

**“¡Venceremos!” (We will prevail!): Investigating the Allure of the Túpac Amaru
Revolutionary Movement**

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
In the Department of History at Brown University
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April 14, 2025

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List of Acronyms

Acronym	Expanded Name (Spanish)	English Translation
APRA	Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana	American Popular Revolutionary Alliance
CGTP	Confederación General de Trabajadores del Perú	General Confederation of Workers of Peru
ELN	Ejército Nacional de Liberación	National Liberation Army
FIR	Frente de Izquierda Revolucionaria	Revolutionary Left Front
IU	Izquierda Unida	United Left
MIR	Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria	Revolutionary Left Movement
MIR-EM	Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria-“El Militante”	Militant Revolutionary Left Movement
MRTA	Movimiento Revolucionario Túpac Amaru	Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement
PCP	Partido Comunista Peruano	Peruvian Communist Party
PCP-U	Partido Comunista Peruano-Unidad	Peruvian Communist Party-Unity
PCP-BR	Partido Comunista Peruano-Bandera Roja	Peruvian Communist Party-Red Flag
PSR	Partido Socialista Revolucionario	Revolutionary Socialist Party
PSR-ML	Partido Socialista Revolucionario Marxista-Leninista	Marxist-Leninist Revolutionary Socialist Party
UDP	Unidad Democrática Popular	Popular Democratic Unity

Acknowledgements

Writing this thesis has been a truly incredible experience. It would not have been possible without the guidance, support, and advice from so many important people. Thank you to Professor Evelyn Hu-DeHart, my advisor and greatest academic supporter. I am so glad I took your history class on the Mexican Revolution, where you asked me if I was writing a thesis and told me you would love to advise me if I did. I am incredibly grateful for your guidance, meticulous comments and encouraging words. Thank you so much for introducing me to Lori Berenson and giving me the confidence to execute this project to the best of my abilities.

Thank you to Professor Emily Owens, whose direction provided in class meetings was invaluable. You taught me things about writing I will never forget and ensured that no one felt alone during the thesis writing process. I am so appreciative of the time and energy you put into planning workshops and reading our drafts, providing motivation and a fresh perspective. I have no doubt I will think back to your advice over and over again.

To Mica Maltzman and Lucas Galarza, my workshop group, thank you for your indispensable comments and insights. I am so glad we went through this process together—I loved reading your drafts and learning about your projects and cannot wait to read the finished products.

Thank you to Professors James Green, Daniel Rodriguez, and Stephen Kinzer, in whose classes I became acquainted with Latin American History and developed a passion that led me to this project.

To my incredible family, thank you for letting me ramble on and on about the MRTA and Peruvian history. To my parents, Alice Naude and Stephen Saxl, thank you for raising me to observe and question everything around me and for pushing me to be my best. Mama, thank you for setting an example of an incredible writer and for your eternal patience when helping me with my own writing (and with me in general); Dad, thank you for paving the path for me to study History and for reading about the MRTA (and enjoying it!). To my sister, Sophie, thank you for your belief in me and for the true light you bring to our family and my life.

To all of my incredible friends, thank you for your continuous love and support and for the conversations we have that push us to be curious and keep me on my toes. To Klara, Alissa, and Tabitha, my co-thesis writer extraordinaires, thank you for your mutual encouragement and well deserved treat day work sessions. To Joey, thank you for your company; your calm, optimism, and unwavering faith that I would get it all done.

To all of those whose stories I told over the course of this thesis, thank you. It was incredibly meaningful to work with your words and I hope that I did your experiences justice.

