From Shining Path to Truth Commission: A brief history of the Political Regimes of the 1980s and 1990s and the Truth Commissions in Peru

I. Introduction

It is estimated that between 1980 and 2000, close to 70,000\textsuperscript{1} Peruvian people died at the hands of the state, the Sendero Luminoso (hereinafter “Shining Path”) and the Movimiento Revolucionario Tupac Amaru (hereinafter “MRTA”).\textsuperscript{2} Of those 70,000 people, it is estimated that 75% were indigenous.\textsuperscript{3} The people of Ayacucho, where the Shining Path began, undoubtedly suffered most during the war between the militant groups and the state. Much of the violence halted in 1992, when the Shining Path leader, Abimael Guzmán was captured by the military.

In aftermath of this tragic period in Peru’s history a Truth Commission was established to bring to light grave human rights violations committed by the Shining Path, MRTA, and the state. The Truth Commission had its critics and its supporters, but the general opinion is that its overall effect was positive.

II. Peru from the 1980s to the early 1990s

In 1980, the Shining Path, a Maoist revolutionary group, began an uprising against the Peruvian military dictatorship to protest pervasive social and economic inequities. Under the leadership of Guzmán, the Shining Path was organized in the early 1960s. The Shining Path’s objective was to destroy the political system in Peru, to take power, and to create an Indian nationalistic popular democracy.

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\textsuperscript{1} This number varies, but according to the official report from the Truth Commissions the number is 69,280. Many sources round up to 70,000. TRUTH OF TRUTH: TRUTH COMMISSIONS AND SOCIETIES IN TRANSITION (United States Institute of Peace 2006).

\textsuperscript{2} Id.

While the Shining Path movement began organizing in 1962, it did not appear as an openly militant group until 1980. Prior to 1970 Guzmán, a former university professor, belonged to the Communist Party of Peru. However, because the Party was unwilling to engage in an armed struggle against the government, Guzmán eventually left the principal organization and launched the Shining Path as an offshoot. Guzman developed the First Military School of the Communist Party of Peru, which would eventually become the Shining Path (hereinafter “Military School”). It was there that he recruited and trained the militants who emerged in 1980. Many of the recruits were high school and college students from Ayacucho’s shantytowns and countryside. Although Guzmán and the Shining Path sought to break from the old colonial hierarchies, the Shining Path comprised white privileged elites commanding a mass of brown-skinned youth. The Shining Path’s young militants held educational sessions to recruit fighters in mountain villages. In 1978, the Shining Path went underground and did not re-emerge until 1980.

From 1980 to 1982, the Shining Path began offensive actions. In 1980, Peru returned to civilian rule after twelve years of military government. In April, 1980 Guzmán announced to the Military School that it was time to take up arms. He proclaimed:

Comrades: Our labor has ended, the armed struggle has begun…The invincible flames of the revolution will glow, turning to lead and steel…There will be a great rupture and we will be the makers of the new dawn…We shall convert the black fire into red and the red into pure light.

A month later, in the Andean village of Chuschi, four militants burned ballots to declare war. Their first goal was to attack the symbols of the bourgeois state. They bombed public buildings and private companies. They hung dogs and cats from lamp posts as warnings to

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5 Id.
supporters of the government, and targeted and assassinated public figures. The Shining Path saw itself as attacking the glue that held Peruvian society together. It would interrupt communication between the government and the populace; it would then come through and take power in the uncontrolled or abandoned areas. In the 1980s alone, the fighting between the Shining Path guerrillas and the government resulted in ten billion dollars in damages.8

Between 1980 and 1982, the Shining Path was very successful in gaining support from the villages in the war zones. It considered this the period “to unfold the guerrilla war.”9 By the end of 1982, the Shining Path had grown and occupied large regions of the country, including Ayacucho, Huancavelica, and Apurimac. During this period, many observers outside of Peru perceived the Shining Path as a “peasant rebellion.”10 At the end of 1982, the Shining Path was admired and respected for fighting against the government, especially when President Balaúnde sent the Second Infantry division to occupy the area of Ayacucho. The military mounted a campaign of torture and disappearance. However, the Shining Path would prove to engage in the same type of campaign, targeting anyone in its way including many individuals who had once supported it.

