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Tracking the Origins of a State Terror Network

Operation Condor

by

J. Patrice McSherry

Operation Condor was a secret intelligence and operations system created in the 1970s through which the South American military regimes coordinated intelligence information and seized, tortured, and executed political opponents in combined cross-border operations. Condor's key members were Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Paraguay, Bolivia, and Brazil, later joined by Ecuador and Peru. In Condor operations, combined military and paramilitary commandos "disappeared" refugees who had fled coups and repression in their own countries and subjected them to barbaric tortures and death. Security forces in the region classified and targeted persons on the basis of their political ideas rather than illegal acts. The regimes hunted down dissidents and leftists, union and peasant leaders, priests and nuns, intellectuals, students, and teachers as well as suspected guerrillas (who are, in a lawful state, also entitled to due process).

Long before the repressive network was formally institutionalized in 1975 and code-named Operation Condor, the militaries engaged in intelligence sharing and coordinated cross-border operations. A Brazilian intelligence officer disclosed in 2000 that in the 1960s, intelligence officers from other Condor countries came to three Brazilian bases for training in counterterrorism warfare, "interrogation techniques," and methods of repression (Gosman, 2000a; 2000b; *Clarín*, May 10, 2000). This former member of the intelligence apparatus Serviço Nacional de Informações (National Information Service—SNI) said that, beginning in 1969, combined teams "gathered data, later used in the political repression" (*Notisur*, July 7, 2000). Martín Almada, the Paraguayan educator who in 1992 discovered the Paraguayan police files known as the Archives of Terror, received information that Brazil

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offered training in torture to other militaries in the 1960s (*Ambito Financiero*, May 15, 2000) and said that documents show that Brazilian intelligence assisted Chilean putschists in the 1973 coup against Salvador Allende (Gosman, 2000a). Human rights groups in the region have estimated that Condor commandos “disappeared” hundreds of persons in cross-border operations: some 132 Uruguayans (127 in Argentina, 3 in Chile, and 2 in Paraguay), 72 Bolivians (36 in Chile, 36 in Argentina), 119 Chileans, 51 Paraguayans (in Argentina), 16 Brazilians (9 in Argentina and 7 in Chile), and at least 12 Argentines in Brazil (*Notisur*, July 7, 2000:5, Gosman, 2000b; Cardoso, 2000: 44). These figures are likely underestimates; in the Paraguayan Archives of Terror in 1996, I saw thousands of photos and *fichas* of persons, many of various Latin American (and some European) nationalities, on the prisoner and suspect lists of security forces of several South American countries, some dating from 1974, and some 200 persons passed through Automotores Orletti, the key Condor detention center in Argentina.

The most secret aspect of Condor (“Phase III”) was its capability for assassination of political leaders especially feared for their potential to mobilize world opinion or organize broad opposition to the military states. Victims in the mid-1970s included the Chilean Orlando Letelier—foreign minister under Allende and a fierce foe of the Pinochet regime—and his U.S. colleague Ronni Moffitt, in Washington, D.C.; the Chilean Christian Democrat leader Bernardo Leighton and his wife, in Rome; the constitutionalist Chilean general Carlos Prats and his wife, in Buenos Aires; the nationalist former president of Bolivia Juan José Torres, in Buenos Aires; and two Uruguayan legislators known for their opposition to the Uruguayan military regime, Zelmar Michelini and Héctor Gutiérrez Ruiz, also in Buenos Aires. In the first two cases, agents of Pinochet’s Gestapo-like state security agency, Dirección de Inteligencia Nacional (Directorate of National Intelligence—DINA), “contracted” right-wing Cuban exiles in the United States and neofascist organizations in Italy to assist in carrying out the crimes. A U.S. expatriate and DINA assassin, Michael Townley, played an operational role in at least three of these terrorist acts. Clearly, Operation Condor was an organized system of state terror with a transnational reach. It was an anticommunist international that went far beyond targeting “communists,” and it signified an unprecedented level of coordinated repression by right-wing military regimes in Latin America.

The purpose of this article is, first, to explore Condor’s origins, both conceptually and organizationally, using the massive new database of declassified U.S. documents in conjunction with other material, and second, to examine the relationship between the U.S. government and Condor. The article is

part of an ongoing research effort to investigate thousands of U.S. documents and reconstruct the hidden history of covert operations in the hemisphere. A flood of information about Condor has emerged in the past few years, but it is just beginning to be studied, synthesized, and analyzed. While documentation is still fragmentary concerning many sensitive aspects of Condor, increasingly weighty evidence indicates that U.S. officials considered Condor a legitimate “counterterror” organization and that Condor was assisted and encouraged by U.S. military and intelligence forces.

EMERGING OUTLINES OF OPERATION CONDOR

Although victims of Condor and some observers began perceiving Condor’s existence in the mid-1970s, the organization was truly a well-kept secret of the cold war. The 1992 discovery of the Archives of Terror provided new, and rare, documentation of the functioning of Condor, confirming earlier testimonies of victims and hitherto incomplete evidence. The investigation of Condor initiated by the Spanish judge Baltasar Garzón, whose extradition request led to the 1998 arrest of General Augusto Pinochet, produced new revelations. In June 1999 the first of three tranches of declassified U.S. documents was released pursuant to a directive by President Bill Clinton. Until that time, the extent of U.S. government information regarding Condor was unknown. The only document on Condor in the public domain was a cable by FBI agent Robert Scherrer, sent from Buenos Aires to Washington in September 1976. We now know that the State Department, the Defense Department, and the CIA were all well-informed of Operation Condor and of what the CIA calls “precursors to Condor” years before 1976 and that U.S. agencies supported or collaborated with some Condor operations.