Introduction

On Sunday, July 9, 1990, forty-eight men and women climbed through a tunnel measuring 332 meters long, 1.5 meters high, and 1 meter wide in a three-year long planned escape of the Miguel Castro Castro Prison. Colloquially referred to as *Canto Grande* (the Big Stone) and located half an hour northeast of Lima, the penitentiary had been built in 1986, designed to hold the prisoners who posed the greatest threat to Peru. Members of the nation's two largest insurgent groups, Shining Path (*Sendero Luminoso*) and The Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (*Movimiento Revolucionario Túpac Amaru*, MRTA), were thrown in in droves after their arrest. Canto Grande was touted as “escape proof”—but that did not stop the MRTA directorate from drawing up plans for a prison break, just a year after the inauguration of the facilities. The plot required building a small house 300 meters from the prison, constructing a trap door leading underground to the opening of a tunnel, finding sympathizers to pose as a couple, and ensuring that neighbors and prison officials bought the story. MRTA leaders enlisted Víctor and Rosa Vargas, who pretended to be young homeowners and helped to remove loads of dirt dug up from under the house. The MRTA faced a number of setbacks: the arrest of their leader, Víctor Polay Campos, a spooked Víctor and Rosa who demanded to be replaced, a slow digging pace, workers' complaints about heat and dust, and the suspicion of prison guards. Nonetheless, they succeeded: “*Venceremos!*”¹ could be heard from MRTA prisoners as they climbed through the tunnel, into the house, and were driven to their freedom. In order to pull off this escape, the MRTA rallied its cadre of engineering students, miners, and able-bodied workers

¹ “Venceremos” is best translated as “we will prevail” in the context of the MRTA's fight against the Peruvian state. However, readers should be aware of an alternate translation, “we shall overcome,” a significant phrase in the American context.

to labor day in and day out to liberate those inside the prison. How did they convince their members to stick with it? What made the MRTA's loyal members committed to radical activity?

This thesis will investigate the membership of the MRTA, an insurgent left-wing group that declared war against the Peruvian state in 1982. The MRTA was born out of revolutionary traditions tracing back to indigenous rebellions against Spanish colonization. The organization was not alone in the region: a large number of radical groups had popped up across Latin America beginning in the late 1950s. The MRTA, born in the early 1980s and active until the late 1990s, was one of the last groups to be viewed as a true threat to state function. MRTA leaders and members stood firmly against imperialism, economic exploitation, and military abuses. They believed their existence to be "...a necessity in the face of the system of exploitation and oppression to which we have been subjected since colonization and throughout this period of supposedly democratic republic"² and saw the MRTA as simply the current iteration of Peruvian radicalism that had engaged in struggle on behalf of the Peruvian people for centuries. The leaders of the MRTA were overwhelmingly middle-class, well-educated urbanites. They had learned about Peru's social and economic struggles in the classroom and studied Peru's revolutionary history. However, a multitude of Peruvians, mostly of a younger generation, shared these leaders' vision for the country. This cross-class pool of students, agricultural workers, and the urban poor supported the MRTA and coordinated attacks, trained as militants in the jungle, and produced propaganda for the organization. These members were motivated not only to enter into the world of radical politics, but to choose the MRTA specifically. Sendero Luminoso, a more violent, Maoist, rural-based insurgent group was also engaged in war against the state in the 1980s and 1990s.

² MRTA, "El MRTA y la revolución peruana," UNMSM CEDOC, May 1985, <https://cedoc.sisbib.unmsm.edu.pe/biblioteca-digital/coleccion-documental/folletos/96>.

This project will focus on the question of why people joined the Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement. Membership will be defined expansively, not only to investigate the organization's inner circle, but also to understand those who sympathized, supported, and were affiliated with the MRTA. Evidence drawn from an array of sources will seek to explain the motivations of Peruvians, and one key outsider, who joined the MRTA. These sources will also illuminate the methods used by MRTA leaders to recruit members and garner support. I will engage with questions around rhetoric, background, political context, revolutionary history, and the conditions of late 20th century Peru in order to determine that the MRTA attracted members because of political and economic grievances and the belief that a radical solution was necessary. The MRTA positioned itself against Sendero and within Peruvian left-wing history to come across as the answer to those who were severely disillusioned with Peruvian society and governance and sought an answer for what could come next. This introduction will explain the MRTA, provide sociopolitical background on Peru, describe the kinds of sources used and the choices made, and elaborate on the larger argument of this thesis before providing summaries of the chapters that follow.

History of the MRTA

In June 1980, a handful of Peruvian leftist groups attended a Unitary Conference. This conference would conclude with the founding of the Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement, an organization that would declare war against the Peruvian state, employing armed struggle to fight for the masses for “national liberation” and against imperialism, corruption, inequality, military abuse, and political stagnation. Thus, at its birth, the MRTA was a revolutionary party: a guerrilla group considered the natural progression of the “Peruvian Revolution” and the struggles against

oppression playing out across Latin America, subscribing to Marxist principles as well as a nationalist desire to fight for Peru.

