



## THE WHITE GUARD / LA GUARDIA BLANCA



A Film By Julien Elie

## THE WHITE GUARD

(La Guardia Blanca)

### STUDY GUIDE

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## **The White Guard**

**The White Guard** exposes the violence orchestrated by multinational companies, in collusion with organized crime and the Mexican government, to seize land and exploit natural resources. Behind barbed wire fences, Mexican forests, rivers and mountains fall into the hands of private companies. These regions become separate universes where the new masters and their mercenaries terrorize people into silence. Like other farmers from across the country, Roberto de la Rosa now walks on pathways riddled with booby traps. In recent years, Mexico has seen the highest number of assassinated land defenders. The White Guard gives voice to the courageous land defenders and their families who dare to speak out about this new form of colonialism that is decimating Mexican villages and landscapes with impunity.

## **Introduction**

Mexico is rich in natural resources including metal and minerals, wood, oil, and agricultural products, and has been profiting from these resources for many years. Its major industries include mining, agriculture, and energy. However, the harvest of natural resources also has environmental consequences.

## **Mining**

Open pit mining is a type of mining used for deposits that are located near the surface of the earth. Miners remove the material on the surface in order to get to deposits, and a large, open pit is left behind. This method is typically cheaper than underground mining. In underground mining, tunnels or shafts are excavated under the ground in order to reach deposits that are located deeper in the earth. Underground mining is usually more difficult and expensive.

Both types of mining can cause numerous environmental harms. Excavation changes the landscape, and can destroy plant and animal habitats and cause erosion. For underground mining, there is also the potential for the ground to gradually sink over time where it has been excavated underneath. According to one a recent report by S&P Global, almost a third of Mexico's mines are located in areas that have high biodiversity, meaning that they pose a particularly high risk of environmental harm. Mining also generates large amounts of toxic waste material. The American Geosciences Institute explains, "The amount of waste rock in open pit mines is commonly two to three times the amount of ore produced, tremendous volumes of waste rock are removed from the pits and deposited in areas nearby." The waste generated includes chemicals and minerals that can contaminate the soil, water, and air. This contamination can continue long after a mine has stopper operating.

## **Mines in Mexico**

There are numerous mines located in Mexico, and this country is one of the largest metal producers in the world and the largest silver producer. According the U.S. International Trade Administration, the United States has significant mining interests in Mexico, with 32 U.S.

companies having operations there. Canada also has substantial mining interests in Mexico. According to a recent article in the Canadian Mining Journal, close to 70 percent of the foreign mining companies in Mexico include Canadian interests. The Canadian government website notes, "Mexico is one of the most important mining jurisdictions in the world." It states that the many advantages to mining there include the large amount of minerals found there, low labor costs, and the availability of skilled workers.

Peñasquito is an open pit mine where gold, silver, lead, and zinc are extracted. It is one of the largest silver mines in the world. It is located approximately 780 miles northwest of Mexico City. The Salaverna mine is located nearby.

## **Hydropower**

A significant percentage of Mexico's renewable energy is produced by hydropower. Hydropower plants work by converting the kinetic energy from moving water into electricity. While hydropower is a source of clean energy, it can have sizeable environmental impacts. The U.S. Geological Survey explains, "Most hydroelectric power plants have a dam and a reservoir. These structures may obstruct fish migration and affect their populations. Operating a hydroelectric power plant may also change the water temperature and the river's flow. These changes may harm native plants and animals in the river and on land. Reservoirs may cover people's homes, important natural areas, agricultural land, and archaeological sites. So, building dams can require relocating people."

## **Carlos Slim Helú**

Carlos Slim Helú is a Mexican businessman. According to Forbes, he is the richest man in Mexico, with a net worth of more than \$80 billion. He controls América Móvil, which is the largest mobile phone company in Latin America. He also has ownership in mining, real estate, construction, insurance, finance, and consumer goods. He was born in 1940 in Mexico City.

