

Kissinger's obsession with Chile enabled a murderous dictatorship that still haunts the country

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It's hard to overestimate the role Henry Kissinger played in Chile. A former Chilean diplomat describes the mark that the powerful statesman made in his country and elsewhere in the Global South.

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Noticing my nonappearance at the start of a black-tie dinner at the Johannesburg home of [Harry Oppenheimer](#), a mining magnate and Africa's richest man, the host assumed I was boycotting the event on principle. It was a reasonable assumption: I was the Chilean ambassador to South Africa, and [Henry Kissinger](#) was the chief guest.

By then, a quarter century had passed since the [military coup that toppled](#) the democratically elected Chilean President Salvador Allende - an event that gave rise to Gen. Augusto Pinochet's brutal 17-year-long military dictatorship - but the issue still lingered. Many Chileans bitterly remembered the role of the U.S. government, and of Kissinger in particular, in the breakdown of Chilean democracy.

It was something Kissinger himself acknowledged during that dinner - which I did attend, just late due to encountering a hailstorm. Kissinger explained that he always declined invitations to visit my home country out of fear over what "Allende Chileans" would do to him.

Plenty of Chileans still despise Kissinger. On news of his death at the age of 100 on Nov. 29, 2023, [Juan Gabriel Valdes, Chile's ambassador to the U.S.](#), summed up that sentiment when he posted in Spanish on X, the platform previously known as Twitter: "A man has died whose historical brilliance never managed to conceal his profound moral misery."

It's hard to overestimate the role Kissinger played in Chile. As [national security adviser and secretary of state](#) during the Nixon and Ford administrations, he oversaw policies that helped install and then prop up a dictator.

Chile's 1973 coup

Upon [Allende's election on Sept. 4, 1970](#), Kissinger became obsessed with blocking his inauguration.

The measures approved by Kissinger included a botched kidnapping attempt of [Chilean Army Chief René Schneider](#), engineered by the Central Intelligence Agency, that ended with the general's assassination.

Kissinger insisted on a hard line with the Allende administration. He did everything possible to make the "Chilean road to socialism" fail, among other things, by "[making the economy scream](#)," as President Richard Nixon put it.

After a meeting with Kissinger in November 1970, a [CIA cable to its station in Santiago stated](#) that "it is firm and continuing policy that Allende be overthrown in a coup."

The [CIA's covert financing of Chilean opposition parties](#), funding of the country's [right-wing media](#) and [support for the 1972 truckers strike](#) that snarled the nation's freight and commerce for months were [amply documented by a U.S. Senate committee](#) a few years after the coup.

Not content with having helped to topple Allende, Kissinger then wholeheartedly supported Pinochet's regime.

When the U.S. ambassador to Chile relayed his efforts to persuade the military to act less brutally against political prisoners, Kissinger wrote on the margins of the cable, "[... cut out the political science lectures](#)." At a 1976 Organization of American States meeting in Santiago, far from urging Pinochet to tone down his regime's repression, as some of Kissinger's staff had recommended he do, he told the general, "[we want to help, not undermine you](#)."

Operation Condor

Kissinger's support for repressive military dictatorships extended beyond Chile's borders.

Argentina's dictator Gen. Jorge Rafael Videla, right, confers with Chile's Gen. Augusto Pinochet, in Mendoza, Argentina, in 1978. AP Photo/Eduardo Di Baia

He supported [Operation Condor](#), an international undertaking that coordinated intelligence and operations among many of South America's right-wing military regimes - Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, Bolivia and Uruguay - from 1975 to 1983. The operations contributed to the widespread [detention, torture and murder](#) of many left-wing opposition activists across three continents.

By September 1976, the excesses of Operation Condor were clear, and the U.S. State Department prepared an important diplomatic message, [known as a demarche](#), strongly objecting to the repressive policies. Amazingly, [Kissinger stopped it](#) in its tracks. It was never delivered to those foreign ministries - and the timing was ominous.

Five days later, on Sept. 21, 1976, [Orlando Letelier, an exiled Chilean diplomat](#) who had served as Allende's ambassador to the U.S. and in his cabinet in three different roles, was assassinated in Washington, D.C. He died after a bomb blew up the car he was driving - fatally injuring him and a colleague, [Ronni Karpen Moffitt](#). Letelier was giving her and her husband, [Michael Moffitt](#), a ride to work. Michael was thrown from the vehicle but survived.

Preceding 9/11 by 25 years, the Letelier assassination was the first foreign-sponsored terrorist act on U.S. soil. Years of investigations revealed that Chile's secret police planned and executed the plot to [get rid of a prominent political figure](#) with influential contacts in Washington, D.C.

Chilean President Gabriel Boric touches a memorial to Orlando Letelier and Ronni Karpen Moffitt at

Sheridan Circle in Washington, D.C., in 2023. AP Photo/Jose Luis Magana

Breaking the mold

Mocking Chile's supposed lack of strategic significance, [Kissinger once dismissed](#) the long and narrow country as "a dagger pointing straight at the heart of Antarctica." Yet, he devoted full chapters to Chile in each of the [first two volumes of his memoirs](#).

What made [Kissinger take such deadly aim at Allende](#) was his new political model, a "[peaceful road to socialism](#)."

It represented something else entirely from the revolutionary movements that were coming to the fore in Africa, Asia and Latin America. In Chile, an established and stable democracy had elected a Socialist president with an ambitious program of [social and economic reforms](#).

Allende's Popular Unity coalition, which brought together an array of leftist and left-of-center political parties, could easily be replicated in Europe, in countries like France and Italy, leading to anti-U.S. governments - Washington's worst nightmare. In this, Kissinger was not wrong. [French Socialist leader Francois Mitterrand](#) visited Chile in 1971, met with Allende, recreated such a coalition in France and repeatedly won presidential elections.

Successful democratic socialist countries did not fit Kissinger's long-held design for the world, inspired by his realist perspective, to create a balance of power between the United States, Europe, the Soviet Union, China and Japan.

This view [sprang from his studies](#) of [Europe's long peace](#) in the 19th century, which was anchored in a balance of power between Great Britain, France, Prussia, Russia and Austria-Hungary.

To Kissinger, what in the 1970s was called the Third World, and today is known as the [Global South](#), played no role in this grand design - to him, nothing important could come from the South. History was shaped by the great powers, such the U.S., China and the Soviet Union.

Big body count

It is estimated that [more than 3,000 people were killed](#) by Chile's military dictatorship, at least 1,000 of whom are still "disappeared" - meaning their bodies were never found.

These numbers pale in comparison to the estimated [30,000 deaths in Argentina](#) under its junta; the [hundreds of thousands of deaths in Cambodia](#) caused by the U.S. bombings directed by Kissinger; the [millions who died in Bangladesh](#) in their 1971 war of independence against a U.S.-backed Pakistan; and the estimated 200,000 killed by the [Indonesian armed forces in East Timor in 1975](#) with Kissinger's explicit approval.

They were casualties of the misguided geopolitical obsessions of a man blinded by a 19th century European view of world affairs. That perspective casts all developing nations as mere pawns in the games played by the great powers.

To this day, Chile lives under the shadow of Pinochet's 1980 constitution, which [greatly expanded presidential powers](#) and enshrined the [neoliberal economic model](#) he imposed on the country. On Dec. 17, 2023, Chileans will vote for a second time in two years on a referendum that could [replace](#)

[Pinochet's constitution](#) with a new one.

That referendum may or may not turn a page in Chilean history. Regardless of the outcome, the scars will remain

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P.S.

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