

Documentary about the brutal 2014 disappearance of teachers' college students

The 43: A state massacre and cover-up in Mexico

By Rafael Azul and Don Knowland
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Directed by Matías Gueilburt, written by Nicolas Gueilburt

"In societies such as ours—where everything is so fleeting, where information flies in and disappears; where things are told in a vulgar manner and abandoned, forgotten; where there is no context, no explanations; where we are enveloped in medi a noise instead of information— there are however some events and some moments that become a wound; a wound that stays open and does not heal.

"That is the case of Ayotzinapa.

"It was that way almost immediately. How can one know how it is that—in a country of crushing injustice, massacres, violations of leg ality, absence of human rights— Ayotzinapa became one of the symbolic scepters of what Mexicans can expect from our government."

These words spoken by Mexican writer Paco Taibo II introduce *The 43*, a two-part Netflix documentary on the disappearance by the Mexican Army of 43 rural students (*normalistas*) on the night of September 26, 2014 in the city of Iguala, Guerrero, Mexico. The documentary is directed by Matías Gueilburt and written by Nicolas Gueilburt.

Taibo, a well-known figure, is featured prominently in *The 43*. He is the author of '68, a book about the events that culminated in the October 2, 1968 student massacre at the Tlatelolco plaza in Mexico City, as well as a popular biography of Che Guevara. He was similarly featured in a 2015 television documentary on Guevara, also directed by Matías Gueilburt.

The Argentine Gueilburt, among other works, has also directed documentaries on Pancho Villa (2008) and on Trotsky's assassination (2007), which featured Trotsky's grandson Esteban Volkov.

In addition to contributing his own personal experience with this case of the disappeared 43, Taibo also interviews surviving students, independent investigators and two journalists, Paula Mónaco and John Gibler, both of whom have involved themselves in investigating the 2014 crime.

As a child, Mónaco's parents were kidnapped and murdered by the Argentine military junta ("It was the horrible desperation of the beginning of something that one knows has no end," observes Mónaco). In 2015, Mónaco published *Ayotzinapa—Horas eternas* (*Ayotzinapa: Eternal Hours*), which includes biographical accounts of the missing Mexican students, based on interviews with parents and survivors.

In 2016, Gibler, an American journalist working in Mexico, made his own contribution to the Ayotzinapa chronicles, *I Couldn't Even Imagine That They Would Kill Us: An Oral History of the Attacks Against the Students of Ayotzinapa* (2017), based also on interviews with survivors and with the families of the victims.

In Episode 2, investigative journalist Anabel Hernández, whose father was kidnapped and murdered in Mexico in 2000, is interviewed at length. She also wrote a book, *La verdadera noche de Iguala: La historia que el*

gobierno (*El Falso True Nightle of Iguala: oculto* Stor Government Tried to Hide), published in 2016, which was based on a thorough documentary investigation.

The 43 brushes aside the campaign of misinformation that for more than four years has concealed the causes of the disappearance of the 43 students, and confirms what many already suspected: that the *normalistas* were targets and victims of a conspiracy by the Mexican army and the Mexican state.

The first episode of the documentary details the events of the night the students disappeared. The second episode deals with the state cover-up of the crime ("curtains of smoke") and attempts to get to the roots of what happened and who ordered the kidnapping of 43 young students from Ayotzinapa.

The students, most of them in their first year at the school, left the Raúl Isidro Burgos Rural Normal [teaching] College in Ayotzinapa on the evening of Friday, September 26, 2014, heading to Iguala. Their aim was to commandeer buses and raise funds so that they and other rural normal students could travel to Mexico City for the annual remembrance of the hundreds of students massacred at Tlatelolco. Students had commandeered buses for similar purposes on previous occasions with the knowledge and acceptance of bus company managers. But this time it would be different.

