

Italian court sentences ex-Latin American dictators for Operation Condor

Cesar Uco and Bill Van Auken
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An Italian tribunal last month sentenced two former Latin American dictators and six other former officials and military officers to life in prison for their part in the deaths of 23 Italian citizens. These 23 victims were among the tens of thousands of opponents of Latin America's fascist-military regimes who were murdered, tortured and illegally imprisoned under a US-backed campaign of repression known as Operation Condor in the 1970s and 1980s.

Those sentenced on January 17 included Peru's former dictator (1975-1980) Gen. Francisco Morales Bermúdez, 95, and Gen. Luis Garcia Meza, 87, who imposed a bloody reign of terror over Bolivia from 1980 to 1981. Garcia Meza is already serving a 30-year prison term in Bolivia for the crimes of his dictatorship.

Receiving the same sentence were: Morales Bermúdez's prime minister, Pedro Richter Prada and former commander-in-chief of the Peruvian Army Gen. German Ruiz Figueroa; Garcia Meza's minister of interior, Luis Arce Gomez; former Uruguayan Foreign Minister Juan Carlos Blanco (1973-76); and two former Chilean military officers, Hernán Jerónimo Ramírez and Rafael Ahumada Valderrama.

During the 1970s and 1980s, dictatorships in Argentina, Uruguay, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay and Peru, with the aid of the US CIA, developed Operation Condor as a program of coordinated continental repression, pooling their police-military resources in order to hunt down exiles and send them back to their deaths, while allowing secret police death squads to freely cross borders.

Ten years ago, when the proceedings were initiated, an Italian judge issued orders for the preventive detention pending extradition of 140 officials of Latin America's former dictatorships. By the time the trial ended last month, the number had been whittled down to 27 by bureaucratic hurdles thrown up by Latin American governments, as well as the deaths of many of the accused, including Argentina's genocidal generals Jorge Videla and Roberto Viola, along with former Uruguayan dictator Gen. Gregorio Alvarez, all of whom who had been sentenced to prison in their own countries for the crimes of their dictatorships.

While the verdict has been hailed by some human rights groups as a victory and an official confirmation of the cross-

border crimes carried out under Operation Condor, there was outrage among many of those present, particularly relatives of Uruguayans who were abducted, tortured and murdered by the dictatorships. Uruguay accounted for 33 of the 42 Italian citizenships whose disappearances and deaths were the subject of the trial at its outset. Yet, only one of the Uruguayans on trial, former foreign minister Juan Carlos Blanco, was found guilty and sentenced to life in prison. Of the 19 accused found not guilty by the court, 13 were Uruguayans, many of them notorious military assassins and torturers.

The most damning of the acquittals, in terms of the court's credibility, was that of Jorge Tróccoli, a retired Uruguayan naval captain, who openly acknowledged torturing prisoners under the dictatorship and who served as a liaison between the Uruguayan dictatorship and infamous School of Naval Mechanics (ESMA), one of the main torture centers in Argentina. Tróccoli wrote books and gave interviews defending his crimes as acts of "war."

Tróccoli's verdict was the most significant because he was the only defendant who was actually within the grasp of the Italian justice system. Having secured Italian citizenship, he fled to Italy in 2007 after proceedings were initiated against him in Uruguay. Uruguayan attempts at extradition were stymied, and Tróccoli has been able to live well beyond the means of a retired Uruguayan naval officer in an expensive area on the Amalfi Coast in southern Italy ever since, apparently the beneficiary of protection from intelligence agencies.

While the rationale for the court's decisions will only be provided in the coming months, it appears that it allowed Tróccoli to go free on the defense of "due obedience," the claim that he was "only following orders" that was rejected when used by the Nazi defendants at Nuremberg. In his case, this defense was patently false, given his own public admission that no one ordered him to torture, and testimony by other officers that there were no sanctions against those who refused to participate in these crimes.

In a video interview in Rome, a young Uruguayan woman expressed her anger over the court's decision: "They are genocidal. It is a shame what is happening. I'm completely outraged. I traveled thousands of miles to have an answer and have convictions. And, again, my parents are missing. I do not

know their fate. I was born in a clandestine center. I'm 39 years old and I thought I would go free today."

