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Giuseppe Gagliano

International Institute for Global Analyses

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www.vision-gt.eu
info@vision-gt.eu

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From Pinochet's Torture Centers to the Transnational Network of Terror:
History, Complicity, and Memory of South America's Repressive Coordination during the Cold War

Giuseppe Gagliano
CESTUDEC - Centro studi strategici Carlo de Cristoforis

Abstract - *This article examines the 1973 Chilean coup d'état and the establishment of the Dirección de Inteligencia Nacional (DINA), a key instrument of Augusto Pinochet's repressive regime. The coup, marked by the bombing of La Moneda and the transformation of the National Stadium into a detention center, initiated a systematic campaign of terror against political opponents. The DINA, created in January 1974, operated as a secret police force, employing torture, disappearances, and extrajudicial killings to suppress dissent. Its transnational reach laid the groundwork for the Plan Condor, a coordinated effort among South American dictatorships to eliminate leftist opposition across borders. Supported by the United States, the DINA and Plan Condor became models of authoritarian repression, leaving a lasting legacy of human rights abuses in Latin America.*
Keywords: Chile, Pinochet, Plan Condor, Latin America, Cold War

Introduction

The Chilean coup of September 11, 1973, which toppled Salvador Allende's government and ushered in Augusto Pinochet's regime, transcends the boundaries of a mere domestic event, embedding itself within the intricate geopolitical dynamics of Cold War-era Latin America. In a global landscape defined by the U.S.-Soviet rivalry, Chile emerged as a critical arena for testing strategies of influence and control in the Western Hemisphere. The establishment of the Dirección de Inteligencia Nacional (DINA) in January 1974 formalized a repressive apparatus that, far from being an isolated phenomenon, became a cornerstone of a broader regional and transnational system, epitomized by the Plan Condor. This network, uniting Southern Cone dictatorships in a coordinated effort of intelligence and repression, reflected not only the drive to neutralize perceived "subversive" threats but also the alignment of strategic, economic, and ideological interests between local regimes and Western powers, particularly the United States.

The DINA, with its secretive and brutal methods, was not merely a tool for consolidating Pinochet's authority but a prototype that shaped repressive practices across the continent. The Plan Condor, formalized in 1975, marked the zenith of this cooperation, rendering national borders irrelevant in the pursuit of political opponents, from armed militants to democratic exiles. This system operated within a framework of interdependence, with Washington providing resources, training, and ideological legitimacy through agencies like the CIA, while maintaining a formal distance to mitigate diplomatic fallout. Simultaneously, the neoliberal economic reforms spearheaded by the "Chicago Boys" in Chile aligned with a global vision that positioned Latin America as a testing ground for authoritarian governance and market liberalization, often at the expense of marginalized populations.

In this geopolitical chessboard, Chile was not an outlier but a node in a wider network where power dynamics intersected with tensions between national sovereignty and external influence. Europe, while offering refuge to exiles and occasionally denouncing atrocities, largely remained a bystander, with notable exceptions like the solidarity shown by Swedish and Italian diplomats. The transnational repression of Condor, underpinned by an anticommunist narrative, not only redrew the contours of South American politics but also contributed to an order where security trumped human rights, leaving lasting scars on the affected societies. The Chilean case thus illuminates the complexities of an era where global superpower ambitions were mirrored in local tragedies, reshaping power balances that continue to challenge collective memory and justice.

The Explosion of Repression: The Chilean Coup and the Birth of the DINA

September 11, 1973, marked a turning point in the history of Chile and Latin America. The coup d'état that overthrew the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende, culminating in the aerial bombardment of the presidential palace La Moneda, was not merely a military act but the beginning of an era of systematic terror. The National Stadium in Santiago, transformed into a concentration camp, became the symbol of this repression: thousands of prisoners, including figures like the renowned musician Víctor Jara, were tortured and murdered in an unprecedented climate of brutality. Among the detainees in September, approximately 600 foreigners stood out—147 Bolivians, 89 Uruguayans, 88 Brazilians, 63 Argentines—interrogated by intelligence officers from their respective countries, foreshadowing the transnational cooperation that would later take shape in the Plan Condor.

