

Pinochet's Mad Scientist

From the Archive: Much like the 9/11 attacks, the Cold War plunged the U.S. government into the “dark side,” especially in Latin America where the CIA colluded with torturers and assassins, leading to grisly murders and enduring mysteries, as Samuel Blixen described in 1999.

By Samuel Blixen (First published on Jan. 13, 1999 and updated in 2006)

On Nov. 15, 1992, a terrified scientist – trapped inside a white bungalow in the Uruguayan beach town of Parque del Plata – broke a window to escape. Chubby, in his mid-40s, the man struggled through the opening. Once outside, furtively and slowly, he picked his way through the town's streets to the local police station.

“I am a Chilean citizen,” the scientist told the police. He pulled a folded photostatic copy of his identification papers concealed in his right shoe. “I have been abducted by the armies of Uruguay and my country,” he claimed.

The scientist, rumpled with a graying beard, said he feared for his life. He insisted that his murder had been ordered by Gen. Augusto Pinochet, then the chief of Chile's army who had ruled as a dictator from 1973 to 1990.

The motive for the execution order was the man's anticipated testimony at a politically sensitive trial in Chile, a case that could have sent reverberations all the way to Washington, D.C., potentially embarrassing the man who in November 1992 still sat in the White House, President George H.W. Bush.

The scientist had worked as an accomplice in a terror campaign that included the bombing deaths of Chilean dissident Orlando Letelier and an American co-worker Ronni Moffitt as they drove to work in Washington in 1976. That terrorist attack in America's capital had occurred when George H.W. Bush was CIA director, despite prior warnings to the CIA about the plot.

'Unbalanced' Chilean

The police in Parque del Plata, a beach town about 30 kilometers from Uruguay's capital Montevideo, weren't sure what to make of the man's convoluted tale.

An Uruguayan army officer had alerted them earlier that an “unbalanced” Chilean prisoner was on the loose. The scientist, who had escaped from a house owned by a Uruguayan army officer, apparently was that man.

But the issue was quickly taken out of the hands of local authorities. A half an hour after the man's arrival, armed and uniformed Uruguayan army troops burst

into the police precinct station and seized control. At their head was the district police chief, a retired army colonel named Ramon Rivas.

Rivas ordered that the Chilean scientist be turned over to the soldiers. The police were told that two Uruguayan army officers would then escort the scientist out of Uruguay to Brazil. Faced with soldiers brandishing rifles, the police relented. The scientist was led away.

From that moment, the scientist's fate became a complex kidnap-murder mystery, with improbable twists and turns, an apparent disinformation trick, raw political power, a grisly discovery and, finally, forensic science.

The disappearance of the scientist, a biochemist named Eugenio Berrios, also had relevance to later legal battles seeking to hold Pinochet accountable for thousands of human rights cases during his reign as Chile's dictator and for an international terror campaign that hunted down opponents of the dictatorships in Chile and other South American countries in the 1970s.

The case also underscored the enduring power of right-wing military officers within the fragile democracies of South America – and the difficulty of bringing Pinochet to justice in Chile.

Poison Gas

The mystery of Eugenio Berrios starts in 1974 when he began doing scientific research for Chile's feared intelligence service, DINA.

Berrios worked closely with an American-born DINA agent, Michael Townley, in a clandestine unit known by the name "Quetropilla." The base of operations was a sprawling, multi-level house – registered to Townley but purchased by DINA – in Lo Curro, a wooded, middle-class neighborhood of Santiago, Chile.

One of Berrios's assignments was the development of sarin gas that could be packaged in spray cans for use in assassinations. DINA officials thought the nerve gas could create lethal symptoms that might be confused with natural causes while giving time for the assailants to escape.

The need for sophisticated murder devices grew more important for Pinochet's intelligence teams when they turned their sights on political enemies living abroad in 1975.