The meticulously constructed Episode 1 combines footage from closed-circuit television and the press, as well as government and cell phone footage, together with photos and forensic reconstructions of what went on during that long night. Viewers are able to follow the buses and police on an animated map of the area. There is footage of the military and police forces who followed and attacked the students with high-powered semi-automatic and automatic weapons.

Army and police forces attacked two of the buses in two separate locations, detained the 43 students and forced the others to flee. By mistake, the state forces also attacked a bus with soccer players returning from a match, killing a fourteen-year-old player and injuring others, including the coach.

As the night went on, students reached out to the media. The army and police did not hesitate to attack with live ammunition a press conference held at the site of one of the buses, later abandoned, killing two students.

Episode 2 deals with the aftermath of the attack. Comrades of the students and parents formed brigades to search for those missing, as government and police were silent. Interviewed parents describe their sadness and desperation as they participate in the brigades.

Gueilburt's *The 43* sets forth the conflicting accounts offered by the students and government sources, as it becomes clear, a few days after the

attack in Iguala, that 43 have been disappeared. Journalist John Gibling describes how Guerrero state authorities, knowing full well what had happened, initially insisted that the students were only hiding and would soon return.

On October 2, 2014, during the march in Mexico City in commemoration of the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre, a very large contingent of rural teaching school students and many parents denounced the disappearance of the 43. From that point on, the issue exploded throughout Mexico and internationally.

In addition to the Mexican government, an Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts (GIEI) commissioned by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and a team of forensic anthropologists from Argentina, also investigated.

Government investigators, based on what was likely coerced testimony from gang members, placed the blame on Iguala's mayor, José Luis Abarca, and his wife, María Los Angeles Pineda, who were in league with the criminal gang of the Guerreros Unidos.

According to this version, dubbed the "historic truth" by then Mexican Attorney General Jesús Murillo Karam, the kidnapped students were handed over by local police to the gang. They were then murdered and incinerated beyond recognition by the gang; their burnt bones were crushed, placed in plastic bags and thrown in the nearby San Juan River.

The students, the parents of the missing and the forensic anthropologists, rejected this version early on, because it was contrary to all the existing evidence, as the documentary shows.

Thousands marched and demonstrated throughout Mexico, across Latin America, the US and Europe, demanding the return of the missing 43 and rejecting the so-called historical truth.

The GIEI experts operated from March through August 2015, until the Peña Nieto government shut them down. The documentary interviews many of them and details their investigation, which also repudiated the official version.

While all this was going on, dozens of burial sites with scores of bodies were found. In truth the disappearance of the 43 was just the tip of the iceberg.

From early in the process, it became clear that the army would stonewall any inquiry regarding the participation by its 27th Infantry Battalion, headquartered near Iguala. The government denied GIEI permission to take testimony from the soldiers stationed there.

The 43 makes a strong case that the army was involved and even organized the attack on the students; that it was aware of their progress from the time they left Ayotzinapa around 6:30 pm.

The documentary also strongly suggests that this murderous operation was being followed minute by minute by the recently disbanded CISEN, an intelligence agency of Mexico's Interior Ministry.

On the basis of cell-phone signals that night, the documentary further suggests it is highly likely the 43 students were taken to the 27th Infantry Battalion base that night and executed there.

In her book, Anabel Hernández suggested the army was acting under orders from a drug cartel to recover drugs stashed in two of the buses. This version is debunked by the documentary, which points out that the forced disappearance of 43 students would have been unnecessary to retrieve heroin from the buses.

In sum, *The 43* makes a persuasive case that an array of police agencies, municipal, state and federal, plus members of the Mexican military, were involved in the attacks on and disappearance of the students and their tragic end. And, that the federal government and the military at the highest levels covered up what really happened.

In March, following the release of this documentary, it was revealed that Julio César López Patolzin, number 38 on the list of the missing 43, had been not only a student at the teaching college in Ayotzinapa, but was also an informant for the military.

