

4 • The Condor System

The penitentiary of Punta de Rieles in the outskirts of Montevideo stood out in 2019 as a model prison for the rehabilitation of offenders in Latin America.¹ Five decades earlier, however, it had served a much more sinister function; in January 1973 a dedicated prison for women guilty of subversive activities had been opened on this site, and throughout the Uruguayan dictatorship it held 651 female political prisoners.²

Sara Méndez was one of the women imprisoned in Punta de Rieles's red zone, which housed the most radical detainees.³ On December 11, 1976, Sara was unexpectedly called to the prison's visitors' room, where she encountered her father and two sisters in the first family reunion since her disappearance in Buenos Aires five months earlier. Her brother was barred from entering the penitentiary because of his beard. Surprise, happiness, and tears characterized the short visit; Sara hoped her relatives would have news of her son Simón, but he was still missing.

Sara had fled political persecution in Uruguay in April 1973 and moved to Buenos Aires, where she became one of the founding members of the PVP in July 1975. On the evening of July 13, 1976, fifteen heavily armed Argentine and Uruguayan agents stormed into her house in Belgrano neighborhood, where she lived with her son and another Uruguayan PVP activist, Asilú Maceiro. The two women were immediately tortured, and afterward their captors took them to a secret prison across the city, later identified as Automotores Orletti. Sara was forced to leave twenty-one-day-old Simón behind. "This war is not against children," Major Gavazzo, who headed the operation, reassured her, "so don't worry about him."⁴

On Orletti's upper floor, Uruguayan officers repeatedly and brutally inter-

rogated Sara while downstairs Argentine guards watched over numerous detainees. After ten days, a clandestine flight, known as the “first flight” (*primer vuelo*), copiloted by Uruguayan Air Force Lieutenant Enrique Bonelli, returned Sara and twenty-three other Uruguayans to Montevideo. There Uruguayan security forces incarcerated the prisoners in two secret sites: first La Casona and afterward the SID central building. After three months of clandestine imprisonment and torture, a fake operation was prepared to justify the militants’ reappearance in Uruguay, which few observers were convinced by at the time.

Sara’s tribulations illustrate the most systematic and lethal phase of transnational repression, when South America’s security forces set up a borderless system of terror and impunity across the continent. This fourth phase, the *Condor System*, began in March 1976 and ended in December 1978, claiming 487 victims. The new scheme envisioned during Condor’s founding meeting had quickly consolidated into reality, and terror was effectively internationalized throughout the region.

Three new elements distinguished the Condor System from the previous phases. First, a database located in Santiago centralized all intelligence information on subversion. Second, member countries used the dedicated encrypted communications channel Condotel to rapidly exchange intelligence and operational information. Finally, an operations command and coordinating office, Condoreje, was established in Buenos Aires, while the Teseo unit conducted special operations against targets in Europe. This multilateral and secretive arrangement integrated informational, communications, and operational tasks in an unprecedented manner. The same military and intelligence organs that had signed the Condor agreement were responsible for implementing operations: the Argentine SIDE, the Bolivian SIE, the Chilean DINA, Paraguayan military intelligence, and the Uruguayan SID.

Three sets of existing collaborative practices endured from the past. First, embassies still played a crucial role, helping coordinate Condor activities through designated representatives, often military attachés.⁵ Brazilian colonel Carlos Alberto Ponzi, the former head of the Rio Grande do Sul’s SNI office, later admitted that military attachés were “institutionalized spies.”⁶ Moreover, the dictatorial governments appointed military officers to cover other civilian administrative and secretarial functions within their diplomatic missions.⁷ Further, evidence was found that an unusually large amount of weaponry—a dozen guns, machine guns, and respective ammunition—was kept in Buenos Aires’s Uruguayan Embassy in mid-1976; these were assigned to seven military officers stationed there, a higher than normal number of military personnel for a

diplomatic mission.⁸ Second, various sets of operations coexisted: the Condor multilateral system overlapped with bilateral and unilateral repressive actions. Third, although the military was at the heart of the scheme, the police remained deeply involved. In Argentina PFA agents regularly contributed to operations undertaken by task force 5 (*grupo de tareas*; GT5), which the SIDE oversaw, mainly targeting the JCR and foreigners. In Uruguay, although the SID was primarily responsible for operations abroad, police officers such as Campos Hermida also formed part of the Orletti task force. Further, the SID habitually requested personal records of sought individuals from the Uruguayan police.⁹

This chapter unravels the intricate web of South American transnational repression in 1976. An analysis of emblematic cases, such as the murder of Uruguayan legislators Michelini and Gutiérrez-Ruiz, who were trying to generate democratic alternatives to the dictatorships, and recurrent operations against PVP activists and MIR militants in Argentina, elucidates the *modus operandi* of this period. In 1975 the security forces had dealt significant blows to the JCR in Argentina, with the arrest of over thirty Uruguayan and Argentine militants and the Fuentes Alarcón–Santucho operation. By late 1976 the JCR was forced to retreat to Europe, and all its leaders in Argentina had been eliminated, including Enríquez, Santucho, and Patricio Biedma.¹⁰

This chapter and the next employ the terms “Operation Condor” and “Condor System” interchangeably, but these have distinct origins. “Operation Condor” is most frequently used in Anglophone scholarship and investigative journalism; it originated from declassified US government documents, where it was employed when analyzing South America’s secretive coordination. Conversely, evidence from South American archives demonstrates how “Condor System” (*Sistema Cóndor*), or simply Condor, was the predominant term.

A Hunting Ground

The military coup on March 24, 1976, removed any remnants of democracy in Argentina and marked a turning point in transnational repression: thousands of South American refugees who had considered Argentina their home since the 1960s found themselves fatally trapped. Surrounded by countries already under dictatorship, there was now nowhere for them to flee.

On the morning of the coup, a task force of the Argentine army, gendarmerie, and police arrested Paraguayan doctor Gladys Meilinger de Sannemann before her patients’ eyes in her house-turned-clinic in Candelaria, Misiones province.¹¹ Gladys and her husband Rodolfo belonged to the MOPOCO, and their family

had lived in Argentina for over a decade. After four months in detention, on the night of July 28 Gladys was conveyed—blindfolded and handcuffed—from the police headquarters in Posadas to the harbor on the Paraná River. Just across the river lay Paraguay, where Gladys was returned by the Argentine Navy Prefecture. Like Gladys, many other Paraguayans, including Domingo Rolón Centurión, Cástulo Vera Baéz, and Gladys's colleague and friend Dr. Agustín Goiburú, were apprehended during their exile in Argentina and subsequently handed over to Paraguayan authorities. Imprisoned in Asunción's infamous Police Investigations Department, they were all brutally interrogated and tortured. Eventually the Paraguayan regime officially incarcerated some detainees in the political prison of Emboscada, while others were disappeared.

A year later, in March 1977, pretending to release her, Paraguayan authorities instead put Gladys and her daughter Ruth Maria on an Argentine Air Force plane bound for Buenos Aires, and they were then confined at the Navy Mechanics School (*Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada*; ESMA). In a miraculous set of circumstances, helped by a guard whose mother's life Gladys had saved in the past, the doctor made a life-saving phone call to the German Embassy, which threatened to break relations with Argentina if Gladys and her daughter did not reappear alive.¹²

In April 1976 the DINA stepped up its operations in Argentina. On April 3 a joint Argentine–Chilean operation in Mendoza illegally detained three members of the Chilean Socialist Party, namely Juan Hernández Zazpe, Manuel Tamayo, and Luis Muñoz.¹³ Persecuted by the Pinochet regime, the young men had fled Chile and worked to regroup party exiles abroad. They were just days away from requesting refugee status, since they also felt threatened in Mendoza, where the Argentine police and the DINA regularly harassed exiles.¹⁴ The same night of the kidnapping, Chilean agents took them back to Santiago, where they were last seen, badly tortured, in the DINA's secret prisons of Cuatro Alamos and Villa Grimaldi.

