

Marighella, film on Brazil's urban guerrilla leader, screened after two-year delay

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On November 4, *Marighella* premiered in Brazil. The movie is centered on the last two years of the life of the longtime Brazilian Communist Party (PCB) member and later guerrilla leader, Carlos Marighella. The date chosen for the premiere was the 52nd anniversary of Marighella's murder at the hands of the São Paulo state secret police, the Social and Political Order Department (DOPS).

The launching of *Marighella* is an event with significant cultural and political implications in Brazil. After its world premiere at the 2019 Berlinale, the movie immediately became the target of a vicious far-right campaign in the country which accused it of glorifying crime and communism—considered by the then incoming ultra-right Bolsonaro government as one and the same thing.

After its first showing at the Berlin festival, director Wagner Moura declared, “Our film is obviously not just about those who resisted in the decades of the 1960s and 1970s but is also about those who are resisting today,” referring to the violent turn to the right by the Brazilian political establishment in the previous years, and the Bolsonaro administration, which had taken office just 40 days earlier.

The film was later subjected to over two years of what Moura described as “censorship.” It confronted unusual bureaucratic delays by Brazil's Ancine public film agency that came amid relentless declarations by authorities in the Bolsonaro government that the country's culture should be liberated from a “leftist dictatorship.”

Amid this right-wing offensive, the film's distributors, Paris Filmes, indefinitely shelved its premiere, citing unspecified financial concerns. *Marighella* appeared poised for a mix of official and economic censorship.

The Brazilian right's targeting of the film, which continued to be exhibited and receive awards abroad, increased interest among those opposed to the fascistic Bolsonaro government and its praise for the 1964-85 military dictatorship that Marighella died fighting against.

When the film finally premiered on November 4, it quickly became Brazil's largest grossing movie, ahead of Hollywood blockbusters such as *Eternals*. That is a rare achievement for a Brazilian film, even considering that *Marighella*'s cast includes famous Brazilian soap opera stars, and the leading role is played by one of the most popular contemporary Brazilian musicians, Seu Jorge. Further testimony to its wide appeal has been provided by news of online protests in poor working-class cities on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro, where theaters were not showing the movie, which finally led to an increase in screenings.

This contemporary political context makes a sober assessment of the movie even more necessary. And to put it bluntly, the film falls woefully short of providing any serious portrait of Marighella's life and times, not to mention a perspective for the current challenges facing its wide audience.

As declared time and again by its director, Moura, the movie is dedicated to those who “resisted” then and “resist” today. The first and obvious question is: Why didn't Marighella's “resistance” succeed and

was instead wiped out by the US-backed military in a couple of years? And the equally obvious followup question would be: What lessons must be drawn from that experience by those who oppose the far right today?

These questions are never addressed by the film, Moura's radical-sounding press conferences and interviews notwithstanding.

The movie is based on the 2012 biography *Marighella—the guerrilla fighter who set fire to the world*, by journalist Mário Magalhães. Over 700 pages long and based on 276 interviews, Magalhães's book provides a comprehensive portrayal of Marighella's entire life. It is also significant for being the first to unearth testimony of an agent who took part in Marighella's murder, providing the first direct evidence that Marighella was not armed and did not resist arrest, as was alleged by the government at the time to justify his assassination, a practice never abandoned by today's “democratic” police in Brazil.

Moura's choice of focusing only on Marighella's guerrilla period in the last two years of his life leads to a generally condescending and moralistic attitude towards both the historical subject and the viewer. That attitude, which Moura considers to be the film's emotional and moral strength, plays a pernicious role, with definite political consequences.

Marighella, the PCB and the 1964 coup

Marighella was an extraordinary historical figure in many ways. His mother was the child of Sudanese slaves known as “malês,” who in 1835 led the largest urban slave revolt in Brazil's history in Marighella's native state of Bahia. His father was an Italian metalworker from Emilia-Romagna, whose countrymen were systematically rejected by Brazilian bosses as “troublemakers.”

Joining the Communist Party as an engineering student in 1936 at the age of 25, he faced illegality under three successive political regimes and was imprisoned and tortured by two of them. He served as an elected member of the 1946 Constituent Assembly during the PCB's only two years of legal work between 1937 and 1985 and was one of the leaders of the landmark “strike of the 300,000” in São Paulo in 1953, which defied anti-strike legislation and forced through a 32 percent wage rise across five industries.