A video taken September 29, 2014, two days after the disappearance of the 43, shows López Patolzin's mother being informed by army Colonel Espinoza Toledo that her son, who was possibly dead, had been "a good informer" who provided intelligence on the students to the military. The Colonel gave the spy's mother 5,667 pesos (\$US 300, two weeks' pay). López Patolzin apparently used his iPhone every afternoon and evening to provide information to the Intelligence Bureau of Battalion 50, headquartered in Chilpancingo, the capital of Guerrero State.

Why were students in a small town in rural Guerrero being monitored and spied on by the Mexican army in 2014?

In the wake of the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre, the Mexican government initiated a "dirty war" against students and various radical groups that lasted until 1980. In the Guerrero mountains, the army battled the guerrilla forces of Lucio Cabañas's Peasants' Justice Brigade, a non-Marxist group that claimed to be revolutionary and socialist. Thousands were disappeared in Guerrero. For more than a decade starting in 1996, also in Guerrero, the army fought the Popular Revolutionary Army (ERP), another group claiming to pursue "socialist peasant revolution." The ERP has continued its operations to this day. The Mexican army remains as an occupying force in Guerrero.

The documentary's scenes of the rural school in Ayotzinapa reveal murals on its walls with large images of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Zapata and Che Guevara. These teaching students had clearly been radicalized. They had been vigorously protesting the so-called education reform under President Enrique Peña Nieto, which amounted to a wholesale attack on teachers, and imposed particular strains on the resources of schools in poor, rural areas.

With the unpopularity of the president and resistance to his "Pact for Mexico" mounting, especially among teachers in poor southern states such as Guerrero, government repression could only increase.

The Mexican people were horrified by the attack on the Ayotzinapa 43 students. The current Mexican president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (popularly known as AMLO), campaigned on getting to the truth and punishing whoever was guilty, without impunity.

On December 3, AMLO decreed the creation of a Commission for Truth and Access to Justice to be coordinated by Alejandro Encinas, Mexico's new Undersecretary for Human Rights, to investigate the Ayotzinapa case, as well as the disappearance of over 40,000 persons since President Felipe Calderon launched a military war on the drug cartels in 2006. "There won't be any hindrances to finding the truth," López Obrador assured.

At a December meeting with the parents of the 43, Encinas' boss, the new Interior Minister, Olga Sanchez Cordero, promised that the commission and its experts would make "their most determined effort and commitment to know the truth... in the shortest time" possible.

In March, the Mexican foreign affairs ministry signed an agreement with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to assist the Commission with its expertise, specifically through the experts of the GIEI. In April, that ministry reached an agreement with the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet (the former Chilean president), for the UN to provide its assistance on the case.

The Commission has now met four times, the last time in April. At the last meeting, parents of the 43 expressed concern as to the slow pace of its work, and complained specifically that a special prosecutor's office and a prosecutor had not been established or named yet.

Separately, in March, Mexico's semi-autonomous National Human Rights Commission delivered a report on Ayotzinapa to international organizations at UN headquarters in Geneva. It concluded, based on a wide-ranging investigation, that several tiers of Mexican authorities conspired with criminal organizations to mislead Ayotzinapa investigators.

In response to its report, AMLO said he was not aware of any government conspiracy concerning the Ayotzinapa students.

Whatever the results of the Commission's inquiry, skepticism is growing that López Obrador will go after the Mexican military if it is implicated, in regard to which *The 43* makes a compelling case. AMLO has repeatedly fawned over the military and its top brass and ceded it more power.

This was most vividly illustrated by his giving it the command of a new National Guard the president created, which disguises the permanence of the armed forces in the streets that became a fact of life during the war on the cartels. Giving that power to the military required Mexico's Congress to amend provisions in the country's constitution limiting the role of the armed forces.

A cover-up of the military's role in the disappearance and killing of the 43 undoubtedly would have gone right up to the highest echelons of the army. If the Commission finds that, will Lopez Obrador break his promises of no impunity?

Whether the Commission will arrive at the truth and nothing but the truth and whether those culpable will be meted the punishment they merit remain in considerable doubt.

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