The post-coup repression was not limited to an initial wave but evolved into a daily hunt for "subversives," becoming the raison d'être of the military junta led by Augusto Pinochet. Clandestine detention centers, such as Villa Grimaldi, a house on the outskirts of Santiago, proliferated. Operational between 1974 and 1978, Villa Grimaldi held approximately 4,500 detainees subjected to systematic torture and, in many cases, secret executions. These hidden sites were the dark heart of a strategy aimed at crushing all political and social resistance.

On January 5, 1974, less than four months after the coup, the junta formalized the creation of the Dirección de Inteligencia Nacional (DINA), a security agency composed of members of the armed forces and police, placed directly under the junta's control. The DINA, whose symbol—a clenched fist in a circle—evoked relentless repression, absorbed all other investigative and repressive structures, becoming Pinochet's primary tool for consolidating power. An American military attaché, in a report to Washington, described the DINA as a "Gestapo-like police structure," emphasizing its dominance: "In Chile, there are three powers: Pinochet, God, and the DINA." [1]

The Structure and Functioning of the DINA: An Apparatus of Terror

The DINA operated under absolute secrecy, with its members—from leaders to civilian informants—protected by anonymity and guaranteed impunity. Its central headquarters, hidden in a house at 11 Calle Belgrado in Santiago (now Calle José Carrasco Tapia), remained unknown for a long time. Colonel Manuel Contreras, founder and director, was the organization's linchpin. A former student at a training course in Fort Belvoir, Virginia, in the 1960s, Contreras maintained close ties with American military circles and the CIA, particularly with Stewart D. Burton, head of

the CIA station in Santiago. Every morning, Contreras met with Pinochet to report on operations and receive orders, in a relationship of trust rooted in their shared years at the Military Academy.

The DINA's organizational structure reflected its totalitarian nature. Pinochet was its de facto leader, while Contreras oversaw both operations and the legal department. The general staff, led by Pedro Espinoza, included figures like Miguel Krassnoff, Vianel Valdivieso (responsible for propaganda and psychological warfare), and Raúl Iturriaga Neumann, head of the foreign department. The press office, managed by Beatriz Undurraga and Roberto Araya, controlled the official narrative, while the religious department, entrusted to the ultraconservative theologian Osvaldo Lira, ideologically legitimized the repression.

The DINA relied on arrest and interrogation brigades, named after indigenous Mapuche peoples (Antumapu, Pehuenche, Peldehue), composed of small groups of plainclothes agents. These units, often moved between secret bases for security reasons, used torture to extract information. Prisoners deemed "irredeemable" disappeared without a trace: in the first year of activity, 421 out of approximately 4,000 detainees were secretly killed, with no record of their deaths. Among the prisoners, 10% were women, often pregnant, and 3% were minors. The DINA's network expanded rapidly, growing from 600 initial operatives to 9,300, supported by over 20,000 informants infiltrated into all sectors of society. Denunciation became a formidable weapon, fueling a climate of paranoia and mistrust.

The Plan Condor: From the DINA to a Transnational Network

The DINA did not limit itself to internal repression but laid the foundations for a regional cooperation that culminated in the Plan Condor, a coordinated system among the secret services of South American dictatorships to eliminate political opponents beyond national borders. The DINA's methods—secrecy, torture, disappearances—became the model for this transnational network, orchestrated by Contreras and supported by the United States. Collaboration with the secret police of Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and other countries began as early as 1973, as evidenced by the interrogations of foreign prisoners in Santiago.

