

Profile on Sendero Luminoso

Lights out. A crash is heard from down the street. The familiar echo of the explosion elicits no reaction but the slightest shifts in people's beds, the only worry is how long it will be before the power returns. Adaptation is something that Peruvians had to learn during the 1980s. Lack of water and common goods, curfews, and constant fear were things that Peruvians had to learn to become accustomed to. In the 80s a simple stroll to the movie theatre posed a threat to your life. Adapting was the only way to get through daily life during a period of death, radicalism, and revolution.

My mother tells me stories from her past, to the days when she wore a uniform to school and bows in her hair. At first the stretch of silence over the phone and hesitant "ums" tell me that she is nervous. My questions take her back to the dangers of her youth, a time when you didn't even feel safe inside your own home. "Bueno, Nicole..." she says, and once she starts, her nerves pass and the stories pour out.

"I remember I was in high school when it started. It was my senior year. One day around lunch time we are all eating when suddenly our teachers told us no one could leave school grounds. A normal school day ended at 3:30 but they kept us there until they got the orders that it was all safe to come out and let parents pick up their kids. We didn't know what was going on. This was kind of the first time something like a bomb exploding had happened in Lima," my mother, Edurne, said.

The explosions were violent devices manipulated by a radical group known as Sendero Luminoso (The Shining Path). The grassroots movement came about to combat the inequality that was evident in Peru.

To understand the period and the reasons behind where Sendero came from, I turn to an old family friend, Luis Lamas who is a lawyer, and former professor of the University of Lima San Marcos. A screen divides us as I interview him over Skype, but it feels as if we were conversing just like we did the other night over dinner with the family. The webcam casts a white glow on the screen, giving his

background a bit of a saturated glare. Luis, or as I call him, "Tio Lucho," scratches his balding head, his cream colored scalp standing out from the surrounding patches of white hair. His eyebrows wrinkle and I can tell he is trying to figure out how to word his answer.

"There were distinct causes behind the creation of Sendero Luminoso. The first being socio-economic. Peruvian society is conformed of different social, and economic groups that find themselves stratified. They must learn to coexist with each other. There are different economic needs as well as social and cultural clashes. These factors create conflict, one of the largest being that not all Peruvians have access to normal civil rights and needs. So Abimael Guzman, the leader of Sendero Luminoso, found himself in a social environment that resembled a feudal society."

Suddenly, Lucho pauses, he asks, "How's your brother doing?" The question takes me off guard for a moment. I had been intently listening to his response. I relax and offer a smile.

"He's good. Probably playing some video game inside his room." We both laugh.

"Well, anyway," Luis continues, "Abimael took advantage of the situation to start his revolution," he says.

Abimael Guzman was a philosophy teacher from his native region in Arequipa. He traveled to China where he observed the social climate of the Cultural Revolution that was occurring there. Once he returned to Peru, he adopted the Maoist ideology and interpreted it to fit the "needs" of Peruvian society.

"Guzman's ideology was a transformed version of Marxism. Marx himself would not recognize many of the left-wing systems set up. The quote 'Marxism-Leninism will open the shining path to revolution' is supposed to be where Guzman took the name of his group and supporters from. Like him, many revolutionary leaders appealed to the peasant population who are discontent, they have grievances, either not enough land or the price of crops is not decided by them. Guzman took advantage of a crisis situation where the poor were really hurting," said Martin Cannon, my mother's

old history teacher at the British school in Lima, San Silvestre. Only minutes earlier we were discussing the outcome of the big match between Chelsea and Manchester United. The biggest topic of the day for most Brits. His accent sticks out as the theme of a football game keeps the tone light even though we are discussing the gravity of such a serious theme, the political and social problems in my home country of Peru that brought radicals to rebel in such a way.

As a member of the upper middle class my mother grew up knowing just about everyone in Peru. Though she attended the best school in Lima and went to the birthday parties of all the ambassadors' children, she has always felt the unfair divide between class groups. While some families never allowed their nanny or maid sit with them at the dinner table or bathe at the same beach, my mother always befriended and showed the utmost generosity to her nannies and then my own when I was growing up. I remember my nanny, Mari Luz who was as thin as a twig but ate portions three times her size and took six hours to eat, but she always cleaned her plate.

My mother said, "The group Sendero Luminoso started as a fight against the injustices of the upper classes. In Lima the upper class dominates, and especially in the 70s and 80s they subjugated the lower classes. Abimael Guzman preached that Sendero wanted society in Peru to be equal. Peru has a very class defined society, and usually the people who live in the mountain regions of Ayacucho or Cusco are very poor, and the government back then ignored their needs. So the poor wanted a better life. If you live in a little hut with no electricity or clean water, and you barely subsist off of what you have, you see all these people with things you've only ever dreamt of, and suddenly there's this group that promises to give you access to all of it if you join them, you're going to join."

