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**OPERATION CONDOR, THE WAR ON DRUGS, AND
COUNTERINSURGENCY IN THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE (1977–1983)**

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**OPERATION CONDOR, THE WAR ON DRUGS, AND COUNTERINSURGENCY
IN THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE (1977–1983)**

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ABSTRACT

In the late 1960s, the Mexican government launched a series of counternarcotics campaigns characterized by the militarization of drug production zones, particularly in the northwestern region—the so-called Golden Triangle, epicenter of both production and trafficking of marijuana and opium poppy since the 1930s. Operations Canador (1969–1975) and Trizo (1976) served as a laboratory for methods to curb drug production, ranging from harassment of drug growers to the aerial defoliation of illicit crops. Operation Condor (1977–1988) combined and enhanced these strategies, wreaking havoc on communities of alleged drug growers, but without entirely disrupting the drug industry. This paper explores the role of the US government in the militarization of Mexico’s anti-drug policy, underscoring how the ruling party (the Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI) took advantage of this shift to tackle domestic issues and reassert its hegemony. I argue that Operation Condor functioned as a counterinsurgency campaign oriented to thwart both social and armed movements, eliminate competitors in the narcotics market, and reorganize the drug industry to protect successful drug lords. Operation Condor also caused the decentralization of the drug industry from the northwest and created a new clientelistic pact between drug lords and national security agencies, such as the Federal Security Directorate (DFS), the Office of the Attorney General of Mexico–Federal Judicial Police (PGR-PJF), and the Secretariat of National Defense (SEDENA), which benefited from drug proceeds. Finally, the de facto state of siege imposed in the Golden Triangle produced thousands of victims of harassment, torture, rape, murder, forced-disappearance, and displacement; massive human rights abuses that authorities either concealed or denied.

RESUMEN

A finales de la década de los sesenta, el gobierno mexicano lanzó una serie de campañas anti-narcóticos caracterizadas por la militarización de las zonas productoras de droga, especialmente en la región noroeste (el llamado Triángulo Dorado), epicentro tanto del cultivo de como del trasiego de marihuana y adormidera desde los años treinta. Las operaciones CANADOR (1969–1975) y Trizo (1976) sirvieron como un laboratorio de métodos para detener la producción de drogas, los cuales iban desde el hostigamiento a los cultivadores hasta la defoliación aérea. La Operación Cóndor (1977–1988) combinó y perfeccionó estas estrategias causando estragos en las comunidades de presuntos cultivadores de droga, sin que esto llegara a dismantelar esta industria criminal. Este artículo explora el papel del gobierno de los Estados Unidos en la militarización de la estrategia anti-drogas de México, enfatizando el hecho de que el partido de Estado (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, PRI) aprovechó este cambio para atajar problemas internos y reafirmar su hegemonía. El argumento central sostiene que la Operación Cóndor funcionó como una campaña contrainsurgente orientada a suprimir los movimientos sociales y armados, eliminar a narcotraficantes para reducir la competencia y reorganizar la industria de las drogas para proteger a los principales jefes del narco. La Operación Cóndor también causó la descentralización de la industria de la droga del noroeste y creó un nuevo pacto clientelista entre los jefes del narco y las agencias de seguridad nacional, como la Dirección de Seguridad Nacional (DFS), la Procuraduría General de la República-Policía Judicial Federal (PGR-PJF) y la Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional (SEDENA), las cuales se beneficiaron de las ganancias del crimen organizado. Finalmente, el estado de sitio de facto impuesto en el Triángulo Dorado

produjo miles de víctimas de hostigamiento, tortura, violación, asesinato, desaparición forzada y desplazamiento; violaciones graves a los derechos humanos ocultadas o negadas por las autoridades de diferentes niveles de gobierno.

During the twentieth century, Mexico-US anti-drug policy evolved from occasional disagreements and clashes to full cooperation from the 1970s onward. The surge in demand for Mexican heroin and marijuana in the United States in the late 1960s, caused by the interruption of the so-called French Connection that supplied heroin from Turkey to the United States, marked a watershed in the binational relationship. The Nixon administration coerced Mexico to change its anti-drug strategy through Operation Intercept (1969), which required a thorough inspection of all vehicles at the US-Mexico border during a time when unregulated air traffic and sea routes were becoming the primary ways of drug smuggling. While this coup de force came as a surprise to the Mexican government, the economic impact of the border shutdown compelled the Gustavo Díaz Ordaz administration (1964–1970) to accept key aspects of the so-called “war on drugs” by means of Operation Cooperation (1969). This paper explores how what started as a US war in Mexican soil, gradually evolved until becoming an instrument of the ruling party (the Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI) to reassert its hegemony in both the political arena and the criminal world.

Operation Cooperation and its successor, Operation Canador (1970–1975), represented weak attempts at responding to the US antinarcotics agenda, albeit the Mexican government reached a point of seeming compliance with it through operations Trizo (1975–76) and Condor (January 1977–January 1988). Operation Condor was not only the longest and most ambitious anti-drug campaign of Cold War Mexico, but also the first spearheaded by the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). Although the DEA only played a leading role from 1977 to 1978, it established the standards that the Mexican security apparatus should meet, especially concerning the implementation of a cutting-edge aerial defoliation program. One major aspect of the operation was the creation of Task Force “Condor” (*Fuerza de Tarea Cóndor*, FTC), a military detachment that periodically entered drug production areas to help eradicate crops in conjunction with the aerial defoliation program.

Scholarship on the Mexican anti-drug efforts has typically characterized Operation Condor as another failed campaign, but a closer analysis of its origins shows that it represented a turning point in the militarization, modernization, and centralization of the anti-drug policy.¹

¹ For the history of the anti-drug policies in Mexico see Luis Astorga Almanza, *Drogas sin Fronteras* (Mexico City: Debolsillo, 2015); Isaac Campos, *Home Grown; Marijuana and the Origins of Mexico's War on Drugs* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Froylán Enciso, *Nuestra historia narcótica. Paisajes para (re)legalizar las drogas en México* (Barcelona: Debate, 2015); Ricardo Pérez Montfort, *Tolerancia y prohibición*.

Earlier, Operation Condor was understudied largely because of the scarcity of sources on the war on drugs in the 1970s, but this has changed in recent years with the declassification of secret files from the US National Archives and Record Administration (NARA) and Mexico's National Archive (AGN), particularly the files pertaining to the Secretariat of National of Defense (SEDENA), and the Secretariat of the Interior's (SEGOB) secret police branches: the Federal Security Directorate (DFS) and the General Directorate of Political and Social Investigations (DGIPS). These documents show the blatant collusion between local, state, and federal authorities in the drug trade, and are also key to understanding how the war on drugs and the dirty war merged. I have used these sources in a critical manner, by examining how the national security agencies participated in the contest for power for their own advantage, even though they claimed to work for the sake of the *patria* (homeland).

The first stage of Operation Condor developed in the so-called Golden Triangle—where the Sierra Madre Occidental connects the states of Sinaloa, Durango, and Chihuahua—the region that is the nation's leading producer of marijuana and poppy and the setting of anti-drug campaigns since the 1940s. The Golden Triangle is alternatively known as Golden Quadrilateral when including the state of Sonora, which has also been fertile ground for drug-related activities. Rugged mountain terrain has served as natural protection, and the absence of roads and means of communication has hindered law enforcement. In addition, the failure of the *ejido* (a system of communal land tenure), the increasing international demand for drugs, and the proximity to the border allowed for the underground economy to flourish. At the same time, the Golden Quadrilateral was the region that gave birth to the socialist armed movement in the mid-1960s. From 1973 to 1979, the 23rd of September Communist League made persistent attempts at fostering an insurrection among peasants, day laborers, and workers, and authorities at all levels waged a dirty war to prevent such an outcome.²

Aproximaciones a la historia social y cultural de las drogas en México, 1840–1940 (Mexico City: Debate, 2016); Carlos A. Pérez Ricart, “Las agencias antinarcóticos de los Estados Unidos y la construcción transnacional de la guerra contra las drogas en México” (PhD diss., Freien Universität Berlin, 2016); María Celia Toro, *Mexico's “War” on Drugs* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1995); Guillermo Valdés Castellanos, *Historia del narcotráfico en México* (Mexico City: Aguilar, 2013), and Peter Watt & Roberto Zepeda. *Drug War Mexico: Politics, Neoliberalism, and Violence in the New Narcoeconomy* (London: Zed Books, 2012).

² Adela Cedillo, “The 23rd of September Communist League's Foco Experiment in the Sierra Baja Tarahumara, 1973–1975,” in *México Beyond 1968: Revolutionaries, Radicals, and Repression During the Global Sixties and Subversive Seventies*, eds. Jaime M. Pensado and Enrique C. Ochoa (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2018), 92–112.

This paper argues that during Operation Condor, the Mexican government applied the counterinsurgency framework forged during the dirty war to secure sociopolitical and military control over drug growers and traffickers.³ In essence, the dirty war and the war on drugs were intertwined conflicts, given that the national security agencies viewed both guerrillas and particular *narcotraficantes* (drug traffickers) as the twin-headed enemy scattered among the population, an enemy they had to track down and overpower with ruthless methods. They also broadened the concept of “internal enemy” to include all peasant communities from the Golden Triangle, and imposed a de facto state of siege on them in order to prevent unrest. In addition, by using US financial and technical support for the anti-drug campaign, the Mexican government enlarged its counterinsurgency infrastructure to suppress political upheaval, notably in Sinaloa and Chihuahua.

The administrations of Luis Echeverría (1970–1976) and José López Portillo (1976–1982) embraced the US anti-drug agenda as part of their efforts to foster the PRI’s hegemony in the aftermath of the Tlatelolco massacre that had shattered the social consensus around the ruling party.⁴ As Aileen Teague points out, Mexico “was not the only country supplying drugs to the United States, but it was the first one to import the US war on drugs framework on such a scale and, in doing so, used the antidrug campaign to reconcile its own political and social challenges.”⁵ There is no evidence proving that US agents had encouraged the PRI’s utilization of the war on drugs to suppress radical dissenters, but clearly, the agents did not oppose it because it was in tune with the global US war on communism.

Sinaloa was the economic hub of the drug industry. By the early 1970s, there were several competing drug clans fighting for their share of the market under the protection of high-level authorities.⁶ Confrontations between them were not confined to the highlands but expanded

³ For a comparative perspective on how state territorial control, insurgent movements, and anti-drug policies overlap, see Daniel Weimer, *Seeing Drugs: Modernization, Counterinsurgency, and U.S. Narcotics Control in the Third World, 1969–1976* (Kent: Kent State University, 2011), and Alexander Aviña, “A War Against Poor People,” in *México Beyond 1968*, 134–152.

⁴ For the aftermath of the Tlatelolco massacre, see Louise Walker, *Waking from the Dream: Mexico’s Middle Classes after 1968* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

⁵ Aileen Teague, “Mexico’s Dirty War on Drugs: Source Control and Dissidence in Drug Enforcement,” *The Social History of Alcohol and Drugs*, v. 33, no. 1 (March 2019): 65. While Teague also looks at how the PRI used the US drug war as an extension of domestic repression, she focuses on the security agencies instead of the local dynamics of the drug war in the countryside.

