

”Worst of the worst”

Chilean state terrorist and death squad leader freed from ICE custody as victims’ families cry for justice

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Nearly six months after his arrest by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents, former Chilean intelligence officer Armando Fernández Larios is living comfortably at home in a South Florida gated community, awaiting an August 5 appearance before an immigration judge on his deportation proceedings.

Fernández Larios was quietly released on parole in March, despite the Department of Homeland Security having posted his name and mug shot on its website entitled “Arrested: The worst of the worst.” The site is designed to cherry pick individual cases to cast all of the hundreds of thousands of immigrants being arrested and deported as violent criminals, even though only one out of 20 has been convicted of a violent crime, and three-quarters of them have no criminal record whatsoever.

“Worst of the worst,” however, is an epithet that is decidedly appropriate as a description of the former Chilean secret police agent. He is one of the principal architects of the first act of state-sponsored terrorism in the history of the US capital, murdering two people with a car bomb.

He is wanted in connection with multiple homicides both in his own country, Chile, and in neighboring Argentina. He is still remembered and reviled as one of the most murderous and sadistic members of Pinochet’s repressive apparatus, which tortured and slaughtered tens of thousands of workers, students and other perceived opponents of the dictatorship. And relatives of his victims continue to clamor for him to be brought to justice, even half a century after his terrible crimes.

How is it that the doors to the Krome Detention Center swung open for the convicted murderer and terrorist, while tens of thousands of working mothers, fathers and their children, whose sole “crime” is to be immigrants, remain locked up under abysmal conditions in for-profit concentration camps like Krome?

The short answer is that lawyers for Fernández Larios filed a writ of habeas corpus petition challenging his “unlawful detention” as part of a lawsuit that charged the US government with “breach of contract” for failing to honor the terms of a plea deal in connection with the 1976 terrorist murders in Washington. Rather than try the case, US officials ordered the ex-officer’s release on so-called “humanitarian parole” based on supposed

medical issues. Countless ICE detainees have been denied needed medical care and medication, with a record number dying in custody.

The plea agreement was reached in 1987, with Fernández Larios agreeing to return to the US and plead guilty to a single count of “accessory after the fact to murder of an Internationally Protected Person.” This was a legal fabrication; the Chilean secret police agent’s crime was not that of lying or cover-up “after the fact,” but carrying out the advance organization of the attack.

Fernández Larios flew to Washington to carry out surveillance of Orlando Letelier, Chile’s former foreign minister and leading opponent of the Pinochet dictatorship. He handed over his intelligence to fellow DINA (Chilean secret police) agent and CIA “asset” Michael Townley, along with cash used to contract CIA-connected anti-communist Cuban exiles to plant and detonate the car bomb that killed Letelier and his American colleague Ronni Moffitt as they drove to work on September 21, 1976.

The car bombing on Washington’s Embassy Row was one of the most infamous crimes carried out as part of Operation Condor, the coordinated campaign of cross-border repression and murder organized by an alliance of South America’s military dictatorships with extensive US intelligence support.

US intelligence knew full well that Fernández Larios was lying when he claimed he was unaware of the planned terrorist attack (he failed a polygraph test), but nonetheless assured that he served only five months in prison for the double homicide, was entered into the witness protection program and was subsequently able to live openly in the US. He was protected by both Democratic and Republican administrations alike for decades, despite repeated extradition requests seeking his return to face trial for the crimes he committed in Chile and Argentina.

Even as his immigration case proceeds in the United States, Chilean courts have continued to establish the criminal responsibility of other members of the dictatorship’s security apparatus.

In June, a Chilean appeals court upheld lengthy prison sentences against three former DINA officials for their participation in the murder of Ronni Moffitt, marking another judicial milestone

nearly five decades after the Washington bombing. The ruling further documents the operation as a coordinated act ordered by the Pinochet regime rather than the work of isolated individuals and reinforces the extensive body of evidence linking Fernández Larios to the conspiracy.

Decades of protection against extradition to Chile

A report released this month by the National Security Archive at George Washington University assembles newly available documentation on Fernández Larios' immigration proceedings and the decades of official protection he received after becoming a cooperating witness. The collection highlights the repeated refusal of US authorities to surrender him to Chilean justice despite multiple extradition requests and despite his involvement in numerous additional crimes, including the Caravan of Death executions following the 1973 military coup.