Condor was established officially in November 1975 during the First Inter-American Working Meeting of Intelligence in Santiago. A letter from DINA chief Manuel Contreras dated October 1975 found in the Paraguayan Archives provides proof that cross-border coordination was to be formalized in a November meeting. The letter invited General Francisco Brites, chief of the Paraguayan police, to “a Working Meeting of National Intelligence” to be held in Santiago under “strict secrecy.” The purpose of the meeting was to establish “an excellent coordination and improved action to benefit National Security” (Manuel Contreras letter to General Francisco Brites, Item 151, 1975). The proposal for the meeting included a plan of action and an organizational structure as well as a security system with three elements: an office of coordination and security, including a computerized central data bank of

suspect persons, organizations, and activities, “something similar to Interpol, but dedicated to Subversion”; an information center with special communication channels, a cryptography capability, telephones with scrambling mechanisms, and message systems, and permanent working meetings. The Chileans offered Santiago as the headquarters of the system, specifying that the “technical personnel” of the system would be equally represented by participating countries. These technical personnel would have diplomatic immunity, and the Chileans proposed that they be from the intelligence services. The “technical personnel” were undoubtedly the agents who carried out Condor operations, including disappearances and assassinations.

As we have seen, unformalized Condor-style coordination was occurring years earlier, and newly declassified U.S. documents and other recent research suggest that the specific concept of Condor as an inter-American cross-border “counterterror” organization may have taken shape in the late 1960s or early 1970s. Some cross-border assassinations and abductions took place before the 1975 meeting. The 1974 car-bomb assassination of General Prats in Buenos Aires—which occurred when Argentina was still a democracy—was coordinated among DINA operatives, right-wing Argentine terrorists, and Argentine military and police officers; the so-called Operation Colombo in 1974-1975, when 119 missing Chileans were found dead in Argentina, also bore the imprint of Condor. The 1973 abduction and murder of the U.S. citizens Charles Horman and Frank Teruggi in Santiago also fit the profile of a Condor operation in some ways (McSherry, 2000). In fact, in Latin America, Condor-style commando and “hunter-killer” operations can be traced back to the formation of death squads in Guatemala in the 1960s and the 1970 kidnapping and murder of Chilean General Rene Schneider.

In the following section, I draw on the seminal work of Michael McClintock and others to propose a linkage between U.S. counterterror doctrine of the 1960s, implemented in Vietnam, Guatemala, and elsewhere, and the emergence of Condor. There were many parallels between Condor and the CIA-led Phoenix Program in Vietnam and with the U.S. Army’s Project X in the 1960s. In fact, a perceptive journalist wrote in 1976: “The assassinations of leading Latin American officers and politicians in the last three years have become so numerous that there is a growing feeling amongst observers of the continent’s politics that something akin to Operation Phoenix is now underway” (Gott, 1976). There is no doubt that Condor’s ruthless operations against political opposition advanced the security agenda of the U.S. national security establishment in its war against communism and revolution in Latin America. The U.S. government was the leader of the global anticommunist crusade, and Condor must be understood in the context of the hemispheric anticommunist alliance led by the United States.

U.S. SPECIAL OPERATIONS DOCTRINE

Some historians have traced methods of terror and psychological warfare to the incorporation of Nazis into Latin American militaries (and, in several cases, U.S. counterintelligence units) after World War II (Simpson, 1988; Irusta, 1997). Space constraints do not permit consideration of this influence here, but in previous work I have shown that in the late 1940s U.S. military and CIA strategists, with their European counterparts, set up and trained “stay-behind” guerrilla forces in Italy and elsewhere in Europe—forces that included extreme-right and fascist networks—in an effort to combat the advance of communism (McSherry, 1999b). By the 1960s, counterinsurgency strategists decided to fight revolutionaries and guerrillas by creating counter guerrilla forces made up of military officers and paramilitary irregulars who used the methods of terror. Modeled on the special operations forces of the U.S. military, these counterinsurgent guerrillas used dirty-war methods and psychological warfare to deceive and destroy perceived enemies. According to McClintock, a classified U.S. Army Special Forces manual of December 1960, *Counter-Insurgency Operations*, was one of the earliest to mention explicitly, in its section “Terror Operations,” the use of counterinsurgent terror as a legitimate tactic (McClintock, 1991: 132).

McClintock cited other secret U.S. Army Special Operations handbooks from the 1960s that endorsed “counterterror,” including assassination and abduction, in certain situations. Counterterror doctrine and operations remain classified today (U.S. Army, n.d.),¹ but they signify the use of extra-legal terrorist methods to neutralize enemies. As McClintock noted, U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine and operations essentially legitimized the use of state terror (McClintock, 1991: 121, 130; see also McClintock, 1992, esp. chap. 10; Simpson, 1988; and Johnson, 1998). As one March 1961 article in *Military Review* stated, “Political warfare, in short, is warfare . . . [that] embraces diverse forms of coercion and violence including strikes and riots, economic sanctions, subsidies for guerrilla or proxy warfare and, when necessary, kidnapping or assassination of enemy elites” (McClintock, 1991: 131). The Special Forces in Vietnam received orders in 1965 to “conduct operations to dislodge VC-controlled officials, to include assassination,” and specified that small commando units would be “ambushing, raiding, sabotaging, and committing acts of terrorism” against the Viet Cong (McClintock, 1991: 138-139).

