

Non-State Violence and Transnational Repression beyond the Southern Cone: The Attack against Bernardo Leighton in Italy

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Introduction

Scholarship on the Southern Cone's dark decades has rightly emphasised interstate coordination and the central role of military and police apparatuses in constructing a continent-wide repressive architecture. While acknowledging the undeniable primacy of state agencies in this domain, an exclusively state-centric framework can nonetheless lead to an incomplete understanding. It risks marginalizing the role played by non-state militant actors – exiled terrorists, paramilitaries, and transnational neo-fascist networks. To achieve a comprehensive picture of transnational repression, it is necessary to integrate these peripheral figures into the analysis. This requires examining their specific utility and understanding the operational contexts in which their involvement became not just convenient, but essential. Their integration into these operations was facilitated not by a stable ideological fusion with South American regimes, but by an overwhelmingly pragmatic anti-communism, that made them useful instruments in campaigns that foreign services wished to conduct, while minimising diplomatic exposure and plausible culpability.

Within this framework, I will briefly explore the developments related to the attack against the Chilean exiles Bernardo Leighton and his wife Anita Fresno, which occurred in Rome on October 6, 1975.

Three analytical points guide the argument. First, the alliance linking South American dictatorships and Italian neo-fascists was an uneasy and contingent convergence, rather than an organic ideological synthesis. Differences in ideology, organisational culture, goals, and long-term vision were substantial; their common denominator was the readiness to combat “subversion” by any means necessary. Second, the formation, nature, and dissolution of the Chilean-Italian alliance demonstrate how, and to what extent, non-state actors were involved in state violence. They provided capabilities, such as mobility, deniability, and operational boldness, and, in exchange, received refuge, logistical support, and funding. Third, evidence shows the limits of the relationship: ties were often weak, mediated by mid-level intelligence officers, and characterised by clear subordination of militants to state interests rather than being a partnership of equals.

The origin

Beginning in 1974, Augusto Pinochet faced the challenge of dealing with regime opponents who had taken refuge abroad. Particular attention was given to those working to build an international movement capable of pressuring for a return to democracy in Chile. In August 1974, Captain Raúl López, military attaché at the Chilean Embassy in London, convened a meeting with the twenty-three Chilean officers stationed in Europe to monitor anti-regime activities organised by exiles in their respective countries: “The purpose of the meeting was to order the reserve officers to maintain a watch on Chilean leftists residing in their respective countries and report any anti-junta actions on their part to Lopez in London”.¹ The main target was Carlos Altamirano, former secretary of the Chilean Socialist Party, who had taken refuge in East Germany:

It was also announced by López that the officers should report to him immediately if Altamirano appeared in any of their respective countries. [...] it is believed that the Junta wants Altamirano either assassinated or kidnapped and brought to trial in Chile.²

In early 1975, Michael Townley³ – a US citizen who worked as a DINA agent – was sent to Europe to evaluate the feasibility of the operation. Altamirano’s presence behind the Iron Curtain rendered any action extremely risky due to the stringent surveillance by local authorities. The DINA recognised that a violent operation in Europe could not involve Chileans directly, to avoid diplomatic fallout and international scandal. To address this, the Chilean service sought support from European anti-communist groups, especially those using Spain as an operational hub. At DINA’s request, Spanish agents facilitated Townley’s contact with a group of fugitive Italian neo-fascists in Madrid, led by Stefano Delle Chiaie (Ruggiero 2023).⁴

¹ National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), CIA, Intelligence Report [Assassination Efforts Against Chilean Political Exiles in Europe], 20/08/1974. Available at https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000345087.pdf

² *Ibid.*

³ Michael Townley's American citizenship has fuelled widespread speculation, with the most famous theory casting him as the crucial link between Chile's DINA and the CIA. Yet, the existing historical record offers no definitive proof of this connection. The known facts of his early involvement are as follows. After moving to Chile as a teenager, he later married a Chilean national, Mariana Callejas, and, by 1967, was living in Miami. There, Townley integrated into the anti-Castro Cuban exile community. It was this group that, following Salvador Allende's election in September 1970, encouraged Townley to offer his services to the CIA. His proposal was to return to Chile as an undercover agent for clandestine operations against the new government. He contacted the agency in December 1970. CIA internal records confirm that by February 1971, the Directorate of Operations sought security approval to employ him. However, the extent of his activities over the next year remains unclear. The paper trail ends on December 21, 1971, when the Directorate of Operations informed the security office that the CIA's station in Chile had withdrawn its interest in recruiting Townley (Kornbluh, 2003, pp. 175-176).

