

Forensic study finds Chilean poet Pablo Neruda was poisoned

The toxin *clostridium botulinum* was in his body when he died in 1973, days after Chile's military coup

Sam Jones in Madrid and
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📷 Pablo Neruda talks to reporters in Paris after being named the 1971 Nobel laureate for literature. Photograph: Laurent Rebours/AP

One of the most enduring mysteries in modern Chilean history may finally have been solved after forensic experts determined that the Nobel prize-winning Chilean poet [Pablo Neruda](#) died after being poisoned with a powerful toxin, apparently confirming decades of suspicions that he was murdered.

According to the official version, Neruda - who made his name as a young poet with the collection *Twenty Poems of Love and a Song of Despair* - died from prostate cancer and malnutrition on 23 September 1973, just 12 days after the military coup that overthrew the democratically elected socialist government of his friend, President Salvador Allende.

But some, including Neruda's nephew, Rodolfo Reyes, [have long believed he was murdered](#) because of his opposition to the then incipient dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet.

Ten years ago, a Chilean judge [ordered the exhumation of the poet's remains](#) after his former chauffeur, Manuel Araya, revealed that an agitated Neruda had called him from the Santiago hospital where he was being treated to say that he had been injected in the stomach while asleep. The poet died hours later.

Samples of Neruda's remains were dispatched to forensic laboratories in four countries for analysis, and in 2015 [the Chilean government said](#) it was "highly probable that a third party" was responsible for his death. Two years later, [a team of international scientists said](#) they were "100% convinced" the poet did not die from prostate cancer.

On Monday, Reyes said scientific tests had shown the toxin *clostridium botulinum* was present in his uncle's body when he died, suggesting he was indeed "poisoned" in the aftermath of the coup. The results of expert analysis are due to be published in a report on Wednesday.

"We now know that there was no reason for the *clostridium botulinum* to have been there in his bones," Reyes told the Spanish news agency Efe. "What does that mean? It means Neruda was murdered through the intervention of state agents in 1973."

The bacteria, which produce the neurotoxin that causes botulism, were discovered on one of Neruda's exhumed teeth in 2017. Reyes said analysis by experts at McMaster University in Canada and the University of Copenhagen

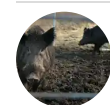
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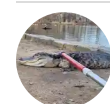
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had established the bacteria did not find their way into Neruda's body from the coffin or the surrounding area.

"We've found the bullet that killed Neruda, and it was in his body," Reyes told Efe. "Who fired it? We'll find out soon, but there's no doubt Neruda was killed through the direct intervention of a third party."

Pinochet's US-backed coup, during which Allende killed himself as troops stormed the presidential palace, devastated Neruda and led him to plan an exile in Mexico.

But a day before his planned departure, he was taken by ambulance to the hospital in the Chilean capital where he had been treated for cancer and other conditions. He died there on the evening of 23 September, purportedly from the wasting effects of the prostate cancer that had first been detected four years earlier.

However, the official version of the events surrounding his death has frequently been called into question. Gonzalo Martínez Corbalá, who was Mexico's ambassador to Chile at the time of the coup, told the Associated Press he had seen Neruda two days before his death, and that the poet had weighed almost 100kg (15st 10lbs) - contradicting claims that he was fatally malnourished because of his cancer.

Last month, Araya told AP that if Neruda "hadn't been left alone in the clinic, they wouldn't have killed him".

The chauffeur said he and Neruda's wife, Matilde Urrutia, had been at the couple's mansion to pick up their suitcases for Mexico when the poet rang, asking them to come back to the hospital quickly. Neruda died later the same day.

Following Neruda's death Urrutia maintained that he had been increasingly agitated as he learned of the early atrocities of the dictatorship and that it was the anguish of the coup d'état which led to his demise.

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The lengthy investigation hit a number of obstacles, from non-cooperation on the part of the clinic where the alleged injection was administered to difficulty in funding foreign lab tests.

In the years after Neruda's death, much of the focus has been on locating a mysterious "Dr Price" who had apparently been on duty at the clinic that night. However, there was no mention of the doctor in the records of Chile's medical union, and it was eventually deduced that he had been invented to stall investigations.

Though described by his friend Gabriel García Márquez as "the greatest poet of the 20th century in any language", Neruda's reputation has been damaged in recent years by details of his personal life. Not only was the writer a self-confessed rapist, he was also a man who abandoned his first wife and their daughter, Malva Marina, who was born with a neurological disorder and died at the age of nine.

In his posthumously published memoirs, *Confieso Que He Vivido* (I Confess That I Have Lived), Neruda admitted raping a Tamil woman who worked as his servant when he was posted to Ceylon as a young diplomat. After describing the rape, he wrote: "She was right to despise me."

The rape confession, which resurfaced almost five years ago, [led human rights activists to oppose](#) an attempt to rename Santiago airport in honour of the poet.

Speaking at the time, the author and women's rights campaigner Isabel Allende told the Guardian that Neruda's criminal and callous behaviour did not devalue his work.

"I am disgusted by some aspects of Neruda's life and personality," she said. "However, we cannot dismiss his writing. Very few people - especially powerful or influential men - behave admirably. Unfortunately, Neruda was a flawed person, as we all are in one way or another."

The Associated Press contributed to this report

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