In Buenos Aires the obsessive search for Edgardo Enríquez was nearing success. Wanted in Chile since late 1973, Enríquez had become by late 1974 the principal MIR leader and a key JCR figure.¹⁵ By late 1975 Arancibia Clavel and agent "Rawson" were cornering him in Buenos Aires, and some of his closest collaborators, including Claudet Fernández, had disappeared. In December 1975 the head of DINA Exterior pushed for Enríquez's detention:¹⁶ the Argentine Army had distributed Enríquez's photos across the country and Rawson was on the lookout for another MIR/JCR member, Brazilian intellectual Ruy Mauro Marini, who could lead them to Enríquez.¹⁷

The net was closing. On March 29, 1976, the owner of La Pastoril farmhouse in Moreno, west of Buenos Aires, alerted the security forces to a possible extremist gathering.¹⁸ The intervening military–police task force interrupted a meeting of the PRT-ERP central committee, in which several MIR delegates, including Enríquez, were participating. Enríquez successfully fled from the back of the farmhouse and hid in the fields, but several militants were killed while others were detained. One Chilean survivor later recounted how he was repeatedly interrogated about Enríquez on that occasion.¹⁹

Just days after his lucky escape, on April 10, Enríquez was murdered in Buenos Aires during coordinated sets of operations against the MIR, in which eight other militants and a six-month-old baby were also detained or disappeared.²⁰ The US Embassy in Santiago confirmed Enríquez's assassination through "an impeccable Chilean Navy source,"²¹ while in Argentina, Enríquez's fate was discussed in an internal PFA report, which detailed the campaigns undertaken against foreign groups. In September 1976 Inspector Alberto Obregón, head of the PFA Department of Foreign Affairs, requested the promotion of forty-three of his men involved in operations conducted against foreign citizens in 1976, which had led to "the fall of the MIR's most important man" and his principal collaborators in Argentina.²² Although Obregón never mentioned Enríquez by name, he was undoubtedly pointing to the MIR's leader, whose murder was a major blow to the organization and its exiled militants.

A Death Trap²³

Besides guerrilla leaders, the repressive coordination also silenced prominent political figures who denounced human rights violations and strived to nurture democratic alternatives to the dictatorships. This was what occurred with Uruguayan legislators Zelmar Michelini and Héctor Gutiérrez-Ruiz, and former Tupamaros William Whitelaw and Rosario Barredo. Senator Wilson Ferreira narrowly avoided capture in the same operation. Their fate in Argentina had been sealed back in November 1975, when the Uruguayan Ministry of Foreign Affairs canceled the politicians' passports.²⁴

At 2:30 a.m. on May 18, 1976, armed men, allegedly belonging to the PFA, broke into Gutiérrez-Ruiz's fourth-floor apartment, where he slept with his wife, Matilde, and their five children, in the Retiro neighborhood of Buenos Aires.²⁵ Acting with complete impunity, the task force ransacked the house for an hour, stealing anything valuable, including silverware and children's toys,

and filling up seven of the family's suitcases, which were then loaded into Ford Falcon cars parked outside. Matilde and her son Juan Pablo later identified two of the men: Aníbal Gordon and Osvaldo Forese,²⁶ former AAA members. Gutiérrez-Ruiz told his wife the names of several Argentines and Uruguayans she could turn to for help; upon hearing Michelini's name, one captor affirmed, "We will get that communist too."²⁷ Gutiérrez-Ruiz was taken away, half-dressed in light-blue pajamas and hooded.²⁸ Before leaving, the men cut the phone line and threatened Matilde "not to contact any Uruguayans until midday, otherwise her husband would be killed."²⁹

Three hours later, at 5:30 a.m., three unmarked Ford Falcons reached Hotel Liberty on Buenos Aires's central Corrientes Avenue. Ten to fifteen heavily armed men, purportedly commanded by Major Cordero,³⁰ emerged and, after intimidating the night porter, seized the keys to Michelini's room.³¹ Screaming "Zelmar, your hour has come," they stormed into room 75, where Michelini lodged with two of his sons.³² There too, documents and personal possessions were stolen before the senator was dragged away.³³ The men acted with no fear of interference, telling hotel employees they belonged to the security forces and were conducting an antisubversive operation.³⁴

Days earlier, in the early hours of May 13, Whitelaw, Barredo, their two children, and Rosario's oldest daughter, Gabriela, had been apprehended at their home in the Caballito neighborhood in a similar operation. The task force had looted their belongings, trashed the house, and interrogated neighbors about what they labeled "the extremist couple."³⁵ Vicious inscriptions were left on the walls; one said, "Death to the sons of bitches of the Tupamaros."³⁶

Relatives of Michelini and Gutiérrez-Ruiz attempted to denounce the overnight kidnappings, but police officers turned them away, affirming that they had been official operations.³⁷ "Don't waste time, ma'am," a police commissioner told Matilde Rodríguez. "You can file a habeas corpus if you want, but it will be a waste of paper."³⁸ Wilson Ferreira, who barely escaped abduction that fateful night, owing to his location at his farmhouse in Buenos Aires province, denounced the captures from a safe refuge before seeking exile at the Austrian Embassy.³⁹ Family members sent telegrams to Argentine President Jorge Videla and other government ministers, pleading for the politicians' release, but to no avail. Neither the police nor judicial authorities showed any interest in what was unfolding: they never inspected the legislators' homes nor talked with their loved ones to clarify the circumstances.⁴⁰ Uruguayan journalist Julio Traibel, who had connections in the Casa Rosada, informed Ferreira that the two men were being held in a military unit known as "DF"; "the Ar-

gentines were not responsible,” he said, and “they needed to look outside (*buscar afuera*).”⁴¹ On May 20 Argentine Defense Minister Brigadier José María Klix affirmed that “this was a Uruguayan operation,” but he did not know “if it was official or not.”⁴²

The tragic outcome is well-known. On May 21 the bullet-ridden bodies of Michellini, Gutiérrez-Ruiz, Barredo, and Whitelaw were discovered in a red Torino car parked under a tunnel on the outskirts of Buenos Aires, covered in leaflets alleging a PRT-ERP execution.⁴³ No one believed in the culpability of the guerrillas, and most observers considered that the security forces were responsible.⁴⁴ The PRT-ERP immediately rejected the accusations and blamed the Argentine and Uruguayan regimes.⁴⁵ The US quickly reached the same conclusion, given speculations that the Argentine government was rounding up important Uruguayan exiles and considering Michellini’s “symbolic significance.”⁴⁶ Robert Hill, the US ambassador in Argentina, concurred that the kidnappings could not have been accomplished without the acquiescence of the Argentine government,⁴⁷ and later noted that, according to the local press, the *modus operandi* was “typical of Triple A operations.”⁴⁸ The US State Department, generally cautious in its assessments, agreed that the murders “could not have been carried out without the tacit support of at least some Argentine officials.”⁴⁹

In the days before the abductions, surveillance of the two politicians and threats against them had significantly increased. On the evening of May 17, Juan Raúl Ferreira, Wilson’s son, had seen two Ford Falcon cars stationed outside Gutiérrez-Ruiz’s house.⁵⁰ Afterward, on May 23, *La Opinión*, where Michellini had worked as a journalist, published a posthumous letter in which the senator revealed his fears of being captured and forcefully returned to Uruguay.⁵¹ At the time, Gutiérrez-Ruiz, Ferreira, and Michellini had been working to encourage a political rapprochement in Uruguay, collaborating with the dictatorship’s economy minister Alejandro Végh Villegas.⁵² Michellini, who had met with Végh Villegas at the Richmond Café in Buenos Aires just days earlier,⁵³ was the ideal person to generate a dialogue with all political groups in searching for a democratic solution.⁵⁴