The MRTA platform was adopted in part against the backdrop of Sendero Luminoso, the radical Maoist group founded in 1970 by Abimael Guzmán, a professor of philosophy at the National University of San Cristóbal de Huamanga in the Southern city of Ayacucho. Guzmán, often referred to by his nom de guerre Chairman Gonzalo, coined the doctrine “Gonzalo thought,” an ideological addition to Marxism-Leninism-Maoism grounded in the Peruvian context. Guzmán’s cult of personality was a central piece of Sendero Luminoso’s platform, and the organization was ultimately unable to survive without his leadership after his capture by the state in 1992. Violence was also central to Sendero’s vision of revolution. The group’s platform noted the “blood quota,” a belief that revolutionaries and noncombatants must be sacrificed for the people’s war. Guzmán was known to have said “the triumph of the revolution will cost a million deaths.”³ Sendero Luminoso launched its armed struggle in southern Ayacucho just a month prior to the Unitary Conference, on May 18, 1980. The Peruvian leftists who attended the conference were well aware of Sendero’s existence, ideology, and commitment to a bloody revolution. They sought to form an organization with a less violent, distinctly Peruvian conception of revolutionary struggle, putting aside differences to come together to form a left-wing vision for Peru. For two years, members of four leftist parties worked in tandem to develop a strategic platform, officially adopting the name “Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement” in 1982, as a tribute to the Inca warrior who led the largest uprising against the Spanish in colonial Latin America.

³ Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación, “Conclusiones generales del informe final de la CVR,” *Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación del Peru*, <https://www.cverdad.org.pe/ingles/ifinal/conclusiones.php>.

Peruvian History and the Peruvian Conflict

The declaration of revolutionary armed struggle against the Peruvian state from both Sendero Luminoso and the MRTA in the 1980s is seen by many scholars as a natural progression rooted in Peruvian revolutionary tradition. Peru had been riddled with inequality since gaining independence from the Spanish in 1826. Peru's elite, traditionally considered to consist of forty-four families of Spanish descent, controlled the nation's land and political affairs for over a century.⁴ James D. Rudolph, author of *Peru: The Evolution of a Crisis*, refers to the period from 1895 to 1919 as "The Aristocratic Republic."⁵ The early decades of the 20th century oscillated between dictatorship and democratic rule, experiencing little disruption to the severely unequal societal order.

In 1968, General Juan Velasco Alvarado deposed democratically-elected president Fernando Belaúnde Terry in a bloodless coup that granted power to the Peruvian Military as "The Revolutionary Government of the Armed Forces." Velasco's administration was, in fact, somewhat revolutionary: while leading the country at the helm of a military dictatorship, Velasco implemented significant land reform that effectively dismantled the agrarian basis of the Peruvian elite's power. The government also fought against the United States's efforts to control industry in Peru and nationalized the International Petroleum Company (IPC) oil fields in the north-western province of Piura.⁶ Despite these progressive moves, Velasco's government was unable to rid Peru of inequality. The rapidly-industrializing nation began to witness capital flock to Lima, where a new elite class was formed around the corporate and natural resource management sectors.⁷

⁴ James D. Rudolph, *Peru: The Evolution of a Crisis* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1992), 11.

⁵ Rudolph, *Peru: The Evolution of a Crisis*, 13.

⁶ Hal Brands, "The United States and the Peruvian Challenge, 1968-1975," *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 21, no. 3 (2010): 471.

⁷ Rudolph, *Peru: The Evolution of a Crisis*, 12.

Francisco Morales Bermúdez took the reins of the Revolutionary Government of the Armed Forces in 1975. Two years later, the Morales Bermúdez government announced a plan to end military governance, facilitated through Constituent Assembly elections in 1978 and a presidential election in 1980. The election was won by Fernando Belaúnde Terry, the former president who had been overthrown by Velasco in 1968. Belaúnde had been re-elected with the promise to create a million jobs and focus on public works. He was elected in part because he was seen as the most anti-military candidate, as he was the very man who was ousted by the military. The Peru that Belaúnde inherited after military dictatorship was vastly different from the Peru he had governed before. While the Revolutionary Government of the Armed Forces had sought to fight against oligarchy and imperialism, it had also severely damaged democracy, and had not cured Peru of poverty or wealth disparity.