⁴ Most of the fugitives came from *Avanguardia Nazionale* (National Vanguard) and *Ordine Nuovo* (New Order), two neo-fascist organizations that represented the core of the Italian radical right in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Between 1969 and 1974, these groups were involved in a series of terrorist bombings targeting public places such as banks, railway stations, and trains. These attacks – part of what became known as the *strategy of tension* – were intended to create fear, social unrest, and political instability. Crucially, a number of these operations were facilitated by collusion between segments of the Italian intelligence apparatus and the terrorists themselves. The ultimate goal was to provoke

Judicial investigations indicate this was not the first interaction between the Chilean junta and Italian neo-fascists. In spring 1974, Junio Valerio Borghese and Stefano Delle Chiaie had travelled to Chile to request Pinochet's support for an import-export enterprise in Spain, where they were based. The plan failed, likely due to Borghese's death a few months later. In any case, this first contact did not establish a lasting link.⁵

The meeting between Townley and the Italian neo-fascists was later described by Vincenzo Vinciguerra before the Corte d'Assise (Assize Court) in Rome:

He [Townley] was in charge, as far as he told me and Stefano Delle Chiaie, of eliminating Carlos Altamirano. He explained that he needed the support, or at least the neutrality, of the Spanish services, with whom he did not want direct contact. He asked Delle Chiaie to seek Spanish consent. However, Delle Chiaie expressed concern, noting that the Spanish were very careful to avoid actions beyond their control on national territory. Delle Chiaie told Townley he would not approach the Spanish services. This was not unwelcome to Townley because – in the event of a refusal – he would not have been able to proceed.⁶

After abandoning the Altamirano plan, the DINA shifted its focus to another prominent figure: Bernardo Leighton. A leader of the Chilean Christian Democrats, Leighton had held major ministerial positions under several governments, including Minister of Labor under Arturo Alessandri (1937–1938), Minister of Education under Gabriel Gonzáles Videla (1950–1952), and Minister of the Interior under Eduardo Frei. He was among thirteen DC parliamentarians who, although not aligned with the Unidad Popular, publicly condemned the coup. Invited to Italy in November 1973 by DC deputy Gilberto Bonalumi, Leighton was declared *persona non grata* by the junta in early 1974 and barred from returning to Chile. During his exile, he worked to build an international movement against the regime, bringing together exiles, including Unidad Popular members (Santoni 2014).

Leighton's activism alarmed the regime, which feared further damage to its international reputation, particularly in Europe – and especially in Italy, where the atmosphere was hostile. After the 1973 coup, Mariano Rumor's Democratic Christian (DC) government faced strong pressure from the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) to sever diplomatic ties with Chile. All parliamentary forces condemned the coup, with the sole exception of the Italian Social Movement

an authoritarian reaction within the state, paving the way for a government led or supported by the military that would suppress the growing influence of left-wing movements and trade unions during a period of intense social conflict in Italy (Formigoni, 2016; Cento Bull, 2007; Ferraresi, 1996).

⁵ Corte di Assise di Roma, Sentenza del Processo di Appello nei confronti di Pierluigi Concutelli e altri, n. 1/87, 07/01/1987.

⁶ Tribunale di Roma, Verbale di sommarie informazioni di persona informata dei fatti, testimonianza resa al P.M. Giovanni Salvi da Vincenzo Vinciguerra nel carcere di Parma, proc. pen. n. 9970/92 A, 09/09/1992, p. 2.

(MSI), the party that carried the legacy of Fascism into post-war republican Italy. Under Foreign Minister Aldo Moro, the Italian government refused official recognition of the junta and suspended diplomatic relations until democracy was restored (Nocera 2008). The Chilean coup also sparked intense political and social mobilisation in Italy, leaving a lasting institutional impact (Nocera and Rolle 2010).

In this context, Leighton became a target. The regime viewed him as an enemy of the homeland, an agent of international communism, and someone to be eliminated. A 1978 FBI document suggests Italian neo-fascists shared this view:

[...] members of this Italian fascist organisation indicated that former Chilean Vice President Bernardo Leighton had been identified as a dangerous catalyst for forming a coalition between the Christian Democratic Party (PCD) and the Socialist Party (PS) in Italy during the forthcoming elections. [...] Leighton was accepted as a prominent spokesman for the PCD in Italy and had excellent contacts among PS members.⁷

This portrayal of Leighton as a threat to DC–PS relations is highly questionable. The first centre-left government in Italy dates to 1963, with the "organic centre-left" under Aldo Moro, when the Socialists and Christian Democrats governed together. Pietro Nenni, leader of the PSI, served as vice president of the Council of Ministers (Tramontana 1995). Despite frequent crises, this collaboration lasted into the late 1970s. The U.S. document instead reflects the neo-fascists' need to fabricate a justification for the forthcoming DINA operation.