From 1975 to 1990 Peru suffered from a tripled inflation rate, unemployment rose, and there was a large external debt. By 1990 there were 12 million living in poverty. This was followed by a cholera epidemic in 1991. Guzman saw the perilous social environment and insisted on raining down a revolution.

Luis, the lawyer, shares with me a critical opinion on Sendero and its leader. Tio Lucho was always interviewed for his insight on Sendero.

"Guzman exploited the poverty crisis to lead an uprising. The only way to gain advantage in the situation was to apply violent methods, to have a strong arm, and usurp the government. Abimael strongly believed that to create an insurrection you have to destroy the current order. His beliefs in destruction are integral to understanding the sudden turn to radical movements."

Today we discuss the political and economic problem but it seems like just yesterday he was sitting my little brother in the front seat of one of his prized Mustangs, and letting tiny Stephano pretend he was driving the giant red car.

It seems as if there were distractions driving Peruvian citizens to focus on other cultural aspects, instead of solely focusing on the terror organization. I remember one night when my brother and I were with my mom in the living room. Bombs started going off and my brother asked my mom why people were lighting fireworks. It was such an innocent moment, but one that speaks true to most Peruvians at the time.

My conversation with Cannon keeps switching between football and the revolution as he shares the story of the 1982 World Cup and the historical events that made it so important.

"At first they were an annoyance. There were much more important situations occurring within Peru at the time like the inflation, Argentina invading the Falkland islands, and the World Cup in 1982. The Berudi, the President of Peru at the time tried to play peacemaker between Argentina and England. Most of South America dislikes Argentina because they're the snobs of Latin America, but surprisingly they sided with Argentina in this conflict, so being a Brit in Peru at the time was a bit of an uncomfortable situations as Brits were then unpopular. There were much more important things occurring in history at the time and when Peru made it to the final rounds of the World Cup the entire country went insane. The world cup was also important because everyone wondered if Argentina,

who had a very good team, would face England on the field, as well as in battle. I remember we made a deal with the students, if one of them brought in a television we would suspend school and watch the matches...which we did," said Cannon.

The crisis originated in the Andean regions, most famously in Ayacucho. Then and even now, the indigenous of Peru are referred to as "Cholos" a slang, almost derogatory term. The use of the word is symbolic evidence of the societal divide in Peru.

"At the beginning everyone thought that what was happening in the mountains were things that would remain there. It was their problem," my mother pauses, she feels guilty for saying such a thing. "In the cities no one predicted that the situation could be something that would affect us personally," my mother said.

The poor were neglected, the indigenous were given no importance. When asking Luis, about this he tells me about the beautiful colors of the natives, the culture, the music, and the wonders of the Andeans. He speaks of it in such a magical way that makes me miss home.

"Abimael started his revolution in the Andes because of the mystic aura it created. The Andes represented an ethnic, unified land; a return to the roots of the country and that is why Abimael chose to start there," said Luis.

At the outset there were just echoes of a dissent against the government. But, time would go on to show that a small group who disagreed with the government would quickly gain followers that would turn into a guerilla army.

"It was just then, when I was first starting at the police force, that I got caught up with the period of Sendero Luminoso. It was the 80s. They were 'un grupo malo'," said Emilio Robles.

I originally found Emilio outside the Performing Arts Center at my college, sweeping leaves into a pile. Everyone around just walked by him, almost as if he wasn't even there. Dressed in his blue janitorial uniform no one would ever suspect that thirty years ago Emilio was confronting danger

every day he stepped outside his home. Emilio tells me his stories with a shine in his eyes, almost like he's divulging a secret.

"Abimael Guzman, the leader, wanted to breach the government, and push for a revolution. Sendero Luminoso was his way of trying to attain that. They would brainwash people to follow their ideas, and they would go after young, intelligent people like students at the University of San Marcos," said Robles.

"The first time I can remember hearing about the attacks was literally, on New Year's Eve of 1980-81 when my wife and I were on the roof of our apartment watching some fireworks go off to celebrate the New Year and, all of a sudden, a chunk of the city blacked out. I think it was somewhere in San Isidro direction, but I could be wrong, we were living close to the school in Miraflores then. But we thought, okay, a power cut of some kind, - probably the music was being played too loud or something.... " Mr. Cannon laughs, sharing, "It was Peru after all! It was only the next day when we heard that in fact Sendero - this weird group from Ayacucho - had succeeded in disabling a power station causing part of the city to lose its electricity. The rest of the year, they gained notoriety and did more of that kind of thing, bringing their campaign down to the urban centers, particularly Lima, but also some of the bigger towns up in the Andes where security was much more lax," said Cannon.

But soon after, power outages seemed tame compared to the violence that would follow. Making a statement turned into directly attacking the population to prove their point.