In order to fund its operations, the Shining Path engaged in narco-trafficking and forced taxes on small business and individuals in the areas over which it had control. It is well established, however, that in the early 1980s, the Shining Path offered fair prices for the coca crops and provided peasant growers shelter from violent traffickers and security forces.11

The years 1982-1983 marked the third stage of the Shining Path movement, commencing in March 1982 with the attack on the Ayacucho department prison and the consequent release of its prisoners.12 In December 1982, the Shining Path attacked Lima’s electrical grid, destroying four high-tension towers and causing a total blackout in the capital and six other cities. During

this period, the Shining Path also targeted key individuals for assassination. It posted death threats in order to disrupt, paralyze, and eliminate local government institutions. It rounded up community leaders, administrators, and other “traitors,” put them on trial for “crimes against the revolution” and administered punishment, including hanging. The Shining Path published a “death list” of those to be targeted. Usually individuals on the list fled the region, leaving control in the hands of the Shining Path.

MRTA emerged in 1982. This group named itself after an eighteenth century rebel leader who fought Spanish colonial control. It was also influenced by the Cuban Revolution. MRTA’s main goal was to reform the Peruvian government and create a socialist society. MRTA attacked the holdings of Peru’s wealthy elite. It claimed to act in such a way as to minimize injuries. Competition between the Shining Path and MRTA contributed to the murders of many of thousands of the Peruvian peasant population. By the end of 1982, the government crackdown on the Shining Path led to mass killings in all regions occupied by the group. The disappearance and death tolls continued to escalate, and did not recede until Guzmán was captured.

The fourth phase of the Shining Path was the consolidation and expansion of political and logistical support bases. In the predominately indigenous communities, thousands of people continued to perish at the hands of the Shining Path and the government. Between 1983 and 1984, more than three thousand Ayacuchans, most of them impoverished villagers, were killed in what came to be known as the “Dirty War.” The military tried to take back Ayacucho. While the Shining Path had previously targeted only administrators, landlords, merchants, and abusers such as wife-beaters, it now began to use violence and coercion against all kinds of people in order to exert a directive political presence. However, it was met with organized resistance from

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15 Id. at 162.
16 Id. at 162.
Background piece for *Just Performance: Enacting Justice in the Wake of Violence*

peasants determined to defend their communities against incursions and intimidation. By 1986, the Shining Path had begun indiscriminately targeting small farmers and, by 1988, the group was thoroughly corrupt.

In 1990, Alberto Fujimori became President of Peru. Fujimori pursued a policy of developing and expanding armed self-defense committees in the countryside. The impact on indigenous communities was two-fold: they were targets of the Shining Path and victims of government manipulation. On September 12, 1992, Peruvian police captured Guzmán in Lima. All but two hundred Shining Path members gave up their arms and mountain bases. The remaining two hundred disappeared into the jungle. In 1998, the official death toll in the center-south region of Peru was reported at 11,969. Of those, 7,481 were in Ayacucho, and most were killed between 1983 and 1984. It has been established that the death toll is actually six times greater than the 1998 estimate. It is still the case, however, that the death toll in Ayacucho was higher than elsewhere in the country. Some point to the military counterinsurgency strategy as one reason for the high death toll: the military indiscriminately terrorized the peasantry in order to demonstrate that the army could exert greater force than the guerrillas.

In December 1996, during the rule of then Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori, fourteen MRTA members occupied the Japanese Ambassador’s residence in Lima, holding seventy-two hostages for over four months. Armed forces were ordered to raid the residence in April 1997 and all but one hostage was rescued while all fourteen MRTA members were killed.

Two major events have occurred since 1992. In December 2006, the Shining Path killed five Peruvian police officers and two employees of the National Coca Company. In August 2008, the Peruvian military launched an operation against the Shining Path, triggering several counterattacks, including an ambush in October 2008 that killed at least a dozen soldiers. Also

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18 *Id.* at 130.
in 2008, Shining Path members, working with drug traffickers, killed a police officer and wounded eleven others who were on an anti-drug patrol.\textsuperscript{21}  

The Shining Path is said to be an ongoing presence in the mountainous regions of Peru. The United States Department of State lists the Shining Path as a terrorist group. The group controls much of the narco-trafficking in Peru.

### III. Peru’s Truth Commission

After the forced removal of President Alberto Fujimori in November 2000 the caretaker government of Valentin Paniagua approved the establishment of a truth commission. The Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación (Truth and Reconciliation Commission) was inaugurated on July 13, 2001 and began its work after President-elect Alejandro Toledo took office later that month.\textsuperscript{22}

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (hereinafter “Commission”) was composed of twelve people-- ten men and two women. All were from Lima and only one spoke Quechua, the language of the indigenous group most affected by the violence.\textsuperscript{23} This was a point of contention among some Peruvians. The President, acting with the approval of the Council of Ministers, appointed the commissioners. To be accessible to all voices, the Commission opened up five regional offices.