It remains unclear where the prisoners were held prior to their executions. Barredo and Whitelaw, along with their children (who eventually were released and reunited with their paternal grandfather in late May), were possibly imprisoned in Orletti.⁵⁵ Juan Azarola Saint, a Uruguayan survivor, heard the voice of a young child playing during his imprisonment there.⁵⁶ Two Uruguayan former militants imprisoned inside Orletti in July 1976 also recognized Whitelaw’s

boxer dog there.⁵⁷ Michelini and Gutiérrez-Ruiz were probably confined in the central SSF building or the secret prison known as Bacacay, located in the same block as Orletti. Recent judicial investigations corroborated that police officers from the fortieth precinct participated in covering up the murders.⁵⁸

Automotores Orletti

The clandestine Orletti prison (fig. 3), situated in Venancio Flores 3.519/21, in the western neighborhood of Floresta, facing the Sarmiento railway, was the heart of Condor in Buenos Aires between May 11 and November 3, 1976. Approximately three hundred prisoners passed through its walls, and the large majority were foreigners, mainly Uruguayans, Chileans, and Cubans, many of whom eventually disappeared.⁵⁹

At the time, agents called the site *el jardín* (the garden), *el taller* (the garage), or *la cueva de la vía* (the railway cave).⁶⁰ The “Automotores Orletti” name originated only after the center closed down when, on November 3, PRT-ERP militants José Ramón Morales and Graciela Vidaillac successfully escaped after a gunfight with their captors. As they frantically ran outside, they saw a poorly maintained sign, which read at the top “Automotores S.A.” and underneath “Cortell, Cortell, Cortell.”⁶¹ Automotores Orletti originated from the misreading of this sign during the breakout. Santiago Ernesto Cortell was the owner of this two-floor car workshop, which he had rented out starting June 1, but the provisional tenancy had begun on May 11.⁶²

Inside Orletti, prisoners were kept in inhuman conditions on the ground floor, where the old car workshop had been located. Upstairs, task force leaders used one room as an office (where a portrait of Hitler hung), while others functioned as cells; at the back, a vast salon was employed for torture and interrogation sessions. Survivors recall the constant noise of trains, the keyword *operación sésamo* to open the metallic entrance shutter door, the wooden staircase up which prisoners were dragged to torture sessions, and the sound of children playing during recess in a nearby school.⁶³

The site belonged to the Department of Tactical Operations I of SIDE’s Subsecretariat A and was known as OT 18 (for *Operaciones Tácticas*).⁶⁴ It also had connections to Campo de Mayo, one of Argentina’s largest military bases, and its 601 Intelligence Battalion. The Orletti task force (*patota*) reflected this mixed composition, comprising SIDE agents such as Eduardo Ruffo, officers of the 601 Intelligence Battalion such as Raúl Guglielminetti, and former AAA mem-



Figure 3. Exterior façade of Automotores Orletti secret prison in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

bers including Gordon and Forese.⁶⁵ Foreign agents, mainly from Uruguay and Chile, regularly participated in certain operations.

By June 1976 the harrowing killing of the four Uruguayans had terrified the exile community in Buenos Aires and reverberated internationally. According to the UNHCR, many Uruguayans were now anxious to leave Argentina and sought asylum in embassies.⁶⁶ Buenos Aires was no longer a sanctuary for refugees: armed groups of civilians, known to belong to the security forces, freely roamed the city, alarming Uruguayans enormously.⁶⁷ On June 2 the exile community was shaken again when the Argentine police discovered the body of former Bolivian President Juan José Torres, who had been living in Buenos Aires since 1973 and had disappeared two days earlier.⁶⁸ Blindfolded and shot three times, he was found near San Andrés de Giles, about 100 kilometers from the capital. Argentine authorities attempted again to hide their involvement. Initially, Interior Minister General Albano Harguindeguy hinted that Torres's disappearance might have been voluntary and linked to "a very well-orchestrated campaign to discredit" Argentina's new leaders.⁶⁹ Subsequently, Economy Minister José Martínez de Hoz accused leftist extremists of killing "one of their own," while letting blame fall onto Argentine authorities.⁷⁰

Conversely, the US Embassy voiced the widely held belief that the Argentine security forces had been involved in Torres's killing, with the government's tacit approval.⁷¹ The connection with the murder of the Uruguayans was inescapable: like the Uruguayans, Torres too had been consolidating political opposition against the Banzer dictatorship in Bolivia.⁷² The anxious exile community was at nervous breaking point, and evidence pointed to a campaign "to eliminate leftist exile leadership in Argentina and probably intimidate exile communities."⁷³

The dramatic situation of refugees in Argentina produced different reactions. Uruguayan authorities acted ambiguously. On one hand, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs directed the embassy in Buenos Aires to offer "all the assistance and protection within reach to Uruguayans in need."⁷⁴ On the other, the same instructions stipulated that for those individuals whose arrest had been legally requested by Uruguayan authorities, "their transfer to the Republic will be provided for."⁷⁵ This latter statement seemed to approve the return of exiles wanted back home.

The US government sought to understand the dynamics on the ground in South America, particularly why so many people were being persecuted and "whether this was the result of a conspiracy to murder opponents."⁷⁶ Thus, in early June, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger requested that embassy staff in Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Chile, Brazil, and Bolivia provide information on the role of local governments in the deaths of refugees, potential international arrangements behind these executions, and the forceful return of refugees to countries of origin.⁷⁷

Simultaneously, the State Department's INR analyzed the killing spate, probing the degree of cooperation among the Southern Cone's security forces, and gauging whether they were actively participating or passively acquiescing in murdering exiles.⁷⁸ The INR concluded that the cooperation among local security forces was justified in tackling leftist subversion and the JCR, albeit admitting that the latter had never conducted any major operations. It found no evidence that governments were cooperating to kill political exiles and instead blamed the murders of prominent political exiles on unique circumstances in Argentina and the victims' association with extremist groups.

Information coming in from the region in response to Kissinger's request, however, partially contradicted this assessment. David Popper, the US ambassador in Santiago, noted that the region's security forces were collaborating to some extent, but the specific degree depended on each country's national interests.⁷⁹ Despite lacking corroborating evidence, the ambassador believed

that international killing arrangements, with the participation of Chilean agents, were quite possibly in place, as well as potential cooperation in returning refugees. Ambassador Hill in Argentina was rather direct in his response, raising three crucial points.⁸⁰ First, circumstantial evidence suggested that elements of local security forces were involved in the murders, which were approved and tolerated by higher ranks. Second, collaboration between Argentine security officers and their regional counterparts was likely, particularly since Uruguayan agents were known to operate in Buenos Aires “in identifying Uruguayan exiles of interest.”⁸¹ Third, the murder of the Uruguayan legislators had presumably been a warning “against any ‘*apertura*’ [opening],” thereby eliminating any potential opposition to the Uruguayan dictatorship.⁸² The assassinations had probably been a favor to the Uruguayans, since the politicians were of limited interest to Argentina. Hill also observed that Chilean officers apparently operated in Mendoza, while Brazilians did the same in Buenos Aires.

Neither ambassador was in a position to confirm the existence of a murder conspiracy, but both asserted it was a possibility because of long-standing regional cooperation. Conversely, Ernest Siracusa, the US ambassador in Uruguay, downplayed the role of the Uruguayan dictatorship, contending that there was no evidence that the recent murders of Uruguayan exiles had resulted from the action, desire, or arrangement of the local government.⁸³ Nevertheless, he conceded that Uruguayan officials were traveling to Argentina and occasionally to Chile to interrogate Uruguayan prisoners or obtain the results of interrogations.