The now-infamous CIA and School of the Americas (SOA) military training manuals, declassified in the mid-1990s, were drawn from Project X manuals (Jentzsch, 1997; Fischer, 1997; Latin American Working Group, 1997;

Priest, 1996; 1997). Project X was part of the U.S. Army's Foreign Intelligence Assistance Program, first developed in 1965-1966 at the U.S. Army Intelligence School at Fort Holabird in Maryland (Office of House Representative Joseph Kennedy, 1997: 6-14). It formed the basis of U.S. intelligence training in Asia and in Latin America until the late 1970s. Joseph Blair, a retired major and former Phoenix operative who taught at the School of the Americas for three years, said that the author of the SOA manuals drew from intelligence materials used during the Vietnam War that advocated assassination, torture, extortion, and other "techniques." President Carter tried to end such training, but in 1982, under the Reagan administration, Project X manuals were used again to update army manuals and to train new generations of officers in Central America and elsewhere. The *Human Resource Exploitation Manual* of 1983 was based on the 1963 *KUBARK Counterintelligence Interrogation Manual* of July 1963 (Cohn et al., 1997). According to one U.S. counterintelligence officer, some Project X materials were based upon lessons drawn from the Phoenix Program, and the army intelligence school taught a course on Phoenix at the same time as the Project X manuals were being written (Priest, 1997).

The training manuals provided documented proof that army and CIA instructors taught Latin American officers methods of torture, including use of electroshock against prisoners; the use of drugs and hypnosis to induce psychological regression; the sequential use of sensory deprivation, pain, and other means in interrogations; assassination methods; and the use of threats against and abduction of family members to break down prisoner resistance (see the manuals at www.parascope.com/articles/0397/kubark06.htm and www.soaw.org/soam.htm; see also Weiner, 1997; McPherson, 1999: 621-632; McSherry, 2000).² The *KUBARK [CIA] Counterintelligence Interrogation Manual*, for example, stated:

Interrogations conducted under compulsion or duress are especially likely to involve illegality and to entail damaging consequences for KUBARK. Therefore, prior Headquarters approval at the KUDOVE level [code name unidentified by author] must be obtained for the interrogation of any source against his will and under any of the following circumstances: 1. If bodily harm is to be inflicted. 2. If medical, chemical, or electrical methods or materials are to be used to induce acquiescence. 3. [excised].

In the SOA and elsewhere, thousands of Latin American officers were taught such methods and the doctrine that justified them. Many of these officers returned to their countries to become key organizers of campaigns of terror and repression or leaders of coups that imposed national security states in the

region. It is important to recall that some Latin American armies, such as those of Uruguay and Chile, had been respectful of democracy and constitutionalism until the 1970s.

PHOENIX AS A PREDECESSOR OF CONDOR

Phoenix, the secret, CIA-led operation in Vietnam, was a computerized counterinsurgency program that used assassination, terror, and psychological warfare to decimate civilian sympathizers of the revolutionary Viet Cong (Valentine, 1990). In so-called hunter-killer operations, commandos were expected to carry out atrocious abuses of human rights. One special-operations commando wrote that his commander instructed him to leave no survivors in one Vietnamese village (Doe, 1999: 635).³ Counterterror operations were set up in 1965 by William Colby, then Chief of the CIA's Far East Division of Clandestine Services (Barry, 1986: 8; McGehee, 1996) and later head of Phoenix. Much of the "dirty work" was done by paramilitary hunter-killer squads and criminal thugs drawn from the ranks of South Vietnamese officers and civilians, while U.S. personnel provided lists of suspects, participated in interrogations, and supervised, controlled, and financed the program. There was no due process, and tens of thousands of civilians were tortured and killed.

A 1966 U.S. Army booklet discussed a "counterterror campaign" in Vietnam that included the formation of "selected Vietnamese troops . . . organized into terror squads" that posted pictures of huge eyes (printed by the U.S. Information Service) on their assassinated victims as well as the doors of suspects' homes (McClintock, 1991: 133). This psychological-warfare technique to instill terror was later used by Guatemalan death squads such as La Mano Blanca. In short, Phoenix was a U.S.-administered "counterterror" operation that employed surrogate forces and used terrorist methods to create a climate of fear and eliminate perceived enemies, a modus operandi that evokes the anticommunist "dirty wars" in Latin America.

A 1986 congressional study of Special Operations Forces indicated that one of their basic tasks continued to be "assassination and abduction," along with hostage taking, random killing and maiming, sabotage, capture, and termination. "A&A" was defined as "illegal special operations employed offensively for sociopolitical purposes. Official actions to capture or kill key insurgents and transnational terrorists ('Termination') are legal and defensive. Assassination and abduction are direct, discriminating, essentially decisive, economical and occasionally unique ways to achieve required results" (Collins,

1986, cited in McClintock, 1991: 146). Elite commandos that corresponded to the special-forces prototype were established throughout Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s, and such commando-style organization and operations characterized Operation Condor.

Declassified U.S. documents confirm that U.S. security officers saw Condor as a legitimate “counterterror” organization. One 1976 Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) report stated, for example, that one Condor team was “structured much like a U.S. Special Forces Team” and described Condor’s “joint counterinsurgency operations” to “eliminate Marxist terrorist activities.” This report noted that Latin American military officers bragged about Condor to their U.S. counterparts. Numerous other CIA, DIA, and State Department documents referred to Condor as a counterterror or counter-subversive organization, and some described its assassination capability in a matter-of-fact manner. In 1978, for example, the CIA wrote that by July 1976 “the Agency was receiving reports that Condor planned to engage in ‘executive action’ outside the territory of member countries” (CIA, “Classified Reading Material re: ‘Condor’ for Ambassador Landau and Mr. Propper,” August 22, 1978). In fact, the CIA was well aware of such operations earlier—although the name “Operation Condor” was not yet used for such cross-border actions.

For example, a November 1973 CIA cable reported that Chilean General Arellano Stark had “left Santiago on a special mission . . . [to] discuss with the Argentine military any information they have regarding the activities of General Carlos Prats. . . . Arellano will also attempt to gain an agreement whereby the Argentines maintain scrutiny over Prats and regularly inform the Chileans of his activities” (Komisar, 1999). This intelligence arrangement—which the CIA knew of and evidently approved—was set up a year before the assassination of Prats, who was killed at a moment when his official security protection (provided by the Argentine army and police) was absent.