⁶ I use the term “clans” instead of “gangs” to emphasize that these groups were based on kinship relationships.

to Sinaloa's capital, Culiacán, reaching their peak in 1976.⁷ Allegedly in response, the Mexican government introduced Operation Condor in the city to put an end to drug-related violence. This paper shows that the campaign's dramatic measures did not snuff out the illegal drug trade or drug-related violence; instead, their ultimate outcome was military control over the population and the elimination of independent local powers. The Mexican government used Operation Condor to attack some traditional drug clans, favoring the reorganization of the drug industry and its decentralization from the northwest. This strategy also served to curb the participation of local police agencies in the drug trade, namely the Sinaloa Judicial Police (PJS) and Culiacán's Municipal Police. At the same time, the Mexican government allowed the DFS, the Federal Judicial Police (PJF), and the military to take over drug trade networks to limit the power of drug lords and subject them to the *priista* clientelistic regime.⁸

Although there is no compelling evidence demonstrating that the presidency or the PRI national leadership designed such plan, archival documents reveal the contest between local and federal agencies over the control of the drug industry. The DFS sent a copy of its daily reports to the president's office; thus, it is safe to assume that presidents approved the role of federal agencies in the drug war.⁹ Moreover, features of the regime such as presidentialism and the one-party system made impossible that top officials did not take part in the decision-making process around any overt or covert domestic policy.

This paper provides examples of the implementation of Operation Condor in Sinaloa and the Golden Triangle, covering the first to the ninth task forces (1977–1983).¹⁰ During its first years, the DEA aerial defoliation program accomplished the temporary destruction of the only cash crops in the highlands and wreaked havoc on the local economy, while as the SEDENA documents show, the FTC wielded extreme violence against dozens of hamlets, whose inhabitants were extorted, tortured, raped, killed, or disappeared. Violence displaced thousands

⁷ Enciso, *Nuestra historia narcótica*, 128.

⁸ For the formation of narco-clientelistic networks during the post-revolutionary period see Benjamin T. Smith, "The Rise and Fall of Narcopopulism: Drugs, Politics, and Society in Sinaloa 1930–1980," *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 7, no. 2, (Fall 2013): 125–165. According to Peter Watt & Roberto Zepeda, PRI clientelism was a system where patrons provided benefits to their clients including protection, support in struggles with rivals, and opportunities for political ascendancy or economic prosperity. In exchange, clients gave the government loyalty, money, or useful services. Watt & Zepeda, *Drug War Mexico*, e-book.

⁹ In 2005, Vicente Capello, a former DFS archivist who was also in charge of the DFS archive in the National Archive (AGN), explained to the author the institutional distribution of the copies of DFS reports in an informal conversation.

¹⁰ From 1983 to January 1988, there were eight more task forces, but President Miguel de la Madrid (1982–1985), unlike his predecessor, managed the anti-drug campaign with a low profile.

of peasants to other regions as well as to the United States. In the meantime, authorities kept announcing the detention of drug traffickers and the seizures of tons of drugs, and routinely invited journalists to watch the burning of piles of narcotics.¹¹

Operation Condor was a half-real, half-simulated anti-drug campaign designed to terrorize the population to ensure the ruling party's dominion, not only in the political field but also in what Alfred McCoy coined the "covert netherworld," an autonomous clandestine realm where organized crime, the secret services, and other elements of the ruling elite compete for economic power and sovereignty.¹² The Mexican state fought against organized crime throughout the postrevolutionary period (1920s–1970s), even employing a great deal of violence against some drug growers and traffickers, but at the same time, it used anti-drug policies to guarantee protection to certain drug lords in exchange for their allegiance to the PRI.

This paper does not focus on the transnational dimensions of Operation Condor. I had access to documents from the US Department of State, the DEA, and the CIA, which show that the White House knew about the links between the Mexican government and organized crime, yet never censured its neighbor for its rampant corruption or its gross human rights abuses. As Pérez Ricart demonstrates, curtailing the glaring corruption of the Mexican authorities was not a goal of US foreign policy.¹³

THE BEGINNING OF A US WAR ON MEXICAN SOIL

Luis Astorga has shown that the drug trade has been ingrained in state power structures since the postrevolutionary period. Hence, the major paradox of the Mexican anti-drugs policies has been that the same security apparatus that benefited from the drug industry was charged with eliminating it.¹⁴ The Mexican state has had both international and domestic grounds to embrace a prohibitionist approach, including US pressure, moral concerns and social fears about drug use,

¹¹ As several DFS documents related to drug distribution show, authorities burnt a small part of narcotics and stored the rest in unsafe facilities where corrupted civil servants stole them in order to sell them to drug clans. "Narcotráfico, 1954–1985," 3 volumes, AGN, DFS, public version.

¹² Alfred McCoy, "Covert Netherworld: Clandestine Services and Criminal Syndicates in Shaping the Philippine State," in *Government of the Shadows, Parapolitics and Criminal Sovereignty*, Eric Wilson, ed. (London: Pluto Press, 2009), 228.

¹³ Pérez Ricart, "Las agencias antinarcóticos," 441–442.

¹⁴ Luis Astorga Almanza, "Drug Trafficking in Mexico: A First General Assessment," Management of Social Transformation Discussion Paper no. 36: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0011/001176/117644Eo.pdf>, accessed February 10, 2017.

and the urge to keep the military active for national security reasons.¹⁵ From the late 1930s through the 1960s, the armed forces had a leading role in anti-drug campaigns, and the Mexican state claimed to be satisfied with their efforts.

President Richard Nixon (1969–1974) used the war on drugs as a campaign pledge to win the support of conservative voters. Once in power, he made the narcotics problem the top priority of his US-Mexico agenda. In September 1969, the US government launched Operation Intercept to push Mexico into conducting more effective law enforcement at the border.¹⁶ The Díaz Ordaz administration was determined to maintain a sovereign anti-drug policy, but after Operation Intercept wreaked havoc on the border economy, it had to accept greater US intervention in its domestic affairs, under the assumption that the US government would then have less reason to act unilaterally.¹⁷ By October 10, 1969, both countries announced Operation Cooperation as a joint strategy to reduce the production and smuggling of narcotics.¹⁸ The Mexican government code-named it Operation “*Canador*” (an acronym for *cannabis-adormidera* [poppy]), which was its official name until 1975. The SEDENA deployed around five thousand soldiers in drug cultivation zones to intensify the manual eradication campaign, and for the first time, US law enforcement personnel monitored Mexican troops.¹⁹

Nonetheless, Díaz Ordaz was reluctant to accept the technicalization of the war on drugs that the US government advocated for, which included the use of remote sensing equipment and aircraft to spread herbicides, the destruction of laboratories and warehouses, and the utilization of enforcement personnel to expand undercover operations and intelligence work.²⁰ Conversely, during the last years of his administration, Echeverría became the first president to apply the US national security doctrine to Mexican anti-drug policy in response to a major shift in the drug

¹⁵ See Campos, *Home Grown*.

¹⁶ Kate Doyle, “Operation Intercept: The Perils of Unilateralism,” April 13, 2013, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB86/>, accessed January 26, 2017; Richard B. Craig, “Operation Intercept: The International Politics of Pressure,” *The Review of Politics* 42, no. 4 (October 1980): 556–580.

¹⁷ Toro, *Mexico’s “War” on Drugs*, 61.

¹⁸ The Mexican government managed to impede the public from perceiving *Canador* as a sign of weakness or submission to the White House, and in media outlets underscored that *Canador* was a victory because it had turned a unilateral operation into a binational initiative. Jacinto Rodríguez Munguía, “Operación Interceptación,” *La Revista de El Universal*, September 2005.

¹⁹ In his MA thesis, DEA officer Edward Heath explained how during the manual eradication campaigns the military only cut down the larger poppy plants while leaving the budding crops, thus allowing farmers to salvage part of their crops. Heath, “Mexican Opium Eradication Campaign” (MA thesis, California State University, 1981), 23.

²⁰ This proposal was outlined before Operation Intercept began. “Task Force Report, Narcotics, Marijuana, and Dangerous Drugs. Findings and Recommendations,” June 6, 1969, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB86/intercept01.pdf>.

industry. While in 1965 Mexico's opium production had been minuscule, by 1975 the country was supplying up to 87 percent of the heroin entering the United States.²¹ The US government then launched its own eradication programs, such as the Special Enforcement Activity in Mexico (SEAM, 1974) and SEAM CLEARVIEW (1975).²² However, as long as the US demand fueled poppy production, these programs were doomed to fail.

In 1975, in the context of Canador, the SEDENA developed Plan Tecpan in Guerrero, a dual strategy that explicitly combined a drug eradication program with counterinsurgency against guerrilla movements. The SEDENA claimed that the military had destroyed three times as many drug crops in Guerrero as in the rest of the country. Allegedly, the armed forces focused on Guerrero because drug traffickers sold weapons to guerrillas—derogatively dubbed *gavilleros* (bandits).²³ However, the SEDENA documents do not mention specific cases of arms dealers supplying guerrillas. It seems that the military was just using the idea of a narco-guerrilla alliance as a front to delegitimize revolutionary movements.

In 1975, the Mexican government was under considerable pressure to eradicate opium production given that on various occasions US President Gerald Ford had expressed that the illegal export of opium to the United States would be considered a national security threat.²⁴ Hence, for the first time, the Mexican government agreed on an aerial defoliation program coordinated by the DEA, the new US anti-drug agency founded in 1973. Edward Heath was appointed to run the DEA office in Mexico.²⁵

The Joint Opium Poppy Eradication-Interdiction Campaign known as Trizo (*Tri-zone*) was inaugurated on November 15, 1975 and focused on the three major drug production zones in the country. Zone I encompassed the states of Sonora, Chihuahua, Sinaloa, and Durango; Zone II, Jalisco, Nayarit, Colima, Zacatecas, and Michoacán; and Zone III, Guerrero, Oaxaca, and

²¹ Heath, "Mexican Opium," 5. Heath believed that the Mexican opium threat grew exponentially because law enforcement and intelligence agencies underestimated Mexico's potential to convert opium into heroin.

²² For a detailed analysis of the SEAM programs see Pérez Ricart, "Las agencias antinarcoóticos," 375–380.

²³ "Plan Conjunto, Plan Tecpan, DN-PR-1," 1975, AGN, SEDENA, Box 101, File 301, 34.

²⁴ "Letter written by President Ford to the Honorable Charles B. Rangel, House of Representatives, re: 'Foreign Producers of Opium,'" July 31, 1975, Washington, D.C., cited by Heath, "Mexican Opium," 30; and Domestic Council Drug Abuse Task Force, "White Paper on Drug Abuse. A Report to the President," September 1975, <https://archive.org/details/WhitePaperDrugAbuse1975>.

²⁵ Peter B. Bensinger served as acting administrator of the DEA from early 1976 to mid-1981, and Operations Trizo and Condor were developed during his tenure. According to Pérez Ricart, it would be misleading to assume that the DEA was able to fully impose its agenda, given the political and operative restrictions of its agents in the field. Pérez Ricart, "Taking the War on Drugs Down South: The Drug Enforcement Administration in Mexico (1973–1980)," *The Social History of Alcohol and Drugs* 34, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 82–113.

Morelos. Alejandro Gertz Manero was designated senior official in the Attorney General's Office (PGR) and overall campaign coordinator. While previous anti-drug efforts with a dual civil-military command were actually led by the military, Trizo contributed to strengthening the leadership of the PGR. However, recurring problems included interagency friction between the PGR and SEDENA, in addition to the disdain of the military for the DEA.

The DEA sent several agents and Evergreen Corporation contract pilots who had prior experience in Vietnam and the Southeast-Asian Golden Triangle to Mexico.²⁶ It also provided financial and technical assistance and help with gathering intelligence.²⁷ Trizo used Bell-206 and Bell-212 helicopters to airlift Mexican troops to destroy illegal crops and apprehend growers, but its most significant innovation was spraying herbicidal solutions like paraquat and 2.4-D.²⁸ Both contract and local pilots conducted the spraying missions, and the DEA agents and pilots focused on reconnaissance flights to evaluate the success of the campaign.²⁹ Phase I of Trizo came to an end on April 15, 1976, while phase II ran from early September to late November 1976. In the aftermath of Trizo, the military sought to retake control of the anti-drug campaign from the DEA and the PGR by increasing the military personnel involved and expanding their functions.³⁰

In the last months of their respective terms, Presidents Echeverría and Ford agreed on an ambitious binational operation that would continue the permanent aerial defoliation and manual eradication as well as the Mexican military control over the drug growing communities. The

²⁶ Evergreen International Aviation (EIA) had strong links to the CIA. In 1975, the company put George Doole—head of CIA air operations until 1971—on its board of directors. Jonathan Marshall, “CIA Assets and the Rise of the Guadalajara Connection,” in *War on Drugs: Studies in the Failures of US Narcotics Policy*, Alfred W. McCoy & Alan A. Block, eds. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 90.

