia. An [invitation](#) to Paraguayan **General Francisco Britez** that month supplies the first trace of a process that led to the creation of the murderous enterprise known as Operation Condor, arising from a Working Meeting of

National Intelligence that took place in Santiago, Chile between November 25 and December 1.

The invitation also sports various attachments that document the bleak and bloody nature of what awaits. In keeping with the temperament of all police chiefs, secret or otherwise, the enemy lurks and can be found everywhere. South America is rife with “subversion” that was borderless in nature, featuring “infiltration” at all levels of society. The Left was on its continental march, typified by such gatherings as the Tricontinental Conference in Havana. To combat such a force required “an effective coordination” of timely exchange of information and experience.

By 1977, the human rights abuses of the regime by DINA were such as to deserve mention in an [analytical report](#) from the US Central Intelligence Agency. It stood to reason, given that the directorate had, at that point, burgeoned to an organisation of 38,000 personnel underwritten by a \$27 million budget. Such agents of cruelty had to fulfil *some* role.

The tone of the report is one of regret, given Washington’s backing for the junta in its quest to quash the Left. It notes how such violations had “nearly ceased earlier this year” but were “again on the rise.” It further notes that the Pinochet regime was “reverting” back to those old practices that had affected “its international standing since the 1973 coup.” The culprit for the spike in human rights abuses, involving instances of torture, illegal detentions, and “unexplained ‘disappearances’”: DINA.

The view of Contreras, as expressed in a press interview, was that his organisation had played a “decisive role” in reining in “extremism”. As the Colonel was a Pinochet confidant and answering directly to him, it was “unlikely that he would act without the knowledge and approval of his superior.”

DINA’s murderously disruptive role in the hemisphere received greater scrutiny in 1979 with a [Top-Secret Senate Staff Report](#) “concerning activities of certain foreign intelligence agencies in the United States” authored for the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on International Operations. Chile receives a notable, if far from honourable mention.

As of January 1979, there was, as such, no Chilean intelligence officers stationed in the US but visits had been previously made using “false identification, and their activities were not known.” The description is frank about Chile’s intelligence role in **Operation Condor**, one marked by assassinations and surveillance of “anti-regime activists”. The intelligence services are also picked up on their “close liaison with the German Nazi colony of La Dignidad in Southern Chile, which makes its substantial resources available to it.” A charming lot indeed.

With chilling revelation, the document mentions the directorate’s initial role in eliminating “subversives” in Chile proper, a task it had largely succeeded in doing by 1976. The task then shifted beyond the borders, the focus being on Chilean dissidents in Europe and the rest of the Americas. Victims of that effort were such notables as former Chilean ambassador to the United States, Orlando Letelier, brazenly killed in the US capital with a car bomb alongside his assistant Ronni Moffit in September 1976.

As the Senate Staff Report goes on to discuss, DINA was dissolved in August 1977, most likely under pressure from Washington “where sensitivity to Chilean repression was

heightened by the assassination of Orlando Letelier, and also of pressure from within Chile.” The official reason was that DINA had done what it set out to do. A legacy most cruel and foul had been left, leaving a thickened trail of blood from Santiago to Washington.

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