

OBITUARIES

# Luis García Meza, Bolivian Dictator Jailed for Genocide, Dies at 88

By SAM ROBERTS MAY 2, 2018

Gen. Luis García Meza, a former Bolivian dictator who was convicted of genocide after leading a brief but brutal rule that had been engineered by cocaine cartels and a Nazi war criminal, died on Sunday in La Paz. He was 88.

He died at the Cossmil military hospital, where he was serving the remainder of his 30-year prison term, a hospital spokesman told The Associated Press.

General García Meza was installed as president in July 1980 after a military junta toppled President Lidia Gueiler, who had been steering Bolivia to democracy after 16 years of dictatorship. They were cousins.

Fiercely conservative and anti-Communist, he seized control in what became known as the “cocaine coup” to keep Hernan Siles Zuazo, who was elected president that June, from taking office.

The military massacred leaders of the Movement of the Revolutionary Left and other opponents. Within a month, hundreds of other Bolivians had been arrested and tortured.

“He doesn’t think he is primarily the president of Bolivia,” Fernando Bedoya Ballivián, the head of the Banco de Bolivia and a longtime friend, said of the general at the time. “He feels he represents the army, and the army is fighting to the death against communism.”

The United States Drug Enforcement Administration said that the general had used millions of dollars he received from cocaine cartels to buy the allegiance of Bolivian army commanders and to forestall an antidrug operation initiated by Washington.

He presided for 13 murderous months. In August 1981, in the face of outcries at home and abroad about corruption, cruelty and economic catastrophe, he resigned. The military installed a less odious successor, Celso Torrelio Villa.

“García Meza and his generals made Bolivia the world’s pariah,” the journalist Elaine Shannon later wrote.

Mr. Siles Zuazo, who had been prevented from taking office in 1980, returned from exile in Peru when the Bolivian Congress, meeting for the first time after more than two years of military dictatorship, elected him president of a civilian government in 1982.

Nationwide democratic elections were held in the mid-1980s, but pretrial investigations and hearings into the charges against General García Meza took a decade.

He was accused not only of collusion with cocaine traffickers but also of collaborating in his coup with Klaus Barbie, the Nazi “butcher of Lyon,” who had been living in Bolivia under an alias and was extradited to France in 1983.

In 1993, General García Meza was finally convicted in absentia of genocide, sedition, corruption and other crimes, including the illegal sale of diaries belonging to the leftist Cuban guerrilla leader Che Guevara, who had been captured and killed in Bolivia in 1967.

After hiding for years, General García Meza was arrested and extradited to Bolivia from Brazil in 1995 and began serving the maximum 30-year prison term.

“To the best of our knowledge,” Human Rights Watch said at the time, “the conviction marks the first time in Latin American legal history that members of a de facto military government have been held to account for usurping power and violating constitutional norms.”

When he died, the general had seven years left to serve.

Last year, a court in Rome convicted him of the deaths of 23 Italians during his crackdown on dissidents.

Luis García Meza Tejada was born on Aug. 8, 1929 (although he once gave his birth year as 1932), in La Paz, the capital of Bolivia. His father was an army colonel.

Luis, known by the nickname Lucho, was educated at La Salle, a Christian school, and graduated from the Military College, which he later ran.

He was once suspended from the army for cruelty to cadets, but he went on to serve as the army commander.

When he staged the coup, he was 50, with a wife, a daughter and four sons. In a letter read by his lawyer after his death, he largely blamed Bolivia’s previous dictator, Hugo Banzer Suárez, for the coup.

“I did not kill or rob,” he wrote.