²⁷ Heath, “Mexican Opium,” 41. The DEA was authorized to interrogate farmers and financiers arrested by the PJF. Given that the PJF used torture as a standard investigative method, the DEA agents bore witness to that practice and might have occasionally intervened in the sessions. Craig Pyles, “Legal Murders. Mexico’s War on Drugs, Operation Condor, is Responsible for Torture, Murder, and Extortion” *Village Voice*, June 4, 1979, 11–15. Also see Jesús Esquivel, *La DEA en México* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 2013).

²⁸ Gertz Manero responded to criticism in media outlets regarding the use of herbicides by claiming that paraquat (gramoxone) was harmless to the environment. Other cables by the Department of State reveal the efforts by the Mexican government to conceal or deny the extent of the US involvement in the narcotics campaign. “Press Conference on Herbicides,” January 9, 1976, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1976STATE005410_b.html,; “Excelsior Story on Vance/Ojeda Agreement,” January 16, 1976, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1976MEXICO00608_b.html, and “Attorney General’s Ground Rules for MOPPS,” August 17, 1976, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1976MEXICO10555_b.html, accessed April 10, 2018.

²⁹ For the depiction of the remote sensing technology and the type of helicopters employed by Trizo, see Pérez Ricart, “Las agencias antinarcóticos,” 362–385. Despite Trizos’s accomplishments, in 1975 Mexico sent 6.5 tons of pure heroin to the United States, which in that year recorded 1,789 heroin-related deaths. Heath, “Mexican Opium,” 31.

³⁰ Richard B. Craig, “La Campaña Permanente: Mexico’s Antidrug Campaign,” *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 20, no. 2 (May 1978), 117–118.

DEA, which continued to provide human, technical, and financial resources, still referred to it as Trizo, but in Mexico the operation was code-named “Condor”—even though this bird of prey is not endemic to the country.³¹ The operation did away with the tri-zone division and instead established thirteen zones. Operation Condor began by launching an all-out attack on the Golden Triangle or Zone VI, the region where more than 20,000 highlanders allegedly produced 70 percent of the marijuana and poppy grown in Mexico.³²

STATE COLLUSION WITH DRUG-TRAFFICKING NETWORKS ON THE EVE OF OPERATION CONDOR

The extreme US pressure on Mexico to intensify its anti-drug policy contradicted the Mexican security agencies’ drive to continue benefiting from the generalized practice of extorting drug traffickers.³³ In addition, in 1976 Mexico underwent its worst economic crisis since 1954, which entailed a drastic devaluation of the peso against the US dollar. The Mexican government did not have a real incentive to prevent the massive wealth from the drug sales in the United States from entering the country. Journalist José Luis García Cabrera maintains that Operation Condor resulted from a decision by the López Portillo administration to increase its participation in the drug trade, given the unprecedented inflow of illegal money during the previous administration.³⁴ In fact, the Mexican government did not stop drug-related corruption but allowed federal agencies to administer it. As a consequence of this strategy, the PRI benefited by gaining control of the Golden Triangle and other areas in the countryside that had either a lack of state presence or weak institutional development. National security agencies diminished the power of the northwestern narco elite—the major profiteer nationwide—and the drug industry flourished in other regions under the control of the DFS, the PJJ, and sectors of the military also participating in counterinsurgency campaigns.

By 1977, media outlets reported that the drug clans that controlled the heroin trade in Sinaloa, Chihuahua, and Durango were run by the Favela, Macías, Herrera, Valenzuela, Avilés-

³¹ “Condor” seems to be a code-name for military operations that are conducted in mountains or rugged terrain. It has been used for operations by different armies around the world, including the famous Operation Condor in South America.

³² Craig, “Operation Condor: Mexico’s Antidrug Campaign Enters a New Era,” *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 22, no. 3 (August 1980), 352.

³³ For more about extortion at all levels of government, see Luis Astorga Almanza, *El siglo de las drogas: el narcotráfico, del Porfiriato al nuevo milenio* (Mexico City: Plaza & Janés, 2005).

³⁴ José Luis García Cabrera, *El Pastel! 1920–2000*, vol. 1 (Bloomington: Palibrio, 2012), e-book.

Quintero, Romero, and Sicilia Falcón families, and to a lesser extent the Leyva, Aispuro, Alvarado, Jasso, and Hernández families.³⁵ A couple of years later, only a few of those families were of any importance in the drug trade, and several major drug lords moved to Guadalajara, Jalisco, protected by the authorities.³⁶ The federal agencies clearly sought to regulate the competition among drug clans by eliminating links in both the supply and the production chains, while at the same time enabling the growth of other entrepreneurs.³⁷

However, it would be simplistic to assume that the state exercised a Leviathan-like control of drug traffickers, even though that might have been the intent. The narco struggle for hegemony also had unpredictable aspects, since having protection from the highest echelons of power did not secure drug lords ever-lasting immunity. That was the case of the Cuban national Alberto Sicilia Falcón, who became one of the first cocaine kingpins in Mexico in the early 1970s, establishing his headquarters in Tijuana, Baja California. Journalist James Mills found evidence suggesting that the Zuno Arce—Echeverría’s brothers-in-law—the Secretary of the Interior and presidential aspirant, Mayo Moya Palencia, and other top officials were involved in a protection racket with Sicilia Falcón.³⁸

Despite Sicilia’s top connections, the US government put enough pressure on its Mexican counterpart to have him arrested in early July 1975. US agents who participated in Sicilia’s detention found that he had a special agent badge (the famous *charola*) signed by Moya Palencia, leading the US embassy to believe that, to avoid a scandal, Echeverría discarded his loyal friend Moya and instead chose José López Portillo as his candidate for president.³⁹

³⁵ “12 clanes Mexicanos en el tráfico de heroína,” *Proceso*, June 25, 1977, <https://www.proceso.com.mx/4453/12-clanes-mexicanos-en-el-trafico-de-heroina>, accessed February 10, 2018.

³⁶ Sicilia Falcón, the Herrera family, and Jorge Favela Escobar were overtly targeted and forced out of business. Toro, *Mexico’s “War” on Drugs*, 27. For an overview of the rise and fall of drug clans in the Sinaloa highlands see Juan Antonio Fernández Velázquez, “El narcotráfico en los Altos de Sinaloa (1940–1977),” (PhD diss., Universidad Veracruzana, 2016).

³⁷ According to Moisés Salcido, a former paratrooper who directly witnessed the havoc caused by Operation Condor in Sonora, the *vox populi* rumored that the winners in the drug trade were satisfied with the campaign because it eliminated their small competitors. Francisco Moisés Salcido, *Zafarrancho de combate en Tlatelolco*, (Caborca: n. p., 2005), 356.

³⁸ According to Mills, when Sicilia Falcón was arrested in 1975, he had a letter about US-Mexico commercial transactions regarding silver, mercury, concrete, iron, and oil products, which had been authorized by Antonio Buch, the legal representative of María Esther Zuno Arce de Echeverría. Sicilia Falcón would have invited the first lady to become his co-investor in a project with the Morgan Arms Company to manufacture a laser weapon. The Zuno Arce brothers were identified as heroin traffickers by the DEA. James Mills, *The Underground Empire: Where Crime and Governments Embrace* (New York: Doubleday, 1986), 515.

³⁹ Enciso, *Nuestra historia narcótica*, 116. In 1976, Sicilia escaped with some of his partners through a tunnel they had built inside the Lecumberri penitentiary, but he was recaptured a few months later. Sicilia’s jailbreak

A salient aspect of Sicilia's trajectory was his relation to the CIA. Sicilia told police that he was "a CIA protégé, trained at Fort Jackson as a partisan in the secret war against Castro's Cuba. In return for helping the CIA move weapons to certain groups in Central America... the Agency facilitated his movement of heroin and other drugs."⁴⁰ One of Sicilia's associates in arms trafficking was José Egozi Béjar, a CIA-trained operative and Bay of Pigs veteran from the Brigade 2506, "who inhabited the twilight world where intelligence agencies, private armies, and organized crime intersect."⁴¹ As a DFS contact, Egozi had introduced Sicilia to the Mexican political elite. Echeverría, Moya, and the Deputy Secretary of the Interior, Fernando Gutiérrez Barrios, portrayed themselves as close friends of the Castro regime, while in the covert netherworld they allied with anti-Castro operatives funded by the CIA.⁴²

The evidence is not sufficient to claim that Echeverría or his wife Esther Zuno had a direct or indirect participation in the drug and weapons trade, but in the case of several state governors the sources are compelling. The best-known cases of such involvement concern the governors of Sinaloa: Gabriel Leyva Velázquez (two terms: 1935–36 and 1957–1962), Leopoldo Sánchez Celis (1963–1968), and Antonio Toledo Corro (1981–1986).⁴³ The cases involving Chihuahua's governors are lesser known, despite their long-standing partnership with illegal actors. According to the DFS, Oscar Flores Sánchez (1968–74), who followed a hard line against both guerrillas and social movements, protected a group from Hidalgo del Parral, Chihuahua, which controlled the state's opium industry. While the DFS had reservations about whether Flores was personally involved in the drug trade, it emphasized that officers from his administration, such as the state's attorney general, Antonio Quezada Fornelli, were directly connected to it.⁴⁴

embarrassed the Mexican government by exposing the corruption of the penitentiary's authorities. Lecumberri was closed in 1977, but Sicilia would be transferred to another prison and released in 1999.

⁴⁰ Marshall, "CIA Assets," 198.

⁴¹ Alexander Cockburn & Jeffrey St. Clair, *Whiteout: The CIA, Drugs and the Press* (London: Verso Books, 1998), 355.

⁴² Egozi Béjar allegedly committed suicide in 1978, shortly after DEA agents visited him in prison. Bernardo de Torres, another Cuban-American who worked as a DEA informant, supplied weapons to the DFS and was tolerated as a drug trafficker. Marshall, "CIA Assets," 199.

⁴³ "Leopoldo Sánchez Celis," files 1 (1952–1966) and 2 (1966–1985), AGN, DFS, public version. Sánchez Celis became the partner of Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo, who was member of his personal guard when he was governor. Félix Gallardo would become the most powerful kingpin in the 1980s. Carlos Antonio Flores Pérez, *Historias de polvo y sangre. Génesis y evolución del tráfico de drogas en el estado de Tamaulipas* (Mexico City: CIESAS, 2013): 211–213.

⁴⁴ "Narcotráfico," August 1978, AGN, DFS, public version, 64. According to Pyes, the DEA was also aware of Flores Sánchez's connections to class-one drug traffickers. Pyes, "Legal Murders," 12.

Several top politicians involved in the drug industry rose to prominent positions in the López Portillo administration. Javier García Paniagua—whose participation in criminal networks is well documented—became head of the DFS, a position that enabled him to surveil allies and rivals alike.⁴⁵ When Flores Sánchez became Mexico’s new Attorney General (PGR), he appointed General Raúl Mendiola Cerecero as chief of the PJJ, and Quezada Fornelli as the PGR deputy in Chihuahua.⁴⁶ Flores also boosted the career of the *Taumalipeco* Carlos Aguilar Garza by appointing him coordinator of the Public Prosecutor’s Office in the northwest. The DFS identified both Mendiola and Aguilar as protectors of drug traffickers.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, this group of officials would have a leading role in Operation Condor.