"I think it was during the Tarata attack when I realized it was getting serious," my mother's voice begins to get louder, I can tell she is reliving the shock of the attacks as she thinks back to the moment. "The violence occurred in Miraflores which is a very nice neighborhood in Lima. The Shining Path filled two trucks with explosives and drove them into the middle of the street. It happened at about seven o'clock at night when everyone was home with their families eating dinner and relaxing. On the news I remember seeing the destroyed buildings, the dead bodies, the injured, and there were

kids...so many little kids that fell victim to this. It was shocking because Miraflores is a quiet neighborhood so it made me realize that if this sort of attack could happen there, it could happen anywhere, it could happen where I live." The slight tone of fear dissipates from my mother's words and she becomes more composed and accepting. The theme of adaptation returns. "When they first started blowing up electricity plants it was scary, but after a while we sort of got used to it. When you heard a bomb explode, you would think...'Oh, what did they blow up now?', and you would already expect there to be no water or electricity the next day. But Tarata changed everything. All of a sudden Sendero could bomb your street, your house, and you would die. From that point on at night the streets were blocked with barricades, there were curfews. After midnight until five in the morning you could not leave your house unless you had special permission. If you had an emergency you had to drive in your car with a very slow speed, the windows open, and a white flag or handkerchief, otherwise the military or the police that were guarding the streets could shoot you," my mother said.

The idea of being shot in the middle of the day was something that Emilio, the kind janitor at my school had to think about every single day. He shares the thrill of being a police officer and tells me proudly that he joined the force because it was the family career. His father, cousins, and uncle were all police officers.

"During the period of Sendero it was difficult to be a police officer. You really had to take care of yourself. Before, one officer could go around on his own. You would see someone driving wrong, stop a car, and they would stop. But this time was different. You had to be alert. Nothing was easy or civil while Sendero was around. My friend was working in an emergency zone. One day he went to the market for groceries and he noticed that members of Sendero were following him. A few weeks later he was out with his brother. They entered a bodega, when suddenly Sendero started shooting them. Because my friend and his brother looked so alike, Sendero mistakenly killed his brother instead. My friend covered himself in the blood that was all over and pretended to be dead," said Emilio.

Peru was on the brink of a war, pitting Sendero Luminoso against everyone who was not on their side.

"Daily life for any Peruvian during this era was difficult," said Cristina D'Ornellas, my mother's old school mate. Cristina is a bit hesitant, not knowing if she holds the ability to answer my questions. She speaks as if it is not her place to be sharing these stories. Her tone is direct and critical, almost angry.

"Sendero Luminoso would drive cars full of bombs into any area at night. They would also place dynamite near electrical powers so that they would explode and the entire country would constantly face power outages at which times Sendero used the blackouts to sneak around and plan more attacks, deceive the police, and kidnap," Cristina said.

Sendero Luminoso and its actions were something entirely new to the country. While left party groups, like the PCP, were known, nothing so radical and violent had been experienced.

"At the time, terrorism as we know it today was unheard of in Peru. Guzman knew that there was no need to convince the Peruvian society of his revolution because they would never accept it as a result of the class climate in the nation. There was never a dialogue. The violence rose out of a need to destroy the status quo," said Luis.

Years before the group, Sendero Luminoso, plagued the country, Peru had been afflicted by several military governments with de facto Presidents. Cristina, my mother's classmate shares this notion with me as she prepares to tell me the story of her father, Manuel D'Ornellas Suarez.

"My dad wanted to be a lawyer. He studied law in Buenos Aires, Argentina, but he never went on to practice law. His greatest passion was writing about politics. He began working in the *Diario Expreso* when he was very young. He first worked as an editor, then director of the editing team, and finally as director of the magazine. While his time at the magazine my father wrote an opinion column about the political situation in the country. This is what he did until his death. In 1970 my dad had to flee Peru to avoid his arrest under the military government of President Juan Velasco. Because of the

harsh dictatorship under Velasco, a lot of journalists were deported. My father's column became very critical and he was strongly against the government, and the need for his arrest grew. So my father fled with my mother, me and my brother. When Velasco's government heard of this they deported him and names my father a traitor to his country. They took away his Peruvian citizenship and he could no longer enter the country. Later, when Velasco was overthrown all the journalists that had been deported were pardoned and allowed to re-enter Peru. During the era of Sendero Luminoso, my father wrote about the terrorist organization. As a result, he was included in the groups list of 'People to Assassinate', said Cristina.

The problem with Sendero was that they started to kill their own. This is where my mother becomes even more skeptical about the radical grassroots organization that swept her country. When we first started our conversation she admitted to the abuses by the upper classes and agreed with the need for equality, but her attitude shifts when she begins to think of the outrage of Sendero. The group who brought hope only to turn on their own supporters.