In September 1975, DINA chief Manuel Contreras launched an international assassination project called Operation Condor, named after the powerful vulture that traverses the Andes mountains from Colombia to the Strait of Magellan. The theory behind Condor was that enemies of South American military dictatorships

should be hunted down wherever they sought refuge, whether in the nations of participating governments or elsewhere.

In October 1975, after soliciting \$600,000 in special funds from Pinochet, Contreras chaired the organizational meeting of Operation Condor with military intelligence chiefs from Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay and Brazil. After the meeting, the intelligence services stepped up their trans-national coordination. More than 100 Chileans were rounded up and returned to Chile for execution. Others were gunned down where they were found.

According to later testimony by DINA agent Townley, Berrios made a major contribution to the cause in April 1976 by recreating sarin, a poisonous nerve gas first invented by the Nazis during World War II.

Townley said the original plan for assassinating Orlando Letelier – who had been foreign minister under Chile's leftist elected government of Salvador Allende, who was overthrown and killed in Pinochet's 1973 coup – was to use a female operative to seduce the debonair former diplomat and then administer a liquid form of sarin concealed in a Chanel perfume bottle. But Berrios also supplied the operation with explosive devices in case the nerve gas proved unworkable.

In September 1976, Townley entered the United States on an official Chilean passport with a false name. He contacted anti-Castro Cubans and recruited their help in hunting down Letelier, a vocal critic of Pinochet. When the Cubans refused to participate unless the Chileans had a direct role in the assassination, Townley switched from poison to a car bomb.

The assassins traveled to Washington where the exiled Letelier lived and worked at a left-of-center think tank, the Institute for Policy Studies. They concealed the bomb under Letelier's car and followed Letelier as he and two American associates drove to the IPS offices on Sept. 21, 1976.

As the car proceeded past the ornate buildings of Embassy Row on Massachusetts Avenue, the assassins detonated the bomb. Letelier and one American, Ronni Moffitt, died in the blast. Moffitt's husband was wounded.

Bush's CIA

Despite official requests, George Bush's CIA provided little help unraveling the mystery. Only later would authorities discover that the CIA director's office received a warning about the Townley operation but failed to stop it. [For details, see Robert Parry's *Secrecy & Privilege.*]

Still, the FBI and federal prosecutors managed to uncover Operation Condor and break the Letelier case. Extradited to the United States, Townley agreed to

plead guilty, serve a short prison sentence and enter a federal witness protection program.

But progress in bringing to justice the architects of the terror campaign was much slower, given Pinochet's continued hold on power through 1990. Long-term U.S. pressure, however, finally led to criminal charges in Chile against former DINA chief Contreras.

Berrios, who continued to work on assassination schemes even after Townley's arrest, emerged as a prospective witness. In October 1991, a Chilean judge called Berrios to testify. The move sent chills through the Chilean military establishment.

It became important for DINA to get Berrios beyond the reach of the Chilean court. That month, Capt. Carlos Herrera Jimenez, a former intelligence officer, escorted Berrios from Santiago on a clandestine trip through the Andes to Argentina.

To hide Berrios, the old Condor network quickly reasserted itself. From Buenos Aires, Uruguayan counterintelligence chief, Lt. Col. Thomas Casella, coordinated Berrios's move to Uruguay. There, Berrios and Herrera holed up in a Montevideo apartment rented by Casella, who frequently had trained with the Chilean military.

But complications continued to arise. In February 1992, while on a trip to Buenos Aires, Capt. Herrera was arrested on an Interpol warrant connecting him to another assassination plot. That forced other Chilean agents to take charge of Berrios in Uruguay. Berrios was becoming a burden – as well as a risk – to Chile's intelligence services.

Gen. Emilio Timmerman, a military officer at the Chilean embassy in Montevideo, assumed the Berrios duty. But Timmerman complained to an embassy cultural attaché, Emilio Rojas, that "it is costing us too much money." Timmerman, who later became second-in-command of the Chilean army, also was growing nervous. Timmerman ordered Rojas to keep his mouth shut about Berrios's whereabouts, the cultural attaché said later.