## **Julián Carrillo**

Julián Carrillo was an environmental activist in the community of Coloradas de la Virgen, in the state of Chihuahua. According to an Amnesty International article, he had been an activist there since 1992, striving to defend the environment from efforts to exploit the natural resources there. Prior to his death, he received numerous death threats, and five of his relatives were killed. The author of the Amnesty International article explains some of the events leading up to Carrillo's death. He says that threats against Carrillo intensified, and "Julián was told by someone in the community that 'the bad guys' were still looking for him; they said that they were going to 'chop his mouth' for denouncing the violence in las Coloradas." The author says that the threats were so serious that Carrillo and some other members of his community were offered support. He says, "They were given a satellite phone, because in the community there is no ordinary telephone signal, and they were offered a police escort for journeys that involved leaving the community. However, Julián explained to me that the satellite phone frequently did not work

and that the police told him that they feared for their own safety because, according to them, the community was very dangerous place.” However, despite these efforts, Carrillo was shot dead on October 24, 2018.

### **Indigenous Peoples**

The population of Mexico is close to 130 million. A significant percentage of the population is indigenous, meaning that they can trace their ancestry back to before the arrival of Europeans in Mexico. According to the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), indigenous peoples make up about 19 percent of Mexico’s population.

Many of these people live in areas that contain a wealth of natural resources. IWGIA says, “Mexico’s Indigenous Peoples have inhabited territories of great biological and cultural diversity since time immemorial, characterized by the presence of mineral, biological, water, forest and wind resources, to name but a few.” The organization stresses that Mexico’s indigenous population is important to the preservation of these natural resources because they understand how to take care of them. It explains, “Over this time, they have accumulated knowledge about their natural environment, including on the care, conservation and use of natural resources for survival.”

### **Environmental Defenders in Mexico**

Research reveals that environmental defenders in Mexico are frequently intimidated, harassed, threatened, displaced, criminalized, and killed. Global Witness reports on environmental activism around the world. It finds that in 2021, Mexico had the highest number of killings of any country for land and environmental defenders, with almost half of them indigenous people. In addition, it states, “Impunity remains rife, with over 94% of crimes not reported, and only 0.9% resolved.”

### **Study Questions:**

1. Why do you think indigenous communities are often the ones to suffer most when it comes to activities like mining or dam operation, which involve natural resources?
2. Why are many of the townspeople skeptical when strangers come to their town, as shown in the film?
3. As explained in the film, why are many people afraid to speak up against what has happened to them?
4. According to the film, how do the mining companies displace people from their homes?
5. What are some of the things that these displaced people miss about their former homes?
6. Why is it dangerous to investigate mining companies, as explained by the film?
7. As explained in the film, why are the people who have been pushed off their land unable to do anything about it?
8. What are “white guards,” as explained in the film?

## Additional Resources

- American Geosciences Institute, “How Can Metal Mining Impact the Environment?” <https://www.americangeosciences.org/critical-issues/faq/how-can-metal-mining-impact-environment>
- Flor Cervantes & Joel Flores, “GeoSemantics II: The Town that the Mining Company Disappeared: A Travel Report to Salaverna, Mexico,” ASAP Review, November 11, 2024. <https://asapjournal.com/node/geosemantics-ii-the-town-that-the-mining-company-disappeared-a-travel-report-to-salaverna-mexico/>
- International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, “March 22, 2024. The Indigenous World 2024: Mexico.” <https://www.iwgia.org/en/mexico/5385-iw-2024-mexico.html>
- Rafael E. Lozano and Anjan Sundaram, “Opinion: The Deadly Costs for Mexico’s Indigenous Communities Fighting Climate Change,” Los Angeles Times, February 26, 2023. <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2023-02-26/us-mexico-border-indigenous-climate-change-environment>
- Erik Post, “Hydroelectric Extractivism: Infrastructural Violence and Coloniality in the Sierra Norte de Puebla, Mexico,” Journal of Latin American Geography 21, no. 3, 2022. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/lag.2022.0039>.
- Rodrigo Sales, “Julián Carrillo Defended the Forest With His Life,” Amnesty International, November 28, 2018. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/11/la-mortal-defensa-del-bosque-por-julian-carrillo/>
- Anjan Sundaram, “Protecting Mexico’s Environmental Defenders: A Policy Imperative,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 29, 2024. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/01/protecting-mexicos-environmental-defenders-a-policy-imperative?lang=en>

## Contact

For inquiries, please contact:  
EPF Media - [info@epfmedia.com](mailto:info@epfmedia.com)

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