Raul Sendic, the vice-president of Uruguay who attended the final court hearing, was considerably more sanguine, declaring himself "disappointed" but "not in a position to pass judgment on this court.". Sendic, whose father Raul, a founder of the Tupamaro urban guerrilla movement, spent a dozen years in prison under the Uruguayan dictatorship, is a member of the Frente Amplio (Broad Front), the electoral alliance into which the ex-guerrillas entered to pursue bourgeois politics.

Another notable aspect of the trial was the Italian prosecution's position that, while Washington clearly was aware of Operation Condor—evidence against some of the defendants came from State Department files—it was not a participant in its crimes.

There is ample evidence however, that the CIA and the US government had a direct and guiding hand in the repression. The position of the Italian authorities was likely driven by political considerations, both the desire not to antagonize Washington and the knowledge that the US would never allow any ex-officials to stand trial under international law.

One of the main architects of Operation Condor, Manuel Contreras, the former head of Chile's notorious secret police, the Directorate of National Intelligence, or DINA—who was also identified as a paid "asset" of the CIA—testified that two notorious assassinations carried out by his agents had been approved and jointly organized by the CIA.

The first was that of Gen. Carlos Prats, the ex-chief of the Chilean army, who had opposed the US-backed coup led by Gen. Augusto Pinochet. He and his wife were murdered in 1974 with a car bomb in Buenos Aires, where they had sought refuge. The second assassination was that of Orlando Letelier, the former foreign minister in the overthrown government of Salvador Allende and a key figure in the international opposition to Pinochet. He was also killed in a car bombing in 1976 together with his aide, Ronni Moffitt, in the streets of Washington, D.C.

Declassified documents also made it clear that then-Secretary of State Henry Kissinger was fully informed of Operation Condor by the foreign minister of Argentina's military dictatorship, Admiral Cesar Guzzetti, in at an OAS meeting in 1976. Kissinger voiced his support for the crimes, urging his Argentine counterpart to "do them quickly" and assuring him "We want you to succeed."

The most prominent among those found guilty who is not already imprisoned in his own country was Peru's Morales Bermúdez. He was convicted in connection with the murders of three Argentines of Italian origin who had fled to Lima as refugees from the Videla dictatorship.

In a January 23 article, the Spanish daily *El Pais* described in detail the fate of the three:

"The Argentine Carlos Alberto Maguid was kidnapped in Lima, Peru, on April 12, 1977. At the time of his capture, he

enjoyed political asylum in the country... at a central bus stop, four officers of the Peruvian Army put Maguid in a white Volkswagen and took him to the Ministry of War, where his military countrymen were waiting for him. It is unclear whether he was executed in Peru or taken to Argentina.

"Montoneras María Inés Raverta and Noemí Esther Gianetti de Molfino were kidnapped in the same city three years later... Both were taken to the military recreation area at Playa Hondable ...and handed over to the Argentine military.

"The torture sessions included electric shocks in the vagina, drowning in the sea, beatings and a Tupac Amaru-style torture, using vehicles instead of horses. ...Raverta was delivered by the Peruvian authorities to the border with Bolivia. She was never heard from again. Molfino was kept alive a little longer; her body was found weeks later in a hotel in Madrid."

According to *El Pais*, the court established that Morales allowed Argentine military personnel into the country and offered them assistance in "torture in facilities of the Peruvian state and hiding the enforced disappearance."

In a July 2015 interview with the Peruvian daily *El Comercio*, Morales Bermúdez denied that Operation Condor had a presence in Peru. In his defense, he insisted that the military regime he headed was "determined to lead the country to the democratic system by withdrawing from power."

All of this is lies. Morales Bermúdez came to power in 1975, with the backing of the CIA, in a right-wing military coup that overthrew his predecessor, General Juan Velasco Alvarado. Velasco's military regime had antagonized Washington by pursuing a left-nationalist course, establishing ties with the Soviet Union and Cuba, while carrying out nationalizations, even as it sought to repress the Peruvian working class.

Morales Bermúdez implemented the demands of the IMF and coordinated the policies of his regime closely with those of Washington and the other Latin American military dictatorships, including through collaboration with Operation Condor. His so-called "reforms" led to economic collapse and a growing resistance from the Peruvian working class that forced the military to relinquish power.

There is no extradition treaty between Italy and Peru, and previous governments refused to send Morales Bermúdez for trial. Given his advanced age and the right-wing character of the current government of President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski, it is even less likely that he will be sent to serve his sentence.



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