On July 2, 1980, Belaúnde took office in a celebrated restoration of civilian rule. His popularity, however, would not last long. The Belaúnde administration stressed neoliberal economic policies to stimulate economic growth and sought to pursue the construction projects of his campaign promise. Yet, between a 1981-1983 recession that greatly affected Peru's two major exports (petroleum and copper), the exorbitant budget demanded by a still powerful Military, and the 1983 drought that devastated agriculture, Belaúnde took the fall for an economic crisis that saw the GDP fall by 11.8 percent. While they hoped for progress under a civilian government, the Peruvian left had emerged from military rule unified, strong, and was ready to organize against Belaúnde, who they had deemed unable to create meaningful change. The MRTA blamed Belaúnde for many of the nation's problems, citing economic crisis and the failure of newly reinstated democracy to address societal grievances as motivating factors for initiating armed struggle. In a press release entitled "Sobre la lucha armada" (On the armed

struggle) from in March 1982, a newly-established MRTA writes, "...the change of regime from a military dictatorship to a civil government does not modify the structural factors that have designed a prolonged pre-revolutionary period, but rather, as is demonstrated day by day, tends to aggravate them."⁸ Peruvians across the left felt disappointed by both the left-wing dictatorship's failure to resolve structural inequality as well as the newly elected democratic government's unwillingness and inability to remedy these issues.

It was in this context of a strong left and economic crisis that Alan García Pérez was elected in 1985. García was the candidate of the APRA party (*Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana*, American Popular Revolutionary Alliance), a left-wing movement founded in the 1920s by socialist thinker Victor Raúl Haya de la Torre. While APRA had been involved with radical political activity in the first half of the 20th century, years of political exclusion had caused the party to turn away from socialism. During his time as a deputy in Congress, García denounced the International Monetary Fund and foreign economic control of Peru. He voiced support for the Sandinista government in Nicaragua and affirmed his alignment with Peruvian unions. At thirty-seven years old, García projected enthusiasm and energy into his presidential campaign, which was centered around a promise to establish "social democracy" and to be a president for all Peruvians.⁹ After García was declared the winner of the 1985 election, the MRTA announced that they would respect this result, yet would hold García accountable for creating change to benefit the masses.¹⁰ Sendero Luminoso deeply criticized this move, calling the MRTA "servants of APRA" and calling out capitulation.¹¹ The MRTA abided by their truce and did not engage in violence against the government for one year. In May 1986, the MRTA's

⁸ MRTA, "Sobre la lucha armada," CeDeMA, March 1, 1982, https://cedema.org/digital_items/665.

⁹ Deborah Poole and Gerardo Rénique, *Peru: Time of Fear* (London: Latin America Bureau, 1992), 127.

¹⁰ "Tupacamarus anuncian tregua política a gobierno Aprista," June 7, 1985, Asociación Pro Derechos Humanos - APRODEH, LUM, <https://lum.cultura.pe/cdi/periodico/tupacamarus-anuncian-tregua-politica-gobierno-aprista>.

¹¹ MRTA, "Mensaje a los militantes del PC del P (SL)," CeDeMA, August 1, 1988, https://cedema.org/digital_items/4031.

newspaper *Venceremos* published a scathing piece on García's failures, calling out the administration's stifling of labor organization, failure to increase wages, cozying up to the U.S., and abuse of political prisoners.¹² While APRA and García had positioned themselves as a left-wing party of the people, the MRTA ruled that they had failed to do so, resuming the war between the group and the Peruvian state. The successive right-wing government of Alberto Fujimori, who would flirt with authoritarianism by dismissing Congress, dissolving the Supreme Court, and extending presidential term limits, would only further ignite this struggle.