Exchanges between the State Department and its diplomatic missions on the possible collusion among South American dictatorships to murder opponents lasted for months until August, when Washington concluded that a conspiracy was indeed taking place.⁸⁴ Consequently, on August 23, Kissinger urgently cabled embassies in Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, Bolivia, Brazil, and Paraguay to unequivocally notify ambassadors that, while the US understood the need for “coordination of security and intelligence information,” “government planned and directed assassinations within and outside the territory of Condor members” had most serious implications, constituting a serious moral and political problem.⁸⁵ Immediate action was required, and ambassadors were directed to arrange meetings as soon as possible at the highest levels in each country. This *démarche*—if delivered—would have clearly signaled to the Condor countries that the US strongly opposed their deadly operations.⁸⁶

In practice, however, only Ambassador George Landau transmitted the message to President Alfredo Stroessner in Asunción; no warnings were commu-

nicated elsewhere. A month later, on September 20, Harry Shlaudeman, the chief of the Bureau of Inter-American Affairs, directed ambassadors “not to take further action,” remarking that there had not been a report in weeks that indicated any intention to activate the Condor scheme.⁸⁷ Tragically, the following day Condor hit in the very heart of Washington. A bomb, placed by DINA agent Michael Townley and anti-Castro Cuban militants, killed exiled Chilean politician Orlando Letelier and Ronni Moffitt, his colleague at the Institute for Policy Studies, as they drove to work; Ronni’s husband Michael survived.⁸⁸

No Respite

In Buenos Aires the situation had quickly deteriorated since mid-1976. On June 9 armed men stole records—including the names and addresses of thousands of political refugees—from the offices of the Catholic International Migration Committee. The committee, sponsored by the Roman Catholic Church, was one of Argentina’s largest organizations working with the UNHCR. Although authorities attempted to reassure refugees, affirming they “were not in any danger,”⁸⁹ everyone feared that “whoever stole the lists meant to do something with them.”⁹⁰ That was indeed the case.

That same day at dawn, a twelve-man task force, which also included Uruguayan officers, abducted Uruguayan exiles and former Tupamaro militants Brenda Falero and José Luis Muñoz from their apartment in Buenos Aires, where they had lived since December 1974.⁹¹ The prisoners later identified Aníbal Gordon and SIDE agent Miguel Ángel Furci, as well as Uruguayans Campos Hermida and Cordero, among their captors. Taken to Orletti, they were interrogated by Uruguayan agents about their connections to Michellini and Gutiérrez-Ruiz, the PVP, other Uruguayans in Argentina, and Argentine political groups. Their interrogators knew precise details from their past militancy in Uruguay. They wanted Brenda to single out other sought Uruguayans from a photo album, where she noticed that a cross and “R.I.P.” were written on pictures of Michellini, Gutiérrez-Ruiz, Barredo, and Whitelaw.⁹²

In the early hours of June 11, two groups of twenty armed men forced entry into two refugee shelters, Hotel Pinot and Hotel Ilton, in the Villa Crespo neighborhood.⁹³ The men, dressed in civilian clothing, arrived in unlicensed cars and forced the entrance doors open; they then proceeded to inspect all the rooms and steal personal belongings, documents, and money. They drove away, taking all male residents, including two minors, to an unknown destination. At Hotel Ilton, they also threatened the owner’s wife that they would burn

down the building if she contacted the police. In total, twenty-three Chileans, one Uruguayan, and one Paraguayan—the proprietor of Hotel Ilton—were captured. According to reports, the officers had lists and photos of the people they sought, and they claimed to be from the army’s security superintendency, a unit that did not exist.⁹⁴

The twenty-five refugees were taken to Orletti, and the abduction of this large group likely saved the lives of Brenda and José Luis: their relatives successfully added their names and that of another Uruguayan, Luis Muniz, to the list of refugees that had been seized from Hotel Pinot. Eventually bowing to international pressure, dictator Videla himself allegedly ordered that the refugees had to reappear. Just before her liberation, the task force leader told Brenda, “You were lucky, madam, you won the lottery today.”⁹⁵

Another Uruguayan Orletti survivor, who was just sixteen and had traveled to Argentina to try to join the Quilmes football team, remembered how, soon after a large contingent of people had arrived, the task force received urgent counterorders to free everyone. One captor said, “What a mess, we filled up the place with people and now we have to let them go.”⁹⁶ Another, who had realized the youngster was not involved in politics, released him out of pity, but gave him a stark warning: “Look, you remind me of my son; if you are Uruguayan, you need to leave, because they are looking for anyone who is Uruguayan, so flee and don’t return.”⁹⁷ All the prisoners were released between June 12 and 13 and reported to the UNHCR that Chilean and Uruguayan security officers had taken part in abductions and interrogations; the kidnappers possessed information previously stolen from the Catholic migration committee, along with files brought from Chile and Uruguay.⁹⁸

Simultaneously with this unfolding ordeal, Argentine Foreign Minister Admiral Cesar Guzzetti met with Kissinger in Santiago and discussed the troubles allegedly caused by refugees in Argentina, complaining that up to ten thousand were potentially engaged in illegal activities.⁹⁹ While Argentine government officials accused refugees of supporting guerrillas, Ambassador Hill painted a different picture and spoke of the extreme fear they lived in, referring to the recent episode of the UNHCR refugee group who had all received death threats during their detention.¹⁰⁰ By that point, it was irrefutable that the kidnapping of exiles relied on the direct involvement and cooperation of the Argentine security forces, as it would otherwise be unthinkable for task forces to raid refugee hotels undisturbed.¹⁰¹

The Uruguayan Embassy in Buenos Aires knew of the refugees’ plight but tried to shift culpability away from the top, contending that Argentine security

officers operated and acted with impunity because the higher ranks could not control them.¹⁰² The embassy estimated that many more Uruguayans than officially documented could have been targeted, since the local press only reported a minority of deaths and disappearances.¹⁰³

Persecuting the PVP

The kidnapping at dawn on June 9 from an apartment in the exclusive Núñez neighborhood in Buenos Aires of Gerardo Gatti—a prominent Uruguayan political and trade union leader who had been among the founders of the FAU, the ROE, and OPR-33—marked the start of the first repressive wave against PVP militants in 1976. Exiled in Argentina since 1973, Gatti became in 1975 the PVP's first secretary general.¹⁰⁴ His secretary Pilar Nores was seized later that day from the same flat.

