Pinochet’s Operation Colombo: A fascist crime and its cover-up

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On July 24, families of the disappeared gathered in silence before La Moneda Palace, carrying life-size silhouettes of the 119 victims of Operation Colombo. The young faces, most in their twenties, are those whom the dictatorship tried to erase: their names, their histories, their very existence.

Fifty-one years have passed since the DINA, the Pinochet regime’s secret police, orchestrated one of its most heinous crimes: the kidnapping, torture and disappearance of 119 political opponents, followed by a transnational media hoax designed to convince the world they had killed each other abroad. The crime and its cover-up were a single operation, planned from within the heart of the repressive apparatus, executed across three countries, and amplified by a corporate press that served willingly as the dictatorship’s propaganda arm.

The crime

Between May 1974 and February 1975, agents of the National Intelligence Directorate (DINA) seized 119 people from their homes, from the streets, from their workplaces. The overwhelming majority were members of the Revolutionary Left Movement (MIR). They were students, social workers, textile workers, teachers, a concert pianist, a filmmaker, a radio announcer. Nineteen were women; at least two were pregnant at the time of their arrest.

They were taken to torture and extermination centers, whose names are now seared into Chile’s collective memory: Londres 38, Villa Grimaldi, José Domingo Cañas, “Venda Sexy.” There they were interrogated under torture. Then they were made to disappear.

The number 119 was not chosen at random. It was a deliberate reference to 11.9—September 11—the date of the CIA-backed coup that brought Augusto Pinochet to power in 1973. It was, as one investigating judge later observed, a “cabalistic signature” of the DINA’s strategists, a mark intended to ensure the country would never forget who held absolute power.

By mid-1975, international pressure was mounting. The United Nations had taken up the case of Chile’s disappeared. Human rights organizations were documenting the regime’s crimes. The DINA needed an answer. The answer was Operation Colombo.

The plan was elaborate. Two foreign publications were created, or revived, for a single day. On June 25, 1975, the Brazilian newspaper *Novo O’Dia*, based in Curitiba, published a list of 59 Chileans allegedly killed in clashes in Salta, Argentina. The newspaper had been discontinued since the 1930s; it was revived on direct orders from Álvaro Puga, Pinochet’s director of Civil Affairs and a DINA psychological operations specialist, relayed through the Chilean press attaché in Brazil who was himself a DINA agent. The publication would appear only three more times in its entire subsequent history.

On July 15, the Argentine magazine *Lea* published a list of 60 more Chileans allegedly killed in an “internal purge.” It was printed by Codex, a publishing house under Argentina’s Ministry of Social Welfare, headed by José López Rega, the leader of the paramilitary death squad the Argentine Anticommunist Alliance (AAA). Only 20,000 copies of that single edition were printed. The magazine never appeared again.

The lists published in these phantom publications were verbatim transcriptions of the legal petitions for protection filed by the victims’ own attorneys in Chile. The DINA had simply taken the legal documents and republished them abroad as evidence of death.

The UPI news agency distributed the wires to the Chilean press. What followed is a demonstration of the degraded level of Latin American yellow journalism.

“Exterminated like rats”

On July 24, 1975, the evening newspaper *La Segunda*, owned by Agustín Edwards, the same press mogul who collaborated directly with the Nixon administration and the CIA to destabilize the Allende government, published a headline in red letters that took up much of the front page, reading: “Exterminated Like Rats.” It was a political act, designed to dehumanize the victims and justify their extermination.

El Mercurio, the Edwards family’s flagship newspaper, ran its own headline: “60 MIR Members Identified as Having Been Executed by Their Own Comrades.” *La Tercera* reported, “the MIR murders 60 of its own men abroad.” *Las Últimas Noticias* spoke of a “bloody internal struggle within the MIR abroad.”

None of these newspapers made any effort to verify the information. They did not need to. They were not reporting news; they were executing a psychological warfare operation. The objective was to cover up the state’s crime, and turn the victims into perpetrators of their own deaths.

For the families, the effect was devastating. They learned of their loved ones’ fates not from any official notification, but from newspaper headlines that branded them as criminals who had been killed by their own comrades. Human Rights lawyer Nelson Caucoto described a “Dantesque” scene of desperate, weeping relatives at the offices of the Committee for Cooperation for Peace, the human rights organization that provided legal assitance, as best as it could.

The architecture of the operation

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Operation Colombo was a carefully planned operation involving the intelligence services of at least three countries.

In Chile, the operation was directed by Álvaro Puga Cappa, a direct adviser to Pinochet who boasted of being called “Pinochet’s Goebbels.” He personally delivered the articles and lists to be published, coordinated distribution to the front media outlets and exercised oversight over foreign correspondents. His personal archive, now held by Alberto Hurtado University, contains documents that describe the operation in the language of “cognitive war”—a maneuver in which the battlefield was the human mind.