DFS reports also show that authorities had detailed knowledge of the drug-trafficking networks that linked the Golden Triangle with the US-Mexico border. A 1976 investigation traced the circuit that began with poppy production in Guadalupe y Calvo, progressed to distribution in Ciudad Juárez, and then smuggling into the United States.⁴⁸ Authorities identified the names of the four families that made up the two principal groups of drug traffickers in Guadalupe y Calvo. “Group number one” had the support of state authorities, such as the Chihuahua Judicial Police (PJC), while “group number two” worked with Sinaloan drug traffickers, in particular Pedro Avilés Pérez, “El licenciado,” a major heroin trafficker in Baja California and Sonora. Avilés, who was likely the most successful *narcocacique* (kingpin) in the Golden Triangle, would become one of the targets of Operation Condor.

A 1977 DFS report reveals telephone communications between PJJ commanders and a major group of drug traffickers in Ciudad Juárez. Carmelo Avilés, Rafael Aguilar Guajardo (then a DFS commissioner), and Rafael Muñoz had to report the exact amount of drugs they had smuggled from Juárez into the United States, and the PJJ commanders extorted them in proportion to their sales. Among the agents who sold intelligence and protection to such criminals were Héctor del Castillo, the federal public prosecutor and coordinator of the anti-drug

⁴⁵ Juan Velez, *Jinetes de Tlatelolco. Marcelino García Barragán y otros relatos del ejército mexicano* (Mexico City: Proceso, 2017), 190–192.

⁴⁶ Mendiola was the subchief of the Preventive Police of Mexico City during the 1968 student movement, and activists identified him as a major human rights violator.

⁴⁷ Flores, *Historias de polvo*, 215–216.

⁴⁸ “Pedro Avilés,” AGN, DFS, Public Version, 10–13.

campaign in Juárez, and Jaime Alcalá, the PJF chief of services in Sinaloa, who became a key player in Operation Condor.⁴⁹

As Condor began, the interweaving between the northwest political establishment and *narcocaciques* made it impossible to strike one side without hurting the other. The Mexican government sought to control both legal and illegal actors through the PGR-PJF, the DFS, and the military. This process was ridden with interagency conflicts that raised questions about whether civilian power was subservient to military power. Furthermore, Operation Condor was not just aimed at drug traffickers, because its general tactics of population control served to contain the agrarian, guerrilla, and human rights movements active in Sinaloa and Chihuahua during the 1970s. According to Teague: “One December 1983 CIA report boasted that Mexico increased its antinarcotics units and operations to ‘supplement Operation Condor,’ specifying that the Mexican army would also ‘take advantage of the eradication campaign’ to ‘uncover arms trafficking and guerrilla activities.’”⁵⁰ In fact, such overlapping of counterinsurgency and counternarcotics efforts was the central characteristic of state violence during the 1970s.

OPERATION CONDOR AS A WATERSHED IN THE CONFLICT BETWEEN SINALOA AND THE FEDERATION

In 1976, Culiacán, which had around 250,000 inhabitants, experienced 543 homicides, becoming the most violent city in Cold-War Mexico.⁵¹ In the majority of cases, murderers used automatic weapons, a mark of drug-related violence. The local population was upset by the state government’s passiveness towards the wave of violence, caused by the security agencies’ widely known links to drug traffickers.⁵² The so-called *gente de bien* (the well-off)—organized into business, merchant, farm, and other professional associations—pressured the federal government to call in the military to protect public security because they did not trust in the corrupt Sinaloa Judicial Police (PJS), whose chiefs either used their position to become drug traffickers themselves or to protect drug lords.⁵³ In an allegedly sympathetic response to society’s demands,

⁴⁹ “Narcotráfico,” AGN, DFS, former public version in one volume, 69–79.

⁵⁰ Teague, “Mexico’s Dirty War,” 80.

⁵¹ Ricardo Urioste, “543 crímenes por la droga en Culiacán,” *El Sol de México*, December 21, 1976, 1.

⁵² “Estado de Sinaloa,” November 12, 1976, AGN, DGIPS, Box 1707 B, File 8, 145–149.

⁵³ “Estado de Sinaloa,” April 7, 1976, AGN, DGIPS, Box 1711-C, File 12, 107-108 and May 24, 1976, 125; “A la opinión pública,” *El Heraldo de México*, February 23, 1978, 7. As the DGIPS files show, virtually all the PJS chiefs and subchiefs were involved in the drug industry, especially since the 1960 onward. In the early 1970s, PJS agents were already smuggling cocaine into the United States because, although heroin was in higher demand, cocaine was

in early November 1976, Sinaloa's governor, Alfonso G. Calderón, announced the implementation of Operation Condor.⁵⁴ One month later, the local congress required the federal government intervene in the state by sending in the military and the PJP. In this way, local authorities legitimized an operation that external actors had planned in advance. The Mexican media did not mention the DEA's role in the operation.

Operation Condor went into effect in Culiacán, Sinaloa, on January 16, 1977, only a month and a half after President López Portillo took office. Operation Condor kicked off in Culiacán with a military parade led by Lt. Gen. José Francisco Hernández Toledo, the general coordinator of the Task Force "Condor" (FTC). The event symbolized the recapturing of the territory by the Mexican state.⁵⁵ Alfonso G. Calderón, Maj. Gen. Ricardo Cervantes, commander of the 9th Military Zone headquartered in Culiacán, and other top federal and state officials also attended the parade. Although Condor first targeted the Golden Triangle, in the same year it expanded to other states experiencing an upward surge in guerrilla movements, such as Oaxaca and Guerrero.

Operation Condor had both a civil and a military command. Gertz Manero continued as the national campaign coordinator, while Carlos Aguilar Garza and Cruz López were respectively the PGR coordinator and deputy coordinator in the northwest.⁵⁶ However, the military component overshadowed the aerial defoliation program controlled by the PGR. Also, the military authority superseded the public prosecutor's law enforcement duties in the Golden Triangle and became the actual sovereign power through a de facto state of siege.

During the first phase of the operation, 1,200 regular troops and paratroopers comprised the FTC.⁵⁷ Troops served six months on a rotational basis, while the Parachute Fusiliers Brigade (BFP), the elite counterinsurgency unit in the countryside, participated in the campaign from time to time at the request of the high command. The FTC set up its military base in

more expensive. Colonel Jesús Quintanar Romero, who was appointed PJS chief in 1975, resigned the position a couple of months later because of his inability to fight against corruption. He sent an accurate diagnosis of the public security situation in Sinaloa concerning drug clans and the role of the PJS to the SEDENA, concluding that the upper echelons of power were shielding the corrupt police command. "Estado de Sinaloa," June 16, 1975, AGN, DGIPS, Box 1711-C, File 12, 31-34.

⁵⁴ "Estado de Sinaloa, November 10, 1976, AGN, DGIPS, Box 1711-C, File 10, 185.

⁵⁵ "Estado de Sinaloa," January 16, 1976, AGN, DGIPS, Box 1711-C, File 12, 258.

⁵⁶ At least 250 PGR agents participated in Operation Condor, and most of them were sent to the northwest. Craig, "Operation Condor," 348.

⁵⁷ The number of 1,200 troops provided by Edward Heath relates to the first phase of the operation. Other sources claim that up to 10,000 troops participated in the FTC. Heath, "Mexican Opium," 35.

Badiraguato—a municipality largely controlled by drug clans—and had jurisdiction over the municipalities, including Choix, Sinaloa de Leyva, Badiraguato, and Culiacán in Sinaloa, Guadalupe y Calvo, Morelos, and Batopilas in Chihuahua, and Tamazula and Canelas in Durango, spanning an area of approximately 80,000 km².⁵⁸

From 1977 to 1987, the FTC operated with nineteen commanders.⁵⁹ Significantly, these commanders had prior field experience in counterinsurgency campaigns across Mexico. As a member of the BFP, Hernández Toledo had fought the Popular Guerrilla Group in Chihuahua in 1965. He also led the military assaults on the public universities in Michoacán and Sonora in 1966 and 1967, respectively, and was one of the commanders of Operation Galeana, the military assault on students in Mexico City's Plaza de Tlatelolco on October 2, 1968.⁶⁰ Toledo's chief collaborators were the BFP commanders Gen. Edmar Euroza Delgado and Lt. Col. Gregorio Guerrero Caudillo. Euroza was well known for his participation in the repression of social movements.⁶¹

Maj. Gen. Roberto Heine Rangel, who had received counterinsurgency training in US military schools and had taken part in the extermination of the guerrilla movement led by Lucio Cabañas in Guerrero, succeeded Hernández Toledo as general coordinator of the FTC and was in charge from September 1977 through March 1978. Brig. Gen. Manuel Díaz Escobar Figueroa, better known for having created a paramilitary group known as *Los Halcones* (The Hawks) that perpetrated a massacre against a student demonstration in 1971, commanded the FTC-III from September 1978 to June 1979. Brig. Gen. Jesús Gómez Ruiz, coordinator of the FTC-IV (June 1979–December 1979), had also taken part in Operation Spider against Lucio Cabañas. Inf. Col. Ricardo Careaga Estrambasaguas, who led the FTC-IX (December 1981–May 1982) had belonged to the Olimpia Battalion, which also participated in the Tlatelolco massacre.⁶² The

⁵⁸ That area would later expand to more municipalities in the three states plus Sonora. Tomás Guevara, "Operación Condor. Compilación de artículos del *Noroeste*," Culiacán, January–December 1977, 1–5.

⁵⁹ "Comandantes de la Fuerza de Tarea Cóndor," SEDENA, <http://www.sedena.gob.mx/leytrans/petic/2005/may/20052005a3.html>, accessed 10 February 2017.

⁶⁰ Rafael Rodríguez Castañeda, *El policía: la Guerra sucia no se olvida* (Barcelona: Grijalbo, 2013), e-book.

⁶¹ Euroza conducted the most emblematic attacks against the 1968 student movement in Mexico City, including the Tlatelolco massacre. Gregorio Guerrero Caudillo was promoted to Brigadier General as a result of his performance in the drug war and commanded the FTC from late 1984 to mid-1985. See Julio Scherer & Carlos Monsiváis, *Parte de Guerra. Tlatelolco 1968* (Mexico City: Nuevo Siglo/Aguilar, 1999).

⁶² For the career trajectories of these officers, see: Roderic Ai Camp, *Generals in the Palacio: The Military in Modern Mexico* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Juan Velez, *El General sin memoria: una crónica de los silencios del ejército mexicano* (Mexico City: Debate, 2010); and Velez, *Jinetes de Tlatelolco*.

background of these top officers foreshadowed their counterinsurgency tactics against peasant communities.

On February 9, 1977, Hernández Toledo claimed that in the highlands there were as many weapons to make a “little revolution,” yet the military had eradicated 720 illegal fields and seized 121 tons of marijuana, which anticipated the success of Operation Condor within the next three months.⁶³ Authorities repeatedly affirmed to media outlets that the problem was nearly solved. The DEA reached the same conclusion given its faith in the aerial defoliation program. Initially, public opinion in Sinaloa backed Condor, but after months of systematic abuses, people became disappointed with its outcomes.⁶⁴

From January 1977 onward, troops from the 9th Military Zone patrolled the streets of Culiacán and its surroundings, established random checkpoints, and carried out disarmament campaigns. However, as early as April 1977, state authorities realized that bank robbery, kidnapping, schoolgirl rape, car theft, and assault on tourists had increased as a result of Condor.⁶⁵ Besides customary social violence, the state of siege brought gross human rights abuses. In 1977 alone, there were more than four hundred complaints against troops by peasants, cattle ranchers, and professionals.⁶⁶ In the highlands, several mass killings took place but went unreported in media outlets. For instance, on October 31, 1977, thirteen alleged drug traffickers and one soldier died in Las Juntas, La Noria, Mazatlán.⁶⁷ No investigation was ever carried out to determine whether the FTC had shot the civilians or if they had died in a gunfight.

