

“They Are Our Parents”

Applications of Forensic Anthropology in Identifying Victims of Operation Condor in Paraguay

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I. INTRODUCTION

- In 1975, dictatorships of the Southern Cone of South America began a campaign of political repression – Operation Condor – resulting in thousands of “disappeared” individuals – men, women, and children accused of political or cultural dissension. This presentation provides an update on efforts to aid the Historical Memory Department, Paraguay, in identifying remains from a clandestine mass grave associated with Operation Condor.

II. BACKGROUND

- When Alfredo Stroessner came to power in 1954 via a coup d'état, he implemented a 35-year dictatorship marked by human rights violations, exacerbated by the establishment of **Operation Condor** – a campaign of political repression and state terror formally implemented in 1975 by the right-wing dictatorships of the Southern Cone of South America (Fig 1).
- The kidnappings, torture, forced disappearances, and extrajudicial killings of those in opposition to these dictatorships is memorialized in Paraguay by the detailed arrest records of citizens – the “Archive of Terror” – now held by the Justice Ministry’s Historical Memory Department in Asunción (Fig 2).



Figure 1. The Southern Cone of South America (L) is a cultural subregion that includes the countries of Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Paraguay, and Brazil's four southernmost states.

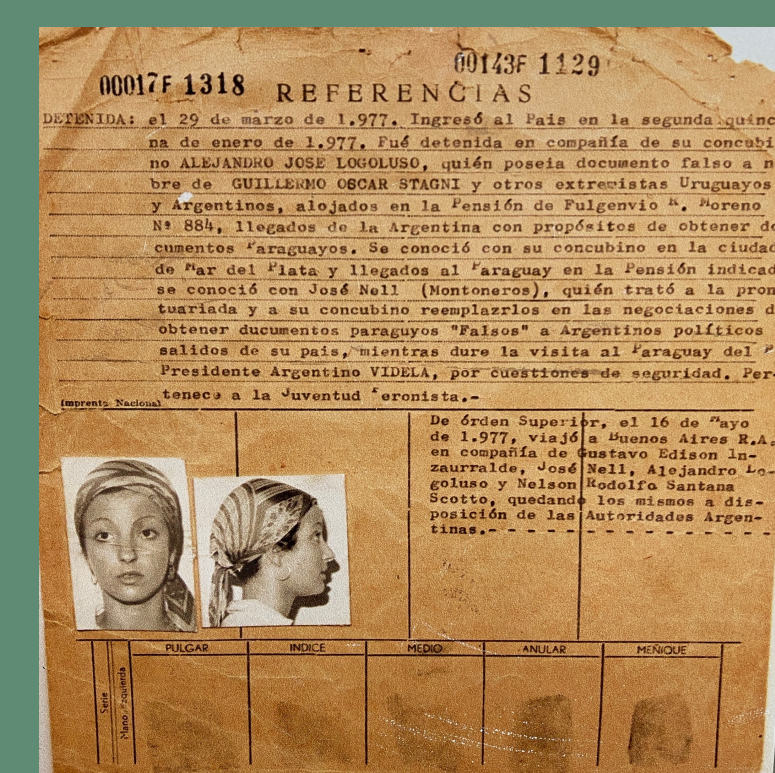


Figure 2. An arrest record from the “Archive of Terror”, uncovered in 1992, which provides a record of activities carried out by the Paraguayan Secret Police during Operation Condor.

III. PROJECT GOALS

- Funded by the The Humanitarian and Human Rights Resource Center (HHRRC) of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences (AAFS), with support from the National Institute of Justice’s Forensic Technology Center of Excellence (NIJ's FTCE), **our aim in this project is to promote the application of forensic anthropology and archaeology in Paraguay to scientifically identify mass graves resulting from Operation Condor, excavate remains, and identify the deceased for return to their families.**

IV. PROJECT DETAILS & 2023 PROGRESS

Operation Condor was grounded in kidnapping, torture, forced disappearance, and extrajudicial killings of political and cultural dissidents from 1975-1983. Across the Southern Cone, it is estimated that at least 60,000 individuals were killed and 400,000 imprisoned. In Paraguay, 423 individuals are known to be among the “disappeared” – as of 2019, only 37 bodies have been recovered and 4 identified.

- In this stage of the project, we analyzed commingled remains of individuals recovered from a mass grave site along the Paraná River believed to belong to a group attempting to flee Paraguay to Argentina during the dictatorship.

Here, we present results of this analysis (Figs 3-6).



Figure 3. In 2018, remains were discovered in the Department of Ñembucú on private property adjacent to the Paraná River (L). The grave was approximately 5m x 4m in area and the remains were buried at a depth of approximately 1.5m. The Human Rights Unit, the Paraguayan Prosecutor’s Office, and the Argentinian Prosecutor’s Office attended, as it was hypothesized the remains were victims of Operation Condor. Remains were transported to the morgue (R) in Asunción.