Comparison of two declassified CIA documents written in the summer of 1976 reveals more information through an inadvertent clerical error (information blacked out in one document is visible in another). The first report, a top-secret CIA *National Intelligence Daily* (no. 168) of June 23, 1976, included a paragraph censored in the second document. It read: “In early 1974, security officials from Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Paraguay, and Bolivia met in Buenos Aires to prepare coordinated actions against subversive targets.” This report demonstrates CIA knowledge of a meeting of Condor security officers earlier than admitted by the agency in 1978. In the 1978 memo mentioned previously, the CIA said that it learned of Condor in 1976, and the FBI apparently first learned of Condor in that year. The earlier date is

confirmed by the CIA's September 2000 report to Congress, which states: "Within a year after the [September 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. This was the precursor to Operation Condor, an intelligence-sharing arrangement among Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay established in 1975" (CIA, Report to Congress, "CIA Activities in Chile," September 18, 2000; www.odci.gov/cia/publication/chile [hereafter Report to Congress]).

A secret CIA *Weekly Summary* (no. 1398) of July 2, 1976 contained almost identical language as the June 23 report, but the above information was blacked out. It did establish the date when the Condor countries set up their computerized database on "subversion": "intelligence representatives from Bolivia, Uruguay, Paraguay, Brazil, Chile, and Argentina decided at a meeting in Santiago early in June [1976] to set up a computerized intelligence data bank—known as operation 'Condor'—and to establish an international communications network." (A later CIA report noted that the specialized telecommunications system was called "CONDORTEL" [CIA Directorate of Operations, February 14, 1978], and, in fact, it appears that the CIA and/or the U.S. military provided CONDORTEL to the militaries, as explained below.) This CIA report also stated that Uruguay, Argentina, and Chile were operating covertly against refugees in Paris and against "targets in Argentina," including 24 Uruguay and Chilean refugees under UN protection, who were abducted and tortured in 1976. Clearly, the CIA was well informed about secret Condor operations, including those in Europe that indicated Condor's transnational capabilities, raising the question of why it was unable to avert the Letelier/Moffitt assassinations by Condor agents in Washington, D.C., in September 1976.

Overall, Condor must be seen in the context of the national security doctrine and counterterror model promoted by the United States in the anticommunist crusade. These were disseminated to Latin America through the training of tens of thousands of officers in Panama and elsewhere. The cold war national security doctrine, with its legitimation of dirty war and counterterror, fused with already antidemocratic and messianic attitudes among many Latin American officers. The result was a virulent "holy war" mentality among the militaries and especially their intelligence forces, a mentality that envisioned mass killings, disappearance, and torture as fitting responses to communism and subversion—and to peaceful movements for social change in their countries.

CONDOR-STYLE OPERATIONS BEFORE 1975: GUATEMALA, CHILE, AND ARGENTINA

In the 1960s, U.S. counterinsurgency strategists taught their Guatemalan counterparts counterterror techniques. The U.S. colonel John Webber led the effort to introduce the counterterror system in Guatemala; in 1968 Webber said that he encouraged the formation of counterterror units, basically death squads (Barry, 1986: 8; Jonas, 1983: 288-289). "Disappearances" as a counterinsurgency strategy first appeared in Latin America in 1960s Guatemala. A declassified State Department memo of 1967 reported that "at the center of the Army's clandestine urban counter-terror apparatus is the Special Commando Unit formed in January 1967. . . . Composed of both military and civilian personnel, the Special Unit has carried out abductions, bombings, street assassinations, and executions of real and alleged communists" (U.S. Department of State, 1967: 2). One anguished 1968 memo written by the U.S. embassy official Viron Vaky, declassified in 1999, argued passionately that U.S. policy in Guatemala served to encourage and condone savage and indiscriminate atrocities by the Guatemalan military that were having a devastating effect on the society. Vaky wrote: "Is it conceivable that we are so obsessed with insurgency that we are prepared to rationalize murder as an acceptable counter-insurgency weapon? Is it possible that a nation which so reveres the principle of due process of law has so easily acquiesced in this sort of terror tactic?" (Viron Vaky to ARA, "Guatemala and Counter-terror," March 29, 1968; www.seas.gwu/nsarchive/NSAEBB/NSAEBB11/docs/05-01.htm).⁴

In Chile, the abduction and murder of General Schneider in 1970 was carried out by a group of military officers and right-wing Chilean paramilitaries associated with *Patria y Libertad* (Fatherland and Liberty—P&L), a group once paid by the CIA that committed terrorist acts before and during President Allende's term (Bonasso, 2000a). The CIA saw Schneider as a major obstacle to a military movement against Allende. Schneider, the constitutionalist head of the Chilean army, opposed a military coup promoted by the United States in 1970 to prevent Allende's presidency. The P&L terrorists were part of one of the "three groups of plotters" that the CIA admits it worked with and encouraged to abduct Schneider. It provided tear gas, sub-machine guns, and ammunition to another of the groups and paid the group that killed Schneider US\$35,000 after the assassination, claiming that it did so "for humanitarian reasons" (CIA, Report to Congress, September 2000, 4, 10-11). The CIA's attempts to foment a coup were part of the so-called Track II strategy, undertaken by order of the Nixon administration to forestall the

election of Allende. This crime evokes Condor Phase III operations, which targeted influential persons for “neutralization” in order to advance the anti-communist crusade. While it apparently involved only Chileans and their U.S. collaborators, such bilateral coordination—and the methods it employed—may be seen as an antecedent of Condor. The Schneider case provides supporting evidence for the proposition that Condor operations had their roots in the counterinsurgency doctrines and counterterror operations promoted by the United States in Chile and elsewhere.

