



Miguel La Serna. *With Masses and Arms: Peru's Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020. 288 pp. \$34.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4696-5597-0.

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In 1997, TVs worldwide transmitted the images of an armed group besieging the Japanese embassy in Peru with a degree of spectacle and horror. In its last days, the Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (Movimiento Revolucionario Túpac Amaru, MRTA) gained an international significance that had been eclipsed until then by Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso, SL).

Studies of leftist movements have gained ground in the historiography in the years since the end of dictatorships in most of Latin America's Southern Cone. Armed struggle is one key component of this literature. The 1960s and 1970s marked the peak of armed groups and political parties in the region. In Peru, armed conflict remained until the late 80s and 90s and had particular resonance and reach in the media, as most of the region was undergoing its democratic transition at the time.

Within studies on the armed Peruvian Left, most scholars have focused on SL. Anthropologists and historians have been attracted to the spectacle that marked its actions, its outreach, and its insertion in large areas of the territory as well its regular media coverage. As noted by Miguel La Serna, the author of *With Masses and Arms*, the study of political violence in Peru has become practically a "Senderology." The creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2001, and the number

of testimonies collected since then, has allowed a new moment in the research and characterization of the period.

With Masses and Arms: Perú's Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement is an expression of the search for more and better knowledge about these convoluted Peruvian years. It is the first work that intends to comprehensively rebuild the MRTA's own history. Its object, La Serna notes, dives into folds of history that have not been addressed until now: the trajectories and life stories of its militants, the situation of women and gender relations, and the MRTA's own fate in the scenario of Peruvian class struggle. In careful narrative style, through three sections divided into twenty-two subtitled chapters, the author reconstructs the origins, the fate, and the collapse of this organization that once was the country's second in size and influence.

The first part of the book is dedicated to the presentation of the organization's origins in 1982. Here La Serna introduces a key theme in the MRTA's history: the dialog between Peru's past and present, expressed by the MRTA in symbols, discourses, and, most notably, their choice of name, which refers to the movement led by Túpac Amaru II in 1780 and through which they aimed to become the heirs of a two-hundred-year-old movement. This identity relied on the gathering of

events going back to anti-Spanish battles, layered with popular and worker struggles of the twentieth century and the party's own milestones during its years of existence. The dispute over national history was a crucial aspect of the MRTA's determinations and evolution. Its highest expression was the appropriation, in 1984, of the original flag used by José de San Martín—Peru's liberator—when he crossed the Andes and which was the obsession of governments until its recovery after the arrest of the activist who was keeping it, an event with which La Serna chose to close the first section. The seizure of said flag represented the state's inability to look after its symbology ("Without the flag, the state had no control over the historical narrative" p. 56), but it also put the MRTA on the offensive in the dispute over the masses that they represented themselves as leading. In that sense, the stage was set for what would be another distinctive feature of their political-military interventions: the determination to appear coherent and consistent with the defense of the exploited majority's needs. This strategy, in early years, made the MRTA earn a certain degree of acceptance or consent by large sectors who would see it as different from its peer, SL.

La Serna then moves to retell the history of the MRTA from its heyday in 1987, after merging with the Revolutionary Left Movement (Movimiento de la Izquierda Revolucionaria, MIR) and launching the guerrilla deployment in the country's northeast corner, until its leader's escape from a maximum-security prison in Canto Grande in 1990. The imprisonment of Víctor Polay, the MRTA's leader to that point, in 1989 gave rise to new leading figures in the organization's Central Committee. During these years, membership in the organization fell from its peak of about a thousand active militants and hundreds of supporters (p. 93), to its collapse. La Serna locates the turning point between the state's counteroffensive and the Molinos Massacre in April 1989, when more than fifty *erremetistas* were killed by police forces. More voices from those supporting the MRTA dur-

ing these years would have benefited La Serna's reconstruction of the period, as he relies heavily on the media and militants' testimonies. In those years and through the MRTA's actions, the tensions in its program can be seen, particularly around whether to end the conflict and enter into accord with the government as well as around the kind of operations to carry out and their effect.

La Serna's third section is focused on the last stage of the organization, in which a succession of captures, defeats, deaths in combat or for treason, along with an amnesty process launched by Alberto Fujimori's government and accepted by some of the organization's members, eroded the *erremetista* militancy and its supporters. In his description, the author gives an account of how the MRTA erred by increasingly committing poorly planned and shortsighted acts that took the lives of many members and also turned both the media and the public against them. More detail to the course of this period would have been welcome. La Serna here reintroduces and questions the notion of "senderization," which was used by the historian Nelson Manrique to conceptualize this change.[1] The last episode brings us back to the event that opens the book: the siege of the Japanese embassy, perhaps the most spectacular act of an organization trying to reclaim its heyday.

A brief introduction or preview of the book's structure would have been helpful. La Serna organizes his book as a narrative; this means that information is not always reinstated and some storytelling relies on assertion rather than argumentation. Some of these presumed contradictions would be interesting to explore at length, such as the honorary presence of Marx, Lenin, and Ho Chi Minh at the organization's second congress, especially since La Serna does not explore the MRTA's Marxism in depth. The lack of engagement with the literature on state terrorism also comes to the fore in this regard, especially in the book's conclusion and treatment of the Peruvian government's operation to put an end to the or-

ganization in the context of the siege of the embassy (which included the killing of the members despite their surrender). It is also sometimes hard to follow La Serna's argument that the history of the MRTA is the history of the Latin American Left during the Cold War; here, too, more conversation about the historiography on this question would have been welcome.

With Masses and Arms draws on a great variety of sources as well as specialist literature. This diversity enriches the narrative style of this work. Life histories introduce the characters and give substance to their feats and contradictions.

One of La Serna's other major achievements comes in his discussion of gender, which reveals the subtleties where gender differences and power relations meet. The author highlights women's family struggles as they sought to join the ranks of the MRTA as well as the contradictions between the organization's internal patriarchal practices and its purported fight against them. La Serna makes this clear through his exploration of the tasks assigned to women, the positions to which they could aspire, at least until 1990, and even the chosen name for the female group's escape operation from Canto Grande prison: "Cupid," which noticeably contrasted with the "Tiger 1" and "Tiger 2" names for those of their male counterparts. La Serna adds that all of this coexisted with homophobic ideas that even led to persecutions and executions in the northeastern campaigns. But discriminatory notions went beyond the frontiers of gender; the author also finds them in the appropriation of indigenous symbols (p. 41), the assassination of the leader Ashánika (pp. 117-118), and the ethnocentrism to which members of that community were subjected.

In sum, the book constitutes a valuable contribution to studies of Latin American Lefts through a text that is notable for its readable and attractive prose.

Note

[1]. Nelson Manrique, *El tiempo del miedo: La violencia política en el Perú, 1980-1996* (Lima: Fondo Editorial del Congreso del Perú, 2002), 121.

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