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Asencios, Dynnik. *La ciudad acorralada: jóvenes y Sendero Luminoso en Lima de los 80 y 90*. Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 2016. 199 pp.

In *La ciudad acorralada*, Dynnik Asencios provides what he calls the “empirical foundations” required to tackle the stereotypes about members of the Communist Party of Peru–Shining Path (Partido Comunista Peruano–Sendero Luminoso, PCP-SL) (p. 21). focusing on the urban theater of the armed conflict in Peru during the 1980s and 1990s, Asencios analyzes and discusses the heterogeneity of *Senderista* activists in the city of Lima, noting that “PCP-SL never became an entirely homogeneous organization” (p.21). In so doing, and by presenting a variety of urban voices, the author seeks to challenge the accepted notion of the group’s purportedly uniquely Andean characteristics. *La ciudad acorralada* contributes to a scanty historiography about the urban theater of the armed conflict.

Asencios’s stated aim is to find out what motivated Lima youths to join the terrorist group during the peak of the conflict. The evidence comes through oral histories, an amalgam of 30 testimonies by ex-activists (16 men, 14 women), all of them imprisoned at some stage due to their involvement in the PCP-SL. “These youths range between 17 and 25 years of age, and entered during a different context in comparison with those who did so in the seventies and the early- and mid-eighties”: that is, in a context of economic and political crisis (p. 20). The motivation that crops up repeatedly in the testimonies is ideological preparation in various degrees, and consequently the question of ideology becomes the focal point of Asencios’s analysis. The book is divided into four chapters. The first two chapters introduce the problematic and place the armed conflict in historical context. In the third chapter, the longest, Asencios analyzes the testimonies in depth. The fourth and final chapter summarizes the conclusions and the reflections presented in the previous chapter, and ends by recapitulating the generational and contextual changes that drove participation in PCP-SL.

Asencios examines the triumphalist mentality of the party, and how this ensured a continuous flow of indoctrination. The period studied in *La ciudad acorralada* is characterized by the *Senderista* approach of “strategic equilibrium,” in which PCP-SL went on the offensive, forcing the state on the defensive. This strategy, for Asencios, triggered a moment of triumphalism within the upper echelons of the party, an impression reinforced by media coverage of the Shining Path’s growing presence in the city. Equilibrium referred to the advance of PCP-SL in Lima, a demonstration of power that

exposed the vulnerability of the Peruvian state. Asencios argues that this atmosphere was part of what prompted youngsters from Lima to join the party. This was the opposite of what had unfolded simultaneously in rural areas, where the Peruvian state had started to regain control and the support of the population. The author suggests that the surface triumphalism of this period concealed a genuine crisis in the ideological preparation of PCP-SL's grassroots activists.

From the analysis of the testimonies, it is apparent that the young activists did not receive the same form of indoctrination as the party's high command, or that employed at the grassroots level in the early 1980s. The "popular school" gradually faded, to be replaced by a superficial idea of military action and justice that referred to "the critical idea" and "the demonstration effect" (pp. 126-131). During those years, the dogmatism prevailing in the rural areas seemed to be in decline in the cities. Asencios does not overlook the role of prisons for many urban youngsters. Referring to articles published in the 1990s and to *La voluntad encarcelada* (2003), José Luis Renique's study about the presence of Shining Path in the prisons, Asencios argues that given the absence of ideological preparation on the streets of Lima, these institutions played a key part in the indoctrination of the youth activists. One of the most interesting revelations of the testimonies is that the youngsters had prior experience of jail conditions. Many activists had been exposed to prisons—delivering food supplies or undertaking missions—before they themselves were arrested, and many expressed a kind of satisfaction at having gained an adequate ideological grounding during their incarceration. Besides the prisons, Asencios also stresses the importance of Shining Path's rituals as a space for securing the loyalty of the new recruits. Festivities and days of celebration were held, breeding a sense of belonging within this large and triumphalist movement.

Beyond his analysis of ideological motivations, Asencios attempts to incorporate a gender analysis. While the author clarifies from the outset that the issue of gender is not the main focus of his study, he stresses that it cannot be overlooked. But insofar as gender is included in the analysis at all, it is concentrated solely on the experiences of women. The most notable section in this regard, "maternity relegated," is a highly unilateral analysis of gender that never expresses any inclination to interpret the role of paternity, and nor does it refer to how the male activists interpreted the family. In general, the presence of gender throughout the text comes across as an afterthought disconnected from the rest of the analysis.

Moreover, even though Asencios's study provides evidence about what motivated urban youngsters to join the terrorist group, there is one aspect

of the Peruvian armed conflict that is neglected. The violence in the rural theater, which preceded the proclamation of strategic balance in 1991, is absent from the testimonies and from Asencios's questioning. Although Shining Path's ideology during the period studied was somewhat superficial, the study does not succeed in exploring how the activists interpreted violence at the time they joined the organization. The concept of memory, alluded to by Asencios early on, is not developed in depth. The experience of violence was intertwined with the ideology of PCP-SL, so it is difficult to accept any explanation that fails to mention it. The media's distribution of bloody images during the 1980s must have made an impact on the activists, and at the same time they—many of them children of migrants—must have felt the violence close to home. It is perhaps this question that demonstrates the main difference between lived experiences in the city and those in rural areas, and how these experiences influenced the grassroots activists.

But despite this criticism, Asencios's study is an important contribution to the historiography of the armed conflict. The emphasis on the urban theater is refreshing, given that historiographical gaps remain in the study of PCP-SL's presence in Lima. The author achieves his aim of complexifying the characterization of Shining Path activists during the conflict, revealing variations in socioeconomic, racial, and gender profiles. The conclusion, and Asencio's approach, delineate the ideology of justice and mobilization, helping to humanize individuals who by now are free or close to completing their sentences. Books such as *La ciudad acorralada* serve as an important tool for understanding the conflicts ongoing in Peru today.

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