It is highly significant that General Prats—Chile’s next appointed army commander—was also seen as an obstacle to the overthrow of Allende, given the general’s constitutionalist commitments. He had been forced to resign in 1973 and had gone into exile in Argentina. One of his assassins was Michael Townley. According to Townley, members of the right-wing Argentine terrorist group Triple A were also involved. Another assailant was a far-right Chilean operative named Enrique Arancibia Clavel, who was also reportedly involved in the earlier Schneider assassination (*La Tercera*, November 12, 2000) and in Operation Colombo (Bonasso, 2000a; 2000b). In November 2000 an Argentine court found Arancibia Clavel guilty of the Prats assassination.

Manuel Contreras, the former head of DINA, has long insisted that the Prats assassination was organized by the CIA and that Townley was a CIA agent working inside DINA (Bonasso, 2000c). In 2000 he repeated these claims in media interviews and in testimony for the Prats trial. Contreras said that early in 2000 he provided FBI investigators numerous incriminating documents showing a CIA role in the assassinations of Prats and of Letelier and Moffitt in Washington, D.C., crimes attributed to DINA or to Condor. While clearly Contreras is an expert in deception and lies with transparent motivation to shift blame from DINA, his assertions have never been investigated. With the killing of Schneider and the exile of Prats, the way was clear for Pinochet’s ascension to army commander in chief—and the bloody 1973 coup. With the later murder of Prats in exile, a potential leader of the anti-Pinochet forces was eliminated, strengthening Pinochet’s regime and securing the Nixon administration’s goal of crushing Allende’s experiment with democratic socialism in Chile.

OTHER CONDOR-STYLE STRUCTURES AND OPERATIONS IN 1973-1974

There is more evidence of pre-1975 Condor operations. In a 1973 abduction case, a Bolivian named Jorge Ríos Dalenz was disappeared in Santiago

in a Condor-style operation. Ríos had been a leader of the *Movimiento de la Izquierda Revolucionaria* (Movement of the Revolutionary Left—MIR) in Bolivia (separate from the Chilean organization of the same name) until the 1971 coup of General Hugo Banzer prompted him to flee to Chile. He lived there quietly until the September 1973 coup, when he was kidnapped by a military commando (García Mérida, 1998). Martín Almada was abducted in Paraguay in November 1974 by combined forces and taken to an interrogation and torture session. He testified that there were Chilean and Argentine officers present (Urien Berri, 2000).

According to a still-classified 1979 U.S. Senate committee report, based on CIA intelligence, DINA asked the CIA in 1974 for authorization to open a Condor headquarters in Miami (Kornbluh, 1998: 15; Schemo, 2000). The initiative was rejected, but Argentine operatives did set up an intelligence and operations center in Miami in the late 1970s, apparently with the assistance of the CIA (McSherry, 1997: 182-186). Moreover, the Senate report stated that Phase III Condor assassinations were planned in 1974, targeting three leftists in Europe, but aborted when the CIA warned authorities in France and Portugal (Calloni, 1994: 57).

In my 1996 research in the Paraguayan Archives I found documents that provided evidence of cross-border intelligence coordination involving the Condor countries and the United States. One Paraguayan intelligence report entitled “Meeting of Latin American Extremists,” dated March 14, 1975 (before Condor’s official formation), listed its distribution as follows: “A”—“D”—“H” AGREMIL ARG/BOL/CHI/URU/USA/VEN. I also found documents detailing a U.S.-led military network called the *Comisión Permanente de Comunicaciones Militares Inter-Americanas* (Permanent Commission of Inter-American Military Communications—COPECOMI) that existed in the 1970s. The headquarters of COPECOMI was in the Canal Zone, and it apparently served as a means to upgrade the communications capabilities of the armies and link them together. In June 1973 a meeting (the Conference of Chiefs of Communications of the American Armies) was held in Brasflia in which discussion took place regarding how the network should operate. (Interestingly, only a few armies attended this conference: Venezuela, Chile, Costa Rica [the National Guard], Paraguay, and Brazil as an observer; there were written communications from the other Latin armies.) One document, “Permanent Instructions for Transmissions for the Network of Inter-American Military Communication [RECIM in Spanish],” originating in Fort Clayton (Canal Zone) and dated October 1973, was sent confidentially to 18 Latin American armies. Another discussed how to integrate the overlapping communications systems of the Conference of American Armies, RECIM, and COPECOMI; how COPECOMI should be financed (at the time the U.S.

Army mainly financed the system); and how very high frequency signals could be used for military communications to give them greater security and speed (Committee reports, Conference of Chiefs of Communications, June 1973). U.S. military officers played a prominent role in these conferences. This communications system appears to have been used for the Condor network.

Operation Colombo, the psychological warfare operation involving Chile's DINA, Argentine intelligence officials, and Triple A paramilitaries, occurred in 1974-1975. The mutilated bodies of 119 missing Chilean leftists, many of whom were originally detained by Chilean security forces in 1974 and others who had disappeared, were discovered in 1975, mainly in Argentina but also in several other countries. Chilean newspapers printed sensationalist stories blaming deadly "vendettas" within Chile's Movimiento de la Izquierda Revolucionaria (Revolutionary Left Movement—MIR) and other leftist groups. Years later, however, secret DINA files were discovered showing that the 119 were disappeared and brought out of Chile as part of a combined Chilean-Argentine security operation called Operation Colombo, linked to Chilean and Argentine Condor operatives. DINA and the Triple A had planted the false stories and false identifications of the victims as part of a psychological-warfare campaign designed to obscure and confuse (CODEPU, 1994; 1996; Comisión Nacional de Verdad y Reconciliación de Chile, 1991: 482-484).

