

Argentine court sentences Plan Condor defendants

Rafael Azul
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Eighteen former military officers were sentenced in Argentina last Friday for their participation in the chain of continent-wide assassinations and kidnappings that were part of *Operación Cóndor* (Operation Condor) in the 1970s and 1980s.

Operation Condor was the name given to the agreement to integrate the security forces of seven Latin American dictatorships (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, Perú, and Uruguay) to hunt down and eliminate left-wing political opponents.

The agreement was formally signed on December 28, 1975, in Santiago, Chile. Formally absent from the meeting was the US government. Though their signatures were missing, the fingerprints of the the CIA, the Pentagon and the US State Department, headed then by Henry Kissinger, were all over the document.

According to J. Patrice McSherry, author of “Operation Condor: Cross-Border Disappearance and Death,” the foundations of this repressive plan had been established by US military intelligence:

The reigning national security doctrine incorporated counterinsurgency strategies and concepts such as “hunter-killer” programs and secret, “unconventional” techniques such as subversion, sabotage, and terrorism to defeat foes. Much of counterinsurgency doctrine is classified, but scholars have documented many of its key components. Michael McClintock, for example, analyzed a classified U.S. Army Special Forces manual of December 1960 Counter-Insurgency Operations, one of the earliest to mention explicitly, in its section “Terror Operations,” the use of counterinsurgent terror as a legitimate tactic. He cites other secret U.S. army special operations handbooks from the 1960s that endorsed “counter terror,” including assassination and abduction, in certain situations. 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.” In short,

“disappearance” was a key element of counterinsurgency doctrine.

During the course of the trial in Argentina, more than 500 witnesses described in detail many of the aspects of Operation Condor that directly applied these US military tactics. Their testimony firmly established the conspiracy that existed among the participating governments to abduct, illegally transport across national borders, torture and murder perceived political enemies. This policy is currently known as “rendition.”

One of the better-known examples of such abductions is that of the daughter and son-in-law of the famous poet Juan Gelman. In 1976, Argentine authorities abducted María Claudia García Irureta Goyena, 19, and Marcelo Ariel Gelman, 20. They were never to be seen again. It is now known that María Claudia was transported by an Argentine “work group” to Uruguay where she was killed after giving birth to her daughter, Macarena, who was given to the family of a police officer. Juan Gelman himself was forced into exile by the dictatorship.

This policy of “rendition,” to other countries to be tortured and killed, now widely practiced by the CIA and other US agencies, was one of the key innovations of Operation Condor.

Originally among the accused, in addition to those that were tried—all of them but one Argentine citizens (along with former Uruguayan military commander Manuel Cordero)—was former Peruvian dictator Francisco Morales Bermudez, whose extradition to face trials in Italy, and Argentina, was blocked by the Peruvian Supreme Court.

The trial against the 18 began in 2013. Since then, seven of the defendants, including Jorge Videla—the general who originally led the murderous military junta that ruled Argentina—have died. Videla headed the military-fascist junta between 1976 and 1981, during the height of the bloody suppression of working class resistance and elimination of political opponents across national borders.

The 1975 document and much of the information that led to the trial were discovered hidden in a Paraguayan police

station in 1992. These are now known as the “Terror Archives.” Paraguayan lawyer Martín Almada discovered these files, acting on a tip. The Terror Archives corroborated suspicions of the existence of the plan, and of the US participation in the context of its above-described “National Security Doctrine.” The documents, compiled by officials of the Alfredo Stroessner dictatorship, detailed the coordinated attacks by the Latin American security forces against alleged leftists in Chile, Argentina, Paraguay, Brazil and Uruguay.

Included in Plan Condor were the assassinations of Chilean general Carlos Pratts, killed in Buenos Aires, and former Chilean foreign envoy Orlando Letelier, killed with a car bomb in Washington, D.C. It is widely and strongly suspected that the deaths of Brazilian presidents João Goulart and Juscelino Kubitschek were also part of Operation Condor. Goulart, a left-nationalist politician who was overthrown in 1964, died in Argentina in 1976. The Argentine junta blocked an autopsy on Goulart. A former member of the Uruguayan secret police came forward in 2008 with testimony that he had been poisoned.

The targets of Condor were not just well-known activists or organizers who opposed the dictatorships. Despite Condor, many of these did manage to survive in exile in México, the US and Europe. The files of the dead and disappeared are filled with the names of workers and youth fighting heroically to defend their economic and social rights, who identified with the various left-wing currents, and who sought to defend their factories, neighborhoods, schools and jobs.

Also part of Operation Condor was the sinister disappearance of infants born in captivity from disappeared mothers, “adopted” by persons connected to the regime. The Catholic Church vetted this policy, which had been widely used by the Franco fascists during and after the Spanish Civil War.

The 2013 trial was the latest in a series of trials in Argentina that began in 1999, following court decisions that declared unconstitutional amnesty laws and pardons to the military dictators and their collaborators.

In this trial, the defendants—most of whom are already in prison for their complicity in other acts of repression and murder under the Videla dictatorship—had been found guilty of the kidnapping and murder of 105 people—45 Uruguayans, 22 Chileans, 14 Argentines, 13 Paraguayans and 11 Bolivians—the tip of the iceberg in an operation that resulted in an estimated 35,000 to 60,000 disappearances across Latin America. If one were to include those victims of political and labor repression that occurred in Latin America between 1964 and 1983, the estimated number rises to 350,000.

Those sentenced on May 27 include Argentina’s last

military ruler, Reynaldo Bignone, who is now 88 years old. Bignone is already serving a 25-year prison sentence for his role in other aspects of the “Dirty War.” He is now sentenced to an additional 20 years.

Maximum 25-year sentences were handed to former commanders Santiago Riveros and the Uruguayan Manuel Cordero, as well as to former agent of the Argentine secret services Miguel Ángel Furci. The latter was accused of crimes against humanity in the clandestine center Automotores Orletti, an infamous Buenos Aires torture center that was the first stop for many Condor victims exiled from, or rendered from Uruguay, Bolivia and Brazil.

Reacting to the sentencing of the military assassins, the organizer of Madres de Plaza de Mayo, Nora Cortiñas, declared: “Perseverance pays off.” However, she voiced regret that the death of many repressors prevented them from “sitting in the dock”.

Also absent from the dock were those who participated in Operayion Condor before it had a name, and in the so-called dirty war during the years that preceded the 1976 coup in Argentina, under the presidencies of Juan Domingo Perón and his widow Isabel Perón (1973-1976). These included officials in the Peronist trade union bureaucracy that collaborated with the security forces and provided many of the assassins for the *Triple A* (Argentine Anti-communist Alliance) death squads.

Also not facing trial was the Catholic Church, which turned a blind eye to the assassination of priests, nuns and lay persons who identified with “liberation theology” and concern for the oppressed. At the same time, the church organized masses, confessions and absolutions for those that carried out the executions of workers and youth, throwing them into the Atlantic Ocean on death flights. Among these is current Pope Francis I (Jorge Bergoglio), who as Buenos Aires archbishop collaborated with the junta and may have conspired in the kidnapping of priests and civilians.

Most importantly, absent from the docks for their crimes against humanity are the top officials in the White House, CIA and the Pentagon who supervised the transnational murder and repression in Latin America, along with leading political figures such as former secretary of state Henry Kissinger, who collaborated directly with the dictatorships.

The task of holding them accountable for their crimes falls to the international working class and future workers’ tribunals.



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