Another factor influencing Italian neo-fascists is noted by former *Ordine Nuovo* (ON) militant Aldo Tisei. He claimed the attempted assassination of Leighton was pre-approved by the "political bureau" of the organisations, which had agreed to receive weapons and money from the Chilean regime.⁸

The attack

Michael Townley, accompanied by his wife Mariana Callejas and Virgilio Paz Romero of the *Movimiento Nacionalista Cubano*, arrived in Rome in September 1975. Their presence prompted several Italian neo-fascists based in Spain to return to Italy, including ON member Pierluigi

⁷ NARA, FBI, Interrogation Report, "Attempted Assassination of Bernardo Leighton. October 6, 1975, Rome, Italy," 09/04/1980. Available at <https://foia.state.gov/documents/Pfbi3/00008806.pdf>.

⁸ Sentenza 07/01/1987, cit., pp. 11-12.

Concutelli. Meanwhile, neo-fascists in Italy had already begun monitoring Leighton's movements. This became easier when a Chilean magazine, likely with DINA's help, published his address.⁹

Preparatory meetings took place at the *Avanguardia Nazionale* (AN) shelter on Via Sartorio in Rome. After a surveillance phase, the attack took place. On the evening of October 6, 1975, around 8 p.m., Pierluigi Concutelli, an ON hitman, opened fire on Bernardo Leighton and his wife Anita Fresno on Via Aurelia 15. Both survived, though they suffered severe and permanent injuries. Although Leighton lived, the mission could be considered successful.¹⁰

In the following weeks, the DINA attempted to mislead the Italian investigation. On November 8, *La Segunda*, a Chilean newspaper close to the regime, published a false claim of responsibility attributed to a fictitious anti-communist Cuban group named *Cero*, stating that the delay in claiming responsibility was meant to allow the attackers to leave Italy.¹¹

The evidence suggests the regime's primary objective was to deflect blame, a strategy that held particular significance within the Italian context. Yet another twist followed. On October 8, just two days after the attack, the Italian security service SID informed the General Inspectorate for Action Against Terrorism that the attack had been carried out by eight Chilean members of the *Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria* (MIR), allegedly led by someone named Ríos and having entered Italy with false documents on August 15.¹² Italian involvement in producing false leads did not end there:

A few days later, in Rome, weapons were "found," or rather planted, in an apartment in the Portuense area and in a trailer, along with documents, including one claiming responsibility for the attack. The Carabinieri attributed this material to the far-left *Nuclei Armati Proletari* (NAP). The operation sought to blame the extreme left. Only recent investigations revealed that, in the AN base on Via Sartorio, authorities had previously seized a map of the area where the trailer was planted and documents typed on the same typewriter as those left in the trailer. The false claim did not prove the NAP's involvement but rather that of AN members. The diversion was planned by SID and the Carabinieri, with the operational help of AN militants, who likely prepared the planted material.¹³

The attempt to blame the radical left did not lead to charges. Judge Guido Salvini attributes this to the removal of General Gianadelio Maletti, head of SID's Department D, on October 29, 1975, which

⁹ Corte di Appello di Roma, Sez. Istr. Penale, Sentenza ordinanza pronunciata dal giudice Lucio Del Vecchio nel procedimento contro Adriano Tilgher e altri, proc. pen. n. 191/83, 15/11/83, pp. 17-18.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 4.

¹¹ Sentenza 07/01/1987, p. 8.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Tribunale Civile e Penale di Milano, Ufficio Istruzione sez.20a, Sentenza ordinanza pronunciata dal giudice Guido Salvini nel Procedimento nei confronti di Nico Azzi e altri, 18/03/1995, p. 224.

deprived the operation of its architect.¹⁴ Documentation shows no formal communication between DINA and SID. Given the absence of direct evidence, cooperation between the two services in the cover-up appears unlikely. Instead, it may reflect one of the final episodes of collaboration between Italian terrorists and sectors of the state security apparatus from 1969 to 1974.¹⁵

In November 1975, Franco's death and the funeral in Madrid provided the occasion for a meeting between high-ranking junta officials and leading Italian neo-fascists. Townley referred to this meeting in letters sent from prison (where he was being held for the assassination of Orlando Letelier in 1976) to Gustavo Etchepare, intercepted by the FBI. Judicial investigations confirmed that during this Madrid meeting, the previously agreed payment – 100 million lire – was delivered for the assassination attempt.¹⁶