American support was crucial. In March 1974, the CIA's deputy director, Vernon Walters, agreed with Contreras to send counter-guerrilla specialists to Santiago, enhancing the DINA's technical capabilities. Meanwhile, the "Chicago Boys," neoliberal economists trained at the University of Chicago, drove Chile's economic transformation, imposing deregulations and privatizations that deepened social inequalities. Fearing that these reforms might limit the DINA's budget, Contreras had the Minister of Economy, Sergio De Castro, and his collaborators monitored, an action that continued until 1978. [2]

The DINA was structured into five sub-directorates—foreign, domestic, economy, psychology, technical support, and transport—with the foreign department divided into two sections: Condor, for transnational repressive operations, and espionage-counterespionage. This department established contacts with anti-Castro groups in Miami, involved in terrorist activities and drug trafficking, and used Chile as a base to train Cuban exiles. The DINA also created 26 foreign companies, with headquarters in Argentina, Paraguay, Bolivia, and Panama, under innocuous names like Pesquera Chile Comercial Caronte. These companies, managed by Contreras and his collaborators, were used to finance secret operations and gather intelligence, with bank accounts

opened in foreign banks and activities ranging from restaurants in Florida to operational bases in Europe. [3]

Solidarity and Silence: The International Response

The international response to the repression was fragmented. Diplomats like Enrico Calamai, Italian vice-consul in Argentina, and Harald Edelstam, Swedish ambassador to Chile, distinguished themselves through their courage, offering refuge to fugitives and providing passports for exile. However, many embassies, including Italy's in Buenos Aires, remained indifferent to asylum requests. The Italian judiciary later established that the Italian embassy had sheltered "no political refugees." [4] In contrast, Europe, particularly Italy, became a haven for many Chilean exiles, thanks to the solidarity of leftist parties, unions, and associations that organized reception and support networks.

In Italy, the Chilean coup had a profound political impact. Enrico Berlinguer, secretary of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), feared that an electoral victory of the left could trigger U.S.-orchestrated destabilization, as in Chile. This fear led him to propose the "historic compromise," an alliance with the Christian Democrats and Socialists to ensure stability. On the right, the coup was enthusiastically welcomed by neofascists, who saw South American dictatorships as a model of resistance to the decline of authoritarian regimes in Europe, such as those of Franco in Spain, Caetano in Portugal, and the colonels in Greece. [5]

A Legacy of Terror and Complicity

The DINA was not merely a repressive instrument but the core of a political project aimed at redefining Chile in an authoritarian and neoliberal direction. By consolidating Pinochet's power, the DINA promoted an authoritarian modernization, supported by the United States and local economic elites. Its influence extended beyond national borders, laying the groundwork for the Plan Condor and establishing a system of terror that marked an entire generation.

The Nixon-Kissinger administration, implicated in the coup's genesis, provided the junta with financial, diplomatic, and military support, ensuring the regime's survival. American complicity, combined with the DINA's brutality, transformed Chile into a laboratory of repression, whose methods were exported across the continent.

The Genesis of a Coordinated Repression System

In the second half of the 1970s, Latin American military dictatorships consolidated an authoritarian model that redefined relations between the state, civil society, and the armed forces, supplanting democratic institutions with a regime of absolute control. This new paradigm, supported by economic elites and blessed by American hegemony, relied on the expansion of secret services' powers, transformed into strategic repressive instruments. In this context, the Plan Condor was born, a transnational cooperation project conceived by Pinochet's regime and Colonel Manuel Contreras, director of the DINA. Its objective was clear: to counter communist "subversion" through a repressive system that transcended national borders, uniting the secret police of the Southern Cone in a network of espionage, torture, and disappearances.

The Plan Condor was not an isolated initiative but the product of a shared ideology among military regimes, which viewed the Latin American left as an existential threat. As Contreras stated in a speech on August 29, 1975: "Subversion spreads without regard for borders, infiltrating every aspect of national life. To combat it, a coordinated response is needed—not a centralized command, but an effective sharing of information and experiences among security officials." [6] This vision reflected the belief that the "psychopolitical war" against Marxism required a supranational approach, capable of neutralizing opponents wherever they were, from South America to Europe.

The Origins of Condor: The DINA's Role and American Support

The genesis of the Plan Condor was rooted in the DINA's repressive experience, whose model of secrecy, brutality, and internal coordination became the prototype for the transnational alliance. In July 1975, Contreras traveled to the United States under a pseudonym to secure American approval. At Langley, he met with CIA deputy director Vernon Walters, presenting the project for an anticommunist coordination uniting South American secret services. Walters approved the initiative, guaranteeing military supplies in violation of Congressional restrictions. However, Undersecretary of State William D. Rogers expressed concerns: "Contreras embodies Chilean repression; his public involvement in such a project could spark a scandal." [7] This ambivalence reflected the U.S. position, which supported Latin American dictatorships while fearing the diplomatic fallout of overt association.

