

1 Review Essay

2 Shining Pathology

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4 **The Shining Path: Love, Madness, and Revolution in the Andes**

5 Orin Starn and Miguel La Serna. New York: W. W. Norton, 2019.
6 £19.99/\$28.95. 416 pp.

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8 When Hollywood actress Cameron Diaz visited Machu Picchu in June 2007
9 she apparently had no idea that the olive-green handbag she'd brought with
10 her, bearing a red star and the Maoist slogan 'serve the people' in Chinese,
11 would cause offence.¹ Like many of the more than four million tourists who
12 now visit Peru annually,² it seems she wasn't aware of the savage
13 ideological revolution waged between 1980 and the early 1990s by the
14 clandestine Maoist revolutionary sect known as Sendero Luminoso (Shining
15 Path). Diaz later apologised for inadvertently evoking an insurgency that
16 killed 70,000 Peruvians, displaced another 600,000 and destroyed \$2 billion
17 worth of property (p. 27).

18 A year before Diaz's visit, the Shining Path's 'maximum leader', Abimael
19 Guzmán, then aged 71, had received multiple life sentences from a judge
20 who took more than five hours to read the verdict. (The trial was his second
21 – he was first convicted in 1992 by a judicially dubious tribunal presided
22 over by a hooded judge.) Shining Path's second-in-command and Guzmán's
23 long-time love interest, Elena Iparaguirre, aged 59, also received a life
24 sentence.³ Guzmán reacted to the verdict with a fist-banging tirade replete
25 with revolutionary slogans. Over the next decade, he would write the first
26 two volumes of his profoundly banal history of the Peruvian Communist
27 Party, which was published online.

28 Anthropologist Orin Starn and historian Miguel La Serna have written a
29 far more accessible history of Guzmán's small but bloodthirsty guerrilla
30 movement, one whose legacy continues to produce visceral reactions

1 among Peruvians even two decades later. In *The Shining Path*, they detail ‘a
2 war frightening, deadly, and wrathful enough to have been sworded to life
3 by a jungle sorcerer’s curse’ (p. 28). To counter any temptation to dismiss
4 Guzmán as an anachronistic buffoon, they take pains to emphasise his
5 importance to the war: ‘he had once issued the orders for assassinating
6 government leaders and assaulting military bases. His followers sang
7 anthems exalting his name. The government built [a] concrete prison just to
8 hold him’ (p. 12). His cult of personality, intentionally crafted by Iparaguirre
9 and Guzmán’s first wife, Augusta La Torre (who filled out the troika of top
10 rebel leaders that serves as the book’s central focus), helped to spur the
11 rank-and-file *senderistas* ‘to frightful cruelty and mad illusions of victory’ (p.
12 31). ‘Abimael wasn’t more intelligent than us,’ Iparaguirre later reflected,
13 ‘but every movement needs a representative, a face – it’s a law of history’
14 (pp. 99–100).

15 **First blood**

16 In 1962, Guzmán, then just under 30 years old, left the conservative
17 southern city of Arequipa, where he’d been a bright young student and
18 precocious member of the Peruvian Communist Party, to take a job in the
19 highlands city of Ayacucho. In this isolated mountain community, where
20 there were no telephones, only one movie theatre and a population of less
21 than 30,000, he expected to finally experience *Perú Profundo*, or ‘deep Peru’ –
22 ‘the Andean heartland in its wrenching poverty and indigenous traditions’
23 (p. 38). Now a philosophy professor at a new public university built to
24 educate provincial (that is, indigenous) highlanders, Guzmán quickly
25 gained a reputation as a dynamic instructor; students signed up for his
26 classes in droves. Some called him ‘Dr. Shampoo’ for his supposed ability to
27 wash young brains.

28 It was in Ayacucho that Guzmán would found his Maoist ‘Red Faction’,
29 a precursor to the Shining Path. Having decided that only Mao Zedong was
30 upholding true communist ideology – he dismissed Soviet premier Nikita
31 Khrushchev as ‘sinister’ – he visited China in 1965, accompanied by his
32 wife, the daughter of a communist landowner (if that is not a contradiction
33 in terms). The trip helped to cement his belief that he could bring Maoism to
34 the Peruvian highlands. If Mao’s communists could employ the far-flung

1 Yan'an as their base of operations, could not the soaring peaks around the
2 historically rebellious Ayacucho 'become the stronghold for a Peruvian
3 people's war?' (p. 57).