The Commission was mandated to investigate assassinations, torture, disappearances, displacement, employment of terrorist methods and other violations attributable to the State, the Shining Path and MRTA between May 1990 and November 2000, during the administrations of Presidents Terry Belaúnde, Alan García and Alberto Fujimori.

The regional offices traveled into areas to encourage victims to provide written or verbal testimony. To reach people without knocking on each door the local staff rode around in a truck

\textsuperscript{21} Josh Rushing, \textit{Chasing Shining Path}  

\textsuperscript{22} For more information of how the Truth Commission was formed procedurally please see:  

\textsuperscript{23} CONFRONTING THE TRUTH: TRUTH COMMISSIONS AND SOCIETIES IN TRANSITION (USIP Press Books 2006).
with a microphone, assuring victims they could trust them. The individuals facilitating these preliminary interviews were Peruvians from the rural areas, many of whom had been affected by the events. Some in the Ayacucho region opposed the Commission, perceiving it as “leftist” like the Shining Path.

The commissioners examined the operations of truth commissions from other countries, focusing closely on the South African and Nigerian truth commissions. They determined that they did not wish to have a trial-like format in the room. Rather, the commissioners were placed on the same level as those testifying and watching. There would be no judge ruling over other participants. Those who could not be in the room for the hearings could view it on televisions placed in public areas. The hearings were also broadcast on national television. Another unique aspect of the Commission was that the Peruvian military and other government officials were not granted amnesty and were to be investigated fully by human rights groups.

Three months after the Commission commenced, it began to exhume mass graves. Villagers gathered to watch, sharing their years of memories with the country. The exhumations received more media coverage than the live testimony. The forensic details established the violent ways in which people had been killed. The Commission exhumed three sites and returned the identifiable remains to family members. There were symbolic funeral services all over the country. For the first time in twenty years, survivors could truly mourn their loved ones.

On August 28, 2003, the Commission’s final report, 8,000 pages in length, was released President Alejandro Toledo and other members of government. It was broken down into an extensive report, comprising the full history — nine volumes and an annex detailing what occurred during the years of conflict. It also includes, in detail, the occurrences of violence in each region, including the violence against women, accounts of significant attacks on

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24 Id.  
25 Id.  
26 Id.
communities, explanations for what happened, and the names of those victims that could be ascertained.\(^{27}\)

The conclusions drawn by the Commissions shocked Peruvians. The final report estimated that the total number of people who died during the conflict was somewhere between 61,007 and 77,552. In addition, hundreds of thousands of people were displaced. It identified the Shining Path as the principal perpetrator of the crimes and human rights violations, responsible for 54% of the deaths. MRTA was found to be responsible for 1.5% of the deaths. The state was determined to be responsible for the remainder of the deaths, and the administration of Fujimori was deemed particularly blameworthy.\(^{28}\)

The Commission recommended that reparations should be made to the victims of the conflict. It noted that the majority of victims were poor, indigenous peasants. It also recommended an acknowledgement, as well as reconciliation and acceptance of Peru’s multiethnic and multilingual composition. Finally, it advocated prosecutions and institutional reforms.\(^{29}\)

There have been many critiques of the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Some observers have noted that the concentration on individual victims hindered the focus on the need for justice for indigenous communities. These commentators argue that the documentation resulting from the Commission does not address the enormous losses suffered by indigenous communities and the appropriation of their land by the State and the Shining Path. While the Commission’s report did acknowledge that 75% of the victims who died spoke Quechua or another native language, some have argued that the recommendations should have addressed the need to strengthen indigenous governance and institutions, and address negative societal attitudes towards indigenous communities.\(^{30}\)


In 2003, following the end of the Commission, President Toledo made a public apology on behalf of the state to “those who have suffered.” He apologized for all the deaths and the disappearances and he stressed the severe impact of the conflict on rural areas, especially indigenous communities. He also set forth the five objectives of his plan for reconciliation: (1) to improve nutrition, health, education and safety for all Peruvians; (2) to rehabilitate and improve road infrastructure, telecommunications, and electricity; (3) to increase production and productivity, especially agriculture and agribusiness; (4) to promote private investment; and (5) to strengthen the presence of the state and civil society. He then offered proposals for how the government could be restructured to meet these objectives.

Conclusion

The armed conflict that spanned the 1980s and 1990s in Peru has been extensively documented. The Truth Commission was one means to shed light on this dark period in Peru and to give voice to the victims.

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31 President Toledo’s Public Apology to the Citizens of Peru (November 22, 2003).
32 Id.
33 Id.