Previously, PVP activists had been apprehended in seemingly isolated incidents, such as the detention on March 28 in the harbor at Colonia by the Uruguayan Navy Prefecture of Ricardo Gil Iribarne, Luis Ferreira, and Elida Álvarez, who had been traveling in a caravan full of PVP propaganda against the Uruguayan dictatorship. Subsequently they were imprisoned in clandestine centers within the premises of the Uruguayan Naval Fusiliers Corps (Fusileros Navales; FUSNA)¹⁰⁵ and the 300 Carlos¹⁰⁶ in Montevideo. At that point, Uruguayan security forces did not possess much information on the PVP. Gil Iribarne recalled first being questioned broadly by Cordero about activities in Buenos Aires and individuals captured there.¹⁰⁷ But by June, Cordero increasingly asked him specific questions about the PVP and its structures, aiming to garner useful information to destroy the party.¹⁰⁸ Cordero also regularly went to Buenos Aires and returned with concrete elements for questioning. By late June the SID had acquired significant intelligence from interrogating prisoners in Argentina and had discovered details regarding PVP operations in Uruguay, Argentina and Europe.¹⁰⁹

The first wave of detentions of PVP militants occurred between early June and mid-July 1976, when joint Argentine–Uruguayan task forces kidnapped thirty-nine Uruguayans. In some cases the PFA initially apprehended the militants, such as with Gatti and Nores, and imprisoned them in the SSF headquarters or other police precincts. After their nationality was determined, however, they were handed over to the “Uruguayan specialists” in Orletti.¹¹⁰ The night of June 13, a task force in Morón, Buenos Aires province, picked up Uruguayan trade union leader Washington Pérez, who was no longer politically

active in Buenos Aires and worked as a news vendor but was a close friend of Gatti.¹¹¹ For weeks until mid-July, Pérez was repeatedly taken to Orletti to act as an intermediary between the PVP and the patota, negotiating first Gatti's freedom and subsequently that of León Duarte, another PVP leader. The patota knew the PVP possessed large sums of money—the result of a successful ransom paid in 1974—and began negotiations to obtain \$2 million in exchange for Gatti's freedom and that of other militants held in Uruguay.¹¹²

By mid-July Orletti was bursting with Uruguayan prisoners kidnapped in successive large-scale operations since early June—largely against the PVP but also including some activists of the MLN, Hugo Méndez of the GAU, and Francisco Candia of the PCU. Simultaneously, relatives of the PRT-ERP leader Mario Roberto Santucho, namely his brother Carlos, sister Manuela, and his sister-in-law Cristina, were also imprisoned there and later disappeared. On July 19, the day Santucho was killed in an ambush on a PRT-ERP safehouse in Villa Martelli, the patota cruelly murdered his brother Carlos, drowning him in Orletti in front of his relatives and other Uruguayan prisoners.¹¹³

The Argentine–Uruguayan task force followed the same *modus operandi* in all its operations. They violently broke into victims' flats, usually at night, stealing virtually all their belongings, including furniture and cars. On July 24, the night of the clandestine flight to Montevideo, Uruguayan officers loaded the plane with all their stolen items, including car engines, and were labeled *cirujas* (rubbish collectors) by their Argentine colleagues.¹¹⁴

Chaos and confusion defined prisoners' lives inside Orletti, where they were viciously tortured to rapidly gather information.¹¹⁵ Their captors blatantly disregarded basic human needs: survivors recalled eating only a couple of times within a ten-day period, and prisoners with serious injuries such as Gatti lacked adequate medical attention for days. Orletti's detainees were treated with extreme sadism,¹¹⁶ and the site housed a much larger number of individuals than initially planned.¹¹⁷ Survivors called Orletti “the house of torments and crimes,”¹¹⁸ where people permanently moaned from the pain of brutal tortures and were kept in freezing conditions on the lower-floor garage in the midst of winter. Loud music at night attempted to cover the screams of those interrogated.¹¹⁹ In this Dantesque hell,¹²⁰ Sara Méndez's pleas for her baby Simón went unanswered.¹²¹

Aníbal Gordon, nicknamed *el jefe*, the boss—a SIDE agent since 1968 and formerly the AAA leader—ran Orletti.¹²² There was a clear division of labor within the task force: Argentine agents oversaw the logistics of operations, while soldiers covered guard duties; SID officers interrogated Uruguayan pris-

oners about their militancy and connections with other exiles in Argentina.¹²³ Relations among Argentines and Uruguayans were strained, and they frequently fought over the *botín de guerra* (war booty).¹²⁴ Argentine officers also questioned detainees about the PVP money,¹²⁵ since they did not trust the Uruguayans and thought they were being lied to (*los estaban mejicaneando*) to avoid sharing the money as previously agreed.¹²⁶ Survivors identified several Uruguayan officers, whom they knew from previous detentions in Montevideo, including Captain Ricardo Arab, Captain Gilberto Vázquez, and a soldier dubbed “Dracula,” namely Ernesto Soca.¹²⁷

Uruguayan officers did not hide their identities and felt “invincible and proud of what they were doing.”¹²⁸ Cordero, for instance, introduced himself to prisoner Ana Salvo, affirming “they were old acquaintances,” since he had interrogated her in Montevideo.¹²⁹ Likewise, José Nino Gavazzo asked Sara Méndez if she knew him; when she answered negatively, he told her his name and who he was.¹³⁰ Most survivors concur that while Gavazzo overall commanded the Uruguayans, Cordero was the PVP specialist, since he obsessively interrogated prisoners to reconstruct *la sabana* (the bedsheet), a large PVP organizational diagram on which Cordero placed all the militants.¹³¹

Just a few of Orletti’s prisoners were liberated; the majority were murdered or disappeared, including Gatti and Duarte, while twenty-five (mostly PVP militants) were secretly transferred to Montevideo in late July. Detention in Uruguay in La Casona secret prison (also known as 300 Carlos R or *infierno chico*)¹³² was a significant improvement. After suffering the cold and near starvation in Orletti, the ability to shower and use a blanket seemed astonishing: “We were eating properly for the first time in days,” Sara Méndez recalled. “I will never forget that, and even a soup felt like a blessing [*manjar de la vida*].”¹³³ In August the detainees were moved to the SID headquarters in Montevideo’s central Boulevard Artigas; a clandestine center functioned in its basement, where most of the prisoners were kept, handcuffed and blindfolded. At night torture and interrogation sessions continued.¹³⁴

In Buenos Aires, meanwhile, the disappearance of the large group of Uruguayans had caused turmoil. Daily requests by victims’ relatives to locate their missing loved ones overwhelmed the Uruguayan Embassy.¹³⁵ Diplomatic staff had their hands tied and could not obtain information from local authorities that merely responded, “The disappeared were not located in their dependencies.”¹³⁶ The remaining PVP militants lived in absolute fear, as one remembered: “You felt so powerless before your comrades’ disappearance. Ford Falcon cars symbolized terror, driving around the city slowly, observing, and with

machine guns peeking through the windows. Each time, I thought, that's it, it's my turn, and yet it wasn't. You could touch the fear."¹³⁷

The situation had degenerated so completely in Buenos Aires that terror had reached the stage of "psychosis."¹³⁸ Since the March coup, hundreds of refugees had been kidnapped, tortured, and murdered.¹³⁹ Declassified US documents have revealed that the CIA was aware of the Uruguayans' fate and the *modus operandi* used in these operations. A July 26 secret cable affirmed that Argentine SIDE and Uruguayan SID were responsible for capturing the exiles, who would not be returned to Uruguay but would "be handled in accordance with current Argentine procedures regarding subversives: they will probably be killed."¹⁴⁰ Further, the cable admitted that the group's leaders, Gatti and Duarte, had been assassinated.¹⁴¹

Liquidating the MIR

Throughout 1976 at least twenty MIR militants were disappeared or murdered in Argentina. After Enríquez's murder in April, Patricio Biedma became the MIR leader and its representative before the JCR.¹⁴² Biedma was Argentine but had joined the MIR when he lived in Chile;¹⁴³ owing to relentless harassment by the Pinochet dictatorship since late 1973, he had returned to Argentina in 1974. As the situation worsened in 1975, Fuentes Alarcón (before his capture) had advised Biedma's wife and children to travel to Cuba for safety, which they did.¹⁴⁴ The Argentine security forces were indeed closing in on Biedma, and agents were keen to establish his activities in helping Chilean exiles and his MIR and JCR functions.¹⁴⁵ The house where he lived with his parents in Buenos Aires was raided, but he was not found.