My mother tells me, "When the rumors of murders began, the ones being killed were the poor farmers in the Andes that Sendero promised to help. A lot of times it was because they didn't want to help Sendero or let their children join. It was strange because they were fighting a revolution for equality, but at the same time they were killing those they were supposed to be striving for."

My mother's story resonates with the confusion that was on everyone's mind at the time. A revolutionary group whose actions counter their belief made it even more difficult for Peruvian society to find a reasonable compromise.

Cristina D'Ornellas' critical attitude continues to flood her responses. It is one that her father would praise.

"In the cities we experienced a difficult time, but for the people of the Andes...they had it worse. Sendero would attack small pueblos, enter homes and kill everyone inside. They murdered so

many families. It was their way of asserting their control over the Andean regions. They killed just to kill. Sendero's excuse would be that they were acting out because the people in the pueblo were falling out of line. At the time, government soldiers would patrol those regions and if a member of Sendero happened to see anyone from the pueblo speaking with a soldier, the next day the entire pueblo would be attacked," said Cristina.

During the age of the Sendero Luminoso attacks, 70,000 Peruvians were killed or missing. The largest number in the country's modern history. At the start of Guzman's attacks there was little government reaction and the leadership of then President Alan Garcia was highly criticized. It wasn't until Alberto Fujimori was elected in 1990 that the real fight against Sendero took flight.

"Ese chino, Fujimori," Emilio begins. His use of words makes me laugh. It's a statement a typical Peruvian would use. His quick word pick up as he voices his opinion, "People think bad of him because he's in jail and was put on trial for abuses against human rights. But the young people...they don't know that much. They never think of what he did for Peru. If it wasn't for Fujimori the situation would have probably been much, much worse," said Emilio.

"When they started attacking Lima, the government began to act. Sendero Luminoso had been partnering with drug dealers, exchanging money and weapons. Because the social climate in the country was becoming very dangerous businessmen were taking their money out of the country. The government began to pay attention in order to save the economy because of a fear of business collapse," my mother said.

"At one point it was believed that Sendero was composed of people from the Andes who were poor and did not agree with the order of Peruvian society. They turned out to be this crazy, radical group that insisted on violence. To understand Sendero, you had to learn their techniques, and recognize their ideas. Essentially, I believe that is what the government tried to do. It takes several years to fully understand how to confront a group that uses terrorist mechanisms and find a solution.

It was a time when democracy was at a disadvantage against terrorism. When Garcia was president he actually governed after years of campaigning, it was a responsible government, but that is also why he did not have much luck against Sendero. Radical actions needed to be taken to combat the group, and that is exactly what Fujimori did. He sent orders to find and capture Sendero leaders and members. He wanted all the terrorists killed," said Luis Lamas.

But radical actions taken by the government came with a price. Emilio goes on to tell me a story that not only shocked me when I heard it, but shocked him too as he retold the memory full of malevolence. The man who spends his days mopping floors and cleaning windows has seen so much violence in his country. One has to wonder why he has never returned to Peru in fifteen years.

"My partner was patrolling Plaza Italia. One night two trucks drove in and members of Sendero jumped out, killing everyone. Though, one boy lived. He was hiding under a table...I think that's what it was. It was because this boy survived that an investigation on the attack commenced and it was later discovered that Sendero had not even been behind the attacks, instead it was a government group, Colina," Emilio said.

It was groups like Colina which were created to match the gun power of Sendero that caused a very unstable environment. The government had to manipulate the same devices to fight this group. It is because of Alberto Fujimori's ruthless tactics that the war against terrorism in Peru became so controversial, even leading to a trial against Human Abuses which resulted in Fujimori's arrest and later conviction.

"I think the government had a difficult enough job dealing with the "normal" running of the country. Dealing with economic problems was a paramount problem facing the government and I really don't think they knew what to do about this splinter group – who, let's face it, weren't very significant in the early eighties, just annoying. As Sendero became more radical, then things were more serious, but we left at the beginning of 1983 before things got much worse. Living in Venezuela

now I can see some parallels with what was happening in Peru then. The government always thinking, 'Are we doing enough?' They didn't handle it too well at first because I think they believed it wasn't that large of a problem...at the beginning Sendero only had a few thousand members, but at the same time look at what the Bolsheviks in the Soviet Union were able to do," said Mr. Cannon, who very much the academic, leaves our interview with an ambiguous outlook.

All these perspectives come together, and though the subject of Peru during the era of Sendero Luminoso is still complex, it is apparent that fear was a dominating factor. While the struggles between the upper classes and lower classes is still very real in Peru, times have changed. The country has progressed economically and politically with the government taking more actions to help the indigenous poor. However, the lines that divide the classes are obvious and this is something that may take a very long time to change, which poses the problem of a possible Sendero resurrection. While the fight for equality remains, Sendero will not disappear, it will only transform.