The year 1964 brought to a head a protracted crisis of Brazilian capitalism that had developed for years, amid the decline in the postwar economic boom, growing strike activity in the imperialist countries and the intensification of the anticolonial struggles.

In 1964, President Joao Goulart intensified efforts to carry out his so-called “base reforms,” including a land reform, limits on urban property speculation, increases in small credits and education investment, curbs on the repatriation of profits of multinational companies and the legalization of the Communist Party.

Although entirely bourgeois-nationalist in character—and mirroring similar reforms sought in neighboring Bolivia and Chile in the previous years, as well as nationalist policies pursued by former Brazilian President Getúlio Vargas—Goulart’s reforms were increasingly considered intolerable by US imperialism and a dominant section of the Brazilian ruling class. His refusal to align himself unconditionally with the anticommunist policies of Washington increased fears within ruling circles that Goulart would be unable to rein in the working class, which was growing rapidly.

Under these conditions, the PCB adamantly refused to organize the working class in opposition to the bourgeoisie, instead trusting Goulart and the military themselves to counter the right-wing, pro-imperialist opposition. When the 1964 coup offensive was unleashed from the highlands surrounding Rio de Janeiro, Goulart and the PCB were caught off guard by the unity of the military. He was evacuated from Rio by a few loyalist officers and flown to Uruguay.

Despite the threat to its own membership posed by a new dictatorship, the PCB was following the line dictated internationally by the counterrevolutionary Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy, whose sole concern since the 1930s was self-preservation at the expense of the revolution internationally. It correctly feared that a successful revolution abroad would trigger renewed revolutionary working-class opposition within the Soviet Union itself and undermine its control over the semi-autarchic Soviet economy, the source of its privileges.

The line dictated from Moscow was that of the “popular front,” i.e., unity with the national bourgeoisie, in country after country. In Brazil, that had found expression in the 1930s under the Getúlio Vargas “Estado Novo” corporatist dictatorship, which was supported by the PCB as an “antifascist” popular front. That support was maintained even as the PCB’s main cadre, including a rising Marighella, were tortured in the “Estado Novo” prisons, and Vargas deported Olga Prestes, the German-born pregnant wife of the PCB’s leader Luís Carlos Prestes, to the Third Reich, where she was murdered at the Bernburg extermination camp.

The PCB maintained its loyalty to the Labor Party founded by Vargas and led by Goulart, even after the 1964 coup. It supported Goulart’s “Broad Front” with former President Juscelino Kubitschek and Vargas’s former political nemesis, Rio de Janeiro Governor Carlos Lacerda, who had cheered the coup before he himself was proscribed by the military regime.

Faced with a political debacle and a growing crackdown on the working class and the unions, the PCB leadership, including Prestes, opposed any criticism of its attitude towards Goulart and the broad front.

The critics included Marighella and other Maoist and Castroite-inspired proponents of guerrilla warfare. Their major disagreement with Prestes was that guerrilla-type armed struggle should have been initiated before 1964. The sclerotic bureaucracy around Prestes considered any such criticism intolerable and moved to expel the opposition. For its part, the opposition largely ignored the PCB’s mass working-class base and was never able to provide an alternative to the party’s popular front line.

As Moura’s film makes clear, Marighella was considerably older than the radicalized students being attracted to guerrillaism in Brazil in the 1960s, many of whom paid with their lives for entering the vastly unequal confrontation with Brazil’s US-backed military. Nonetheless, his decades of training under the PCB fighting for the Stalinist two-stage theory had rendered him organically incapable of providing any political alternative or leadership, outside of some rather rudimentary tactical prescriptions for the “armed struggle.”

The 1964 coup posed with maximum urgency the building of a new revolutionary party in the working class based upon Trotsky’s theory of Permanent Revolution. The decision of the Brazilian bourgeoisie to remove Goulart for fear of rising working-class opposition was the clearest demonstration that it feared socialism more than it opposed the

plunder of national resources by the imperialist powers. The bourgeois democratic tasks of democracy, national development and independence from imperialism could be achieved only under the leadership of the working class, overthrowing the bourgeoisie and beginning to implement its own socialist measures, while seeking to extend its revolution internationally.