Research conducted in the Paraguayan Archives by the attorney Kathryn J. Zoglin also substantiates the view that the Condor system emerged long before 1975. In her studies of the documents, Zoglin found that militaries in the Southern Cone coordinated their so-called war against subversion and met to share intelligence from approximately 1973 through 1982. One document she found, dated 1973, was a secret memo notifying Paraguayan officials of the Second Congress of the Latin American Anti-Communist Federation, scheduled for May in a Paraguayan city. Delegates from Brazil, Chile, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Paraguay, and Uruguay were invited to this conference. In another meeting report from 1973, Zoglin found that Brazilian security officials offered Paraguay extensive collaboration, and all the delegates concluded that the time had come to take offensive action against communism (Zoglin, 2000: 3). All this information puts early operations that fit Condor's profile, such as the assassinations of Horman and Teruggi, in a new light.

THE HORMAN AND TERUGGI CASES

The murders of Horman and Teruggi in 1973 reflect characteristics of a Condor operation (for background see Hauser, 1978; McSherry, 2000). A search for "Operation Condor" in the U.S. State Department web site produces numerous files on the Horman case, indicating that the State Department itself has associated the case with Condor. Several of the files released in 1999 report accusations by a Chilean intelligence officer that a CIA officer was present in the room when the Chilean general in charge of military intelligence made the decision to execute Horman (because he "knew too much"). Clearly, a CIA presence would indicate high-level cooperation between U.S. and Chilean intelligence in the murder of Horman, and, indeed, State Department investigators suspected as much at the time (McSherry, 2000). A high-ranking U.S. military officer may also have tipped off the Chileans about where Horman lived; a hotel clerk told a CBS journalist in 1973 that Lt. Col. Patrick Ryan took a hotel card with Horman's new address. The Horman family believes that the card was given to the Chilean military, and Horman disappeared soon afterward. Horman and his friend Terry Simon had been stranded in Viña del Mar at the time of the coup, and there they met U.S. officers who hinted of their involvement. A former Chilean government official also said at the time that a Chilean military man had told him of seeing a large intelligence file on Horman's activities in the United States that he presumed was of U.S. origin (Hauser, 1978: 233, 244). State Department investigators suspected CIA involvement in Horman's murder in the 1970s. It stands to reason that the Chileans would not eliminate U.S. citizens without such a green light, a fact noted by State Department officials in the 1970s documents (McSherry, 2000).

Documents declassified in 2000 revealed that Frank Teruggi, also murdered in Chile shortly after the coup, was under U.S. Army and FBI surveillance in 1972 because of his leftist political activities, news that outraged his family (Teruggi documents, National Security Archive; www.gwu.edu/nsarchiv/news/20001113). One intelligence memo reported Teruggi's address in Chile. These documents too raise the question of whether U.S. agents passed this information to the Chilean junta and provided a green light for his abduction and murder. Coordination of secret extralegal abductions and assassinations between national intelligence services was a central feature of Condor.

OTHER LINKS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

The seizure of Chilean Jorge Isaac Fuentes Alarcón, accused of acting as a courier for the Chilean MIR, sheds light on U.S. involvement. Fuentes was arrested by Paraguayan police as he crossed the border from Argentina to Paraguay in May 1975. Chile's Rettig Commission reported that the capture of Fuentes was a cooperative operation by Argentine intelligence services, Paraguayan police, and the U.S. embassy in Buenos Aires (which reported the results of Fuentes's "interrogation" to Chilean police, while the FBI searched for suspects associated with Fuentes in the United States) (Weiner, 1999; McSherry, 2000; Dinges, 2000). In this case U.S. security officials clearly acted as a link in the Condor chain.

There are other linkages. A U.S. embassy official told the scholar Saul Landau, for example, that an Argentine military source reported to him in 1976 that the CIA had played a key role in setting up computerized links among the intelligence and operations units of the six Condor states (Landau, 1988: 119). This system may refer to CONDORTEL or to the computerized central data bank of suspects, "something similar to Interpol, but dedicated to Subversion," mentioned in Contreras's letter.

There were two significant revelations about U.S. links to Condor in 2000 and 2001. The first was a declassified 1978 cable from Ambassador to Paraguay Robert White to the secretary of state that linked Condor to the former U.S. military headquarters in the Panama Canal Zone. In the cable White reported on a meeting with the commander of Paraguay's armed forces, who identified a U.S. army facility as the site of a secure telecommunications base for Condor intelligence coordination throughout Latin America (White cable, 1978; [foia.state.gov/documents/StateChile3/000058FD.pdf](https://www.foia.state.gov/documents/StateChile3/000058FD.pdf)). According to the Paraguayan general, intelligence chiefs from Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Bolivia, Paraguay, and Uruguay used "an encrypted system within the U.S. telecommunications net[work]," which covered all of Latin America, to "coordinate intelligence information." In the cable, White drew the connection to Operation Condor and advised the Carter administration to reconsider whether this linkage was in the U.S. interest. He received no response. Clearly, such technological and infrastructural support was a crucial component of Condor intelligence and "hunter-killer" operations, reflecting a significant collaboration by the U.S. military. Moreover, it would have allowed U.S. intelligence to monitor all of Condor's operations planning and intelligence sharing reported through this communications facility, helping to explain the up-to-date information held by the DIA and the CIA regarding secret Condor operations and meetings.

The Army SOA and the Panama headquarters of the U.S. Army Southern Command served as the center of the continental anticommunist alliance. According to one military graduate, “The school was always a front for other special operations, covert operations” (Nelson-Pallmeyer, 1997: 31; see also Fischer, 1997: 189). Another officer, an Argentine navy man whose unit was organized into kidnap commandos (“task forces”) in 1972, said that the repression was part of “a plan that responded to the Doctrine of National Security that had as a base the School of the Americas, directed by the Pentagon in Panama” (Ginzberg, 2000).

