

Colonia Dignidad: Nazi criminality exported to Chile

Joanne Laurier
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In Germany, as the WSWs has explained, 76 years after the end of the Nazi dictatorship, the government is once again attempting “to declare socialist ideas and left-wing positions anti-constitutional.” On January 6, 2021, fascist forces attempted to overthrow the US government. The exposure of the horrific crimes of fascism and its followers is not a historical or academic exercise. It has the greatest political immediacy and urgency. It is indispensable to the building and educating of a mass socialist movement in the working class today.

The Netflix original documentary, *Colonia Dignidad*, addresses the evangelical cult, run by the German psychopath and pro-fascist Paul Schäfer, that participated in the torture of political prisoners and used slave labor to produce weapons for Chile’s Pinochet dictatorship in the 1970s.

The six-episode series, written and directed by Wilfried Huismann and Annette Baumeister, is the latest work dealing with Colonia Dignidad (“Colony of Dignity”), following the remarkable 2015 feature film *Colonia* (with Emma Watson, Daniel Brühl and the late Michael Nyqvist) and the 2020 documentary *Songs of Repression* that premiered at the Copenhagen International Documentary Film Festival.

Schäfer, born in Germany in 1921, eventually joined the Hitler youth movement (and reportedly attempted to volunteer for the SS). After the war, he set up a religious-based orphanage until he was charged with molesting two children. He fled Germany in 1959 and ultimately emigrated to Chile with a group of his supporters, where he established Colonia Dignidad in a remote part of the country.

The Netflix series contains footage, shot by various cameramen from the compound’s earliest years, showing life in Colonia and its tyrannical, deranged leader, as well as disturbing interviews with survivors who recount stories of rape and other twisted forms of abuse. It also

includes commentary by fascist adherents of Pinochet.

A lengthy September 2008 article by Bruce Falconer in the *American Scholar*, “The Torture Colony,” provides valuable information about the colony.

First setting foot in Chile in 1961 and “using funds collected from his congregation back in Germany, Schaefer bought an abandoned 4,400-acre ranch several hundred miles south of Santiago, which he and some 10 original settlers from Germany began to rebuild. By the end of 1963, an initial group of approximately 230 Germans—the bulk of Schaefer’s congregation—had emigrated from Europe. ... Two more waves of German pilgrims followed, in 1966 and 1973, most belonging to the 15 families that formed the core of Schaefer’s following.” Over the years, the community expanded further through the illegal adoption of Chilean children.

“They turned us into robots. Schäfer’s order were the law ... we were so broken from being raised that way that we didn’t resist,” laments one interviewee in *Colonia Dignidad*.

In an interview with *taz*, the German newspaper, co-director Wilfried Huismann remarked that Schäfer “had his own totalitarian system, and it was even more perfect than Nazi Germany. Because with him, not 50 or 60 percent, but everyone took part. Whenever someone struggled, they were broken, beaten and tortured so brutally that they were part of it.”

According to an article from Columbia University’s Journalism School, “Schaefer and his deputies, many of whom had served in the Waffen-SS and Gestapo during World War II, set up an elaborate security system: a network of tunnels and bunkers, watchtowers, guard stations, vicious watchdogs, and military training for the Colonia’s men, each of whom carried a sidearm. Colonia Dignidad also had its own airport and airplanes, internal telephone system, power plant, brick factory, and a chemical-weapons laboratory.” Footage in the

documentary series provides a panorama of the operations.

Schäfer became very useful to the brutal military dictator Augusto Pinochet, who overthrew the Popular Unity government of Salvador Allende on September 11, 1973.

“I accept my responsibility as a promoter of the military intervention. The navy initiated the plot to overthrow Allende,” declares Robert Thiemo, General Secretary of Patria y Libertad, in *Colonia Dignidad*. The documentary fails to mention that the fascistic organization received funds and logistical support from the CIA to supply shock troops for Pinochet's death squads after the coup.

“Schäfer provided torture chambers for Pinochet's use in exchange for mining licenses and other perks,” explains the series. Colonia facilitated the infrastructure that supported the dictatorship's rampage in poor neighborhoods. For Pinochet's National Intelligence Directorate (DINA), Colonia Dignidad became one of the regular secret torture and execution centers for its kidnapped political opponents. In underground prisons, captives were tortured in numerous ways, including mutilation from savage dogs and electric shock. Samuel Fuenzalida of DINA comments in *Colonia Dignidad* that the Chilean fascists thought the Germans were more experienced with torture.

One member of the Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (Revolutionary Left Movement, MIR) describes the horrors of undergoing brutal assault at the colony. Adriana Borquez, another left-wing activist, was locked up and tortured for weeks, not knowing what was happening to her young child.

“As long as Augusto [Pinochet] is here it will be hard to destroy us,” Schäfer boasts in one of the video clips.

Amnesty International in 1977 produced a 60-page report called “Colonia Dignidad: A German Community in Chile—A Torture Camp for the DINA.” Schäfer's legal efforts managed to block the release of the report until 1997.

American Scholar's Falconer writes that Chile's National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation concluded “that a certain number of people apprehended by the DINA were really taken to Colonia Dignidad, held prisoner there for some time, and that some of them were subjected to torture, and that besides DINA agents, some of the residents there were involved in these actions.”

Willi Malessa, a former colonist, describes in *Colonia Dignidad* how he unearthed mass graves at the facility.

Additionally, footage is presented of demonstrations by Chilean victims and their families, decrying “Justice for the Missing Detainees” and that Colonia Dignidad was a “wound in the country.”

“In July 2005,” according to Falconer, “police unearthed Schaefer's collection of military weaponry. The stockpiles, buried in at least three different locations, included some 92 machine guns, 104 semi-automatic rifles, 18 antipersonnel mines, 18 cluster grenades, 1,893 hand grenades, 67 mortar rounds, 176 kilograms of TNT, and an unspecified number of rocket launchers, surface-to-air missiles, and telescopic sights.”

Schäfer's 2005 arrest saw more than 500 government files of missing detainees hidden in the “bodega de las papas” (“potato cellar”), where much of the torture took place. Each of these files contained details of severe human rights violations committed under Schäfer's supervision in collaboration with Pinochet, according to Wikipedia.

The series never points to the crimes of American imperialism in relation to Chile. It was the odious Henry Kissinger, then US Secretary of State, who infamously declared: “I don't see why we need to stand by and watch a country go communist because of the irresponsibility of its own people.” Washington oversaw a program of aggression aimed at destroying the Chilean economy, fomenting right-wing terrorism and finally orchestrating the military's overthrow of Allende. Afterwards, Kissinger and US officials defended the atrocities carried out by Pinochet's junta.

The fact that *Colonia Dignidad* lets the US government and the CIA off the hook indicates the documentary series' general political limitations. Although its creators are obviously hostile to Schäfer and his sadistic torture mill, as well as the butcher Pinochet, extreme right politicians and intelligence agents appear without comment. Nonetheless, under conditions where fascism is once again rearing its head, the Netflix series renders a service in exposing this inhuman filth.



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