Biedma was responsible for arranging the escape of the remaining MIR militants from Argentina, as well as the transfer of money and messages for the JCR between Argentina and Chile.¹⁴⁶ He was accidentally captured in late July 1976 in an *operativo rastrillo*, a "razor operation," in which agents randomly checked large numbers of people on public transport or the street. Biedma maintained his cover story for a while but eventually broke under torture, admitting his real identity.¹⁴⁷ In Orletti Biedma also disclosed to José Luis Bertazzo, an Argentine prisoner captured in late August, that earlier that month he had perceived the presence of two Cuban prisoners, distinguishing their accent and the unusual use of words such as *caballero* (gentleman).¹⁴⁸

Indeed, on August 9, Orletti's task force had kidnapped two young Cuban diplomats, Jesús Cejas Arias and Crescencio Galañena Hernández, who were

tortured for forty-eight hours and then killed.¹⁴⁹ DINA agents, probably including Townley, who regularly collaborated with anti-Castro Cubans for the DINA, traveled from Chile to question the Cubans and Biedma.¹⁵⁰ The bodies of Cejas Arias and Galañena Hernández were later hidden in “fifty-five-gallon drums, which were dumped in the Paraná River”¹⁵¹ near Puente Colorado in San Fernando, a location the SIDE used to dispose of prisoners’ bodies. Subsequently, a fabricated story was disseminated to the local press, alleging that they had defected to another country.¹⁵²

Biedma and Mario Espinoza, another seized MIR militant, both admitted that the Cuban Embassy regularly funded revolutionary groups in Argentina, including the JCR, Montoneros, and PRT-ERP.¹⁵³ Biedma himself had received \$75,000 to support MIR activities in Argentina.¹⁵⁴ For the security forces, cutting the funding channels that supported political groups and armed organizations was a priority objective. Indeed, the lack of economic resources weakened the strength of political resistance and threatened militants’ very survival, thereby facilitating their capture and elimination.¹⁵⁵

The Argentine PFA actively participated in operations against members of the MIR and the PVP in Argentina, including the detention of Biedma and Espinoza,¹⁵⁶ the arrest or disappearance of 95 percent of MIR militants, and the capture of thirty-four PVP activists.¹⁵⁷

The Informer

In mid-September 1976 Carlos Goessens, a PVP militant in Buenos Aires nicknamed *el karateka* because he was a martial arts expert, phoned the First Army Division in Montevideo proposing a deal.¹⁵⁸ In return for sparing his life,¹⁵⁹ Goessens offered to hand over militants of the PVP operational arm that he belonged to, whose leader was Alberto Mechoso.¹⁶⁰ Major Gavazzo immediately traveled to speak to Goessens in person.¹⁶¹ Goessens’s betrayal accelerated the ongoing efforts by the Uruguayan security services to eliminate the PVP in both Argentina and Uruguay.¹⁶² Since late August Cordero had resumed efforts to locate militants “who possessed a significant amount of PVP money.”¹⁶³ Uruguayan officers knew they had to find those funds, beyond simply tracking activists, if they wanted to entirely disband the PVP.¹⁶⁴

From September 23 to October 5, Uruguayan agents were back in Buenos Aires collaborating with the Orletti patota to undertake a second wave of operations during which thirty-seven Uruguayans were seized, including twenty-seven PVP members, Adalberto Soba’s and Mechoso’s wives, and eight children

of various couples. Everyone except Mechoso's wife and children was imprisoned in Orletti, where Goessens was seen behaving "as if he were a Uruguayan Army officer."¹⁶⁵

On September 26 three major operations occurred to target the PVP leadership. In the early afternoon in Villa Lugano, south of Buenos Aires, Gavazzo led twenty to thirty Uruguayan and Argentine agents in a raid on the house of Mechoso, who had been captured earlier that day.¹⁶⁶ The men ransacked the property until they found the money they were after, approximately \$1.5 million.¹⁶⁷ Afterward, Mechoso's wife, Beatriz Castellonese, and the couple's two children were imprisoned in the former house of Sara Méndez, which the SIDE had transformed into an intelligence base.¹⁶⁸

In Haedo, west of Buenos Aires, a similar operation unfolded at Soba's home. His wife, Elena Laguna, their three children, and two PVP activists (Juan Pablo Errandonea and Raúl Tejera) working at a printing press located within the property were detained.¹⁶⁹ Earlier that day Soba had been seized and brutally tortured. Finally, in the late afternoon another operation by a GT5 team comprising SIDE and PFA agents with Uruguayan agents occurred in San Martín, northwest of Buenos Aires, targeting Mario Julién's family.¹⁷⁰ As this book's introduction recounts, Mario was murdered, and Victoria and their two children were taken to Orletti.

On September 27 a task force involving Uruguayan officers and Argentine agents from the 601 Intelligence Battalion and the SIDE kidnapped María Emilia Islas, Jorge Zaffaroni, and their eighteen-month-old daughter Mariana from their apartment in Vicente López, north of Buenos Aires.¹⁷¹ Afterward, SIDE agent Miguel Ángel Furci illegally adopted Mariana, who recovered her identity only in 1992.¹⁷² That same day the wives and children of Soba and Mechoso were forced to travel on a commercial flight to Montevideo with Gavazzo and Ricardo Arab, who, posing as their husbands, carried the stolen PVP money to Montevideo. Laguna recounted how, at one point, Arab opened a wooden box snatched from her house and began to stash dollars into his pockets, saying that "he could not have enough."¹⁷³ The women and children were later freed.

Similar operations continued in Buenos Aires throughout late September. Beatriz Barboza and Francisco Javier Peralta are among the few survivors of this second wave; in Orletti, Barboza briefly spoke with María Emilia Islas, who told her how her husband was being viciously tortured to reveal information about other Uruguayans.¹⁷⁴ The evening of their abduction, Barboza and Peralta were put on a commercial flight back to Uruguay, escorted by two guards.

Peralta's Spanish nationality and the fact that his employer had called the Campo de Mayo military base to inquire about his detention likely contributed toward saving their lives.¹⁷⁵ In Montevideo they were initially kept in the infamous 300 Carlos secret prison; subsequently Barboza was incarcerated in Punta de Rieles, and Peralta in Libertad.¹⁷⁶

By early October this second wave was winding down, with Washington Queiro being the last militant to be detained on October 4. But unlike the first wave in June–July, it remains unclear whether all the prisoners were transferred to Montevideo. Survivor Álvaro Nores, who was taken to Uruguay by plane on October 5, recalled how Gavazzo told him that prisoners' transfers had been suspended and only the heads of the SID and SIDE could authorize those operations, but that an exception was being made for him.¹⁷⁷ Likewise, Cordero repeatedly mentioned to Gil Iribarne that his friend Juan Pablo Recagno had been captured in Buenos Aires, but the major was unsure whether *el Colorado* (ginger head, Recagno's nickname), could be brought to Uruguay.¹⁷⁸

By October 7 only Biedma and Espinoza were left in Orletti, while all the Uruguayans had gone.¹⁷⁹ The fate of this second group of PVP activists has never been entirely determined. One likely hypothesis by journalist Roger Rodríguez is that they were flown to Montevideo on the “second flight” (*segundo vuelo*) on the night of October 5, in a C-47 Uruguayan Air Force plane piloted by Major Walter Pintos, Major José Pedro Malquín, Captain Daniel Muñoz, and Major Walter Dopazzo, which landed at Carrasco Airport with twenty-two prisoners. Likely incarcerated in 300 Carlos, the detainees were subsequently murdered, and their bodies buried on military grounds.¹⁸⁰