While the FTC had territorial control over the highlands, the intricate dynamics of violence in the Culiacán Valley resulted from the participation of a number of forces, namely the Municipal Police, PJS, PGR-PJF, DFS, the White Brigade (a secret death squad), and the 9th Military Zone. The FTC, the 9th Military Zone, and the judicial forces experienced regular

⁶³ Roberto Martínez Montenegro, “Fin al narcotráfico en mayo: Gral. H. Toledo,” *Noroeste*, February 10, 1977, 1; “Estado de Sinaloa,” February 9, 1977, AGN, DGIPS, Box 1711-C, File 12.

⁶⁴ “Estado de Sinaloa,” March 15, 1977, AGN, DGIPS, Box 1711-C, File 13, 24.

⁶⁵ When the drug sales were disrupted, gangs switched to alternative criminal activities. “Estado de Sinaloa,” April 12, 1977, AGN, DFS, Box 1711-C, File 13, 56.

⁶⁶ Governor Calderón admitted that the military was perpetrating abuses against innocent civilians, but the 9th Military Zone did not take his criticism well. AGN, DGIPS, Box 1711-C, File 14, [Penitenciaría del Estado de Sinaloa, November 18, 1977, and Instituto de Readaptación Social del Estado de Sinaloa, December 19, 1977], 127–137.

⁶⁷ “Estado de Sinaloa,” October 31, 1977, AGN, DGIPS, Box 1711-C, File 13, 176. During the anti-drug campaigns of previous years, there were similar internal reports of massacres in the Sinaloa highlands. For instance, in 1971, in El Realito, Badiraguato, the military killed elders, women, and children. On November 2, 1976, in a skirmish in Santiago de los Caballeros, Badiraguato, the military killed ten alleged drug traffickers and wounded several civilians. AGN, DGIPS, Box 1711-C, File 12, “Estado de Sinaloa,” November 3, 1976.

commander turnovers, allegedly to prevent corruption. That practice made it difficult to reach long-lasting agreements between agencies or with local actors, and added to the ongoing political instability. Furthermore, the DEA agents headquartered in Culiacán ended up favoring the PGR-PJF, while the DFS had a closer relationship to the CIA. At the same time, the disarray among different branches of the Sinaloa government reached dramatic proportions. During the Calderón term (1974–1980), the state’s attorney and the PJS did not collaborate with each other because of their mutual accusations of drug-related corruption, yet the governor did not intervene to put an end to this dual command.⁶⁸ The coordination among both domestic and foreign agencies proved to be tortuous, and in some cases internecine strife impeded any institutional functioning.

Despite the astounding number of security agents on the streets of Culiacán, there were several high-profile killings and jailbreaks from 1977 to 1978. On March 3, 1977, the PJS sub-chief, Alfredo Reyes Curiel, was shot for having extorted several drug traffickers.⁶⁹ At the end of that month, Major Gustavo Sámano, a military advisor for the FTC, was assassinated, allegedly for pointing out police officers linked to drug traffickers as well as drug cultivation areas.⁷⁰ However, Sámano had not been untainted himself. On November 10, 1975, when Sámano was head of the prison guards at the infamous Social Rehabilitation Institute of Sinaloa (IRSS), one of the most infamous heroin traffickers in southern Sinaloa, Manuel Salcido Uzeta—known as *El Cochiloco* (“Crazy Pig”)—and six of his men escaped. Sámano was removed from that position but managed to evade a PJF investigation.⁷¹ There is no doubt that the highest echelons of power protected Manuel Salcido, since he was one of the survivors of Operation Condor.

The state attorney suspended the investigation into Sámano’s killing, but the military accused the PJS of being the perpetrator. Prior to the murder, the relationship between the 9th Military Zone and the PJS had already been strained, because the army carried out law enforcement functions while the PJS took part in the smuggling of drugs and weapons.⁷² And as soon as Condor began, the military disarmed the PJS agents. Maj. Gen. Cervantes handled

⁶⁸ “Estado de Sinaloa,” March 31st, 1977, AGN, DGIPS, Box 1711-C, File 13, 48; “Estado de Sinaloa,” January 29, 1979, AGN, DGIPS, Box 1711-C, File 14, 238.

⁶⁹ Reyes was one of several officers from both the PJS and the Municipal Police who were killed for drug-related issues during the Condor years. “Estado de Sinaloa,” March 3, 1977, AGN, DGIPS, Box 1711-C, File 13, 20.

⁷⁰ “Estado de Sinaloa,” March 25, 1977, AGN, DGIPS, Box 1711-C, File 13, 45.

⁷¹ Manuel Salcido was imprisoned in early 1974. “Estado de Sinaloa,” November 10, 1975, AGN, DGIPS, Box 1711-C, File 12, 73–74.

⁷² “Estado de Sinaloa,” February 23, 1977, AGN, DGIPS, Box 1707-B, File 9, 6; “Estado de Sinaloa,” March 31, 1977, AGN, DGIPS, Box 1711-C, File 13, 48–49.

Sámamo's case as a personal matter, unleashing a ruthless plan of revenge against the PJS. On May 1, 1977, he called Governor Calderón to his office in the 9th Military Zone to force him to listen to the recorded interrogation of a PJS agent who had confessed that his unit had killed Sámamo.⁷³ After the meeting, the army detained seven of Calderón's PJS security guards and escorted him to the Government Palace to ensure that he would formally dismiss the culprits. Soldiers then tortured and disappeared the security guards.⁷⁴ All in all, Cervantes humiliated Calderón and sent a terrifying message to the PJS: no one was above the military. Shortly afterwards, however, Gen. Alberto Quintanar replaced Cervantes, even though he had only held the position for five months. The message from the president's office had been made clear: no one was above the PRI's civilian elite.⁷⁵ Thenceforth, the DFS in Sinaloa assumed the role of protecting that elite.

On February 13, 1978, Roberto Martínez Montenegro, a correspondent for *Noroeste* and *Excelsior*, who had written news reports on the relationship between PJS agents and drug traffickers in Sinaloa, was shot dead in Culiacán. Unlike other journalists, such as José Guadalupe Mendivil Payán and Carlos Rodríguez Falcón, who had been killed in Culiacán the previous year, Montenegro's case incited national uproar and galvanized several media outlets from different states to demand justice for him and protection for freedom of expression—an unusual demand in the largely state-controlled media landscape.⁷⁶

The DGIPS reported that the PJF had killed Montenegro because he had planned to write about its widespread practice of extorting drug traffickers.⁷⁷ The execution marked a turning point in the relationship between the PGR and Sinaloa authorities. The DFS sub-chief Miguel Nazar Haro traveled to Sinaloa to investigate the case and back the governor, a maneuver that infuriated the PJF, which subsequently tortured several PJS agents and forced them to

⁷³ The state Attorney, the Chief of the PJS, and the Director of Government spent one night in the 9th Military camp. "Elenco Político," *Proceso*, June 4, 1977, <http://www.proceso.com.mx/7212/elenco-politico-no-31>.

⁷⁴ "Estado de Sinaloa," May 6, 1977, AGN, DGIPS, Box 1711-C, File 13, 70. The wives of the disappeared PJS agents became important human rights activists.

⁷⁵ The president is the commander-in-chief of the Mexican Armed Forces. "Estado de Sinaloa," May 31, 1977, AGN, DGIPS, Box 1711-C, File 13, 78.

⁷⁶ [Assassination of Roberto Martínez Montenegro], February and March 1977, AGN, DGIPS, Box 1711-C, File 13, 240–280.

⁷⁷ "Estado de Sinaloa," April 13, 1978, AGN, DGIPS, Box 1711-C, File 14, 37–38. Pyes also reported this version, specifying that Montenegro would charge Alcalá and other agents with extorting millions of pesos from narcotics suspects through the use of torture. Pyes, "Legal Murders": 12.

incriminate themselves in Montenegro's homicide.⁷⁸ Jaime Alcalá, along with Gen. Alberto Quintanar, went one step further and detained the commander of the State Government's Special Group (GEGS, the local secret police), Víctor Gómez Vidal, for his involvement with the DFS. In fact, Quintanar's troops were also on the verge of assaulting the PJS headquarters.⁷⁹ The military joined the PJF operations as a result of its conflict with the state government regarding Sámano's case.

The PJF took advantage of the situation to crack down on another of its traditional enemies: the Sinaloa Bar Association "Eustaquio Buelna" (CAEB), the only NGO that spoke out against the massive human rights abuses carried out by both the police and the military. On April 14, 1978, the CAEB vice-president, Jesús Michel Jacobo, was detained and then tortured over four days as part of a plot to charge Governor Calderón and Nazar Haro for Montenegro's execution. Michel identified Carlos Aguilar, Jaime Alcalá, and Pablo Hernández as the agents who assaulted him and other detainees and their families.⁸⁰

During its investigation, the DFS attempted to smear Montenegro's image by stating that he was an informant (*madrina*) for the Federal Public Prosecutor and was also on the drug traffickers' payroll because he worked as a middleman to secure their release from prison. The DFS also prevented the PJF from making a public statement accusing the GEGS of Montenegro's killing, while Calderón and Leopoldo Sánchez Celis went to Mexico City to negotiate with the federal government.⁸¹ The terms of the conversations remain secret, but the balance of power favored the DFS. The GEGS agents were released on April 18, although the PJS agents remained jailed. The next day, Nazar Haro declared that *madrinas* had killed Montenegro over a dispute about money. The murder was never solved.

⁷⁸ "Estado de Sinaloa," February 14, 1978, AGN, DGIPS, Box 1711-C, File 14, 247. The former PJS chief, Alejandro Valenzuela Chávez, was also interrogated because Martínez Montenegro's articles had played a role in his indictment. The journalist had revealed that as police chief back in 1973, Valenzuela participated in the drug trade and received protection from the governor, Alfredo Valdéz Montoya.

⁷⁹ Gómez's family was also detained, and Gómez was tortured in front of Gen. Mendiola, with his pregnant wife and his 3-year old son tortured next to him. "Estado de Sinaloa," April 15, 1978, AGN, DGIPS, Box 1711-C, File 14, 42–44. Pyes also recorded the brutal testimonies of torture by Gómez and Michel. Pyes, "Legal Murders," 13–15. Paradoxically, Gómez Vidal had been one of the architects of counterinsurgency in Sinaloa. Camilo Vicente, *Tiempo suspendido. Una historia de la desaparición forzada en México, 1940–1980* (Mexico: Bonilla Artigas Editores, 2019), 240.

⁸⁰ "Colegio de Abogados 'Eustaquio Buelna'," AGN, DFS, public version of, 2–4.

⁸¹ "Estado de Sinaloa," April 17, 1978, AGN, DGIPS, Box 1711-C, File 14, 64, 68.

On September 15, 1978, PJF agents seem to have ambushed and killed Pedro Avilés, “El licenciado,” and his seven companions in Loma de Rodriguera, Sinaloa.⁸² Notwithstanding that Carlos Aguilar and Jaime Alcalá had received bribes from the Avilés drug clan, the PJF followed orders from a higher authority that deemed the veteran kingpin disposable.⁸³ Aguilar and Alcalá were later sent to Tijuana, and Cruz López assumed the position of PGR coordinator in the northwest. Whether Avilés’s execution was intended to facilitate the growth of other drug traffickers, while also serving as a state performance illustrating the efficacy of Condor is hard to prove. However, chief drug traffickers associated with Avilés and other Golden Triangle kingpins increased their profits after the first stage of Condor.⁸⁴ The removal of Avilés brought about the reorganization of criminal networks, and from late 1978 to 1982 it was not clear who would control the narcotics trade in Mexico.