The second astonishing piece of information was the admission by the CIA itself in September 2000 that DINA chief Manuel Contreras was a CIA asset between 1974 and 1977 and that he received an unspecified payment for his services (CIA, Report to Congress, September 18, 2000, 17). During these same years Contreras was known as “Condor One,” the leading organizer and proponent of Operation Condor. The CIA did not divulge this information in 1978, when a federal grand jury indicted Contreras for his role in the Letelier-Moffitt assassinations. Contreras was sentenced to a prison term in Chile for this crime and convicted in absentia in Italy for the Leighton attack. The CIA claims that it did not ask Contreras about Condor until after the assassinations of Letelier and Moffitt in September 1976. This assertion is hardly credible, especially given the CIA’s admission that it knew of the “precursor to Condor” and its assassination plans shortly after the 1973 coup in Chile. Moreover, the CIA helped to organize and train DINA in 1974, and it retained Contreras as an asset for a year after the Letelier/Moffitt assassinations. The CIA destroyed its file on Contreras in 1991 (Marquis and Schemo, 2000).

That Contreras was a CIA asset adds more weight to well-founded suspicions that the CIA and U.S. military intelligence forces were secret sponsors of Condor. Robert White, the former U.S. ambassador, has written the following about CIA assets (2000: 54, emphasis added):

CIA activities in foreign countries are usually described as falling into two categories: clandestine collection of information and covert action. . . . In my experience, there exists a third category, a hybrid that parades as information-gathering but in reality is a form of covert action. The CIA contends that it has no choice but to recruit uniformed criminals such as General Manuel Noriega of Panama and political assassins such as Emmanuel Constant in order to gather intelligence. This claim is false and self-serving. These tropical gangsters enjoyed profitable contractual arrangements with the CIA not because they were particularly good sources of information *but because they served as paid agents of influence who promoted actions or policies favored by the Agency.*

It seems entirely plausible that as DINA chief and Condor One, Contreras was an “agent of influence” for the CIA.

There is substantive new evidence of CIA penetration of and coordination with the intelligence organizations of the Condor countries. Contreras stated in 2000, for example, that Pinochet had instructed him to ask the CIA for assistance in setting up DINA shortly after the 1973 Chilean coup. He had met with General Vernon Walters, deputy director of the CIA, and in March 1974 the CIA had sent eight agents to Chile to help organize DINA—and, Contreras added, they had tried to assume key leadership positions permanently within DINA (*La Tercera*, September 21, 2000; Franklin, 2000; *Jornal do Brasil*, September 22, 2000). According to Contreras, the Pinochet regime had refused to accept this level of CIA dominance, but nevertheless the CIA had worked closely with DINA until it was replaced by the Central Nacional de Informaciones (National Information Center) in 1977 in the wake of the Letelier/Moffitt assassinations. The CIA played a similar role in other Latin American intelligence agencies. For example, the Technical Department for the Repression of Communism in Paraguay (*La Técnica*), the nerve center of dictator General Alfredo Stroessner’s repressive apparatus, was originally organized with U.S. support.

Michael Townley’s relationship to the CIA also remains murky. He admitted his role in the Prats, Letelier-Moffitt, and Leighton crimes. He turned state’s evidence in the Letelier/Moffitt assassination trial, served a short sentence, and entered the witness protection program. In Chile, Townley had claimed that he was a CIA operative, and so did the defense attorney of accused Cuban exiles in the Letelier/Moffitt assassination trial in the United States. In fact, Townley was interviewed by CIA recruiters in November 1970 (CIA, memo dated March 1978, heading excised) and was judged to be “of operational interest as a possible [phrase excised] of the Directorate of Operations in 1971” (CIA, Security Analysis Group to C/SAF March 6, 1978), although the memo carefully states that the “Office of Security file does not reflect that Mr. Townley was ever actually used by the Agency.” A separate affidavit states that “in February 1971, the Directorate of Operations requested preliminary security approval to use Mr. Townley in an operational capacity” (CIA General Counsel, affidavit by Robert W. Gambino, November 9, 1978).

Townley also had close ties to the U.S. embassy and to high-ranking foreign service officers, who knew of his ties to the fascist *Patria y Libertad* (U.S. Embassy in Ecuador, Second Secretary David H. Stebbing to Arnold Isaacs, Chief of Chilean Political Affairs, U.S. State Department, October 17, 1973). The years 1970 and 1971 were crucial in Chile, when right-wing attempts to destabilize Allende were prevalent. Given the CIA’s doctrine of

“plausible deniability” and its record of deception,⁵ it may be impossible to determine whether Townley and Contreras were acting as CIA agents in Condor operations or whether the CIA sanctioned any Condor atrocities. The circumstantial evidence raises serious questions, however.

CONCLUSION

This article has sought to shed light on several shadowy aspects of Condor, especially its roots and its links to the U.S. government. The question remains: why was savage “counterterror” sanctioned by the foremost Western superpower when the use of such methods violates every principle of law and human rights upon which the United States is founded?

During the cold war U.S. policy makers framed their strategies in the developing world as responses to the threat of communist subversion directed by Moscow. Their real fear, however, seemed to be not guerrillas but new popular movements in the class-stratified nations of Latin America and elsewhere that were demanding political and socioeconomic change. As one 1970 CIA report stated, “Cooperation among Latin American revolutionary groups across national boundaries is not extensive. . . . Insurgency movements thus far have remained essentially national in scope. . . . Most revolutionary groups in Latin America have struggled merely to survive” (CIA Directorate of Intelligence, intelligence memorandum, “Cooperation among Latin American Terrorist and Insurgent Groups,” no. 1464/70, September 21, 1970). A 1976 CIA memo similarly acknowledged that “guerrilla groups in South America have never posed a direct challenge to any government. Most of the groups have been too small and weak to engage security forces directly” (CIA, “Terrorism in South America,” August 9, 1976).