By November 1992, Berrios realized that his Chilean superiors might want him silenced – as the safest and cheapest alternative to a long exile. He apparently overheard his captors discussing Pinochet's orders for them to eliminate the scientist.

A Disappearance

So, on Nov. 15, 1992, Berrios climbed through the broken window of the white

bungalow and fled to the precinct station at Parque del Plata. He begged the police to protect him, but the escape was cut short by the intervention of Uruguayan troops. Berrios disappeared.

Exactly what happened next remains a mystery. Senior Uruguayan officials only learned about the November 1992 police confrontation the next June from an anonymous caller.

The discovery of the abduction touched off a political crisis inside the Uruguayan government where the army still wielded great power. Uruguayan President Luis Alberto Lacalle was in Great Britain when the story broke. He immediately ducked out of a reception at the Uruguayan embassy in London and flew back to Montevideo.

There, Lacalle met with 14 of the 16 generals heading the armed forces. After four hours of tough negotiations and threats from 12 generals, Lacalle backed down to avoid a new military challenge to the civilian government. The president relented on his initial inclination to impose severe sanctions against the intelligence services. Lacalle did fire the police chief, Rivas, but agreed only to transfer the head of military intelligence, Mario Aguerrondo.

As for Berrios's fate, Col. Casella, who had supplied an apartment for hiding Berrios, reported that Berrios had gone to Brazil. The colonel assured the government that he had talked to Berrios by phone at the end of November 1992, weeks after his disappearance.

There were public doubts that Berrios was still alive. But another assurance about Berrios's well-being surfaced in Europe. The Uruguayan consulate in Milan received an anonymous letter supposedly signed by Berrios and a photo of him holding a recent issue of the Milan newspaper, *Il Messaggero*.

President Lacalle, seeking political peace with Uruguay's military, announced that "Berrios is not in Uruguay. He is somewhere else." That made the Berrios mystery "a Chilean matter" again, the Uruguayan president declared.

At the end of the crisis, Uruguay's foreign minister Sergio Abreu met with the Chilean ambassador and bluntly admitted that Lacalle had no choice but to "doblar el pescuezo" – "let it go." If President Lacalle pursued sanctions against powerful figures in the military, the 12 generals had threatened another military coup, the foreign minister said. Chile's ambassador cabled that news back to Santiago, according to a cable that I later obtained.

For Uruguay, the Berrios case was closed – or so the authorities thought.

Grisly Discovery

The Berrios case resurfaced, quite literally, in April 1995 when two fishermen found a man's decomposed body partially buried at a beach in El Pinar, another resort town about 25 kilometers from Montevideo. The body had broken bones suggesting torture, was wrapped in wire, and had two .45-calibre bullet holes in the back of the neck and head.

Forensic doctors used new research techniques to reconstruct the victim's face. The face looked remarkably like Berrios. DNA tests were ordered on the remains with comparisons made against genetic samples from Berrios's relatives. In early 1996, forensic specialists concluded, with near certainty, that the dead man was Berrios. They also placed the date of his death as the first half of March 1993, just four months after his abduction.

The findings contradicted the June 1993 photograph – which presumably had been composed using computer graphics to insert a current issue of the Italian newspaper into the photo. But the timing of Berrios's death added yet another side to the mystery.

In March 1993, Pinochet had made a personal visit to Uruguay accompanied by 12 bodyguards and with Col. Casella joining his entourage. In Uruguay, there were suspicions that Pinochet might have used the visit to confront Berrios one more time about his knowledge and then eliminate him.

But few observers in either Uruguay or Chile believe that those civilian governments were strong enough – or determined enough – to follow the Berrios case and others to clear answers. The nations of Operation Condor remained in the grip of the vulture's powerful claws.

Samuel Blixen is a Uruguayan journalist and author of several books, *El Enjuague Uruguayo. Secreto bancario y tráfico de drogas; Bancotráfico. Diez años de política bancaria en democracia;* and *El Vientre del Cóndor. Del archivo del terror al caso Berríos.*