Magalhães’ and other accounts of the PCB’s internal conflicts establish that Marighella had been a chief combatant against genuine Marxism in the party, leading the struggle against anything perceived as “Trotskyism,” principally the Theory of Permanent Revolution and criticism of Stalinist popular frontism.

One of the key episodes in his rise within the party apparatus had been the suppression of questioning of the Popular Front policy of subordination to Vargas within the PCB’s São Paulo leadership.

Marighella’s later guerrilla collaborator Joaquim Câmara Ferreira reported having been personally tasked with the execution of the PCB’s São Paulo leader Hermínio Sacchetta, who was leading the criticism of the Stalinist Popular Front with Vargas. Ferreira refused to carry out the murder, and Sacchetta later became the main leader of the Trotskyist movement in Brazil during World War II.

Upset by Sacchetta’s survival, the PCB exposed him as a party member in a radio transmission dedicated to denouncing “Trotskyists,” effectively putting a target on his back for the security forces, fascists or other less hesitant PCB members. Despite Sacchetta’s physical survival, Marighella was credited with politically “shooting down” Sacchetta’s faction within the party.

Faithful to his Stalinist training, Marighella and his co-thinkers never opposed the Stalinist theory that Brazil should undergo a bourgeois-democratic revolution led by the nationalist bourgeois and petty-bourgeois sectors, and, crucially, that the working class should be subordinated to that movement. In particular, when it came to the fight against the fascistic right and the dictatorship, Marighella took Popular Frontism as his starting point. In his clash with the Prestes clique, Marighella remained trapped within the perspective first developed by the PCB in the 1920s, that Brazil needed “its own Kuomintang,” that is, a bourgeois-nationalist party to which the working class should be subordinated. The PCB would tirelessly seek to find it in the Labor Party and its factions.

His radical phraseology about “taking up arms” and “revolution” notwithstanding, Marighella remained loyal to this fundamental outlook of the PCB. As he grew more frustrated with the cowardice of the reformist national bourgeoisie embodied by Goulart and its servants in the PCB leadership, Marighella also grew more hostile and contemptuous towards the working class. In his “Mini-manual of the Urban Guerrilla,” read throughout the world, the organization of the working class is entirely subordinated to helping the rural guerrillas. Even workers’ strikes were viewed from a strictly tactical military standpoint, as useful cover for staging ambushes of security forces.

Across the continent, the experience of the guerrillas was already proving disastrous. Just before Marighella’s adhesion to guerrillaism and expulsion from the PCB, the foremost proponent and role model of guerrilla warfare in Latin America, Che Guevara, was murdered by the US-backed Bolivian army while trying to “replicate” the Cuban revolution in that country. The actions of Marighella’s ALN would prove no more successful. The group was exterminated by the army and finally disbanded in 1973 after retreating to the geographic center of Brazil, the Araguaya valley. Failing to find peasant support for a “prolonged conflict” with the dictatorship, it succeeded only in further isolating itself from the working class.

The political costs of the turn to guerrillaism went far beyond the tragic and brutal deaths of Marighella and other combatants. It contributed to the isolation of self-sacrificing and radicalized layers of students, the intelligentsia and workers themselves from the working class as a whole.

While the PCB as an organization was shattered by the dictatorship, its fundamental aim of subordinating the working class to the bourgeoisie via the union apparatus was only strengthened by heroic armed acts in which workers were reduced to the status of spectators.

When the working class again erupted on the national political scene in the second half of the 1970s, its ranks swelled, strengthened by the dictatorship's industrialization drive, and a new generation of union leaders would refurbish the PCB's old subordination to the bourgeoisie and its loyalty to bourgeois democracy. Its foremost representative would be Brazil's former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the pragmatic metalworkers union bureaucrat who would lead the creation of the Workers Party (PT) in 1980 based on an explicit repudiation of Marxism and the socialist revolution, before being elected to the presidency in 2002.

Moura's Marighella

Moura's take on the complex political environment that created Carlos Marighella is intellectually anemic, to say the least.

It has been extensively argued in Brazilian circles associated with left politics and opposition to Bolsonaro that the film is courageous for taking on the dictatorship and telling the truth about a historical figure vilified by the ruling class as a bloodthirsty serial killer for nearly 50 years.