In Argentina, the operation was coordinated by DINA agent Enrique Arancibia Clavel, working directly with López Rega’s AAA. Arancibia Clavel was arrested in Argentina in 1978 on espionage charges and handed over to Argentine authorities personal files detailing what his own documents called “Operation Publicity.” Argentina’s undersecretary of Internal Security, Héctor García Rey, collaborated directly in creating false immigration records to “prove” the 119 had crossed the Andes.

In Brazil, the operation ran through the Chilean embassy, where DINA’s second-in-command Pedro Espinoza Bravo was serving as military attaché.

The operation was a dress rehearsal for what would become Operation Condor—the coordinated state terror campaign linking the US-backed dictatorships of Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Bolivia and Brazil in the hunting down and murder of political opponents. Declassified US documents show that the CIA and the State Department were fully aware of Condor’s operations, including its plans for cross-border assassinations.

The resistance

The most forceful response to the cover-up came from the political prisoners themselves. Upon learning of the published lists, prisoners at the Melinka concentration camp in Puchuncaví, many of whom had been imprisoned alongside people named in the lists and knew they had been alive in Chile and not dead abroad, began the dictatorship’s first hunger strike on July 31, 1975. The action grew to 98 participants, led primarily by MIR militants, including journalist José Carrasco Tapia.

The strikers managed to smuggle their statement out of the camp via messages hidden in household items or clothing which reached their families and the Committee for Cooperation for Peace. The Committee sent attorney Hernán Montealegre to Argentina and Brazil, where he confirmed that neither *Lea* nor *O’Dia* had a real journalistic structure. The printing presses at the listed addresses did not physically exist.

The hunger strike broke through the media blackout. Even *El Mercurio*, which had staunchly defended the cover-up, was forced to publish an editorial days later calling for clarification of the “strange version” of events. For the prisoners, this shift was a political triumph.

José Carrasco Tapia, the strike’s leader, was executed in 1986 by a CNI commando unit in retaliation for an assassination attempt on Pinochet.

The journalist who broke the story

Among the small number of foreign correspondents who refused to serve as conduits for the dictatorship’s lies, the American journalist John Dinges played a decisive role in exposing Operation Colombo to the outside world.

Dinges was stationed in Santiago as a correspondent for the *Post* and *Time* magazine during the mid-1970s. At a time when the Chilean press was functioning as an arm of the DINA’s psychological warfare apparatus, and when the UPI news agency was uncritically distributing the fabricated reports from the phantom publications, Dinges pursued the story that the regime wanted buried.

His investigation produced the definitive forensic proof that the lists of the 119 were a fabrication. Working with the archive of the legal petitions for protection filed by the victims’ attorneys that had been compiled by the Committee for Cooperation for Peace, Dinges discovered that the names published in the Argentine and Brazilian magazines were a verbatim transcription of those very judicial documents, complete with the same spelling errors. This could only mean one thing: the source of the information was not any journalistic investigation in Buenos Aires or Curitiba, but Chilean intelligence itself. The DINA had simply taken the legal documents filed by desperate families seeking to locate their loved ones and republished them abroad as proof of death.

Dinges was forced to file much of his reporting from Buenos Aires because he considered it too dangerous to do so from Chile. The regime was well aware of his investigation. In 1977, after a failed attempt to have him expelled from the country, Álvaro Puga summoned Dinges to his office in the Diego Portales Building. Puga warned him that since the government could not remove him from Chile, it could no longer protect him. There were “many terrorists around,” Puga said, who might “run him over while he was walking on the sidewalks.”

Dinges continued his work. His reporting in the *Washington Post* and *Time* brought the reality of Operation Colombo to an international audience, breaking through the wall of disinformation that the DINA and its collaborators in the Chilean and international press had constructed. Along with the British journalist George Roth Forgacs and the Chilean journalist Mario Planet, Dinges belonged to that small current of journalists who demonstrated, under threat of death, what journalism looks like when it refuses to be an instrument of state terror.

The contrast is not merely historical. Today’s embedded journalists and media stenographers are the heirs of *El Mercurio*, serving the same function for contemporary imperialism and the Trump adminstration’s drive to re-colonize Latin America that the Edwards press served for the Pinochet dictatorship.

The long road to limited justice

For nearly a quarter of a century, there was no serious judicial investigation into Operation Colombo. The 1978 Amnesty Law, imposed by the dictatorship to grant itself impunity, blocked all prosecutions.

The turning point came in October 1998, when Pinochet was arrested in London on a warrant issued by Spanish Judge Baltasar Garzón. The arrest sparked a diplomatic crisis and exposed the complicity of the British, Spanish and Chilean governments in protecting the former dictator. The international legal precedent the arrest set, for universal jurisdiction over crimes against humanity, forced the Chilean judiciary to begin confronting what it had spent a quarter-century avoiding. By 2000, some two hundred criminal lawsuits had been filed against Pinochet.

