

Probe finds ex-president of Brazil was assassinated by US-backed regime

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A commission investigating the August 1976 death of Juscelino Kubitschek has concluded that the Brazilian ex-president (1956-1961) was the victim of a plot hatched by the US-backed military dictatorship.

In a report made public on Tuesday, the Sao Paulo truth commission presented extensive evidence that Kubitschek was the victim of a political assassination that was covered up and made to look like an automobile accident.

“We have no doubt that Juscelino Kubitschek was victim of a conspiracy and a political crime,” Gilberto Natalin, a Sao Paulo city councilman and president of the commission, told the Brazilian media.

Kubitschek, who was credited the transfer of the country’s capital from Rio de Janeiro to the futuristic Brasilia in the country’s central-west highlands, was apparently targeted by the US-backed dictatorship for fear that he would challenge its rule following his return from exile. The 73-year-old ex-president’s death immediately followed the restoration of his political rights, making him eligible to run for office in the indirect elections staged under the military regime.

The new revelations have contributed to growing demands in Brazil for the abrogation of the amnesty law that was imposed in 1979, in the waning days of the junta. The statute, which has been kept in place by successive governments, including those of the Workers Party (PT), allowed the return of political exiles, while granting absolute impunity to members of the security forces involved in extra-judicial executions, disappearances and torture during the two decades of military dictatorship.

While the present government of President Dilma Rousseff set up a national truth commission—to which the Sao Paulo report on Kubitschek will be submitted—it has made no move to charge anyone for the crimes of the dictatorship.

The probe into Kubitschek’s death has proceeded parallel to another investigation into the demise—less than

four months later—of Joao Goulart, the Brazilian president overthrown by the military in 1964, after he had proposed nationalization of oil infrastructure along with other economic reforms and resumed diplomatic relations with Cuba and Soviet bloc countries.

The CIA laid the groundwork for the coup, carrying out psychological warfare operations against the Goulart government and funneling money into right-wing groups and anti-communist unions through such fronts as the Agency for International Development and the AFL-CIO-affiliated American Institute for Free Labor Development. Then-Colonel Vernon Walters, the US military attaché in Brazil who went on to become deputy CIA chief, oversaw the coup, coordinating operations between Washington and the Brazilian generals.

The December 1976 death of Goulart, in exile in Argentina, was attributed at the time to a heart attack. His family was allowed to bring his body back for burial in Brazil only on the military dictatorship’s condition that no autopsy be performed.

A Uruguayan secret policeman imprisoned for criminal activity in Brazil, Mario Neira Barreiro, came forward in 2006 to testify that he had been part of a plot to introduce poison into the ousted president’s heart medication.

Goulart’s body was exhumed last month and subjected to extensive tests by an international team of forensic pathologists. No conclusive results are expected in the case until next May.

There are also strong suspicions that the sudden death in 1977 of Carlos Lacerda, the former governor of the state of Guanabara, attributed at the time to a health crisis, was a medical assassination. Kubitschek, Goulart and Lacerda at the time were the leaders of the three principal proscribed bourgeois parties in Brazil and had negotiated to form a “Broad Front” to campaign for a return to civilian rule.

Among the 90 items of evidence cited in the truth

commission's report on the death of Kubitschek was testimony by a bus driver, who said that he had been bribed and threatened to say that his vehicle had collided with the ex-president's car, sending it careening into an oncoming truck. He told the commission that Kubitschek's vehicle had passed the bus on the right and kept on going into the opposite lanes without ever coming into contact with the bus. This account was substantiated by an examination of the two vehicles as well as testimony by passengers on the bus.

Another witness, a truck driver who had been on the road with Kubitschek's car, recounted that immediately before the crash he had seen its driver slumped between the steering wheel and the car door, clearly unconscious and no longer in control of the vehicle.

Bullet wounds to the head of Kubitschek's driver were never recorded in the initial police investigation. In testimony to the commission, however, a criminal pathologist who examined the driver's body during a 1996 investigation said that there was a hole in the skull consistent with a bullet wound and there were also vestiges of metal. Police in charge of the investigation prohibited the pathologist from taking photos of the skull and issued a report claiming that the metal was from coffin nails.

The commission's report also links the killing of Kubitschek to that of Orlando Letelier, Chile's former foreign minister in the government of Salvador Allende before its overthrow in a CIA-orchestrated coup. Letelier was assassinated with a car bomb, which also claimed the life of his American colleague Ronni Karpen Moffitt, as they were riding past Washington, DC's Embassy Row in September 1976.

Organizing the conspiracy to murder Letelier—as well as the murders of several other prominent opponents of the dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet—was Michael Townley, a double agent for the CIA and the DINA, the Chilean secret police. While convicted in 1978 of conspiracy to commit murder in relation to Letelier's killing, Townley was given a suspended sentence for testifying against the anti-Castro Cuban thugs he recruited for the assassination. He was freed under the witness protection program.

The Brazilian panel's report cites a 1975 letter from the then-chief of the Chilean secret police, DINA, Col. Manuel Contreras Sepulveda, to his Brazilian counterpart, Gen. Joao Baptista Figuerdo, expressing fear that figures like Kubitschek and Letelier could be politically strengthened given the anticipated election of a

Democratic administration in Washington the following year, and this “would seriously influence the stability of the Southern Cone.” Contreras proposed that the Chilean and Brazilian dictatorships coordinate actions against their political opponents.

It is well-established that Letelier's killing was carried out as part of Operation Condor, in which the dictatorships in Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Brazil, Bolivia, and Paraguay—Ecuador and Peru would join later—agreed to conduct joint action to hunt down and murder left-wing activists and opponents of military rule throughout Latin America and across the globe.

Between them, these US-backed regimes murdered and “disappeared” tens of thousands of workers, students, peasants and intellectuals and imprisoned and tortured many tens of thousands more.

The US government provided crucial support for Operation Condor, including communications infrastructure based in the Panama Canal Zone, as well as the political backing of US officials, chief among them former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.

Goulart was reportedly number four on a list of intended victims drawn up for Operation Condor. The ex-president's assassination was given the codename Operation Scorpion; its logistics were reportedly worked out by the chiefs of Uruguayan military intelligence with, according to a number of accounts, the participation of the then-CIA chief of station in Montevideo, Frederick LaTrash.

Others who played a role in these bloody operations include George H.W. Bush, who was at time director of the Central Intelligence Agency, and Donald Rumsfeld, who was secretary of defense.

Goulart's son, Joao Vicente, who has led the campaign for an investigation into his father's death, has demanded that Brazilian prosecutors subpoena former US officials and intelligence agents with knowledge of the operation and demand documents from the US State Department that deal with these crimes.



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