Bolstered by American support, Contreras refined the project with Pinochet. On September 16, 1975, he sent the dictator a memorandum emphasizing the need for an extraordinary budget: "I propose an additional fund of $600,000 to neutralize the main opponents of our government abroad, in countries like Mexico, Argentina, Costa Rica, the United States, France, and Italy." [8] This request revealed the ambition to extend the national security doctrine beyond Chile's borders, transforming the DINA into a global actor in the fight against the left. Contreras visited Buenos Aires, La Paz, Montevideo, and Asunción, meeting with local secret police chiefs and promoting collaboration based on shared values of "order and homeland," transcending inter-state rivalries.

The Founding of the Plan Condor: The Santiago Meeting

The decisive moment came on November 25, 1975, during a secret week-long meeting at the Santiago War Academy to define the structure and objectives of the Plan Condor. Participants included the heads of intelligence services from Chile (Contreras, Mario Jahn, and Raúl Iturriaga Neumann of the DINA), Argentina (Jorge Casas of SIDE), Uruguay (Amaury Prantl and José Fons of SID), Paraguay (Benito Guanes Serrano), and Bolivia (Carlos Mena Burgos). Brazil sent observers (Flávio de Marco and Thaumaturgo Sotero), while Peru and Ecuador expressed interest in future membership.

The preparatory document, drafted by Contreras, painted an alarming picture: "Subversion operates through a global network, with structures like the Tricontinental Conference in Havana and the Junta de Coordinación Revolucionaria (JCR), supported by solidarity committees and international congresses." [9] Although the JCR was already in decline, Contreras exaggerated its threat to justify the creation of a repressive alliance. The Plan Condor aimed to dismantle leftist organizations through a shared database, transnational missions, and the elimination of political leaders deemed "Marxist." The network relied on anti-Castro Cuban exiles, former Nazis settled in South America,

members of the French OAS, and Italian neofascists, forming a mosaic of actors united by anticommunism.

The agreement provided for the presence of intelligence agents in member countries' embassies, transforming diplomatic missions into centers of espionage and covert operations. The proposal to name the organization "Condor," in homage to the Chilean bird of prey, was put forward by the Uruguayan delegate and enthusiastically adopted. Formal ratification was set for January 30, 1976, with funding allocated for the structure's operations, and its central headquarters established in Buenos Aires at 2547 Calle Billinghurst, in the San Telmo neighborhood. There, representatives from Chile (Christoph Willeke), Argentina (Juan Nieto Moreno), and Uruguay (Nino Gavazzo) coordinated repressive activities.

CIA Complicity and Operational Expansion

The CIA closely monitored the birth of the Plan Condor, acquiring and translating its founding pact and Contreras's communications. Reports sent to the State Department, addressed to Henry Kissinger, described the South American regimes' intentions to act with extreme violence, including in Europe, through "specialized units for physical attacks." Contreras, who visited the United States five times to present the project's progress, portrayed Condor as an anticommunist bulwark, omitting the links between official structures and clandestin ...e apparatuses, such as secret detention centers and death squads. The CIA, while aware of these dynamics, avoided delving deeper, convinced that repressing the left served American interests.

An early example of Condor's operability was the April 10, 1976, kidnapping in Buenos Aires of Chilean doctor Edgardo Enríquez, a prominent figure in the JCR, and Brazilian journalist María Regina Marcondes, executed by a Chilean-Argentine team. Both disappeared without a trace. A CIA report described the cooperation between South American intelligence services: "Security forces from several countries collaborate in operations against political refugees in Argentina. Recently, documents on thousands of immigrants were stolen from the Argentine Catholic Commission, and 24 Chilean and Uruguayan refugees, whose data appeared in those files, were abducted and tortured by Chilean and Uruguayan officers, likely with Argentine complicity." [10]

Transnational Repression in the Río de la Plata: The Operational Core of Plan Condor

In the 1970s, the Río de la Plata region, where Buenos Aires and Montevideo face each other across the same estuary, became the operational heart of the Plan Condor, a system of repressive coordination among South American dictatorships. The military juntas of Argentina and Uruguay, led respectively by Jorge Rafael Videla and Juan María Bordaberry, granted their intelligence services a borderless mandate, transforming the region into a laboratory of transnational intelligence and terror. This collaboration, cemented by shared ideological goals, aimed to neutralize all forms of opposition, from armed militants to political exiles, in a strategically critical area for controlling the Southern Cone.