Interagency conflicts and recurring high-profile assassinations make evident the lack of governance and the difficulties the many actors on the stage had in reaching long-lasting agreements over the management of the drug trade. In their government reports, both Calderón and López Portillo produced triumphant statements about drug eradication, but hid the social cost of Operation Condor and the clashes between federal and local agencies.⁸⁵ Nonetheless, year after year Sinaloa’s people continued to complain about both social and state violence. Although there was not any active opposition to Condor, a passive resistance prevailed instead. In the November 1977 state elections to elect representatives, mayors, and council members, the voter

⁸² The official version stating that Avilés was killed by accident because he did not stop his car at a PJF checkpoint was clearly a cover-up. “Pedro Avilés Pérez,” September 16, 1978, AGN, DFS, public version, 14.

⁸³ Juan Veledíaz, “La muerte de ‘El León de la Sierra’, el primer Padrino del narco,” <http://laparednoticias.com/la-muerte-de-el-leon-de-la-sierra-el-primer-padrino-del-narco/>, accessed March 12, 2017.

⁸⁴ Jaime Herrera Nevárez, the most powerful heroin kingpin according to the DEA, was detained in 1978 but unlike Avilés, the DEA and the PJF gave him the opportunity to negotiate his surrender. Eduardo Fernández, the drug lord who introduced the cocaine trade to Sinaloa, fled to Puebla in the late 1970s. Pedro Avilés worked with some of the drug traffickers who would dominate the drug scene during the early 1980s: Ernesto Fonseca, Rafael Caro Quintero, Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo, Manuel Salcido, Juan José Esparragoza, Juan Matta Ballesteros, Javier Barba, Amado Carrillo Fuentes, and the brothers Rafael and Juan Quintero Payán. Juan Carlos Reyna suggested that during the 1976 gang wars, some drug traffickers had become independent from Pedro Avilés and made new arrangements with the PJF, among them Ernesto Fonseca and Rafael Caro Quintero. Juan Carlos Reyna and Farrah Fresnedo, *El Extraditado* (Barcelona: Grijalbo, 2014), e-book.

⁸⁵ Cámara de Diputados, “Informes de Gobierno del Presidente Constitucional de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos José López Portillo,” <http://www.diputados.gob.mx/sedia/sia/re/RE-ISS-09-06-15.pdf>, accessed March 10, 2017. Calderón claimed that Operation Condor had left Sinaloa almost cleaned out of drug crops, and the remaining 12 percent of production was located on the borders of Chihuahua and Durango. “Tercer Informe que rinde al H. Congreso del Estado el C. Gobernador Constitucional de Sinaloa, Alfonso G. Calderón,” December 1st, 1977, in *Informes de Gobierno del Estado de Sinaloa, 1916–2009*, Culiacán: Archivo Histórico General del Estado de Sinaloa, 2010. CD.

turnout was 18 percent, the lowest in Sinaloa's history,⁸⁶ which brought into question the legitimacy of PRI rule.⁸⁷ In Sinaloa, violence rather than consensus underlaid the regime.

OPERATION CONDOR'S ATTACKS AGAINST SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN SINALOA

The seventies were a period of widespread upheaval in Sinaloa. Besides the persistent activity by the 23rd of September Communist League, there were continuous mobilizations by students, peasants, laborers, workers, squatters, and human rights activists. Peasant organizations carried out systematic land seizures from 1972 to 1978, but given the climate of political unrest, the state government either yielded to their demands or resorted to extreme violence. That context radically changed at the end of the decade. After the 1977 political reform that allowed the participation of opposition parties in elections, traditional left-wing organizations like the Mexican Communist Party (PCM) reduced their efforts to organize mass mobilizations and focused on electoral campaigns. Additionally, by the 1980s, the combination of the dirty war and the war on drugs had nearly annihilated the revolutionary left in the northwest.

During his asylum hearing in Canada in 1988, Zacarías Osorio Cruz, a Mexican army deserter, explained that as a paratrooper he contributed to the elimination of the regime's foes. Osorio stated that in 1979, three sections of his brigade, made up of 105 soldiers commanded by Lt. Col. Ramón Arrieta Hurtado, went to Guamúchil, Sinaloa, to put down a protest in front of the Municipal Palace, as well as to pick up about twenty prisoners detained by the local battalion and transfer them to the secret prison in Military Camp No. 1 in Mexico City. Osorio described this procedure as being part of Operation Condor, even though it was unrelated to drug trafficking. Osorio also asserted that the high command selected him to kill prisoners in clandestine executions in the military shooting camps of San Miguel de los Jagüeyes and San Juan Teotihuacán, State of Mexico, from 1977 to 1981. Furthermore, Osorio revealed that José Hernández Toledo and Edmar Euroza Delgado were part of the high command that gave the BFP orders for those executions.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ "Estado de Sinaloa," November 6, 1977, AGN, DGIPS, Box 1707-B, File 9, 104–106.

⁸⁷ Federal authorities deemed that in municipalities like Badiraguato, where the majority of the population worked in the drug industry and had endured the economic consequences of Condor, there would not be political problems for the PRI. Clearly, they trusted that the de facto state of siege would prevent unrest. "Panorama político," AGN, DGIPS, Box 1763-B, File 7, 269.

⁸⁸ Enrique Maza, ed., *Obligado a matar. Fusilamiento de civiles en México* (Mexico City: Proceso, 1993), 8.

In the same asylum hearing, the former guerrilla Antonio Hernández testified that he was detained in Guerrero in 1978 and sent to the secret prison at Military Camp No. 1. He learned that not only activists but also drug traffickers were confined there. The latter were tortured until they paid to be brought before a judge.⁸⁹ The military would have killed only those who lacked resources to “buy” their trial, he said. An unknown number of clandestine prisoners, both activists and criminals, were disappeared, and the Mexican government has never provided an official explanation of their whereabouts.

In Sinaloa from 1972 to 1974, security forces usually sent guerrillas to public prisons, and there was a seeming low rate of disappearances because the counterinsurgency infrastructure was predominantly directed to Guerrero.⁹⁰ In 1976, however, that pattern shifted. Of the forty-two forced disappearances that human rights organizations recorded in Sinaloa from 1976 to 1979, twenty-five were guerrillas.⁹¹ The remaining seventeen cases, of policemen, soldiers, and civilians, were related to Operation Condor. The counterinsurgency infrastructure expanded by Condor favored the forced disappearance of clandestine prisoners.

The State of Siege in the Sierra Madre Occidental

Journalist Francisco Ortiz Pinchetti, one of the first to conduct investigative journalism on Operation Condor, defined Sinaloa as a “transplant of South America,” where state-terror regimes prevailed.⁹² Ortiz Pinchetti disregarded the fact that the counterinsurgency campaigns had ravaged the Sierra Tarahumara and the Sierra Madre del Sur since the mid-1960s, in pursuit of guerrillas and drug-traffickers. Thus, although South America’s Operation Condor began in 1975, the Mexican Condor belonged to an older domestic tradition.

The worst human rights abuses of the Mexican war on drugs occurred during the administration of US President Jimmy Carter, who expressed his concern about the atrocities committed by the Argentinian dictatorship but showed little interest in the Mexican case. Political scientist Richard B. Craig summarized the most significant human rights charges against Operation Condor: 1) the use of dangerous herbicides; 2) the failure or inability to protect

⁸⁹ Maza, *Obligado a matar*, 71.

⁹⁰ José Sotelo Marbán, ed., *La verdad negada. Informe histórico sobre la Guerra Sucia del Estado mexicano entre los años '60 a los '80* (Mexico City: Centro de Investigaciones Históricas de los Movimientos Sociales A.C., 2012).

⁹¹ There was also a noticeable underreporting of cases of forced disappearance. Óscar Loza Ochoa, *Tiempo de Espera*, (Culiacán: UAS, 2004), 132, and Vicente, *Tiempo Suspendido*, 209–258.

⁹² Francisco Ortiz Pinchetti, ed., *La Operación Cóndor* (Mexico City: Proceso, 1991), 13.

those who attacked drug-related corruption; 3) the abuse of fundamental rights during arrest, detention, and imprisonment for narcotics violations; and 4) the disregard of *campesino* rights during drug-related maneuvers in the countryside.⁹³

A key source for understanding the dimensions of Operation Condor are the declassified SEDENA files, which include a series of complaints made by highlanders against the FTC from 1977 to 1986, and also show that the high command rarely recognized the abuses. The municipalities that stand out in the sources as the most affected were Badiraguato, Guadalupe y Calvo, Tamazula, Morelos, Urique, Batopilas, Topia, Canelas, and Guanaceví. The military had enough intelligence to direct their assaults just against drug clans, but instead also targeted peasant families and innocent civilians. The FTC committed systematic illegal detentions, executions, forced disappearances, acts of torture, rape, pillage, and extortion. By following a scorched-earth policy, the troops destroyed both illicit and livelihood crops, plundered stored harvests, and burnt down the homes of poor peasants. In consequence, the regional economy was devastated, and thousands of highlanders had to flee the region.⁹⁴

In their testimonies, highlanders depict how soldiers put marijuana in their trucks so there would be fake grounds to arrest them and stole their money and their vehicles. All detainees were sent to the IRSS, where they received sentences of up to five years.⁹⁵ There was an extensive use of torture, notwithstanding that the majority of detainees lacked any relevant information to confess. Not even drug growers had information that authorities would fail to discover by employing professional investigators. Thus, torture was not employed as an investigative method but as a tactic to spread terror among the population. Authorities arrested and tortured hundreds of guiltless peasants only to pretend that Operation Condor was a major success.

In 1978, the CAEB conducted a survey of between 457 out of 1300 prisoners in the IRSS; 85 percent of them were poor peasants and laborers, and the 15 percent remaining were predominantly urban youth. The report shows that the PJJ and troops based in Sinaloa carried out all the detentions, but they caused an illegal deprivation of freedom in 90 percent of the cases because detainees were not caught in flagrante delicto and the arresting agents had neither arrest

⁹³ Richard B. Craig, "Human Rights and Mexico's Antidrug Campaign," *Social Science Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (March 1980): 691–701.

⁹⁴ Ortiz, *La Operación Cóndor*, 68; AGN, DGIPS, Box 1711-C, File 13, "Estado de Sinaloa," 13; Pyes, "Legal Murders," 11–15.

⁹⁵ Author's interview with a group of peasants from Mocorito, Sinaloa, May 8, 2017.

warrants nor search warrants. In all cases, the detentions were performed with excessive violence and were followed by intense torture sessions, although detainees were unarmed and compliant. The agents also sacked the belongings of the victims as spoils of war.⁹⁶ Families were not notified about the whereabouts of the detainees and had to travel to distant towns to search for them.⁹⁷

The CAEB report detailed the different torture techniques that peasants experienced. Some of them followed the so-called scientific procedures—deadly blows, electric shocks in the genitals, suffocation, waterboarding, reverse hanging, induced dehydration and starving, burns, isolation, blindfolding—but others had a gendered dimension and exhibited sheer brutality. Women were raped “in normal and unnatural ways,” and babies and children were also tortured in front of their parents. Some female prisoners underwent forced abortions. Many victims died due to the lack of medical care after being tortured, while others suffered mutilations, fractures, tumors, hearing loss, teeth loss, and post-traumatic stress disorder.⁹⁸

With the approval of the public prosecutor, the surviving detainees remained isolated for twenty to forty days in the Badiraguato military prison or the PJF cells in Culiacán. After signing self-incriminating confessions, they were transferred to the IRSS, without having an adequate defense or a fair trial. In sum, authorities violated due process in every way. Operation Condor also put unnecessary pressure on the Sinaloa judicial system to deal with prisoners from Chihuahua and Durango in addition to those from Sinaloa.

