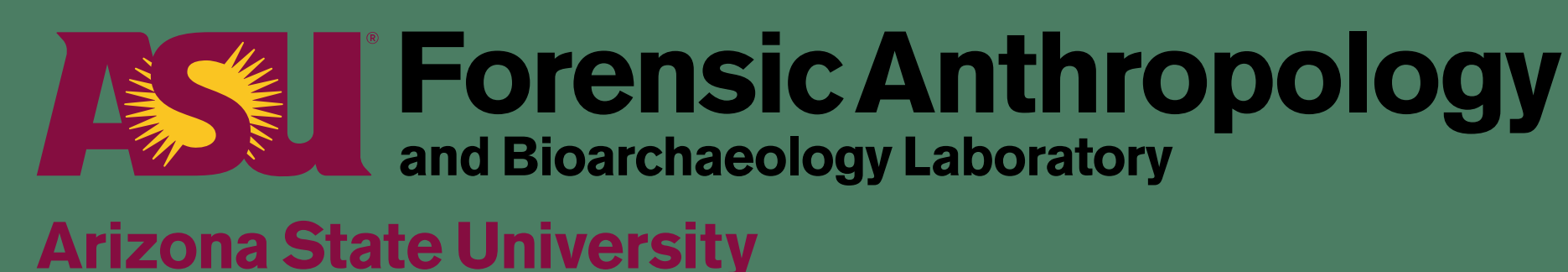


# “They Are Our Parents”

## The Identification and Mapping of Mass Graves Resulting from Operation Condor in Paraguay

Jacob Harris, PhD, Adriana Sartorio, MSc, Rogelio Goiburú, MD, and Katelyn Bolhofner, PhD, D-ABFA

Arizona State University | Historical Memory Department, Justice Ministry, Paraguay



### I. INTRODUCTION

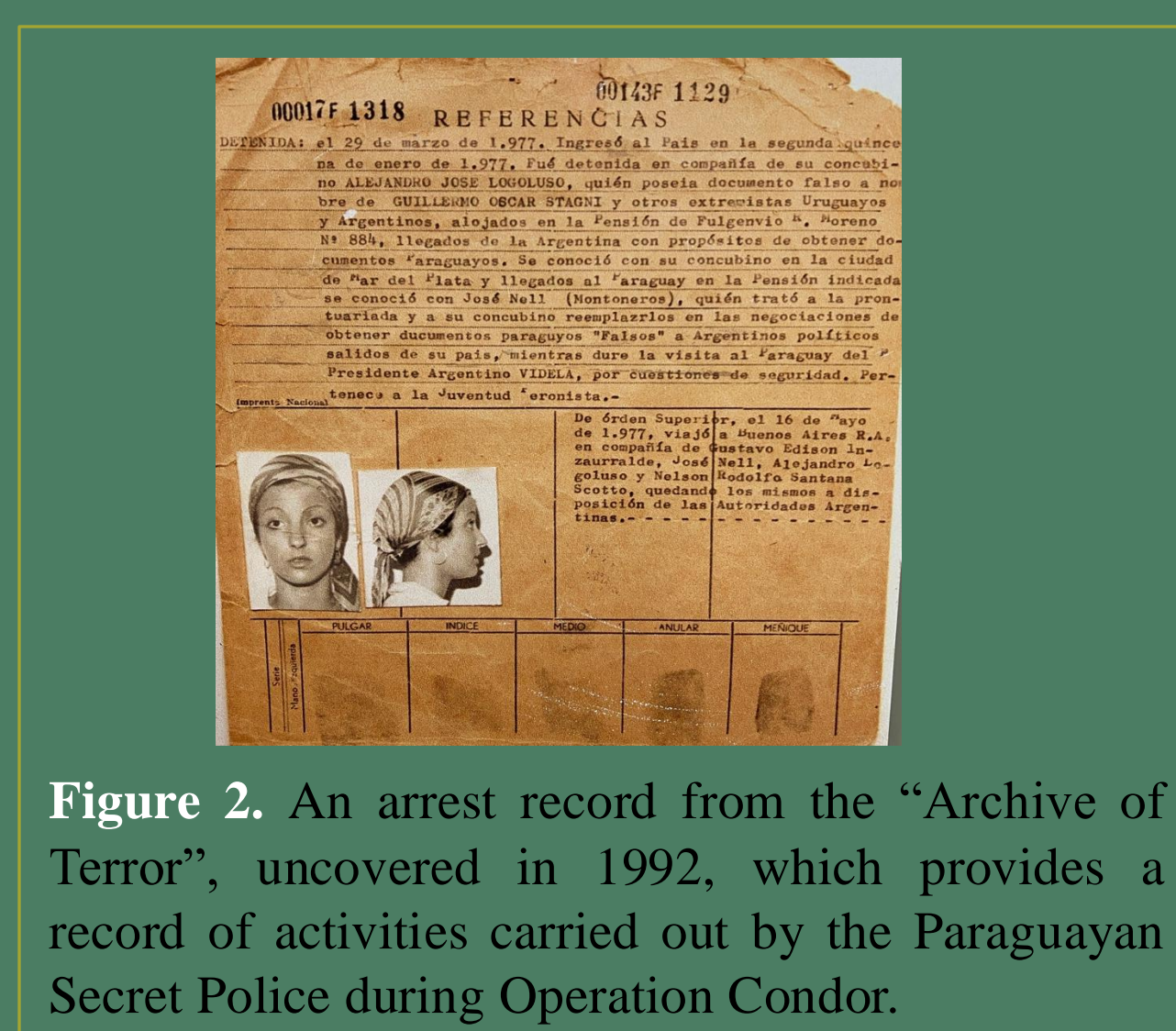
- In 1975, dictatorships of the Southern Cone of South America began a campaign of political repression – Operation Condor – resulting in thousands of “disappeared” individuals – men, women, and children accused of political or cultural dissension. This presentation provides an update on efforts to aid the Historical Memory Department, Paraguay, in identifying and mapping six potential clandestine mass graves 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 dictatorships of the Southern Cone of South America (**Fig 1**).
- The kidnappings, torture, forced disappearances, and extra-judicial 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 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 & 2024 PROGRESS

