

Chavín de Huántar: The Rescue of the Century: A film of reactionary propaganda for Peru's military

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Netflix recently added to its global catalogue the Peruvian film *Chavín de Huántar: The Rescue of the Century*, which premiered in Peru last October.

Advised and logistically supported by the Peruvian Army, the film is a dramatization of the April 1997 rescue by 195 commandos of 72 hostages held at the Japanese embassy in Lima, Peru. Fourteen members of the guerrilla movement MRTA (Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement) had seized the embassy and the hostages nearly five months earlier.

The operation was touted by the Peruvian military as one of the most successful in its history, as only one hostage and two soldiers lost their lives. However, all of the insurgents — who had no military training, let alone political preparation—were killed, summarily executed after being captured unarmed.

Certainly the embassy takeover, and above all its political roots, is an event that deserves artistic treatment. It revealed, above all else, the dead end that small-bourgeois nationalist armed movements had reached. These were promoted for decades by the Stalinists, their pseudo-left allies, and—most reprehensibly—Pabloite revisionists such as Ernest Mandel and Nahuel Moreno. The latter presented these movements, which neither possessed nor aspired to gain the support of the working class, as alternatives to Marxist workers' parties.

But in the hands of the Peruvian Army and director Diego de León, the film inevitably becomes a piece of reactionary militarist propaganda designed not only to glorify the Peruvian Army (as Hollywood films like *13 Hours: The Secret Soldiers of Benghazi* do analogously for US security forces), but also, within the current context, an attempt to prop up the institution of the Army amid a long-running crisis of bourgeois rule and an unprecedented loss of credibility by all the institutions of the Peruvian state.

From an artistic standpoint, there is not much to say about the film itself. It is nothing more than a collection of well-worn clichés from military action movies. The protagonist Juan Valer, one of the soldiers who died in the rescue, is portrayed as a loving father with a perfect family who selflessly submits a request to join the squad that will rescue the hostages. The remaining squad members are battle-hardened soldiers ready to

give their lives, and so on.

The treatment of the MRTA members, while not portraying them as fanatics or irrational, is simply bland and says practically nothing more about them beyond the fact that they decided to invade and seize the embassy in order to force the state to release their imprisoned comrades and to pressure the corrupt and authoritarian regime of then-president Alberto Fujimori into changing its policies.

The social and political origins of the MRTA are deliberately disregarded in order to present the rescue operation as a binary struggle between the “heroic” army and a guerrilla force that is the enemy of the entire nation.

The MRTA emerged from the fusion of Castroite armed movements with petty-bourgeois nationalist and Stalinist tendencies. The leader of the hostage taking, Nestor Cerpa Cartolini, began his political activity as the 25-year-old secretary of a union that carried out an occupation of a textile factory. The action ended in violent repression ordered by the military government, leaving several workers dead and sending Cerpa himself to jail for a year.

The methods of guerrillism served to separate such militant younger workers from the working class as a whole, strengthening the grip of Stalinist and bourgeois nationalist bureaucracies dedicated to subordinating workers' struggles to the capitalist order.

As the WSWS explained:

What all these factions shared was the conviction that some force other than the working class would be the vehicle of social struggle in Peru. Their methods and policies had nothing in common with Marxism in any genuine sense. They operated through kidnappings, bombings, bank robberies, and armed actions aimed primarily at pressuring the Peruvian state and extracting political concessions — not at mobilizing or politically educating the working class. The organization made no systematic appeals for working-class popular support and remained organizationally isolated from the broad

masses.

The film makes no reference either to what the Fujimori government had become by that point. Having been unexpectedly elected in 1990 as a populist outsider opposed to the neoliberal reforms demanded by Washington, Fujimori rapidly jettisoned his electoral promises and launched a wave of privatizations and economic 'shock therapy' measures. To impose these sweeping attacks, he carried out a "self-coup" (autogolpe) in 1992, disbanding parliament and the judiciary in order to concentrate dictatorial power in his hands and creating a new constitution that, to this day, favors large foreign capital, among other anti-worker laws.

By 1996, the Peruvian government was guilty of death squad massacres and numerous other human rights violations, interference with and assault on the branches of the state, and massive corruption. His own re-election in 1995 was the product of legal modifications approved by a congress under his corrupt control.

The Peruvian Army was the backbone of the regime. It rolled out tanks on the day of the 1992 self-coup to intimidate the population, and Army members became part of regime's death squads.

In reality, the Peruvian Army, like all its counterparts in Latin America, has a notorious and bloody history of intervening against the country's democracy and suppressing the struggles of its working class and peasantry. During the twentieth century, twenty-eight of its coups succeeded in overthrowing civilian governments or constituted internal insurrections within a military regime.

Today, the country's democracy is once again under assault by the so-called "congressional mafia pact"—an alliance of right-wing and far-right parties led by Fujimori's own daughter, Keiko.

This alliance has followed Fujimori's playbook and used congress as a platform to concentrate political power in its hands through constitutional amendments, threats against judges and prosecutors, the passage of laws that weaken the fight against crime and corruption, and the removal of democratically elected presidents.

Millions of Peruvians despise this miserable and shameless clique that has seized control of the state—as in the Fujimori era—and turned it into an instrument to sustain their privileges and favor foreign capital and the native oligarchy. Since 2023, following the parliamentary coup that ousted democratically elected pseudo-left president Pedro Castillo, congress has maintained an approval rating of between 4 percent and 6 percent, one of the lowest in the world.

It is within this political context that the emergence and promotion of the film must be understood. Faced with a population that despises them and with all their political institutions utterly discredited, Peru's ruling class is attempting

to cling to a "glorious" episode of the Army's history in order to gain some measure of approval—enough to remain in power, or to lull the population as much as possible.

This is reflected, in a distorted way, in the fact that the film has been one of the biggest box-office successes in Peruvian cinema history. Certainly, the rescue of the Japanese embassy hostages is an episode that enjoys approval among the majority of Peruvians.

In 2004, then-president Alejandro Toledo (currently serving two consecutive 34-year prison sentences for having received bribes from the Brazilian construction giant Odebrecht totaling more than US\$35 million) founded the Chavín de Huántar Museum, which consists of a replica of the structure used to train for the embassy assault. Later, the corrupt and hated president Dina Boluarte led the ceremony for the 27th anniversary of the Japanese embassy assault in April 2024.

After complaining that the "Place of Memory" Museum (LUM) was not giving adequate attention to Operation Chavín de Huántar, she intervened to dismiss its director, historian Manuel Burga. Boluarte reacted out of fear that the LUM, which memorializes the estimated 70,000 killed in Peru's two-decades-long "dirty war" that began in 1980, would add a presentation on the killing of 50 people between January and March 2023, when she herself gave a shoot-to-kill order to suppress widespread protests against the ouster of President Castillo.

Whatever the attempts of Peru's ruling class to rewrite its bloody history and glorify its armed forces, the insoluble crisis of capitalism and Washington's imperialist offensive against Latin America are engulfing Peru and driving the masses of working people once again into struggle in defense of their economic, social and democratic rights. The Peruvian Army will once again be called upon to demonstrate its usefulness as a tool of state repression.

The victory of the working class requires a break with all bourgeois parties, including those posturing as "left" populists, and the construction of a revolutionary leadership based on the program of the International Committee of the Fourth International, to lead the working class in Peru and internationally in a socialist offensive against war, dictatorship and capitalism. This program includes the abolition of the standing army along with the capitalist system that it defends.



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