The 1960s and 1970s were a turbulent time in Latin America. The Cuban revolution occurred in 1959, challenging U.S. hegemony, and throughout the hemisphere a clamor for political inclusion and social justice was rising from millions of newly awakened people. Populist, nationalist, and socialist movements emerged that challenged the entrenched privileges of local oligarchies as well as U.S. political and corporate interests. Nationalist and socialist leaders ascended to the presidency in the early 1970s in Chile (Allende), Bolivia (Torres), Argentina (Perón), and Peru (Velasco). In this context, U.S. national security strategists and their counterparts in Latin America began to define large parts of Latin America’s civilian populations as potentially or actually subversive. The new security doctrine of counterrevolution targeted “internal enemies.” To paraphrase Charles Tilly, elites were faced by challenges to the prevailing distribution of power and resources (1978: 53), and

they turned to repression. Fearful of “losing” its sphere of influence, Washington seemed to prefer Latin America “safely” under military rule.

President Richard Nixon and National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger wanted to punish the Chilean people for electing Allende and send a warning to other Latin Americans who dared to defy U.S. imperial preferences. As Nixon put it in a National Security Council meeting of November 6, 1970: “Latin America is not gone, and we want to keep it. . . . If there is any way we can hurt him [Allende] whether by government or private business—I want them to know our policy is negative. . . . No impression should be permitted in Latin America that they can get away with this, that it’s safe to go this way” (White House Memorandum of Conversation: NSC Meeting-Chile [NSSM97], 1970, www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/news/2000113/).

As early as the late 1940s, U.S. national security strategists deemed the use of terror to be “effective,” and “techniques” of assassination were taught in the 1950s, as recently declassified documents on Guatemala have shown (“CIA and Assassinations: The Guatemala 1954 Documents,” Electronic Briefing Book no. 4, and “U.S. Policy in Guatemala, 1966-1986,” Electronic Briefing Book no. 11, National Security Archive, 1997). Moreover, as Jeffrey A. Sluka has pointed out, “the structures, tactics, and technology of state terror have been diffused, in fact aggressively marketed and exported as a form of ‘military aid’ to developing countries” (2000: 9). As *Army Field Manual 31-16* instructed: “The Chiefs of Mission and brigade commanders should encourage the military chiefs of the host countries to adopt organizations similar to those that have proven to be efficient in countering guerrilla forces” (U.S. Army, 1968). While some officials in the U.S. government were dismayed and outraged by such strategies, as was most of the U.S. public, they were usually overruled or disregarded. During most of the cold war, the U.S. national security establishment ranked security interests and anticommunism above human rights and democracy. The result was that the counterterror doctrine and special-forces model promoted by the United States were adopted by militaries worldwide. Some of them went on to torture and murder thousands of their own people. Moreover, the historical record suggests that a line can be traced from the counterterror doctrine and model to the development of Operation Condor.

The stamp of approval for Condor provided by U.S. military and intelligence forces—the legitimization of methods of terror against “internal enemies;” the use of a major communications network located in a U.S. facility in Panama; the recruitment of Contreras, Condor One, as a paid CIA asset; and routine U.S. collaboration with murderous Condor intelligence units in the Fuentes Alarcón case and many others—undoubtedly encouraged Condor commanders to act with impunity as they planned and committed horrific

transnational abductions and assassinations. The new evidence increasingly illuminates the depth of U.S. involvement and complicity in cold war repression in Latin America and in the human rights crimes of Operation Condor.

NOTES

1. Chapter 8, "Combatting Terrorism," states: "Combatting terrorism involves two sets of actions to oppose terrorism: antiterrorism (defensive measures) and counterterrorism (offensive measures). . . . Counterterrorism programs, which will not be addressed here, are classified and addressed in various national security decision directives, national security directives, and contingency plans" (U.S. Army, n.d.).

2. I studied copies of the manuals at the National Security Archive in Washington, D.C., in July 1999. Seven Pentagon and CIA manuals were released in 1996 and 1997 after the *Baltimore Sun* threatened to sue. They are entitled "Handling of Sources," "Counterintelligence," "Revolutionary War, Guerrillas, and Communist Ideology," "Terrorism and the Urban Guerilla," "Interrogation," "Combat Intelligence," and "Analysis I."

3. This anonymous U.S. operative of the Phoenix Program described how he was ordered to "take out a village" in Vietnam. His superior told him that "we are not to take prisoners, that all of these people are Communist sympathizers." There were no survivors of this U.S. operation. The Bob Kerrey case, made public in 2001, seems to be another example of such methods.

4. Vaky concluded that "counter-terror is wrong as a counter-insurgency tactic" and expressed the fear that "we will stand before history unable to answer the accusations that we encouraged the Guatemalan Army to do these things."

5. For example, one secret CIA document written by David Phillips urges the Santiago CIA station to "stonewall all the way" regarding U.S. involvement with the Schneider operation and "presume . . . absolute denial will be the order of the day even with ambassador and other Embassy colleagues" (CIA, October 28, 1970). See also Warren Christopher, State Department, to Santiago Embassy, Roger Channel Telegram, "Letelier/Moffitt Assassination Case: Contingency Press Guidance on Allegations of CIA Involvement," August 1978, which reproduces "a CIA message received August 29 concerning expected allegations of CIA involvement in Letelier/Moffitt case." Government officials are instructed to deny any CIA linkage and even told what to say by the CIA.

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