Another clandestine flight from Buenos Aires to Montevideo, possibly on October 6 or 7, carried Anatole and Victoria Julién, together with seven-months-pregnant Argentine national María Claudia García, who had been captured in August with her husband Marcelo, son of renowned Argentine poet Juan Gelman, and incarcerated in Orletti.¹⁸¹ In a set of still not fully clarified circumstances, María Claudia was confined with the Julién siblings in a ground-floor room in the SID building,¹⁸² where many prisoners remember seeing a pregnant woman and hearing the noise of children playing on the floor above theirs.¹⁸³ After María Claudia gave birth to a baby girl in early November in Montevideo's Central Military Hospital, Captain Arab and Colonel Juan Antonio Rodríguez Buratti removed her and the child from the SID in December; that day a soldier overheard Arab say that sometimes one had to do “tricky things” (*cosas embromadas*).¹⁸⁴

María Claudia was later assassinated at Base Valparaíso, another secret

prison in Montevideo, whose premises had been purchased with the appropriated PVP money.¹⁸⁵ According to Captain Gilberto Vázquez, the funds, estimated between \$1 million and \$6 million, were split among the SID, the Army Command, and the First Army Division, and were employed for institutional expenses.¹⁸⁶ The Argentines retained a portion too, which became a bone of contention.¹⁸⁷ To resolve this matter, four Argentine Orletti agents, including Gordon and Osvaldo Forese, visited the SID in early December.¹⁸⁸ Most likely, Argentine and Uruguayan agents also discussed the fate of María Claudia and the other *segundo vuelo* prisoners on that occasion.

Charade at Shangrilá

Just before the start of the second repressive wave against PVP militants, Gavazzo had begun negotiations with the *primer vuelo* prisoners in Montevideo in late August. According to the major, the Uruguayan security forces had saved their lives and rescued them “from the Argentine murderers, who had wanted to send them up to play the harp with Saint Peter.”¹⁸⁹ To justify their presence in Uruguay, Gavazzo continued, they had to collaborate in simulating a fake guerrilla invasion—a proposal that the detainees unanimously rejected. Amid threats, negotiations continued for a month until another plan was agreed upon. The farce began on October 23, when some agents, standing in for the prisoners, were arrested in various hotels in Montevideo and in a house, Chalet Suzy, in the coastal town of Shangrilá. Special communiqués, which Gavazzo had previously redacted, informed the Uruguayan population of the detention of sixty-two PVP members in Uruguay.¹⁹⁰ In late November fourteen of the twenty-six Uruguayan prisoners transferred from Argentina were prosecuted by the military justice system and later transferred to the Libertad and Punta de Rieles jails.¹⁹¹ By December 22 all the remaining detainees had left the SID: six more were incarcerated, while another six were released.

Few believed the story of Chalet Suzy at the time, and the unexpected reappearance of the Uruguayans raised many questions. In Montevideo, US Ambassador Siracusa welcomed the news of their forced repatriation from Argentina, given earlier reports indicating their summary execution. The situation, however, clearly demonstrated cooperation between the two dictatorships, including the attempts to cover up what had happened.¹⁹² In Buenos Aires, Ambassador Hill forcefully challenged the Uruguayan version of events and squarely attributed the kidnappings to the Argentine and Uruguayan security forces. He declared that no one in Argentina or abroad would believe

the cover story, and pointed out that numerous refugees remained still unaccounted for.¹⁹³

Many PVP activists kidnapped in the first wave inexplicably lived to tell their tales, while the majority of those seized in the second were murdered. One potential explanation relates to efforts by the Uruguayan dictatorship to convince the US that guerrilla groups threatened the country, thus warranting continued American economic and military support.¹⁹⁴ On October 1 the US Congress had signed into law an amendment—proposed months earlier by Democratic Congressman Edward Koch—that halted \$3 million of military aid going to Uruguay in 1977, because of its abysmal human rights record.¹⁹⁵ The Shangrilá charade possibly aimed to demonstrate to the US that Uruguay was still under attack. The US government knew, however, that the PVP had been decimated by coordinated operations in Argentina conducted by Argentine and Uruguayan intelligence officers.¹⁹⁶

Throughout 1976 Argentina was irrefutably the main theater of Condor operations, but exiles were also pursued in neighboring countries, with prominent cases in Bolivia and Uruguay. Several ELN leaders, especially Argentine Luis Stamponi and Uruguayan Enrique Lucas López, were targeted in operations unleashed by the Bolivian security forces. Between April and September 1976 numerous militants were captured in the cities of Oruro, Cochabamba, Llallagua, and Santa Cruz and subsequently interrogated by police agents from the Department of Political Order (Departamento de Orden Político; DOP).¹⁹⁷ Argentine PFA officers also traveled to La Paz to question Stamponi and Graciela Rutila Artes, the wife of Lucas López.¹⁹⁸ On September 17 the Bolivian State Intelligence Service (Servicio de Inteligencia del Estado; SIE)¹⁹⁹ notified Uruguay through encrypted Condortel cable no. 707/76 that DOP agents had murdered Lucas López during a raid in Cochabamba.²⁰⁰

Just a few weeks earlier, after a lengthy detention in Bolivia, Rutila, her one-year-old daughter Carla, and another Argentine prisoner had been handed over to the Argentine police on August 29 at the border towns of Villazón, Bolivia, and La Quiaca, Argentina.²⁰¹ Subsequently flown to Buenos Aires, they were straightaway imprisoned in Orletti, where they disappeared.²⁰² In a similar manner, on October 15 Stamponi and prisoner Oscar González were delivered at the same boundary. Stamponi's mother, Mafalda Corinaldesi, who went to Bolivia to investigate her son's whereabouts and unearthed evidence of his illegal rendition to Argentina, was herself disappeared upon returning to Buenos Aires in November. Out of this group, only baby Carla survived; she was

illegally appropriated by Orletti agent Eduardo Ruffo but recovered her biological identity in 1985.

Argentines were also targeted in Uruguay. In early November Argentine siblings Claudio and Lila Epelbaum of the communist organization Poder Obrero were unlawfully seized in a joint operation in Punta del Este. Returned to Argentina by plane, they were held in the secret prison known as Protobanco or Brigada Güemes, southwest of Buenos Aires, and later disappeared.²⁰³

Condor in Action

Unquestionably, 1976 was the year of Condor. On January 30 the Condor agreement had come into effect, and the new system began to materialize and consolidate. Several core features of the Condor System are now clear. First, the leadership of the Condor organization rotated annually among member countries and fell first upon Argentina, which was represented by SIDE Director General Otto Paladino.²⁰⁴ Second, meetings of Condor countries were regularly held; the second gathering occurred between May 31 and June 2, 1976, in Santiago.²⁰⁵ On that occasion Chilean, Argentine, Bolivian, Paraguayan, and Uruguayan intelligence chiefs mainly discussed long-range cooperation, while Brazil sent an observer. For Uruguay, the head of the SID, General Amauri Prantl, attended with Major José Nino Gavazzo, who was the SID's "representative of the area of operations"²⁰⁶ and thereby managed Condor operations for Uruguay.²⁰⁷ Gavazzo permanently coordinated with the intelligence services of other member countries, ensuring "a perpetual exchange of information to enable better action in the struggle against subversion."²⁰⁸

Three crucial decisions were taken at this second Condor conference. First, Brazil formally joined the organization.²⁰⁹ Second, "a basic computerized data bank," collating copies of all intelligence cards and files from participating countries, would be created and physically located in Santiago.²¹⁰ Finally, through a separate accord but still in line with "Condor cooperative thinking," Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay decided to send teams to operate covertly in Paris to liquidate top-level JCR and leftists targets.²¹¹ The logistics of these operations were extensively debated during a separate Condor summit on July 2 in Buenos Aires.²¹²