The CAEB was able to identify some direct perpetrators, among them the PJF commanders Manuel Arreguín and Jaime Alcalá, whose bosses were the prosecutors Carlos Aguilar, Pablo Hernández, Cruz Garza, and Humberto Dávila.⁹⁹ There are no official reports of the abuses because the majority of victims either remained silent, went into exile, or denounced their cases to the attorney general’s office, the same institution that had violated their rights. The

⁹⁶ “Estudio practicado por el Colegio de Abogados ‘Eustaquio Buelna’ de Culiacán, auxiliado por el Comité de defensa de los derechos de los internos del IRSS del Edo. de Sinaloa,” May 31, 1978, AGN, DFS, public version of the “Colegio de Abogados ‘Eustaquio Buelna’,” 18, (hereafter CAEB report). According to Pyes, the CAEB published a second report containing 110 more prisoner testimonials, but none of the archives I consulted contained it. Pyes, “Legal Murders,” 11.

⁹⁷ “Para informar a la superioridad,” June 1st, 1979, AGN, SEDENA, Fuerza de Tarea Cóndor: quejas, Box 44, File 1012-1979, 31.

⁹⁸ CAEB report, 20–22. The CAEB detailed ten cases of executions, forced disappearances, and people who passed away after being tortured; underlying that there were many more cases where victims did not want to testify because they were afraid of retaliation by the authorities.

⁹⁹ CAEB report, 19. The CAEB provided the names and plates of a number of agents who committed abuses, but there were many more who went unidentified.

only NGO that received complaints for Operation Condor was Amnesty International, but no domestic or international organization had enough leverage to hold the Mexican government accountable.

The protracted terror policy caused a massive exodus from Badiraguato, Guadalupe y Calvo, and Tamazula to Culiacán and the United States. As a result of Operation Condor, Los Angeles has the largest community of Badiragatenses outside Sinaloa.¹⁰⁰ The Sierra Madre Occidental had a low population density before Condor, with hamlets or *rancherías* from 20 to 100 inhabitants. Oscar Loza Ochoa, one of the oldest human rights activists in Sinaloa, estimates that during the campaign up to 2,000 hamlets were abandoned in the Golden Triangle.¹⁰¹ The activist José Luis López Duarte claims that the number of depopulated hamlets amounted to 8,000.¹⁰² By taking the case of Badiraguato as a reference, Loza's estimation might be more accurate. The 1970 census showed that Badiraguato had 29,252 inhabitants dispersed in 325 localities. In the 1980 census, this figure was reduced to 23,742 inhabitants.¹⁰³ Considering the relative balance between births and deaths, in ten years Badiraguato had a population loss of roughly 5,500 inhabitants.

Regardless of these estimations, the demographic statistics of the Golden Triangle municipalities did not show the exponential demographic growth experienced in the rest of the country during the 1970s.¹⁰⁴ The available sources do not suggest that there was a deliberate plan to depopulate the Golden Triangle, yet they show that the government was careless about the forced displacement of thousands of rural residents. In the 21st century, both the National Action Party (PAN) and the National Regeneration Movement (MORENA) administrations have recognized to some extent the human rights abuses of the dirty war, but they have neglected those of the first war on drugs. There has never been a truth commission to investigate the social costs of the anti-drug campaigns or the number of civilians who were victims of atrocious crimes, such as torture, extrajudicial executions, and forced disappearances.

¹⁰⁰ The history of the Condor diaspora has never been investigated, but I thank Adèle Blazquez for providing me information about the Badiragatense community in California.

¹⁰¹ Oscar Loza Ochoa, interview with the author, Culiacán, Sinaloa, May 2, 2017.

¹⁰² José Luis López Duarte, interview with the author, Culiacán, Sinaloa, May 8, 2017.

¹⁰³ Censos y conteos del Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía:

<http://www.beta.inegi.org.mx/proyectos/ccpv/cpvsh/default.html>, accessed March 13, 2018.

¹⁰⁴ From 1970 to 1980, Guadalupe y Calvo, Chihuahua, went from 29,053 to 30,231 inhabitants, while Tamazula, Durango, went from 18,315 to 20,647. For other municipalities in Sinaloa, see, "El narcotráfico en los Altos de Sinaloa," 31–32.

THE SPECTER OF AN ECOCIDE

During the initial year of Operation Condor, US researchers expressed concern over the paraquat contamination of up to a quarter of the Mexican marijuana that entered the United States and the health damage it caused.¹⁰⁵ Conspiracy theorists then accused the US government of deliberately poisoning marijuana plants to discourage its consumption. In Mexico, researchers warned that the herbicide could contaminate food crops and poison water. Journalists observed the paradox of the government's damage to health in the name of public health.¹⁰⁶

Given the secrecy of the aerial defoliation program, the exact concentration of paraquat and other herbicides sprayed on crops was unknown, unleashing speculations about permanent soil damage. However, in a conversation with the author in 2017, officials of the Badiraguato Council claimed that they had never heard about ecological damage or land that had become useless as a result of aerial defoliation in their municipality.¹⁰⁷

An anonymous PGR-PJF informer interviewed by journalist Anabel Hernández asserted that when drug growers paid a “drug tax” to security forces, they were allowed to put colored flags around their crops to single them out. Thus, when helicopters flew over the fields, they sprayed them with water instead of herbicides.¹⁰⁸ The evidence regarding the massive extortion of peasants backs the claim that drug growers who paid bribes had their crops left untouched. But there were also dozens of drug growers who had their crops defoliated. News reports made constant references to peasants who attempted to defend their crops by shooting up at the Bell helicopters.

According to Heath, 1977 was the most effective year for the eradication campaign.¹⁰⁹ Despite this alleged success, the Mexican government called off the participation of the DEA in 1978, purportedly to reduce social upheaval, even though the state of siege curbed the possibility

¹⁰⁵ Jeffrey Smith, “Spraying Herbicides on Mexican Marijuana Backfires on US,” *New Series* 199, no. 4331 (February 24, 1978), 861–864; Jeffrey Smith, “Poisoned Pot Becomes Burning Issue in High Places,” *Science* 200, no. 4340 (April 28, 1978), 417–418; “Paraquat Contamination of Marijuana,” *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 28, no. 8 (March 2, 1979), 93–94; L. Garmon, “Pot-Smokers May Be Imperiled by Paraquat-Spraying Program,” *Science News* 124, no. 4 (July 23, 1983), 55.

¹⁰⁶ Ortiz, *La Operación Condor*, 48.

¹⁰⁷ Conversation of the author with the authorities at Badiraguato City Hall, Badiraguato, Sinaloa, May 10, 2017.

¹⁰⁸ Anabel Hernández, *Los señores del narco* (Mexico City: Random House Mondadori, 2010), 120.

¹⁰⁹ Heath, *Mexico Opium*, 41.

of a backlash.¹¹⁰ Pyes suggested that the State Department squeezed the DEA out of its supervisory role because State was alarmed that DEA investigations of high Mexican officials would jeopardize the cooperation of the Mexican government with the US.¹¹¹

After the DEA quit, the number of opium poppy hectares destroyed fell from 9,311 hectares in 1977 to 1,819 in 1978, 80.4 percent less.¹¹² Heath observed that the decrease was also due to drug traffickers switching from heroin to cocaine but did not question the success of the aerial defoliation program. On the contrary, he asserted that a private firm from the United States operating under a US-Mexican contract monitored the effectiveness of the program. That company was Aviation Associates International (AAI), which had also worked in Southeast Asia, and it was in charge of the surveillance flights beginning in April 1978. Nevertheless, if Mexican pilots knew which crops they should spray with water, the Mexican government could easily circumvent the certification. Hence, the entrenched corruption of Mexican authorities prevented the Golden Triangle from experiencing anything similar to the ecocide in Vietnam.

According to the official DEA account, the defoliation program was a major success because by 1979 it had lessened the demand for Mexican heroin in the US.¹¹³ There was a dramatic drop in heroin's purity as well as a decrease in US heroin-related deaths, which went from 1,455 in 1974 to 471 in 1978. The Mexican government also promoted the program as the most successful eradication effort in the world.¹¹⁴ However, Heath acknowledged that as early as 1977, up to 30 percent of Peru's annual production of thirty-two tons of pure cocaine were smuggled into the United States through Mexico.¹¹⁵

Pyes's investigation found that US authorities acknowledged that Mexican federal narcotics agents used access to comprehensive intelligence data, including what US law enforcement supplied, to run a sophisticated protection racket based on "selective enforcement," arresting only traffickers who would not pay the "drug tax."¹¹⁶ Other reports by the CIA, the

¹¹⁰ "Drug Enforcement Administration, 1975–1980," <https://www.dea.gov/about/history/1975-1980.pdf>, accessed November 10, 2017. For a quantitative analysis of the results of Trizo see James Michael Van Wert, "Government of Mexico Herbicidal Opium Poppy Eradication Program: A Summative Evaluation" (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 1982).

¹¹¹ Pyes, "Legal Murders," 11.

¹¹² In 1980, less than 900 opium poppy hectares were destroyed. Heath, *Mexico Opium*, 37, 67.

¹¹³ DEA officials stuck to a narrative of success to justify their expenses, even though internally they recognized the program's shortcomings. Marshall, "CIA Assets," 90.

¹¹⁴ Heath, "Mexican Opium," 76.

¹¹⁵ Heath, "Mexican Opium," 36.

¹¹⁶ Pyes, "Legal Murders," 11–15.

DEA, and the FBI demonstrate US awareness of the complicity of the Mexican government with drug traffickers, but there is nothing to suggest that the US government aimed at punishing the Mexican government for its bogus drug policy.¹¹⁷

On the contrary, in 1983 the House Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control praised the Mexican government for its success in building “the world’s finest aerial crop-eradication program. Its size, professionalism, competence, performance, and experience make it the world leader in this technique.”¹¹⁸ Marshall sustains that such assessments represented one of the greatest cover-ups in the history of US drug enforcement, given that the US officials knew that Operation Condor was a sham, but hid this fact from the public, allegedly for a combination of diplomatic and propagandistic reasons.

During the last years of the López Portillo administration, the DEA was confined to the US Embassy, and the aerial eradication program was transferred to the State Department’s Bureau of International Narcotics Matters (INM), which set up a Narcotics Assistance Unit (NAU) in Mexico. In 1985, a congressional staff study mission presented the report “US Narcotics Control Programs Overseas: An Assessment (August 1984–January 1985)” to the House of Representatives. The report admitted that the NAU narcotics control program was in shambles, notwithstanding that it had invested \$115 million to maintain seventy-six planes and six airbases across Mexico.¹¹⁹

The report claimed that Mexican government corruption was the “single biggest obstacle to effective anti-narcotics efforts,” with every agency accused of corruption, especially the DFS. Drug traffickers had exploited government’s corruption and inefficiency to their advantage. Mexican official statistics on production and eradication were probably inflated and unreliable. The same “plots of land were being eradicated over and over again,” and even though more plants were destroyed, even more were produced. Furthermore, “Mexican heroin purity is going up, while the price is going down.”¹²⁰ The report admitted that although the DEA presence in Mexico was the largest in the world, with over thirty agents in six offices throughout the country, had yielded poor results.

¹¹⁷ Pérez Ricart, “Las agencias antinarcóticos,” 442.

¹¹⁸ Cited by Marshall, “CIA Assets,” 89.

