

Rescue Under Fire (Zona hostil): Propaganda in the service of Spanish militarism

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Rescue Under Fire, originally released in Spanish in March as *Zona Hostil* (Hostile Zone), is a defence of Spanish militarism. It whitewashes Madrid's participation in the Afghan war and glorifies the armed forces.

Rescue Under Fire is directed by Adolfo Martínez Pérez, who has worked on *The Jungle Book*, *Alien Resurrection*, *Terminator Salvation* and *Oblivion*. Martínez Pérez has done for Spanish imperialism what some of his US counterparts have accomplished with such jingoistic works as *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) and *American Sniper* (2014).

Rescue Under Fire has received the full support of the Spanish armed forces, which provided military equipment, advisors, training and locations. The storyline is inspired by an article in the military magazine *Ejército* (Army). Without embarrassment, the director declared, "This film could not have been made without their collaboration."

The film's premiere received ecstatic reviews. *El Español* wrote, "Spain does not have a tradition of war films, much less so of military cinema. But the display made by this film ... transforms Spanish soldiers into heroes." It is "a film that praises the patriotic spirit and the work of its military in war missions", it gushed.

Novelist and former RTVE war correspondent Arturo Pérez-Reverte welcomed the film, saying how something "so normally recounted in *Rescue Under Fire* is so rare in Spanish cinema ... it is sad and absurd to go to the cinema and see and envy what the Americans and British explain." It is "comforting to see the Spanish flags carried so naturally," Pérez-Reverte added.

Rescue Under Fire is based on the rescue in Afghanistan in August 2012 of the crew of a medical helicopter, which broke down while helping US/United Nations troops under Spanish command. It focuses on the effort of Commander Ledesma (Antonio Garrido) to retrieve the helicopter.

The film never tries to explain the background to the invasion of Afghanistan: the attempt of the US and its allies to transform the country into a permanent base of operations to extend its hegemony over the adjacent energy-rich region of Central Asia. In the words of Martínez Pérez, "This is a story not about politicians who declare war, but about soldiers who fight and can die in these battles. I have not done a political analysis. Just a human portrait."

As elsewhere, the mantra of "no politics" is a justification for defending the status quo and whitewashing its crimes.

Martínez Pérez's attempt at giving us a "human portrait," in any event, is very poor. The characters are stereotypes. Even one of Spain's best actors, Ariadna Gil, is incapable of injecting much life into her empty character—the medic Captain Varela.

Lieutenant Conte (Raúl Merida), who leads the squad to rescue the helicopter, is the son of a general. Yes, you've guessed it—he is struggling to live up to his father's "legacy." There there's Sergeant Aguilar (Jacobo Dicenta), Spain's answer to Rambo: headscarf, toothpick in his mouth and a big rifle. He constantly questions Conte's orders, demanding he be more ruthless. At one point he tells Conte to kill an unarmed teenager—"Give me the order lieutenant, make my day!" Of course, the boy is later revealed to be working with the Taliban. "Rambo" was right all along.

To complete the stereotypes we have the rookie, accident-prone medic Sánchez (Ingrid García) on her first mission, who inevitably hardens up in the end, and the Afghan translator who finds safety in exile (in Barcelona, naturally) after the wicked Taliban kill his family.

There is nothing resembling real human emotion. At no point do the soldiers question why they are at war or why the insurgents are resisting them. There is not a hint of fear as they are surrounded and attacked by forces which

vastly outnumber them.

Without any fanfare, Conte recites to his men on radio the Spanish Foreign Legion's Hymn to Death: "To die in combat is the greatest honour, you don't die more than once, death comes without pain and death isn't as terrible as it sounds. The worst thing is living like a coward."

This is the song written by the legion's fascist psychopathic founder, José Millán-Astray (1879-1954), described as the person who "institutionalized and evangelized the brutal and brutalizing values which [dictator Francisco] Franco fought for and won in the Spanish Civil War" (Paul Preston, *Las Tres Españas del 36*, Barcelona: Plaza & Janés, 1998).

Rescue Under Fire ends with a dedication "to the members of the armed forces who died in international missions."

The glorification of the military is a response to the growing inter-imperialist tensions and the drive to war, which have been intensified by the installation of an aggressively nationalist and protectionist administration in the US.

Spain's ruling elite has sought to protect its national interests by promoting a "culture of defence." The 2015 National Security Law states that the government "will promote the culture of defence that favours the active involvement of society in its preservation and guarantee... To this end, the Government will implement actions and plans aimed at increasing the knowledge and awareness of society about the requirements of National Security, the risks and threats likely to jeopardize it."

Rescue Under Fire is an attempt to promote "the culture of defence" among a population long hostile to the army for the crimes it perpetrated during the Civil War and Franco dictatorship. More recently, in 2004, Popular Party Prime Minister, José María Aznar, was forced from office largely as a result of his support for the Iraq War and his Socialist Party successor José Luis Zapatero was forced to withdraw Spain's troops.

The ruling class sought to counter this sentiment and clean up the military's image in the 1980s and 1990s, while integrating Spain in the main structures of post-war European capitalism: the European Union and NATO. It ended unpopular conscription, banned the military from making public political statements and allowed women to serve.

One of the leading actors in *Rescue Under Fire*, Ismael Martínez, revealed the impact of this clean-up operation on layers of the petty-bourgeoisie. He said that though he once belonged to the anti-conscription *Insumiso*

movement, today, "I realized that the work of the military is totally worthy of respect. There is a great separation between the military and the civilians, and we forget that the Army is there to support and defend us."

Key to consolidating the "culture of defence" has been branding military intervention as humanitarian—in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Libya and Syria—by the Stalinists and pseudo-left groups. The United Left worked for decades to disarm the traditional opposition of the working class to militarism by promoting such "humanitarian wars". Podemos has followed suit, so that former Chief of Staff José Rodríguez, who commanded Spanish forces in NATO as it destroyed Libya in 2011, is now Podemos shadow Minister of Defence.

Despite such efforts, there is a broad consensus that the army should not participate in wars and defence expenditure must be slashed. Only 16.3 percent would fight voluntarily "for their country", a figure that has been decreasing year after year.

For the ruling elite, such sentiments have become intolerable. As one academic close to the military, José Jiménez, concludes, Spanish governments have to "make an effort to communicate the importance of our action abroad in areas such as defense and security, and the risks that are assumed..."

"Foreign missions are not exclusively of peace and humanitarian aid in 'neutral' scenarios. In terms of economic interests, there might be occasions when sending military contingents to scenarios where one of the components is the control, direct or indirect, of resources in the Middle East." (José L. Rodríguez Jiménez, "Las misiones en el exterior de las Fuerzas Armadas de España," Alianza Editorial, 2010, p. 410.)

By excluding any reference to such considerations, Martínez Pérez becomes an apologist and propagandist for nationalism, militarism and war.



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