4 As was the case with so many leftist revolts during the Cold War,
5 Shining Path started out with 'praiseworthy, even noble' intentions to
6 reform a highly unequal and impoverished country (p. 28). As the authors
7 put it, 'That great Communist longing to redeem humanity from misery and
8 injustice motivated Shining Path to its war' (p. 28). Unlike the Spanish
9 priests who had come to Peru five centuries earlier, promising a better life
10 in the world to come, Shining Path offered the 'more immediate heaven of a
11 new socialist order' (p. 28). Yet it is still difficult for Starn and La Serna to
12 understand how a 'former philosophy professor and two intelligent,
13 cultured women captained such a murderous rebellion', even if they did not
14 carry out the violence themselves [ok?] (p. 91). Instead, the three
15 revolutionaries rented safehouses in Lima's toniest neighbourhoods –
16 Miraflores, San Borja, San Isidro – reasoning that the authorities would
17 never think to look for communist leaders there. They even used a house
18 very near the military's El Pentagonito installation in San Borja. When they
19 did leave the capital, they usually relocated to equally pacific locations such
20 as tranquil, apolitical Arequipa, rather than violent Ayacucho. (The higher
21 elevation there aggravated Guzmán's debilitating polycythemia, a rare
22 blood disease, and in any case he liked his creature comforts.) Incredibly,
23 what many inside and outside Peru believed was a rural, indigenous
24 revolution was in fact run by fair-skinned Peruvians from Lima's diplomatic
25 and political barrios in the country's sole cosmopolitan outpost.

26 While Guzmán, La Torre and Iparaguirre had come from the petite
27 bourgeoisie, their rebellion's foot soldiers mostly came from humbler,
28 'copper-complexioned, Quechua-speaking families' (p. 141). They were the
29 children of peasants, construction workers, craftsmen. According to Peru
30 expert Robin Kirk, 'By joining Abimael's movement, young people became
31 better than white; they went instantly from the bottom to the top of the
32 social pyramid' (p. 94). But Shining Path's anachronistic Maoist caricatures
33 of nefarious landlords and suffering serfs did not translate well in the
34 Andes (p. 93). Peru in the 1970s was not China in the 1920s. In fact, the

1 Peruvian military regime that ruled after 1968 implemented a far-reaching,
2 albeit chequered, left-wing agrarian reform programme that eliminated
3 most of the large landed estates.

4 Nevertheless, the revolution began on 17 May 1980, when half a dozen
5 armed and hooded insurgents burned ballots for an imminent presidential
6 election – the first such election in more than a decade – and seized a clerk
7 in an Ayacucho village. In what would become a signature move, the
8 fighters raised hammer-and-sickle flags over the town. By June they were in
9 Lima, where they blew up power lines. As the city lay in darkness, the
10 rebels lit torches, sometimes arranged to form a hammer and sickle, on
11 nearby hills. I remember working in Lima in 2000 when there was a sudden
12 blackout – the expression on the faces of local colleagues was a startling
13 reminder that they had experienced continual, threatening power cuts.

14 Starn and La Serna contend that Shining Path had much in common with
15 other twentieth-century communist movements, though they accepted no
16 aid from Moscow or Beijing, only some ‘penny donations’ from the US and
17 Europe (p. 31). After all, ‘terror and mass killing’ had also been integral to
18 Vladimir Lenin’s rule (p. 29). However, unlike Fidel Castro or Ho Chi Minh,
19 Guzmán never won that many hearts or minds. While Shining Path ‘burned
20 tremendously hot’, it was never a very large movement. Consisting of at
21 most 5,000 fighters, most of whom were poorly armed and trained, the
22 group nonetheless managed to terrorise Peru for more than a decade (p. 29).

23 Starn and La Serna were unable to find any evidence that Guzmán had
24 ever expressed remorse for the violence he’d unleashed. Even after his
25 incarceration, ‘He usually slept well, despite a bad hip. Heads split open by
26 machete? A woman blown to bits before her two little boys? A country in
27 flames? The old man believed their war had been just despite its ugly costs’
28 (p. 13).