The aftermath

The relationship built because of Leighton attack represented the gateway for neo-fascists to enter Latin America which, in that historical phase, embodied the new focal point for radical and global anti-communism. Starting in 1977, in fact, a considerable numbers of Italian neo-fascist militants moved to Chile to join the DINA, which provided them a house and an office in Santiago de Chile. A faction of the group also relocated to Buenos Aires to integrate with the DINA's exterior brigade, led by Enrique Arancibia Clavel. There, they engaged in establishing front companies for meat trading and import-export, helping to fund DINA's operations abroad (Ruggiero 2023).

The alliance with the DINA however proved transient. The international scandal following the 1976 assassination of Orlando Letelier in Washington D.C. forced Pinochet to dismantle the DINA and replace it with the CNI (*Central Nacional de Informaciones*) in 1977. The new leadership, who took office in April 1978 under General Odlanier Mena, was unaware of the Italians and their agreements. The financial and logistical support dried up, and the CNI even began hunting the now-inconvenient fugitives.¹⁷

Cut off from their Chilean patrons, the Italian neo-fascists found a new institutional home: the Argentine military intelligence. Their integration was facilitated by the networks they had built while working for the DINA in Buenos Aires. A key figure was Luis Alfredo "Freddy" Zarattini, an agent of the army's *Batallón de Inteligencia 601* (Ruggiero 2023). This unit was the apex of the Argentine

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ See footnote n.2.

¹⁶ Sentenza 07/01/1987, cit., p. 13.

¹⁷ Tribunale di Roma, Verbale di sommarie informazioni di persona informata dei fatti, testimonianza resa al P.M. Giovanni Salvi da Vincenzo Vinciguerra nel carcere di Parma, proc. pen. n. 9970/92 A, 09/09/1992, p. 4.

dictatorship's repressive apparatus, responsible for intelligence coordination, running clandestine detention centres, and conducting operations abroad.

Organisational charts from declassified documents place Delle Chiaie in direct operational contact with Zarattini. With his support, the entire Italian group was incorporated into Jefatura II - Inteligencia, the division of Batallón 601 responsible for foreign missions. This represented a significant upgrade from their status in Chile; they were no longer just deniable assets, but were integrated into the formal, albeit secret, structure of a state's intelligence service (Ruggiero 2023).

The most dramatic demonstration of this new alliance was the pivotal role played by the Italian neo-fascists in the coup of July 17, 1980, in Bolivia. The Argentine junta, led by Jorge R. Videla, was determined to prevent the democratically elected leftist coalition, the Unidad Democrática y Popular (UDP), from taking power. Motivated by both ideological fervour (preventing a "second Cuba") and the lure of massive profits from cocaine trafficking, *Batallón 601* was tasked with orchestrating the coup that brought General Luis García Meza to power. The Italians were at the heart of this operation. They formed part of a transnational paramilitary group known as "*Los Novios de la Muerte*" (The Death's Boyfriends), led by Delle Chiaie and including German neo-Nazi Joachim Fiebelkorn and French mercenary Jaques Leclerc. According to CIA documents and the findings of the Bolivian Truth Commission, this group played a "key role in the bloody coup d'état," and had a key role in repression and drug trafficking until the fall of the regime, occurred in 1981 (Ruggiero 2023).

Final considerations

The attempted assassination of Bernardo Leighton in a quiet Roman street in 1975 was far more than a single act of terrorism. It was the catalyst that forged a durable transnational network. The operation served as a successful "audition" for Italian neo-fascists, proving their value to the Chilean DINA as deniable, effective, and ideologically committed operatives. This trust facilitated their mass migration to Latin America, where they were employed in espionage, logistics, and media manipulation.

The subsequent breakdown of the Chilean alliance, rather than ending their activities, propelled them into the embrace of Argentine intelligence. Their integration into *Batallón 601* signified their formal enlistment into the state terrorism apparatus of the Southern Cone. Their culminating role in the 1980 Bolivian coup demonstrated how this European extremist element became instrumental in projecting Argentine power and enforcing anti-communist hegemony across the region, blurring the lines between state repression, terrorism, and organised crime.

The Leighton attack, therefore, stands as a critical juncture. It opened the door for Italian neo-fascism to become a mercenary force in the South American state terrorism, transforming them from national militants into actors on a global stage of political violence.

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