Peru was far from the only country in Latin America to witness military dictatorship and left-wing revolutionary struggle. The MRTA cite the Cuban Revolution and Fidel Castro's rise to power after the overthrow of dictator Fulgencio Batista in 1959 as a particular inspiration, as well as the ouster of the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua by the Sandinista party in 1979. The MRTA took inspiration from both the *Miristas* in Chile and the Tupamaros in Uruguay, as well as the FMLN, (*Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional*, Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front), left-wing rebels fighting against dictatorship in El Salvador.¹³ Túpac Amaristas would refer to some of these movements not only as inspiration, but also as evidence that radical activity was occurring across Latin America and held the potential for success.

The Focus of This Thesis

The 1980s and early 1990s marked a period of incredible instability, violence, and strife in Peru. The Belaúnde, García, and Fujimori governments treated Sendero Luminoso and the MRTA as one in the same. Hard-line policies led to sweeping classifications of left-wing radical

¹² MRTA, "Basta de marchas, hasta de paros...se me acabó la paciencia," *Venceremos*, no. 14 (May 1986), UNMSM CEDOC, <https://cedoc.sisbib.unmsm.edu.pe/biblioteca-digital/coleccion-documental/publicaciones-periodicas/54>.

¹³ Miguel La Serna, *With Masses and Arms: Peru's Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 75.

activity as “terrorism” on an equal playing field. For much of the Peruvian public, this rendered the two groups indistinguishable. When an attack occurred, the police were quick to declare terrorist presence. Even when Sendero or the MRTA claimed an attack, public perceptions of the differences between the two groups’ tactics remained hazy. Peruvians who worked on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (*Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación*, CVR) of the early 2000s speak to the lumping together of “terrorists,” noting that they “...believe the Peruvian confuses the MRTA with Sendero Luminoso” and that it was “...unfair that all this time they have put them all in the same bag and said, ‘those are terrorists.’”¹⁴

Since the Truth and Reconciliation report, Sendero has been distinguished from the MRTA and has certainly received harsher criticism—despite the fact that for many Peruvians, terrorism is still terrorism; both groups contributed to the catastrophic violence of 1980s and 1990s Peru. Once this distinction had been made, scholarly work began to concentrate on Sendero Luminoso, leaving the MRTA to receive considerably less scholarly attention. This is likely a result of Sendero’s far more extreme role in the violence perpetrated in the Peruvian Civil Conflict. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, conducted after controversial president Alberto Fujimori left office and fled the country, found that 69,280 people were killed throughout the conflict. The CVR’s analysis attributes the Peruvian Armed Forces as responsible for 30% of these, Shining Path as responsible for 46%, and “other agents or circumstances” as responsible for the remaining 24%, with around 1.5% of those ascribed to the MRTA.¹⁵ The conflict was largely fought between insurgent groups and the Peruvian Military, who waged a bloody and often indiscriminately violent counterinsurgency struggle. Furthermore, Sendero’s

¹⁴ *Alias Alejandro*, directed by Alejandro Cárdenas-Amelio (Sabotage Films GmbH, 2005), 1:07:00, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jACKju-MTYI>.

¹⁵ Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación, *Informe Final*, Annex 2: “Estimación del total de víctimas,” 13.

cult-like tendencies and ruthlessness have held a sort of allure for Latin American historians and global audiences in general.

This thesis will add to scholarship on the MRTA and argue that the movement was a vital piece of the revolutionary fervor and radical leftist current observed across Latin America in the second half of the 20th century, just before, during, and in the wake of the Cold War. The MRTA built off the movements of 1960s Latin America and borrowed from Peruvian revolutionary traditions and organizations. They took a more “traditional” approach to radical politics, tackling what they considered a fundamentally unjust system of governance and seeking to replace it with a distinctly Peruvian, socialist, anti-imperialist model. The MRTA believed Peruvian social conditions called for violent revolution in order to take down the state and fight against entrenched inequality, corruption, and imperialism. Propaganda was used to recruit members and appeal to the wider public, urging them to support a new vision for Peru. The MRTA employed tactical violence, focusing on targeted attacks rather than mass bombardment. The organization attacked representatives and symbols of the government, the bourgeoisie, and imperialism, including bombing the house of the American Ambassador, police stations, and seven Kentucky Fried Chicken locations. They saw themselves as “...organizing the revolutionary violence of the masses to defeat the ruling classes and imperialism on the road to national and social liberation.”¹⁶

The MRTA’s choice to engage in targeted and not indiscriminate violence was one element of its appeal to Peruvians. Their strongest support came from younger generations that were fed up with economic stagnation and political corruption. Many had heard or been exposed to Peruvian revolutionary traditions, and some were members of left-wing organizations such as the PSR-ML (*Partido Socialista Revolucionario Marxista-Leninista*, Marxist-Leninist

¹⁶ MRTA, “Sobre la lucha armada.”