29 **Backlash**

30 When Fernando Belaúnde returned to the presidency of Peru in 1980 after
31 12 years of military rule, he quickly came under pressure to do something
32 about the Maoist bandits, even if they only effectively controlled Ayacucho.
33 Given that the military could not be fully trusted to stay out of politics,
34 Belaúnde’s preference was to call on Peru’s anti-terrorism police, the *sinchis*,

1 to hunt down the guerrillas in their remote mountain lairs. Starn and La
2 Serna describe this as the 'dirty war' phase of the conflict: 'Soldiers broke
3 down doors to search for weapons and propaganda ... Whispered stories
4 described nighttime executions, gang rapes, and target practice with live
5 prisoners' (p. 127). Many detainees were never seen again. 'Someone from
6 Ayacucho has disappeared', lamented a song from this period. 'Where
7 could she be?' (p. 128). Things only escalated after the military intervened in
8 1983.

9 In 1985, newly elected president Alan García promised to stop fighting
10 'barbarism with barbarism' (p. 176). Yet the abuses continued to pile up. It
11 wasn't until Alberto Fujimori, the former dean of an agricultural university
12 who upset establishment candidate and renowned novelist Mario Vargas
13 Llosa in the 1990 election, became president that the tide began to turn. One
14 of Fujimori's key decisions was to place the so-called *rondas campesinas*
15 (peasant militias whose members were called *ronderos*) at the centre of his
16 counter-insurgency strategy. To their great credit, the authors spend ample
17 time detailing the remarkable gains that these poor Andean villagers made
18 in beating back the Shining Path thugs who had been terrorising their
19 pueblos with impunity since the war broke out; in many cases, the peasant
20 militias prevailed using only the most rudimentary of arms, such as rusted
21 Winchester rifles.

22 By the late 1980s, Shining Path's original strategy of winning over the
23 rural population had flopped in the face of *rondero* resistance. Guzmán's
24 Plan B was to relocate the war from the *sierra* (Andean highlands) to Lima,
25 where destitute rural migrants who had fled the violence became a source
26 of new recruits. The guerrillas were also aided by García-era hyperinflation
27 and economic contraction that was threatening to turn Peru into a failed
28 state. 'Ayacucho is the cradle', Guzmán was prone to utter, 'but Lima is the
29 catapult' (p. 220). The urban phase of his rebellion involved car bombs and
30 more blackouts – there were over 1,000 attacks in Lima in 1989 alone – as
31 well as the targeting of civil-society actors whom the Maoists considered
32 threats. One of the most disturbing episodes was the shooting of María
33 Elena Moyano, president of the Villa Women's Federation, whose body was
34 detonated with dynamite. Shining Path wanted to take control of the

1 federation and its 20,000 members, accusing Moyano of ‘suffocat(ing) the
2 revolutionary struggle of the masses’ before killing her (p. 221).

3 By the early 1990s, it had become clear to the Peruvian authorities that
4 the only way to defeat the Shining Path insurgency would be to decapitate it
5 – efforts by the Andean military and the *ronderos* had been effective but not
6 decisive. A new government-intelligence unit (GEIN) was formed to track
7 down the troika and key subordinates. Colleagues playfully called the outfit
8 *Cazafantasmas* (Ghostbusters), though at first the unit did not possess a
9 single telephone (‘who ya gonna call?’, indeed). Yet the agents carried out a
10 relentless investigation, eventually retrieving cigarette butts – Guzmán
11 preferred Winstons – and polycythemia medicine from trash bins. ‘Garbage
12 speaks an eloquent language’, quipped one officer, in reference to Umberto
13 Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* (p. 323). This led to the remarkably low-key arrest
14 of Guzmán and Iparaguirre (La Torre had died in 1988 under mysterious
15 circumstances) in September 1992. As Starn and La Serna put it, the
16 ‘revolution culminated anticlimactically with a middle-aged couple on their
17 study couch’ (p. 332).

18 The authors not unreasonably draw a parallel between Guzmán’s
19 fanaticism well into his incarceration and that of the Japanese fighters
20 purported to have carried on fighting on remote Pacific islands despite the
21 Second World War having ended long before. They also point out that
22 Shining Path’s timing could not have been worse, coinciding with the fall of
23 the Berlin Wall in 1989. ‘They fought the Peruvian army, but also a more
24 formidable force, the bull rush of history itself’ (p. 30). In addition to
25 counting the war’s costs, the authors detail the remarkable progress the
26 country has made since it ended: ‘Back in the war’s darkest hours, no one
27 could have imaged the five-star Lima restaurants or the crowded shopping
28 malls’ (p. 351). Even Ayacucho, the insurrection’s ground zero, is today
29 bursting with energy and commerce – no thanks to Guzmán. [ok?]

