

2 CUBANS CONVICTED IN LETELIER MURDER AFTER 3-WEEK TRIAL

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A Third Anti-Castro Exile Is Found Guilty of Lesser Charge in '76 Bomb Slaying of Chilean

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 14—Two leaders of a Cuban exile group were convicted of murder today in the 1976 slaying here of Orlando Letelier, a diplomat of the former Chilean Government of Salvador Allende Gossens.

A third member of the anti-Castro group — the Cuban Nationalist Movement — was found guilty of having lied about his knowledge of the murder and of having failed to inform the authorities.

The defendants convicted of murder, Guillermo Novo Sampol and Alvin Ross Díaz, face possible life sentences. The third, Mr. Novo's brother Ignacio, could be sentenced to up to 13 years for perjury.

Chilean Police Role Was Charged

The prosecution had charged that the Cuban exiles had taken part in the murder of Mr. Letelier and of an assistant, Ronni Moffitt, on orders of the Chilean secret police chief under the junta headed by Gen. Augusto Pinochet. The junta overthrew the Allende Government in a coup in 1973.

Diplomats see the conviction of the three exiles as increasing pressure on General Pinochet to agree to a United States request to extradite Gen. Manuel Contreras Sepúlveda, the former head of the secret police, and two other police officials, for trial for their alleged role in the case. They are awaiting a decision by the Chilean Supreme Court on whether they will be extradited or tried in Chile.

Two others involved in the case are fugitives. They are José Dionisio Suárez Esquivel and Virgilio Paz Romero, also members of the Cuban exile group.

Relatives of the three defendants began sobbing as the jury of seven women and five men returned their verdict after having deliberated for nine hours. Because of an apparent concern over possible violence, 20 United States marshals stood around the court room of Judge Barrington D. Parker as the foreman announced the verdicts.

The three defendants, who did not testify in their own defense, stood with blank

Continued on Page A4, Column 3

2 Cuban Exiles Are Found Guilty In '76 Murder of Letelier in Capital

Continued From Page A1

expressions facing the jury as the verdict was read. But as they were being led away, they shouted, "Viva Cuba."

Judge Parker, who ordered the men held without bail, said he would set the date for their sentencing at a later hearing. The defense attorneys, Paul Goldberger and Lawrence Dubin, said they would appeal the conviction.

The jury, which had been sequestered during the trial, reached its verdict after having heard 21 days of testimony and argument. A total of 33 witnesses testified.

Judge Parker had ordered that the jury be kept under surveillance by the marshals partly because of anonymous death threats made before the beginning of the trial against both himself and the chief prosecutor, Eugene M. Propper. The security measures included sweeps by police dogs trained to smell explosives as well as searches of everyone entering the sixth-floor courtroom where the trial was held.

Avowed Assassin Was Key Witness

The key witness was Michael Vernon Townley, an American, who testified that he had killed Mr. Letelier, with no regret, on the orders of the Chilean secret police.

"He was a soldier and I was a soldier," Mr. Townley told the jury. "In his own way, within his own party, with his own actions, he was carrying on a battle against the Government of Chile."

Behind the dispute between the junta and Mr. Letelier lay a political struggle over the future of South America. Mr. Letelier, in his effort to unseat the junta, which has adopted a conservative form of capitalism, had appealed to the Socialist parties of Western Europe. The Socialist Government of Sweden had provided refuge for Chilean exiles and the Socialist Government of the Netherlands had persuaded a Dutch concern to withdraw an important credit from Chile.

Father Was Businessman in Chile

Mr. Townley, born 36 years ago in Waterloo, Iowa, is the son of a Ford Motor Company executive who worked in Chile for many years. He said he had become a member of the Chilean secret police after the junta came to power. He agreed to testify against the Cuban exiles after the United States Government had permitted him to plead guilty to one charge of killing a public official and the prosecutors had promised that they would seek his release after he served three years and four months in prison.

In August 1976, Mr. Townley said, Capt. Armando Fernández Larios, a Chilean secret police officer, flew to the United States and put Mr. Letelier under surveillance as he moved around Washington from his home in Bethesda, Md., to his office at the Institute for Policy Studies.

On Sept. 9, 1976, Mr. Townley, using the alias Hans Peterson Silva, flew to New York, received a report from Captain Fernández about Mr. Letelier's activities and contacted leaders of the Cuban Nationalist Movement in New Jersey. Four days later, at the Chateau Renaissance Motel in North Bergen, N.J., Mr. Townley said, he appealed to leaders of the exile group, including Guillermo Novo and Mr. Ross, for help in killing Mr. Letelier. By Sept. 15, he said, the group had agreed to provide explosives and manpower for the mission.

The Cuban Nationalist Movement agreed to help Mr. Townley, the Government argued, in hopes that Chile would



Associated Press

Isabel Letelier, widow of slain Chilean Ambassador, outside court in Washington yesterday after three Cuban exiles were convicted in the murder of her husband.

recognize the group as a Cuban government in exile of Cuba.

The following day, Mr. Townley said, he and one of the Cuban exiles who is now a fugitive, Mr. Paz, drove to Washington and began building the bomb. Mr. Townley corroborated this part of his testimony with a complete collection of receipts for bridge, tunnel and highway tolls he paid on the 240-mile drive.

On Sept. 18, according to the testimony, Mr. Suárez, the second fugitive, arrived with the last necessary bomb component.

Townley Planted Bomb Under Car

Mr. Townley said that he had crawled under Mr. Letelier's car and placed the device on the frame under the front seat on the driver's side early in the morning of Sept. 19. He then left Washington. At 9:35 A.M., on Sept. 21, as Mr. Letelier drove down Washington's Embassy Row on Massachusetts Avenue, the bomb exploded and instantly killed Mr. Letelier. Mrs. Moffitt, who was sitting beside him, died a short time later.

The defense lawyers contended that Mr. Townley had been an undercover agent for the Central Intelligence Agency in the Chilean security agency and that Mr. Letelier had been killed by the C.I.A. and not their clients. But they presented virtually no evidence to support the contention of a relationship between Mr. Townley and the C.I.A.