Judge Juan Guzmán Tapia, who took up the investigation, made a decisive procedural decision: to separate the 119 cases and investigate them as distinct incidents. This fragmentation meant that the Chilean justice system would address Operation Colombo through dozens of individual rulings spread over decades.

The most significant judicial milestone came on March 2, 2023, nearly 50 years after the events, when the Supreme Court handed down a final

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ruling in the main case of Operation Colombo, convicting 59 former DINA agents for the forced disappearance of 16 victims. It was the largest-scale conviction for human rights violations in Chile's history. Among those sentenced were Miguel Krassnoff Martchenko, Pedro Espinoza Bravo (DINA second-in-command), Raúl Iturriaga Neumann (head of the agency's Foreign Department) and César Manríquez Bravo.

The ruling incorporated categories from international criminal law to establish the liability of agents who never directly laid a hand on the victims. The Supreme Court held that standing guard at a torture center or processing intelligence information was sufficient to establish criminal responsibility for the common plan.

But the limits of bourgeois justice are stark. Fourteen indicted agents died during their trials without receiving a final conviction. Augusto Pinochet was indicted and stripped of his immunity in 2005, but the case was dismissed on grounds of mental health. He died in 2006 at age 91. Manuel Contreras, founder and director of the DINA, died in 2015 at 86, with multiple cases pending. Thirty-four former officers, many low-ranking conscripted soldiers, were acquitted on procedural grounds.

And not a single newspaper editor or journalist responsible for disseminating the smear campaign has faced criminal conviction. The only sanctions were ethical sanctions imposed by the Journalists' Association in 2006. Álvaro Puga, the orchestrator of the campaign, has never faced criminal trial for his specific role in the media hoax. *La Segunda* refuses to this day to issue a front-page correction, claiming it would be a "catastrophe" for press freedom. The case has been brought before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

What Operation Colombo reveals

Operation Colombo was not an aberration. It was the logical expression of a class dictatorship installed and sustained by US imperialism.

The 1973 coup that brought Pinochet to power was organized by the CIA and the Nixon administration to crush a revolutionary upsurge of the Chilean working class. This upsurge was betrayed by the Stalinist and Social Democratic leadership of Salvador Allende's Popular Unity government. The Allende government insisted on the "Chilean road to socialism" through the existing bourgeois state and brought the military into its cabinet, disarming the working class in the face of the fascist assault. The Castroite Left Revolutionary Movement (MIR) played a critical role in channeling worker militancy back behind the Popular Front.

The dictatorship that followed was a class project: the violent defense of capitalist property relations, the smashing of workers' organizations, and the imposition of the "free market" program of Milton Friedman's "Chicago Boys." Terror was instrumental to this project. The torture centers, the death flights, the disappeared were the method.

Operation Colombo demonstrated the organic relationship between the dictatorship's repressive apparatus and the oligopolistic media. The Edwards family's *El Mercurio* and *La Segunda* were active participants in the crime. Agustín Edwards had collaborated with the CIA to destabilize Allende before the coup. His newspapers continued to serve as instruments of state terror after it.

Moreover, the demands of the families remain unsatisfied. Full criminal justice is still pending in multiple cases. The secret archives of Colonia Dignidad and SENDET, the regime's National Executive Secretariat for Detainees, remain largely inaccessible. The final whereabouts of most of the disappeared have never been revealed.

And denialism is advancing. José Antonio Kast, Chile's new fascistic president, is an open admirer of Pinochet. He is laying the groundwork to overturn dictatorship-era convictions by executive fiat, pressing for mass pardons, dismantling legal protections for human rights prosecutions and granting de facto amnesty to the torturers and murderers still imprisoned at Punta Peuco. Across Latin America, from Javier Milei's Argentina to the Peruvian government's release of prisoners convicted of crimes against humanity, the forces that never accepted the limited democratic gains of the post-dictatorship period are once again on the offensive.

The political demand that those responsible for Operation Colombo be held to account cannot be satisfied within the framework of the existing capitalist state, which is the same state that organized the crimes in the first place. The Chilean bourgeoisie has never broken with Pinochetism. Pinochetism was the fusion of the Pentagon's counter-insurgency doctrine with the class vengeance of a bourgeoisie that could not tolerate even the limited reforms of the Allende government. Pinochet was their attack dog—*their* creation as much as Washington's—and the class he served remains in power.

The working class of Chile, which mounted one of the most powerful revolutionary upsurges of the 20th century before it was betrayed and crushed, will ultimately be the force that settles these accounts. The lessons of 1973, above all, the necessity of building a revolutionary party, armed with the program of the International Committee of the Fourth International, that does not subordinate the working class to bourgeois state structures or Popular Front coalitions, remain the essential political foundation for that struggle.

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