During the last government of Juan Perón (1973–1974) and the subsequent Argentine military regime, Buenos Aires became a refuge for thousands of Uruguayan exiles fleeing the 1973 coup. Among them were activists from the Tupamaros, communists, socialists, anarchists, and members of the Grupos de Acción Unificadora (GAU), inspired by Christian ideals. Many lived in clandestinity, using false documents, while others had obtained legal residency. In this context, new

political formations emerged: the Partido por la Victoria del Pueblo (PVP), with an anarcho-Marxist orientation; the Unión Artiguista de Liberación, founded by Zelmar Michelini with a democratic program; and Nuevo Tiempo, a splinter group from the Tupamaros. With the activation of the Plan Condor, these groups became priority targets, struck by systematic repression that led to their annihilation.

The Dynamics of Repression: Torture, Disappearances, and Plunder

Condor operations in the Río de la Plata were distinguished by their brutality and organization. Mixed Argentine-Uruguayan teams carried out abductions, interrogations, and torture, often aimed at extracting information and seizing the economic resources of clandestine organizations. The Argentines targeted the funds of rebel groups, while the Uruguayans sought to dismantle exile networks, not hesitating to share the "spoils" with their allies. Torture, practiced with methods such as electric shocks, beatings, and prolonged suspension, was standard, and in many cases, culminated in the death of prisoners.

Orchestrating this persecution was Uruguayan Foreign Minister Juan Carlos Blanco, a far-right jurist determined to eliminate not only revolutionary movements but also democratic figures like Enrique Erro, Héctor Gutiérrez Ruiz, Zelmar Michelini, and Wilson Ferreira, who posed a threat due to their potential for alternative leadership. Blanco, in agreement with Argentine Foreign Minister César Guzzetti, encouraged the hunt for exiles in Buenos Aires and proposed the creation of special units to target political leaders in Europe. During a July 1976 meeting with Harry Shlaudeman, a U.S. official for inter-American affairs, Blanco defined the Southern Cone countries as "the last bastion of Christian civilization" against global Marxism, a threat he deemed, though "exaggerated," to justify an extreme response. Shlaudeman, while acknowledging Blanco's lucidity, noted his paranoid vision: "The military considers anyone who opposes the government subversive, from the center-left to nonviolent dissidents, in a besieged mentality that borders on obsession." [17]

The Role of José Nino Gavazzo: An Architect of Terror

At the center of transnational repression was Uruguayan Major José Nino Gavazzo, a key figure in the Servicio de Información de Defensa (SID) and the Órgano Coordinador de Operaciones Antisubversivas (OCOA). Born in Montevideo in 1939 to an Italian-origin family, Gavazzo pursued a military career that led him, in the 1960s, to specialize in intelligence and counter-guerrilla warfare. In 1972–1973, he managed the interrogations of Tupamaro leaders like Mauricio Rosencof, Henry Engler, and Adolfo Wasem, refining coercion techniques. When Zelmar Michelini denounced the torture of detainees in parliament, Gavazzo arranged a meeting between Rosencof and his father to refute the accusations, but the prisoner, visibly broken, was unrecognizable, prompting the father to exclaim: "This is not my son!" [18]

From 1974, Gavazzo assumed a leading role in the SID, coordinating operations against political prisoners and establishing contacts with Argentine intelligence. In 1976, he obtained an office in Buenos Aires, shared with the Chilean Christoph Willeke, the DINA's representative in Condor. His activities ranged from prisoner transfers to coordinating abductions, often followed by disappearances. The repression intensified after the May 1976 assassination of Michelini and Gutiérrez Ruiz, prompting exile Wilson Ferreira to request the U.S. Congress to suspend aid to

Uruguay, which was achieved in September. To divert international attention, the Uruguayan and Argentine regimes amplified the narrative of a guerrilla threat, targeting the PVP.