Figure 4. An Argentinian team conducted an initial assessment of the remains to facilitate storage and to fulfill requirements of excavation. The individuals have remained undocumented and sealed in storage containers in Asunción (L). Our team visited the morgue in December 2023 to inventory and analyze the remains, aiming to produce a Minimum Number of Individuals (MNI) and ascertain temporal origins. Remains were stored in brown paper bags, sorted by bone type (R).



Figure 5. The majority of the commingled remains recovered were cranial and long bone fragments (e.g., above L and R). Our analysis resulted in inventories of the bones present, age and sex estimates where possible, and notations regarding pathology, anomalies, trauma, and taphonomic changes. MNI was estimated based on the presence of left tibiae – the remains of at least 10 individuals were identified.



Figure 6. Metric and morphological features for all remains that could be assessed for sex were recorded and the results indicated **the group was entirely composed of males**. Stages of epiphyseal union, cranial suture closure, dental eruption and wear, and changes to the auricular surfaces suggested **individuals were between 18 and 45 at death** (e.g., above L open cranial sutures; R unfused medial clavicle).

- Based on the degree of preservation and their demographic profiles, the team determined that the remains recovered from this site are **not** likely associated with Operation Condor. Rather, it appears the remains are likely those of soldiers who died during the Paraguayan War (1864–1870). The Paraguayan War resulted in a catastrophic loss of life in Paraguay, particularly among young adult males, due both to direct conflict and outbreaks of disease in camps.

V. DISCUSSION – ISSUES AND IMPACT

- The Historical Memory Department relies on aid from Argentinian agencies for many of its scientific analyses. When remains have been recovered, such as those described here, identification efforts are hampered by the lack of anthropological resources and training of the Paraguayan team.
- Further complicating the mission of the department, Paraguay has been the site of multiple armed conflicts resulting in mass and clandestine burials over the past two hundred years, resulting in the recovery of remains that must be analyzed and repatriated to the appropriate stakeholders.

- **Families across Paraguay are seeking answers as they try to locate “their parents”.** This project provides aid to Paraguayan humanitarian organizations in this regard, but also aims to assist these organizations in obtaining independence in their efforts to conduct their own forensic investigations and identifications by establishing local expertise in forensic anthropology and archaeology.

VI. NEXT STEPS

- Dr. Goiburú and the Historical Memory Department have identified an additional 30+ potential locations of mass graves dating to Operation Condor across Paraguay (Fig 7). In May 2024, our team will return to Paraguay to conduct geospatial mapping of the sites to present the results to the Justice Ministry and begin to outline plans for future excavations in these locations.
- The team will continue to pursue analysis and excavation of the site of a mass grave in Lambaré, Paraguay, where it is has been suggested one of Stroessner’s subordinates had a house with a large backyard he used to bury victims of torture and extrajudicial killings (Fig 8). Witnesses to the burials have been interviewed and initial assessments of the site have been conducted. Permits are being obtained to conduct test excavations of the site in 2024.

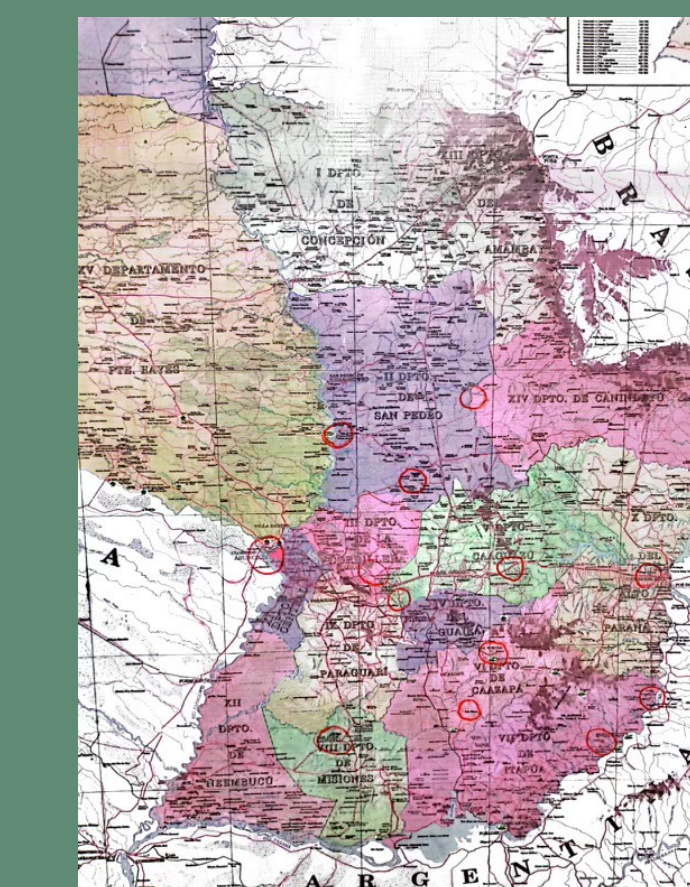


Figure 7. Map of Paraguay highlighting potential locations of mass graves in red.



Figure 8. Remains of a palatial house in Lambaré, Paraguay – the site of a mass grave.