The Condor System rested overall on two main pillars: Condortel and Condoreje.²¹³ Already by April 1976, if not earlier, the secret and encrypted communications channel Condortel was operational, and this secure system enabled

exchanging data on sought individuals and prisoners, tracking the movement of people across borders, transmitting orders to operational teams, and exchanging intelligence across South America.²¹⁴ A cryptography system was initially made available to member countries by late December 1975, later replaced by cryptographic machines.²¹⁵ By early 1977 Brazil had provided all Condor countries with a manual Swiss-made cipher system machine that was similar to an old cash register, with numbers, slide handles, and a manually operated dial on the side.²¹⁶ By late 1977 Argentina had supplied Hagelin Crypto H-4605 equipment to enhance Condortel's security.²¹⁷ The Condor Editing Center would also be hosted in Buenos Aires, "to handle limited edition publication of intelligence documents required by Condor members."²¹⁸

Condortel confidential cables found in the Uruguayan Ministry of Defense provide an example of how it worked. On April 9, for instance, Condor 1 (Argentina) requested from Condor 5 (Uruguay) "the ideological record of [name blacked out], Uruguayan, born on July 10, 1955, single, son of [name blacked out] and [name blacked out]. He entered our country on January 20, 1976. The person in question is in detention."²¹⁹ Similarly, on April 21 Condor 1 (Argentina) asked Condor 4 (Paraguay) to transmit the criminal records of two Paraguayans accused of subversive activities who were residing in Corrientes city; one had been arrested.²²⁰ Declassified US government documents confirmed in 2019 hypotheses that Condortel followed a simple alphabetical order for the original five Condor states:²²¹ Condor 1 was Argentina, 2 Bolivia, 3 Chile, 4 Paraguay, 5 Uruguay, while Brazil maintained observer status.²²² Supposedly the CIA also helped establish computerized links among the Condor states' intelligence and operative units. The Paraguayan chief of staff Alejandro Fretes Davalos disclosed in a 1978 meeting with US Ambassador Robert White how South American countries kept in touch and coordinated confidential intelligence information through a US communications installation in the Panama Canal Zone.²²³

Condoreje oversaw operational activities. Each Condor country sent "two officers to Buenos Aires to man this forward command and coordinating office," which was distinct from Santiago's "central archives office of Condor."²²⁴ John Dinges contends that the Condoreje office was located in a SIDE building in Recoleta neighborhood, on Billinghurst 2457 (fig. 4).²²⁵ Officers stationed there processed incoming intelligence, including information and requests transmitted by Condortel, into orders for raids and kidnappings, and operational teams were dispatched to execute the orders.²²⁶ Military officers openly remarked that colleagues were out of country because they were "flying like a condor."²²⁷



Figure 4. Exterior façade of Condoreje operative base at Billinghurst 2457 in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

DINA Army Brigadier Cristoph Willeke Floel further explained Condor's operational logistics.²²⁸ He had been designated by Manuel Contreras as the Chilean representative to the Condor organization in Buenos Aires between September 1976 and January 1978 under the false name of Georg Wegner Stapf. Other permanent representatives included an Argentine civilian called Enrique Domínguez (potentially a cover name), and an unnamed Uruguayan officer (possibly Ricardo Arab). Paraguayan and Bolivian delegates only traveled to Buenos Aires when needed, and thus varied.

In his later testimony to the Chilean judiciary, Willeke Floel declared that between October 1976 and April 1977 he was the liaison officer between the DINA and the SIDE, facilitating the transmission of information between Chile and Argentina. Further, he closely and regularly collaborated with Colonel Barría Barría, based at the Chilean Embassy, who remitted documentation to Santiago via diplomatic pouch to the head of DINA Exterior. Willeke Floel's superior in Argentina was Colonel Juan Ramón Nieto Moreno, the head of GT5. The Chilean brigadier also provided assistance to what he labeled the

“chasing unit,”²²⁹ whose agents traveled from Chile to Argentina at various intervals and in diverse compositions; he helped them coordinate meetings with Colonel Nieto and facilitated various other tasks.

Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile were Condor’s most enthusiastic members and engaged in operations against targets primarily in Argentina.²³⁰ Willeke Floel admitted that once sought individuals were detained, requesting countries could collect them, and, although there were different handover procedures, “usually there would be no records left” (*no quedaba registro de ello*).²³¹ Allegedly, Brazil’s participation in Condor was limited to information exchange, including providing communications equipment for Condortel, training foreign agents, and monitoring subversives; its involvement fell short of murder operations.²³²

The 2019 declassification of US documents revealed for the first time the existence of the so-called Teseo unit,²³³ which primarily targeted JCR members in France.²³⁴ Teseo was a distinct initiative but still reflected Condor’s collaborative philosophy. Previously to this latest round of declassification, operations conducted by special teams against targets outside South America were known as the “Third Phase.”²³⁵ Teseo was a top-secret operation, whose true nature was known by only a few high-ranking officials; these included, in Uruguay, Army Commander-in-Chief General Julio Vadora and, in Chile, Contreras, who coordinated details and target lists with Pinochet.²³⁶ Although Brazil, Bolivia, and Paraguay initially tentatively adhered to this new unit, none of them eventually followed up. Paraguay feared that Teseo would bring “nothing but problems” and assisted by only providing information.²³⁷ Bolivia also withdrew because of a lack of funds, the fact that its principal targets were located in Peru, and potential adverse international reactions if Teseo activities were linked back to Condor countries.²³⁸ Ultimately, only the three Southern Cone countries moved ahead, since they already had agents on the ground in France,²³⁹ where the largest concentration of Latin American exiles, including JCR leaders, resided.²⁴⁰ According to the CIA, the Teseo operations center was located within the 601 Intelligence Battalion in Buenos Aires.²⁴¹

Targets for Teseo included both alleged terrorists and political figures, such as Uruguayan PVP activist Hugo Cores, Senator Ferreira, leaders of Amnesty International (possibly Edy Kaufman),²⁴² US Congressman Koch (the sponsor of the amendment cutting military aid to Uruguay), international terrorist Ilich “Carlos” Ramirez, the JCR/MIR leader René “Gato” Valenzuela and his partner, and Carlos Altamirano.²⁴³ Each Condor country participating in Teseo had to provide financial contributions for the unit and send two representatives for

two months of training in Argentina before teams would be dispatched to France.²⁴⁴ A single list of targets would be approved:²⁴⁵ interested parties proposed their choices, and the final selection was by simple majority vote.²⁴⁶ Subsequently, operations would proceed in two steps. First, an intelligence team would locate, identify, and monitor the target(s), transmitting information to the Condoreje operations center. The latter would use Condortel in its communications with each participating service, while those from abroad would use telephones or cable “in a previously agreed upon language.”²⁴⁷ Second, an operational team would be dispatched “to carry out the actual sanction against the target” and then escape.²⁴⁸ For security, members of these teams did not know each other, except for the team leaders.²⁴⁹ Teams were reportedly composed of members of different nationalities, and structured like a US Army Special Forces team.²⁵⁰

Between September and early December 1976, Argentine and Chilean officials dictated the training course for Condor officers from Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay to operate in France,²⁵¹ which included urban search-and-destroy techniques for surveillance operations and the subsequent elimination of targeted persons.²⁵² Assassinations were planned for approximately twenty intended victims, but all European missions were aborted after the CIA presumably alerted the French intelligence services.²⁵³ Indeed, in early December 1976 a Condor team of Uruguayans and Argentines was on the ground in Paris to operate against three Uruguayans, including Cores.²⁵⁴ But the mission was unsuccessful; the team was convinced its operational plan had been leaked and thus returned to Argentina.²⁵⁵

These failed European missions closed out Condor’s first and deadliest year. The next chapter considers its evolution and changes in 1977 and 1978 before explaining the waning of transnational repression in South America between 1979 and 1981.