Automotores Orletti: The Condor's Laboratory

The clandestine center Automotores Orletti, a former mechanical workshop in Buenos Aires (Calle Venancio Flores 3519/21, Floresta neighborhood), became the operational core of Condor in the Río de la Plata. Between 1976 and 1977, hundreds of prisoners, primarily foreigners—Chileans, Uruguayans, Bolivians, Brazilians, Paraguayans—were detained and tortured there, captured by Condor teams. Managed by the Gordon gang, the Argentine Federal Police,, and Uruguayan agents like Gavazzo and Manuel Cordero, Orletti was a place of horror, with a garage converted into a torture room and makeshift cells.

A emblematic case was that of Sara Méndez, co-founder of the PVP, abducted on July 13, 1976, with her housemate Asilú Maceiro. The Argentine-Uruguayan team burst into their Belgrano apartment, mistreating them and seizing Méndez's newborn son, Simón, who was handed to a police sub-commissioner. The two women, tortured with electric shocks and suspensions, suffered severe physical and psychological injuries. Méndez, a survivor, reunited with her son only in 2002, an exceptional case in a context where mothers of "appropriated" babies were typically killed.

Death Flights and Media Staging

Condor operations in the Río de la Plata were marked by their theatricality. Between July and October 1976, two "secret flights" transferred prisoners from Buenos Aires to Montevideo. The "first flight," on July 24 transported 24 PVP members, captured at Orletti, to the clandestine center in Punta Gorda. After months of torture, about fifteen were forced to participate in a staged event: on October 26, they were moved to a chalet in Shangrilá, presented as guerrillas captured in a military operation. Filmed by television, this masquerade—with weapons and money displayed as "spoils"—served to justify the repression and legitimize Condor as a bulwark against subversion. Gavazzo and Captain Gilberto Vázquez, the operation's directors, were celebrated as heroes.

The "second flight," on October 5, 1976, was even darker. Prisoners, including PVP leaders Alberto Mechoso and León Duarte, were transferred from El Palomar to Montevideo, their faces hooded, following the Argentine disappearance modus operandi. None reappeared. Despite promises of salvation in exchange for ransoms, the detainees were eliminated, and the money—over one million dollars—was divided between Argentines and Uruguayans, used to finance new clandestine detention centers.

The Careers of the Oppressors and the CIA's Shadow

The success of the Shangrilá staging earned promotions. Vázquez was promoted to major and assigned to the Instituto Militar de Estudios Superiores, while Gavazzo became a military attaché at the Uruguayan embassy in Washington. However, both were implicated in a plot to assassinate U.S. Congressman Edward Koch, an opponent of military aid to Uruguay. A 1976 CIA report, sent to George H.W. Bush, flagged Gavazzo as a potential executor of a Condor operation in the U.S. The State Department declared Gavazzo and José Fons, another Uruguayan officer, "personae non gratae," but avoided public disclosure to prevent controversy.

Gavazzo, enraged, wrote in his autobiography: “The Americans accuse us for what we did, but it was they, with the Cold War, who created the problems afflicting Latin America.” [19] His career ended in 1978 when he was forced to resign for plotting against General Gregorio Álvarez. With Uruguay’s return to democracy in 1985, Gavazzo was tried for crimes against humanity. Convicted in 2009 to 25 years alongside Vázquez, he faced further sentences for abductions and murders. In 2019, the Rome Tribunal sentenced him to life for the disappearance of Italo-Uruguayan and Italo-Argentine citizens, recognizing him as the “commander of Condor operations in Uruguay.” He died in 2021 at the Military Hospital in Montevideo, followed months later by Vázquez.

