

The Last Hour (La Hora Final) and Peru's ongoing glorification of its military and intelligence forces

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Written and directed by Eduardo Mendoza

During the 1980s and early 1990s, Peru was plunged into a bloody counterinsurgency war as the US-trained military sought to defeat the Maoist-nationalist guerrilla movement Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path), which at the beginning of the decade had declared a “people’s war” against the Peruvian state.

La Hora Final (The Last Hour), directed by Eduardo Mendoza (born in Lima in 1975), is a new film that attempts to dramatize the efforts of the intelligence forces to destroy the guerrilla movement.

Tens of thousands of Peruvians lost their lives at the hands of the state repression unleashed in response to the tactics employed by Shining Path. Rather than trying to mobilize the working class in revolutionary struggle, that movement sought to organize a Maoist, peasant-based insurrection in the Andean countryside that would supposedly gradually encircle the capital.

All this took place in the midst of a wave of Washington-backed counterinsurgency interventions across Latin America, including the CIA’s Contra war in Nicaragua and the horrifying campaigns of state terror in El Salvador and Guatemala.

In the early 1990s, Shining Path intensified its campaign and actually reached the capital of Lima. However, the sudden capture of its leader Abimael Guzmán (“Chairman Gonzalo”) in September 1992 and his state-manipulated calls for “peace” a year later, little by little destabilized and disarmed the guerrilla movement. Nowadays, the last remnants of Shining Path maintain activity in a deep jungle valley where, reportedly, they engage in drug trafficking.

The state’s war against Shining Path is one of the major events that have defined political and social life in Peru over the last three decades. The ruling class has seized on the opportunity to vilify all forms of significant social opposition as being related to or having developed out of the guerrilla movement.

Furthermore, left-wing and social democratic parties became widely discredited as they held many state posts and mayoralties during the economic crisis that intertwined with the counterinsurgency. As it entered the 1990s, the working class was left virtually defenseless when President Alberto Fujimori closed down Congress in 1992 in a “self-coup” (“autogolpe”) in order to establish an authoritarian government with unlimited power.

Over the past two decades or more, various academics and

sociologists have attempted to explain the rise of Shining Path. Many of them justify the state repression on the grounds that the Maoist movement also committed atrocities. These apologists for the state and the army—given free rein to vent their views in the corporate-controlled media—downplay the Peruvian state’s countless human rights violations, while particularly praising Fujimori’s coup as the only response to an obstructionist Congress that didn’t allow the authorities to “take off the gloves” in the fight against Shining Path.

Meanwhile, another trend has emerged, mainly from the bourgeois-liberal layer, which argues that a weak and neglected intelligence force was the real cause of the rise of Shining Path. Had there *only* existed a competent intelligence service that could have captured Guzmán before the movement recruited thousands of militants, so much bloodshed might have been avoided.

Hence Mendoza’s *La Hora Final*, a film that dramatizes the ultimately successful efforts of the GEIN (Grupo Especial de Inteligencia Nacional), a small intelligence unit of the Peruvian police tasked with capturing Shining Path’s central committee.

On September 12, 1992, after months of following dozens of people and staking out their homes, GEIN members broke into a house in Lima’s upper-class Surquillo district and arrested Guzmán and many high-ranking members of Shining Path who had been hiding there several weeks. Though he would later take all credit for the capture, Fujimori didn’t have any role whatsoever in the operation. Guzmán would then be presented to the world via television in a black-and-white striped prison uniform inside a cage.

Unfortunately, *La Hora Final* is a superficial and cliché-ridden work. The most fatal weakness, however, is the filmmaker’s lack of any seriousness with regard to the historical and social forces that gave rise to Shining Path. This turns the movie into a run-of-the-mill detective film about some policemen trying to capture a terrorist mastermind.

The movie centers on Carlos (Pietro Sibille) and Gabriela (Nidia Bermejo), two GEIN agents who pretend to be a couple as they spy on people who might be hiding Guzmán and his comrades. Back at GEIN’s headquarters (located in an old building in downtown Lima), Carlos voices his frustration to his superior and colleagues about months of surveillance and investigation amounting to nothing. “Guzmán could be dead or have fled the

country years ago,” he says. “We’re chasing ghosts. We’ve been nicknamed ‘The Ghostbusters.’”

Outside of his police work, Carlos faces the determination of his former wife to speed up the signing of divorce papers so she can leave the country with their son as quickly as possible. “I’m working on something important,” he insists, but she sees no point in staying in a country on the verge of collapse.