¹¹⁹ “US narcotics control programs overseas: an assessment (August, 1984–January 1985),” Report of a staff study mission to Southeast Asia, South America, Central America, and the Caribbean to the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, February 22, 1985, 37–40, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=pst.000013383244;view=1up;seq=7>, accessed March 14, 2018.

¹²⁰ “US narcotics control programs overseas,” 34–35.

Finally, the report acknowledged that thirty-three narcotics families had organized themselves to control most of the drug-growing areas in Oaxaca, Sinaloa, Sonora, Durango, and Jalisco; they had taken over the city of Guadalajara and had managed to convert non-traditional areas into alternative growing areas as necessary. This report had little impact because the Contra war in Central America changed the geopolitics of the Americas, and drug traffickers would become a geostrategic actor as never before.

THE OUTCOMES OF OPERATION CONDOR

The SEDENA's final figures on Operation Condor from 1977 to 1987 indicate that 224,252 illegal fields were destroyed and that 2,019 presumed criminals were indicted. In addition, twenty-seven civilians and nineteen soldiers died.¹²¹ The PGR also reported the loss of thirty-four agents, pilots, and mechanics from 1977 to 1979.¹²² But other reports hint that the death toll was much higher. Heath mentioned two DEA agents and fifty-eight Mexican officials who died in the course of the eradication program, up until 1980.¹²³ Furthermore, the DEA stated that four thousand members of illegal drug organizations had been arrested by 1979.¹²⁴ In its report of activities during the López Portillo administration, the PGR stated that from 1976 to 1980 it had promoted withdrawal from prosecution in more than two thousand drug-related cases.¹²⁵ The PGR did not mention the hundreds of US citizens detained for drug-related crimes or the number of US inmates extradited back home.¹²⁶

¹²¹ "Resultados de la Fuerza de Tarea Cóndor," <http://www.sedena.gob.mx/leytrans/petic/2005/may/20052005a4.html>, accessed May 20, 2017.

¹²² "Periodo del presidente José López Portillo," PGR, <http://pgr.gob.mx/que-es-la-pgr/Documents/XIV.pdf>, accessed March 15, 2018.

¹²³ Heath, "Mexican Opium", III. Heath omitted the names of the DEA agents Ralph N. Shaw and James T. Lunn, both killed in a plane crash in the northwestern highlands on May 14, 1976.

¹²⁴ "Drug Enforcement Administration History, 1975–1980," <https://www.dea.gov/sites/default/files/2018-07/1975-1980%20p%2039-49.pdf>, accessed November 10, 2017. The constant detention and release of prisoners make it difficult to have a record of all drug-related cases, but the figures regarding the prosecution of 2,019 cases fall short, considering the ten years of Condor activity.

¹²⁵ "Periodo del presidente José López Portillo," <http://pgr.gob.mx/que-es-la-pgr/Documents/XIV.pdf>, accessed March 15, 2018. It is possible that more than two thousand detainees were released. As early as March 1978, the PGR had released 325 peasants by withdrawing their cases from prosecution. "El Lic. Carlos Aguilar Garza, Coordinador de la campaña contra el narcotráfico, informó que 325 campesinos alcanzarán el desistimiento de la acción penal," March 29, 1978, AGN, DGIPS, Caja 1711-C, File 14, 45

¹²⁶ In late 1977, twenty-seven US inmates in Sinaloa prisons were sent to the United States. Craig claims that by mid-1977 there were around 600 US inmates in Mexican prisons, 85 percent of them for drug-related charges. The Mexican authorities gave them the same ill treatment that local detainees received. "Estado de Sinaloa," December 16, 1977, AGN, DGIPS, Box 1711-C, File 13, 203-204; Craig, "La Campaña Permanente," 125.

Mexico's Amnesty Law, enacted in September 1978 as a sign of reconciliation and political openness, was intended for political prisoners, but also benefited hundreds of alleged drug growers—all together giving amnesty to 1,539 people.¹²⁷ It was an odd move, one that reaffirmed the military assertion that subversives and narcos could be conflated in the same category as one internal enemy.

In any case, official figures do not grasp the political significance of Operation Condor. It reinforced the PRI's hegemony both in the political arena—by thwarting strong social and guerrilla movements—and in what McCoy calls the “covert netherworld,” the clandestine realm intersecting with the visible surface of society in ways that elude existing models of politics or political economy.¹²⁸ Operation Condor is a blatant example of how state actors and criminal organizations in Mexico have either formed alliances or competed for control of the drug industry.

Condor consolidated the intermingling of federal security agencies, the political elite, and organized crime. A considerable number of officers who participated in both the dirty war and the war on drugs became involved in drug trafficking or came to control other illegal businesses. State agents directly related to Operation Condor used the campaign's resources to increase their power and expand their criminal networks. For example, PJF commander Jaime Alcalá sold protection to drug traffickers in Jalisco until Manuel Salcido, *El Cochiloco*, killed him in Guadalajara in 1979 in revenge for his participation in the Avilés' execution.¹²⁹ According to DEA reports, he left an estate of ten million pesos, even though he had no money when he joined the PJF.¹³⁰ Authorities detained former PGR coordinator Carlos Aguilar for drug-related activities, first in Tamaulipas in 1984 and later in Texas in 1989; he was killed in a 1993 score settling.¹³¹ At upper levels of the government, the DEA pointed to Antonio Toledo Corro, governor of Sinaloa from 1980 to 1986, as a collaborator of *El Cochiloco* and other drug lords.¹³²

¹²⁷ I read this information in a DFS document before the DFS archive was reclassified. I have not yet located an alternative source about the identity of all the amnestied, given that newspapers focused just on political prisoners. I believed that alleged drug growers were included in the amnesty to add numbers for publicity reasons, and also because authorities knew that most of them were innocent.

¹²⁸ McCoy, “Covert Netherworld,” 228.

¹²⁹ Reyna & Fresnedo, *El Extraditado*, e-book.

¹³⁰ Cited by Pyes, “Legal Murders,” 12.

¹³¹ Astorga, *El siglo de las drogas*, 119.

¹³² Hernández, *Los señores del narco*, 230.

The evidence suggests that the participation of state agents in the counterinsurgency wars during the 1970s functioned as a filter, allowing them to become members of an elite with dual privileges. The government gave those state agents medals and awards in public and then secretly paid them off by giving them the opportunity to partake in illegal activities in the “covert netherworld.”¹³³ Both the public and secret recognitions were rewards for their contributions to consolidating the PRI’s hegemony, limiting local powers, decentralizing the drug industry from the Golden Triangle, and reinforcing federal oversight of drug trafficking networks.

Condor favored the removal of some drug clans and the control of the drug market by fewer hands. This allowed for the rise of a new generation of drug lords who formed centralized criminal organizations. During the early 1980s, the Golden Triangle—continuing to lack a majority of state institutions—saw the emergence of a type of hybrid control or shared sovereignty between the new criminal organizations and the military, the only federal institution that has never left the region since the beginning of the first war on drugs.

The most popular interpretation of the outcomes of Operation Condor maintains that the destruction of the Golden Triangle provoked the increase in drug production in other Mexican states and caused a “cockroach effect,” whereby criminals spread and then regroup in other regions. This view neglects the key role the DFS played in the final arrangements between drug lords and the Mexican government. Kingpins such as Miguel Angel Félix Gallardo, Rafael Caro Quintero, and Ernesto Fonseca Carrillo moved to Guadalajara because of their close relationship with DFS chiefs Javier García Paniagua (1977–1978) and Nazar Haro (1978–1982).¹³⁴ Drug lords were able to form a centralized crime syndicate only because they received official support. The DEA dubbed it the “Guadalajara Cartel,” officially the first drug cartel in Mexican history. The Guadalajara cartel rebuilt its networks in the northwest and coexisted with the military in the countryside while Operation Condor continued.

In a paradoxical way, the removal of the Sinaloan drug lords from their base and their transplanting to Jalisco signaled the triumph of the federal government over local powers. As Watt and Zepeda showed, the PRI accomplished the subjection of drug lords to its clientelistic

¹³³ I have consulted FOIA documents from both the FBI and the CIA in the National Security Archive (NSA) related to the cases of Miguel Nazar Haro, Javier García Paniagua, Mario Arturo Acosta Chaparro, Francisco Quirós Hermosillo, Manlio Fabio Beltrones, and other Mexican officers and officials involved in both counterinsurgency and illegal businesses.

¹³⁴ Valdés Castellanos, *Historia del narcotráfico*, 175–176.

regime.¹³⁵ Operation Condor was not a façade to please the US government, as many speculated; instead, it was a counterinsurgency war whose ultimate payoff was the consolidation of a narco-clientelistic regime.

The US government assisted Mexico with training, technical assistance, and the sale of military equipment, but those resources proved insufficient to fight both guerrillas and drug traffickers simultaneously. Consequently, the Mexican security forces resorted to illegal proceeds to finance their counterinsurgency campaigns. Anabel Hernández's informer claimed that both the PJF and the DFS used the "drug tax" to purchase safety houses, weapons, and equipment, as well as to fund their spy networks.¹³⁶ In the global context, Mexicans were mere apprentices to the CIA, which funded its global proxy wars against communism through the drug trade, as McCoy and other authors have demonstrated.¹³⁷

Pyes, who was reporting on the frontlines of Operation Condor, proved that this campaign of systematic torture and extortion of citizens to enrich Mexico's federal authorities had "occurred while American agents stood by without protest, even though the program is subsidized by American funds and violates legislative constraints on foreign appropriations, international law, and Mexican constitutional law."¹³⁸ Given that the elimination of communism in the Americas was a US top priority, the US government turned a blind eye to the corruption of its Mexican counterpart, as long as it made progress in containing the communist threat.

CONCLUSIONS

Mexico's anti-drug operations of the late 1970s were based on the use of cutting-edge technology for aerial defoliation programs and the application of a counterinsurgency framework to overpower traditional drug clans. Operation Condor served an array of purposes that were beneficial for both the US and the Mexican governments. On the US side, it fostered the perception that the US government had obliged Mexicans to take stronger action against the illegal drug trade by welcoming DEA leadership and the full-fledged militarization of drug producing zones. In Mexico, Condor contributed to cracking down on social and revolutionary

¹³⁵ Watt & Zepeda. *Drug War Mexico*, e-book.

¹³⁶ Hernández, *Los señores del narco*, 119.

¹³⁷ Alfred McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin: CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade, Afghanistan, Southeast Asia, Central America, Colombia* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2003). Also see Peter Dale Scott, "Drugs, Anti-Communism, and Extra-Legal Repression in Mexico" in *Government of the Shadows*, 173–194.

¹³⁸ Pyes, "Legal Murders," 11.

movements and to establish a state of siege in the countryside to prevent the emergence of independent actors, either political or criminal. The Mexican government used the Golden Triangle as a showcase for the alleged success of the joint drug eradication campaign, concealing the destruction of thousands of peasant communities. Finally, the DFS consolidated its power by becoming the protector of the political elite against abuses by the military and the mediator between the ruling party and drug kingpins.

Guerrillas, drug growers, and traffickers were the internal enemy that justified the seeming submission of the Mexican government to the United States and the involvement of the PRI in the drug trade for the sake of national security. While in the Southern Cone the transnational Operation Condor targeted left-wing groups, the Mexican Condor took aim at any threat to the PRI's political legitimation and its role in the illicit economy.

The intertwined fight against drug traffickers and political opponents was one of the legacies of the Condor years, one that reactivated during the 2006 Mexican war on drugs. Peasants in the Golden Triangle have never received official recognition as victims of state terror, but the seeds sowed by Condor guaranteed that people involved in the drug industry from the ravaged communities turned extremely violent in order to preserve their criminal sovereignty. Drug lords and their accomplices would define not only the criminal but also the political history of Mexico's twenty-first century.

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