A Crucial Testimony: The Condor’s Chain of Command

During the trial, Vázquez provided critical testimony: “In early 1976, we created the Plan Condor outside military structures, through coordination between the Gordon gang, Generals Otto Paladino and Campos Hermida. The exchange of information was directly approved by Videla and Pinochet.” This statement confirmed Condor’s centralized nature, with a chain of command linking the dictatorships’ leadership to their repressive apparatuses, under the complicit shadow of the United States.

The Río de la Plata, with its clandestine centers and secret flights, was the laboratory where Condor perfected its terror techniques. The repression not only eliminated opponents but destroyed an entire generation of activists, leaving a legacy of pain and impunity that continues to mark Latin America’s memory.

A Coordinated Repression System: Objectives and Mechanisms of the Plan Condor

The Plan Condor, operational in the late 1970s, represented the pinnacle of collaboration among Southern Cone military dictatorships, uniting their intelligence apparatuses in a transnational network to neutralize communist “subversion.” As Argentine junta leader Jorge Rafael Videla stated, the enemy was defined not only by actions but by attacking the “fundamental values of national identity.” This ideological vision justified a borderless war against militants, exiles, and dissidents, wherever they were. Condor aimed not only to repress the “internal enemy” but to destroy resistance hubs abroad, weakening international solidarity networks and discouraging leftist activism.

Condor’s structure relied on periodic meetings of intelligence chiefs, who refined strategies and identified priority targets. By December 1975, months after the alliance’s formalization, members shared detailed information on the Junta de Coordinación Revolucionaria (JCR), including its clandestine activities in Europe, funding sources, and the movements of Brazilian, Paraguayan, and Argentine militants. This data, gathered through deep infiltration of the JCR, demonstrated Condor’s intelligence efficiency, capable of penetrating an already declining organization used as a scarecrow to legitimize repression.

Strengthening the Alliance: Argentina’s Role and U.S. Support

Argentina, under Videla’s dictatorship, played a central role in strengthening Condor. In 1976, the junta sent Hugo Miatello, former head of the Secretaría de Inteligencia de Estado (SIDE) and a counterinsurgency expert, as ambassador to Santiago. Miatello, who had convinced Videla to wage an “intelligence war” with abductions, executions, and disappearances, became a key architect of

repressive coordination. His presence in Santiago enhanced synergy between Argentina's SIDE and Chile's DINA, perfecting transnational operations.

Condor relied on a heterogeneous coalition: members of ultranationalist groups like Patria y Libertad and the Triple A,, anti-Castro Cuban exiles, European neofascists, and former Nazis settled in South America. This "black international," though operating outside legality, was rooted in state apparatuses and enjoyed the CIA's tacit approval. A 1976 report by Paraguayan General Francisco Britez Borges offered a sanitized view: "Paraguay, due to its strategic position and anticommunism, is a priority target of global subversion. A Marxist victory here would expose neighboring countries. Our collaboration is not a favor but collective self-defense to protect our institutions and way of life." [20]

American complicity was pivotal. In September 1976, FBI Special Agent Robert Scherrer described Condor in a report to Washington: "A system to collect, exchange, and store information on alleged communists and Marxists, aiming to eliminate leftist terrorist activities in South America." [21] Scherrer highlighted the enthusiasm of Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile and revealed the project's expansion beyond the continent: "A secret phase involves special teams operating in third countries, including Europe, to locate, monitor, and eliminate terrorists or their supporters." The report's precision suggested direct sources at Condor's highest levels, such as Contreras, with whom Scherrer maintained contacts.

Technological Infrastructure: Condortel and Condoreye

Condor developed an advanced technological infrastructure, inspired by Interpol but focused on "political crime." Each member country had operational centers equipped with voice-scrambling phones, photographic labs, and teleprinters connected in a cryptographically secure communication system called Condortel. The Condoreye** division, based in Buenos Aires' Recoleta neighborhood, coordinated European missions, assigned to South American officers. Brazil provided Swiss encryption machines, Argentina supplied Swedish Hagelin Cripto equipment, and communications used complex, regularly updated alphabetic codes to prevent interception. For example, the word "enemy" could be encrypted as an incomprehensible sequence of capital letters.

