

The German Foreign Ministry and the Dictatorships

Wolfgang Kaleck, 25 April 2016

Better late than never: German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier is planning to make a statement this week on his office's handling of the criminal sect Colonia Dignidad, a German settlement located in a huge compound in Chile. From 1961 on the group's founder and leader Paul Schäfer was involved in drugging residents and the rape of children from the sect and the neighboring villages. After 1973, the Colonia collaborated with the Pinochet dictatorship to run a torture prison for opponents of the regime.

Steinmeier's announcement raises high expectations. In 2010 the German foreign ministry set high standards with its historical work "The Ministry and the past. German diplomats in the Third Reich and in the Federal Republic" (*Das Amt und die Vergangenheit. Deutsche Diplomaten im Dritten Reich und in der Bundesrepublik*). At the instigation of the Foreign Minister at the time, Joschka Fischer, a commission of academics researched not only the role of the foreign ministry in the Nazi system, but also the continuity of personnel and ideology within the fledgling Federal Republic of Germany. I would have wished for one short extra chapter: German diplomacy during the Argentine and Chilean military dictatorships.

There would have been plenty of grounds for it. In February 1976, shortly before the military putsch, the German ambassador in Buenos Aires Jörg Kastl recommended that Germany "work together with the new regime" and later stressed Argentina's importance as a "cornerstone of the expanded transatlantic security framework, a market and source of raw materials, home of many German settlers and German assets, and ever a true friend to our Volk". Cold war mentality in its purest form: global communism as the enemy that must be fought by any means.

Around the same time, the Pinochet regime was more or less publicly torturing people at the national stadium in Santiago de Chile. In Argentina it was done in secret, but the abductions and torture, including of German citizens, after the military seized power were well known around the world – again, including here in Germany.

Yet German diplomats did scandalously little and even helped the military to spread their lies, as in the case of German woman Elisabeth Käsemann. Käsemann was tortured in the secret detention center *El Vesubio* and subsequently murdered. To cover it up the junta made it look like she had died in combat. The military placed weapons beside her body, and the bodies of other dead prisoners, to make them look like guerrilla fighters.

German diplomats visited the torture and rape colony Colonia Dignidad several times from the mid 1960s on. And yet they didn't intervene, as they were obliged to do, until well into the 1980s, despite being familiar with the witness testimonies of escaped former residents and the reports on the torture from Amnesty International. The few people who managed to leave the colony got no help from the embassy; in fact, the embassy handed them back to the Colonia leadership, who brutally punished anyone who tried to flee.

Even after Hartmut Hopp, the sect's doctor and Schäfer's right-hand man, faced torture allegations before a human rights commission at the German parliament in 1988, the

prosecutor's office in Bonn didn't feel the need to seriously examine the role played by the Germans in Chile.

In the meantime, prosecutors in Krefeld started investigations against Hopp after he dodged a sentence handed down to him in Chile. A court in Chile sentenced him to five years in prison for aiding and abetting the sexual abuse of minors but Hopp fled to Germany before serving the time.

But Germany's role in the dictatorships in Chile and Argentina is not just a matter of failures on the part of the foreign ministry. Other entities also played a role. German industry made weapons and nuclear deals with the dictatorships. Mercedes Benz helped to "disappear" trade unionists who stood in their way. Meanwhile, the regime's henchmen were given a red carpet welcome in Germany, and officers were provided with training in weapons techniques. Bigwigs from the CSU party gave their unwritten support to the dictatorships. And most of the German public looked the other way.

So, better late than never: a thorough investigation is needed into the actions of German diplomats, as well as the intelligence services and the defense ministry, during the dictatorships in Chile and Argentina. The victims must be compensated. And then there must be other consequences: disciplinary consequences, criminal proceedings, and where still possible, political consequences, in order to ensure that in future, human rights are respected in foreign politics. One final note: between 1974 and 1992 the German foreign ministry was led by Hans-Dietrich Genscher, who was recently honored in a German state ceremony.