It is true the film is most effective in exposing the dictatorship's crimes, including its efforts to vilify the ALN and other guerrillas, desperate to quash any sympathy generated by their acts of opposition to the military junta. A large focus is placed on the efforts by DOPS chief, Deputy Lúcio (Bruno Gagliasso) to suppress reports in the press of the political content of the actions of the guerrillas, as the dictatorship portrayed Marighella as a fiendish murderer and "public enemy number one," while criminalizing any sympathy for socialism.

For a wide audience, exposing these crimes is important as the ruling classes worldwide turn to the rehabilitation of the worst crimes of the 20th century—Nazism and its collaborators in Germany and France, Francoism in Spain, and, of course, the Brazilian military dictatorship by Bolsonaro.

That being said, the film's ability to provide a perspective for its audience is seriously undermined by Wagner Moura's politically bankrupt take on Marighella, which turns into a glorification of the worst aspects of his political confusion.

The movie's plot is prefaced by a brief written text accompanied by 1964 era images stating that while various groups, from unions to peasant organizations, resisted the regime, it was "especially students" who "realized" the dictatorship could only be fought with arms—in the film's context, through guerrilla warfare and not a workers' revolution. The 1964 coup is taken as a fact, warranting no other consideration beyond the crimes to which it gave rise. How it came to be and what it aimed to accomplish are beside the point.

The focus of the movie is the spectacular actions of the guerrillas: the seizing of an arms cache from a train in the opening scene; bank robberies; the assassination of US military attaché Charles Chandler and the kidnapping of US Ambassador Charles Elbrick. Whenever a larger context is presented, such as Marighella's clashes with the PCB leadership or the international support he received from prominent European intellectuals such as Jean-Paul Sartre, the scenes are entirely focused on Marighella's personal morals and courage. The PCB, the party he belonged to for over 30 years and which exerted such a powerful influence over millions of Brazilians, is reduced to the figure of bureaucrat Jorge (Herson Capri), an amalgam of different historical figures and treated with disdain.

One must say that more than banality and superficiality are at play in the one-dimensional confrontation between the "brave" guerrillas and "cowardly" bureaucrats and torturers that frame the film's kinetic action scenes.

The banal defense of "democracy" is accompanied by a heavy-handed promotion of Brazilian nationalism and patriotism. This reaches the point of portraying torture victims shouting that they are "f---ing good Brazilians," as opposed to their pro-imperialist torturers. As the film ends, spectators are presented with Marighella's mother (played in the film by his real-life daughter), reacting to news of his death by shouting he was a "true Brazilian." The film's credits are followed by a scene of the actors screaming the national anthem during a warm-up session, a heavy-handed means of reaffirming the message that the guerrillas were the "true patriots."

Even Lúcio, who is for the most part a reference to DOPS chief Sérgio Paranhos Fleury, is portrayed as a nationalist confronting US authorities on the best tactics for annihilating the political opposition. Moura has repeatedly said he is particularly proud of his take on Fleury, arguing somewhat defensively that it adds "complexity" to the movie by showing that Lúcio also "thought he was doing the best for his country," i.e., he was not simply a US stooge.

This approach largely mirrors a broad right-wing turn by sections of the upper middle class, who in an earlier period identified with opposition to imperialism and the dictatorship and now oppose the fascistic Bolsonaro from the standpoint of his perceived damage to Brazil's foreign policy and, by extension, to the business interests of Brazil's major companies. Their perspective is summed up in Lula's campaign promise to "Make Brazil Great Again."

The film's general thrust is a repetition, under far more dangerous international political conditions, of the PCB's and Marighella's own turn to the national bourgeoisie. This perspective can only result in even worse disasters, as the major capitalist powers impose unprecedented austerity, turn toward police state measures and race to rearm themselves, even as millions die from the uncontrolled spread of COVID-19.

True opposition to the far right, poverty and the threat of dictatorship in Brazil and internationally can be based only upon a socialist and internationalist perspective, a perspective to which the Stalinist ideology that Marighella embraced, including during his guerrilla period, was savagely opposed. His undeniable personal courage and tragic death, like those of so many others who pursued the political dead end of guerrillaism, cannot be allowed to conceal the decisive political lessons of the defeats suffered by the workers in Brazil and Latin America as a whole half a century ago.



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