**Operation Condor** was grounded in kidnapping, torture, forced disappearance, and extra-judicial 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 interviewed surviving victims of Operation Condor and investigated six sites representing the probable location of either single or mass clandestine graves. *To protect the anonymity of the informants, here we only report on three of the sites and have omitted the specific locations.*

Here, we present results of our recent survey work (Figs 3-5).



**Figure 3.** Site one is the former location of a vacation home owned by Stroessner. Local informants report Stroessner and his political allies would regularly kidnap young boys and girls from the nearby village (blue star) and bring them to the Stroessner house. Captives were purportedly tortured and forced to participate in sex parties. Multiple accounts report numerous captives were murdered at the location and their remains either thrown in the nearby river (blue arrow) or hidden on the property (orange circle). Reports claim the house was destroyed and time-lapse satellite imagery confirms the location of two structures (3A). In 1990 the structures begin to disappear and by 1994 they are completely gone (3B).

On-ground survey confirmed there is no visible structure at the location. However, within the heavily vegetated area, our survey revealed the remains of at least two residential structures. Figure 3C shows tile flooring directly below surface leaf litter. Several informants also reported a strong belief that human remains had been buried within the property or deposited in a nearby cistern. A partially buried structure matching informants’ descriptions was documented (3D).



**Figure 4.** We also surveyed Lambaré, an abandoned brick factory located behind a Police Department currently in use. The location is adjacent to an arroyo (orange arrow) that is actively threatening the structural stability of the site. According to anonymous informants, the likely location of a mass grave lies directly beneath the concrete floor (blue arrow).



**Figure 5.** The third site is a remote, heavily forested area. Witnesses recall a group of Condor-era farmers that voiced dissatisfaction with the regime and report seeing military personnel transport the farmers to a nearby forested area (blue arrow). Only the military personnel returned. Our survey identified four possible soil depressions. A soil probe revealed subterranean cavities approximately 1-2m deep.

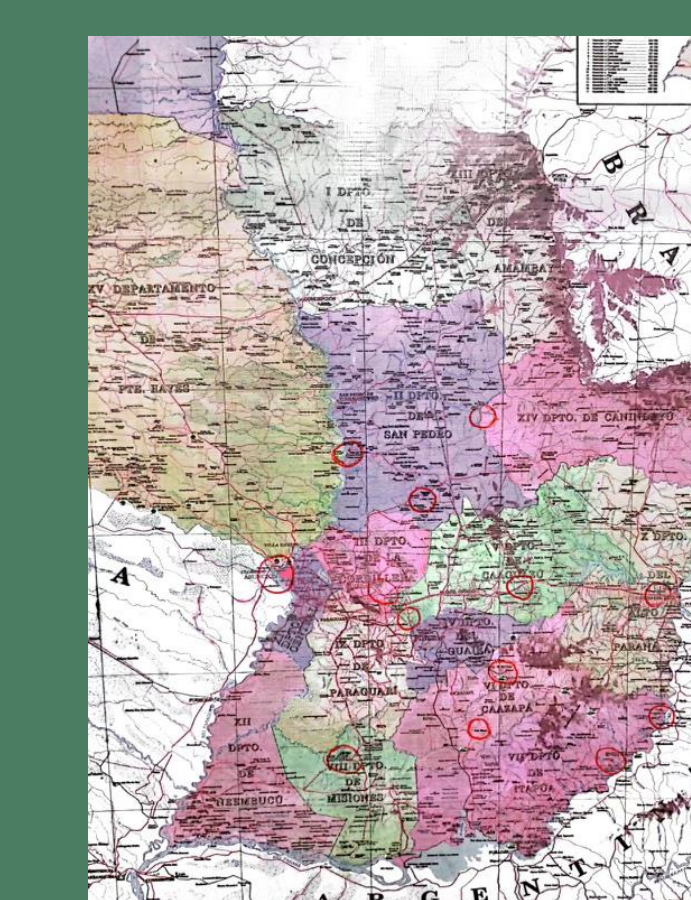
- In 2024, we identified three locations with probable single and mass graves (Figs 3-5). One location we investigated included a private residence where the descendants of personnel associated with Condor-era war crimes still reside. The current residents are known supporters of Stroessner and his regime and are hostile to our efforts. The other locations are located on a military base and require a signed letter from the Paraguayan president to access.

### V. DISCUSSION – ISSUES AND IMPACT

- The Historical Memory Department works diligently to identify potential clandestine grave sites through extensive interviews with the survivors of Condor-era atrocities and visits to potential gravesite locations.
- The witnesses that have come forward and participated in interviews represent a small minority of the Operation Condor survivors. Many Paraguayans remain fearful of reprisal and are reluctant to speak out. Thus, the few sites we have identified likely represent a small fraction of the total number of locations.
- Heavily forested terrain and lack of published geophysical survey results present additional challenges to our efforts.
- **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 March 2025, our team will return to Paraguay to conduct geophysical 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 2025.



**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.