Fernández Larios was not merely an accessory to a single assassination. Trained at the US Army School of the Americas, he participated in the repression unleashed immediately after the September 11, 1973, US-backed coup that overthrew the Popular Unity government of President Salvador Allende. He later joined the Caravan of Death, whose helicopter missions across Chile resulted in the torture and execution of scores of political prisoners. Chilean courts and victims' families have also linked him to the murders of United Nations official Carmelo Soria, engineer David Silberman and numerous other opponents of the dictatorship, as well as to Operation Condor's campaign of international assassinations.

In court documents charging the ex-officer and others, the role played by Fernández Larios stands out for the extreme savagery he employed against his unarmed victims. Witnesses describe him torturing and murdering defenseless prisoners with a *corvo*, a curved combat knife used by the Chilean military to hack their enemies to death in combat.

His role in these crimes unfolded within a dictatorship whose seizure of power and subsequent reign of terror depended heavily upon the political, financial and intelligence support of US imperialism. Declassified documents have demonstrated the close collaboration between the CIA and DINA, whose director, Manuel Contreras, remained a paid CIA asset even as his agency organized international assassination operations.

The fate of Fernández Larios remains to be seen, but his release from ICE detention is in line with the decades of protection offered by the US government, leaving intact the the extraordinary impunity enjoyed by one of the surviving participants in some of the most notorious crimes of the Pinochet era.

What was behind his arrest, brief detention and speedy "humanitarian" release? The most likely explanation is that he was "collateral damage" in a frenzied anti-immigrant crackdown by an agency that increasingly resembles an American Gestapo. With the Trump administration reportedly demanding 2,000 arrests daily, ICE agents are grabbing anyone and everyone they can, including

many immigrants with the legal right to be in the country.

It is highly improbable that his arrest reflected any change in policy in relation to his crimes and those of the Pinochet dictatorship. Washington is pursuing a policy of promoting and installing regimes across Latin America that defend and even celebrate the repression and mass murder carried out by the continent's most savage dictatorships. This includes Milei in Argentina, Kast in Chile, Fujimori in Peru and De la Espriella in Colombia.

Moreover Trump's most fervent supporters have turned Chile's murderous dictatorship into an object of worship. The Proud Boys and other fascist outfits that support Trump regularly wear T-shirts bearing the slogan "Pinochet Did Nothing Wrong" and images of people being thrown from helicopters, a common method of extrajudicial execution of political prisoners under both the Chilean and Argentine dictatorships.

From the Chilean side, families of the Pinochet dictatorship's murdered and disappeared victims have loudly demanded the rapid deportation of Fernández Larios to Chile to face trial for his crimes. They were highly critical of the government under the pseudo-left President Gabriel Boric for its passivity and failure to aggressively intervene in the matter. A statement signed by a number of groups representing the families and fighting for justice demanded that the government "take concrete and urgent actions for this expulsion to materialize quickly, considering that the long-running extradition demands, have not until now achieved their objective."

Now, with the election of the far-right President José Antonio Kast, the son of a German Nazi officer and defender of the Pinochet dictatorship who maintains close ties to some its worst butchers, there is no doubt direct collusion between Santiago and Washington in seeking to maintain the four decades of impunity enjoyed by Fernández Larios.

For the families of those murdered by the dictatorship and for human rights advocates in Chile, the August 5 immigration hearing will no doubt be watched closely.

For the working class in Chile and internationally, this case continues to illuminate the enduring legacy of Washington's support for the Chilean dictatorship and the terrible price paid for the betrayal of the revolutionary upsurge of the early 1970s.

The case also exposes the rank hypocrisy of the Trump administration's claims to be pursuing "the worst of the worst" and upholding the law in its vicious crusade against immigrants. On the contrary, the US government, under both Democrats and Republicans alike, has shielded and sheltered those who have carried out the most savage crimes in the furtherance of US strategic interests. Their impunity is a measure of the willingness of the US ruling oligarchy to employ the same methods at home.



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