Meanwhile, in the course of shadowing certain suspects, Gabriela recognizes someone she knows from her small hometown in the Highlands (the area that saw the bitterest fighting and most terrible massacres). The man turns out to be her own brother, who was still a child when she left home and is now a follower of Sendero Luminoso. Gabriela keeps this a secret from their colleagues.

Eventually, the agents break into a house and find a cache of Shining Path propaganda material. Carlos discovers a VHS tape showing Guzmán, alive and well and happily reunited with his followers. Morale surges in the unit and they redouble their efforts.

Gabriela confronts her brother, trying to convince him of the wrongheadedness of Shining Path’s terroristic activities, but he rebuffs her, insisting that it is necessary to change the world.

Carlos learns about Gabriela’s brother and confronts her. She admits she has been keeping it a secret, but they bond together and initiate a sexual relationship. Days later Carlos beats up a man who was trying to enter Gabriela’s apartment. Carlos questions him and deduces he comes from another intelligence service that is spying on them, and ends up killing the man accidentally.

Gabriela assists in throwing the body into the sea, but the pair are captured by members of the SIN, the intelligence branch of the state. They are both tortured in a military base, but escape. Back at GEIN, the detectives managed to uncover Guzmán’s real location and prepare the assault while Gabriela tries at the last minute to find her brother before he carries out an attack.

None of *La Hora Final*’s narrative strands are seriously developed. Sibille portrays Carlos as hardened by a decade of combating Shining Path. The subplot regarding his wife, his divorce and the attempts to pass the time with his son amounts to an attempt to “humanize” his character, but never rises above the banal, predictable and lazy.

More problematic—and revealing—is the treatment of Gabriela’s brother. Here, the filmmaker Eduardo Mendoza aims to present a young man, from a poor and historically neglected region of the country, who has sided with Shining Path because it has promised to create a fairer country from the ashes of an old one that has abandoned him.

Thousands of young men and women joined the movement, not because of its rhetoric, however radical it might be, but because the established parties from the “left”—the Stalinists of the Communist Party, the bourgeois-nationalist APRA, the unions—were in the process of integrating themselves—or had already been integrated—into the political establishment, abandoning any pretense of seriously defying the status quo. They left the road open for Guzmán to advance the retrograde perspective of peasant war and terrorist violence.

In the hands of Mendoza, however, the explanation for Gabriela’s brother taking this path is reduced to a small speech

denouncing the “system’s injustices.” It is so forced and empty that it is almost embarrassing to watch. For the filmmaker and the producers of the movie, this miniscule segment is intended as proof that the movie gives voice to “both sides” of the conflict.

The scenes showing characters tortured at the hands of the SIN intelligence service are meant as an acknowledgement of the crimes committed by this arm of the state. But this effort is undermined by the film’s extolling of GEIN’s work. The theme seems to be the need for a more efficient intelligence agency that can actually do a “better” and relatively “bloodless” job.

La Hora Final is just one of many examples of the continuing glorification of the military and intelligence services that is promoted by the right, the corporate media and the Catholic Church, with little to no opposition from the Peruvian “left.”

On April, Congress overwhelmingly voted in favor of bestowing the title “Heroes of democracy” on the “Chavin de Huantar” army squad. The latter successfully released the 72 hostages who were held during the armed occupation of the Japanese ambassador’s residence in Lima in 1997 by the MRTA (Movimiento Revolucionario Túpac Amaru), a bourgeois-nationalist guerrilla that operated in parallel with Shining Path. The squad was charged with summarily executing MRTA militants after they surrendered.

The honor was proposed by APRA congresswoman Luciana León. APRA was a social democratic party which had a larger mass following in the working class than the Communist Party during the first decades of the last century. Throughout the 20th century, it was the target of military crackdowns and once a military coup was carried out to prevent its leader—Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre—from taking office after he had been democratically elected.

The only opposition to this state award came from Marco Arana, a leader of the pseudo-left Frente Amplio (FA) coalition. His questioning of the award was widely criticized in the corporate media and by his fellow “leftists” from Nuevo Perú, FA’s rival “left” party.

Then, in September, the same honor was bestowed on the members of GEIN itself. The man who led it during the capture of Abimael Guzmán, Benedicto Jiménez, could not attend as he is in prison on corruption charges. The same was true for President Fujimori, who ordered the operation.

Behind these various reactionary ceremonies lies the discrediting of all Peruvian bourgeois institutions. The Lava Jato scandal, involving massive bribes from the Brazilian construction giant Odebrecht, has helped ruin the already fragile reputation of the main established parties and politicians in Peru. The ruling class hopes to sustain its authority by leaning ever more heavily upon the military, the main institution that has suppressed democracy in the country throughout its history.



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