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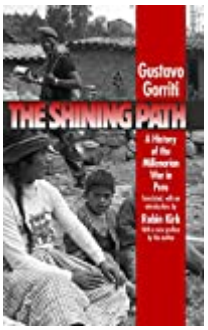

Gustavo Gorriti Ellenbogen. *The Shining Path: A History of the Millenarian War in Peru.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999. xiii + 290 pp. $35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4676-6; $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2373-6.

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The Shining Path

In this book, Gustavo Gorriti presents a journalistic account of the founding and early years of the Shining Path guerrilla insurgency in Peru. Conducting its first armed raids in May of 1980 as the country was returning to civilian rule after twelve years of military government, over the next decade the Shining Path would lead Peru into one of the most bloody civil wars Latin America has witnessed.

This is an important book which challenges standard interpretations and assumptions about the Shining Path, and it has done so since its initial publication almost a decade ago in Spanish in Peru. Now presented to an English-speaking audience in the University of North Carolina's Latin American in Translation series, it will lead more scholars, activists, and policy makers to reconsider this tragic period in Peruvian history.

Many previous writings assumed ignorance of Shining Path ideology because the guerrilla group did not find it necessary to disseminate their propaganda broadly. Likewise, the Shining Path acquired a reputation as an isolated movement cut off from international organizations. Part of this assumption grows out of their strict Marxist determinist view of history that society would move through a series of stages with minimal human intervention. Nevertheless, Gorriti utilizes interviews, Shining Path publications, and government reports to describe the organizations ideology and strategy. He maintains that outsiders could (and should) have known of the insurgents' philosophy and intents had they only bothered to pay attention to what the Shining Path was saying.

The Shining Path is commonly viewed as led by an elite cadre of urban intellectuals who focused on rural zones in the Maoist strategy of encircling the cities which only later in the war led the insurgent forces to close in on urban areas. Gorriti's book effectively disabuses us of that idea. It demonstrates that for the Shining Path the city was always as important of a theatre for the war as the countryside, but at the onset of the conflict internal criticisms led the leadership to minimize emphasizing urban actions in their proclamations.

Gorriti also illustrates the Shining Path maintained important international connections with Maoist organizations including ones in Albania, France, and Berkeley.

His descriptions of these interactions present a new image of an organization which saw itself as the vanguard of an international revolutionary movement. Unlike what Che Guevara mandated in his foco theory, the Shining Path did not seek a jungle canopy for cover, but rather operated openly among the population. The Shining Path also inverted the normal equation of subjugating political to military concerns by privileging ideological correctness over military strategies. One of the most thought-provoking aspects of this book is Gorriti's reflections on the implications of that reversal.

Observers often note the irony that the Shining Path turned to violence just as Peru was returning to democratic governance. Gorriti attempts to explain why the Shining Path rejected an electoral route to change, but his bourgeois values and anti-Communist biases blind him to the full significance of this decision. The book begins in January 1979 with Abimael Guzman, the leader of the Partido Comunista del Peru-Sendero Luminoso (Peruvian Communist Party-Shining Path), arrested during a general strike in Lima. He seems to imply that had the military government not released Guzman at that point the country would have been saved the subsequent tragedy which befell the country.

Throughout the book, the government failure to understand the nature of this insurgency led to inappropriate responses which deepened the crisis. At the onset of the war, the Peruvian military was determined to find Soviet or Cuban support for the guerrillas. No evidence of these connections ever emerged, simply because the Shining Path assumed a political line opposed to those doctrines. In fact, during the height of the insurgency both the Soviet Union and Cuba would become very critical of the Shining Path. Furthermore, the Peruvian military was trained to confront a Che Guevara-style guerrilla warfare, not the type of war which Shining Path launched. Gorriti indicates that the Shining Path insurgency was different from other guerrilla movements in Latin America, but he fails to explain fully how and why it was different.

Gorriti notes the failure of civilians to contain the Shining Path and proceeds to champion a strong armed government response as the one path which would have stopped the bloodletting. This is ironic since Gorriti is often associated with human rights issues and the police and military committed the majority of human rights abuses during the war. This also reveals Gorriti's urban perspective and a lack of understanding of conditions in the countryside which led to the war. For Gorriti, the guerrillas are misguided and misled, but he fails to explain why so many Indians and peasants would join the Shining Path's forces. He primarily sees the negative impact of the war on his world, rather than the years of destruction and exploitation the white world waged on the rural, Indian and peasant world. This book attempts to analyze Guzman's motivations for launching the war, but says nothing about what led the rank and file to join him. If, as Gorriti states, people did not want the war, why did so many participate?

Gorriti's journalistic style presents the advantage that his writing is interesting and easy to read. Robin Kirk has done an excellent job of translating the book into English and interpreting cultural references, which results in a work that is accessible to an undergraduate or general public audience. The book, nevertheless, includes several liabilities which may hinder its usefulness in the classroom. The book is very descriptive in nature, and is generally short on analysis and interpretation. Finished in 1990 at the height of the war, the book has a very presentist sense to it that will make it difficult for students unfamiliar with Peru's subsequent history to make sense of Gorriti's arguments. He describes the beginnings of the war during which the Shining Path's military objectives were quite limited and they did not yet engage in executions of popular leaders or seemingly random terrorist attacks which would later gain the group a reputation for being pathological murderers and a death cult. From the descriptions which Gorriti presents in this book, the Shining Path does not appear to be much different from the current Zapatista uprising in Mexico or other more benign popular uprisings. The alarmist tone of the book would ring true for a 1990 Lima audience, but may not make sense for those unfamiliar with this history.

For a general audience, it is disappointing that the book does not contain a single map. In its original Peruvian edition where the audience would be familiar with the country's geography, such a map would not be necessary, but I suspect that for many readers of the English edition, a map would clarify the early course of the war. The book also lacks a broader international context for the emergence of this conflict. Even a brief explanation of the Cultural Revolution in China or Reagan's preoccupation with the Sandinista government in Nicaragua would help explain to a non-specialist the events unraveling in Peru.

This was to be the first of three books on the history of the guerrilla insurgency, but the 1992 Fujicoup

and subsequent detainment of Guzman derailed plans to complete the other two volumes. The result is a single volume with a chronologically narrow focus which minimizes exploration of the broader significance of the war. This book does not explore the deeper roots of the conflict nor its subsequent development. A much better work in this regard is Steve Stern's recent edited volume *Shining and Other Paths* (Duke University Press, 1998), but is unfortunately too long for most classroom use. Although anyone wishing to gain a deeper understanding of this conflict in Peru will want to read this book, there is still a need for a synthetic interpretive discussion which would pull together what we know about the Shining Path and help us make sense of it.

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