The United States facilitated these operations, providing facilities in the Panama Canal Zone to coordinate communications. A U.S. diplomat noted: "Southern Cone countries use bilateral codes to keep their transmissions secret, supported by technologies installed in our jurisdiction." [22] This technological collaboration confirmed Washington's active role in supporting Condor, despite its human rights violations.

Condor's Brutality: The ESMA and Death Flights

In Argentina, the most notorious clandestine center was the Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada (ESMA), located in Buenos Aires on Avenida del Libertador. Directed by Rear Admiral Rubén Chamorro, the ESMA became a symbol of terror, holding around 5,000 prisoners during the dictatorship. Torture, accompanied by loud rock music to drown out screams, included sexual abuse, particularly against women. The "death flights," in which sedated prisoners were thrown alive into the ocean, represented the height of this brutality. Admiral Emilio Massera, Navy commander, promoted the ESMA as a trophy, organizing visits for dignitaries, military delegations, and

ambassadors from Condor countries. The Church, through figures like papal nuncio Pio Laghi and military chaplains like Alberto Zanchetta, was aware of the atrocities but never denounced them.
Among the torturers, Alfredo Astiz, a naval lieutenant known for his cruelty, stood out. In January 1977, he abducted Dagmar Hagelin, an Argentine Swedish teenager, injuring her and taking her to the ESMA, where she disappeared. In late 1977, infiltrating the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, he orchestrated the arrest of twelve activists, including founders Esther Ballestrino, Azucena Villaflor and María Ponce, as well as French nuns Alice Domon and Léonie Duquet,, all eliminated. Astiz also operated abroad, infiltrating Paris in 1978 and teaching courses in South Africa for the apartheid regime. Convicted to life in Argentina, France, and Italy, Astiz justified his crimes: "The Navy taught me to destroy, not to build. I know how to kill, infiltrate, dismantle. It's what I do best." [23]

Global Expansion and Death Lists

Condor was not confined to South America. Member countries' embassies served as espionage hubs, monitoring exiles and foreign activists. In October 1977, a U.S. embassy report in Stockholm revealed a Condor "death list" targeting Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme, Chileans like Orlando Letelier(assassinated in 1976 in Washington) and Carlos Altamirano, and former president Eduardo Frei. Palme, targeted for his criticism of the Chilean coup and support for exiles, was monitored by the Chilean embassy in Stockholm, transformed into an intelligence center. Social Democratic secretary Pierre Schori confirmed that Palme was aware of the threat for months, with the Swedish police (SÄPO) mobilized to monitor Chileans in Scandinavia.

Public Denunciation and U.S. Inaction

On August 3, 1976, journalist Jack Anderson published an article in the Washington Post, exposing Condor to the American public, describing it as an "international consortium of assassins" supported by "former and new Nazis" and the CIA. Drawing on a McGovern subcommittee report, Anderson condemned Condor's terrorist operations, including in the U.S. That same day, Harry Shlaudeman drafted a State Department memo attributing Condor's strengthening to the "growing effectiveness" of the JCR, a misleading claim given the organization's decline.
Despite the Ford administration's knowledge—through the CIA, FBI, and embassies—Condor operated unimpeded. Ambassadors like Robert Hill and Ernest Siracusa sympathized with the military regimes, sharing their anticommunism. John Dinges, a Washington Post journalist, helped unmask Condor, collecting dossiers on Chilean crimes under the pseudonym Ramón Marsano. Arrested multiple times by the DINA, he was saved by the regime's fear of international repercussions.

The Failure of Revolutionary Counteroffensives

Condor's network proved devastating against leftist movements. In 1979, the Montonero attempted a "strategic counteroffensive" in Argentina, organizing the return of exiled militants. Condor's intelligence, backed by Uruguay, Brazil, Bolivia, Paraguay, and Peru, intercepted the plans, capturing around 100 guerrillas and crushing the project. Similarly, the Operación Retorno of the Chilean Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (MIR), launched in 1979 with Cuban support, failed. About 200 repatriated militants were decimated by the Central Nacional de Informaciones (CNI), with 70 deaths and few successes, such as the 1980 assassination of Lieutenant Colonel Roger Vergara. A mix of idealism, underestimation of the enemy, and infiltrations doomed these initiatives.

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