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31 One quibble I had with this commanding book concerns the authors’
32 portrayal of US officials and policies. It is true that a hawkish Reagan
33 administration was preoccupied with Marxist revolution in Central
34 America, a region much closer to home. But whereas the actions and

1 motivations of Peruvian actors are given careful consideration, those of the
2 US government are interpreted in a narrow, simplistic way. For example,
3 the sole reference to the Cold War-era, US-run School of the Americas cites
4 its critics as calling it 'The School of the Assassins' (p. 273). Given how
5 critical the authors are of Shining Path, it might be the case that they are
6 especially hard on Washington to somehow reinforce their standing as
7 conventional scholarly critics of US Cold War policies.

8 We do learn that Washington belatedly woke up to the Maoist threat.
9 President George H.W. Bush's top diplomat for Latin America, Bernard
10 Aronson, told Capitol Hill in 1992, 'If Sendero were to take power, we
11 would see this century's third genocide', thereby comparing Shining Path to
12 the Nazis and the Khmer Rouge (p. 324). The authors might have spent
13 more time considering why Washington did not become more fully
14 involved in checking the Peruvian insurgency, one that, had it seized
15 power, would have made the Nicaraguan Sandinistas or Salvadoran FMLN
16 guerrillas look like Boy Scouts in comparison.

17 Something else that the authors might have addressed more fully is the
18 question of fault. Based on the time I've personally spent in Peru over the
19 past 20 years, my own sense is that Peruvians who lived through the war
20 years draw a clear moral distinction between the instigating Shining Path
21 and the reacting Peruvian military. It is not that they are eager to whitewash
22 the latter's myriad abuses, but rather that they perceive the military as a
23 highly imperfect but nonetheless legitimate instrument of state power
24 possessing a monopoly over the use of lethal force. The authors note that
25 Peru's Truth and Reconciliation Commission attributed roughly half of all
26 deaths to Shining Path, 30% to the government and the remainder to the
27 *rondas campesinas*. What they don't discuss is why so many Peruvians bristle
28 at what they see as an unfair moral equivalency between the insurgency and
29 the counter-insurgency. It may be that unresolved anger and resentment
30 toward the commission's findings contributed to the blow-up over Diaz's
31 Maoist bag.

32 While Diaz's faux pas seems to have been unintentional, I must confess
33 to a more wilful sin. Back in the late 1980s, when I was a high-school
34 student in the San Francisco Bay Area, I happened upon a left-wing

1 bookstore that sold communist-solidarity T-shirts and other merchandise, in
 2 addition to revolutionary books. Unwittingly playing the role of ‘useful
 3 idiot’, I purchased a Shining Path bumper sticker that I proudly displayed
 4 on my family’s automobile, even though I probably could not have
 5 answered even the most basic questions about the Peruvian insurrection.
 6 Knowing that my purchase probably sent a few pennies to Ayacucho or,
 7 more likely, a San Borja safe house, I now feel deeply embarrassed by my
 8 adolescent naivety and wish to apologise to the Peruvian people. I expect I
 9 feel more sorry for my youthful indiscretion than Guzmán or Iparaguirre do
 10 for the terror and bloodshed of their futile ‘revolution’ [ok?].

11 Notes

- 1¹ See Joanie Couture, ‘Reason 2,000,623 Why You Must Know What You’re Wearing’, *Sun-Sentinel*, 25 June 2007, https://www.sun-sentinel.com/entertainment/sfl-mtblog-2007-06-reason_2000623_on_why_you_must-story,amp.html.
- 2² Agencia Peruana de Noticias, ‘Peru: Tourism Generated US\$489 Billion in 2018’, 1 April 2019, <https://andina.pe/ingles/noticia-peru-tourism-generated-4895-billion-in-2018-747197.aspx>.
- 3³ ‘Peru: Shining Path Founder Gets Life Sentence’, *New York Times*, 14 October 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/14/world/americas/14briefs-001.html>.

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 14 contributing editor to *Survival*.