Revolutionary Socialist Party) and the MIR-EM (*Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria El Militante*, “The Militant” branch of the Revolutionary Left Movement). However, the MRTA attracted Peruvians from across the social stratum, recruiting members in areas of Lima such as Villa el Salvador, the largest of the city’s *pueblos jóvenes* (“young towns”), informal neighborhoods that were home to hundreds of thousands of working-class people in the early 1980s. For all of those who were drawn to the MRTA, the organization's call to action and vision for Peru was convincing. Those who joined the MRTA made the conscious decision to do so instead of joining Sendero. This choice, as well as the choice to join a radical organization in general, must be investigated in order to better understand the conditions of 1980s Peru and to begin to answer the question of why people join radical political movements. This thesis will argue that widespread discontentment with the government’s continual inability to solve rampant inequality and raise the standard of living drew Peruvians to radical politics in the 1980s, after witnessing failures of the first democratic administration since the military dictatorship. Those who chose to join the MRTA did so because of the organization’s self-positioning within Peruvian revolutionary traditions and the existing leftist political sphere, due to their view of violence as a necessary tool to be used strategically and not indiscriminately, and because of the MRTA’s choice not to completely denounce the existing political and electoral system while remaining loudly skeptical.

This thesis will also tell the story of an outsider who joined the MRTA. Lori Berenson is an American citizen who was born in New York City and was introduced to Latin American politics as a student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In 1989, when she was twenty years old, Lori moved to El Salvador to work for the FMLN (*Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional*, Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front), the left-wing guerrilla group

engaged in armed struggle against the U.S.-backed Salvadoran government and U.S.-trained Salvadoran army. Lori worked for the FMLN through the 1992 peace process which ended the war and formalized the left-wing organization as a political party. In 1994, she moved to Peru. She sought to use the South American nation as a base for travels around the continent while also working on freelance reporting for a handful of independent newspapers. On November 30, 1995, Lori was arrested after a visit to the Peruvian Congress building and taken into custody by DINCOTE, the branch of law enforcement dedicated to antiterrorism operations. She was charged with treason—against a country that was not her own—and specifically for being a leader of a terrorist group. Lori and her parents, who fought for fifteen years for their daughter’s release, denied not only these charges but any connection to the MRTA. However, Lori’s story, and her later words to reporters, clarify that she was in some way involved with the MRTA. While her official membership may be questioned, I will refer to Lori’s decision to “join” the MRTA to indicate that she made a conscious choice to support and affiliate with the movement. Somewhere between MIT, El Salvador, and a holding cell in the DINCOTE headquarters, Lori had been introduced to the movement and drawn to the MRTA’s vision of Peru.

While Lori is an American, white woman, and therefore not a “case study” for explaining what drew people to the MRTA, her membership and story adds an important dimension to this thesis. Lori is both a typical and distinct example of someone who became involved with the MRTA. She shared the middle-class, well-educated background of many of the group’s leaders and supporters, as well as an orientation towards social justice. Understanding why Lori was attracted to the MRTA underscores additional reasons for the group’s mass appeal.

Her decision to join the MRTA says something about how the group fit into larger regional political currents. She had seen firsthand the peace process in El Salvador—an example

of armed struggle's capability to take down right-wing dictatorship and achieve better conditions for a country and a people. In order to become involved with the MRTA, in whatever capacity, Lori must have believed the organization's cause was just enough to join and that their vision and strategy was judicious enough to pursue.

The fact that Lori, an American, would move to Peru and work with the MRTA speaks to the role of imperialism and the United States in late 20th century Latin America, and perhaps less directly, in Peru. U.S. economic control, resource extraction, politically influential aid, and army training had directly impacted the lives of Peruvians, even if there were no American boots on the ground. Lori left the United States in order to support the left-wing Salvadorean group fighting against the Salvadoran army who had full U.S. backing—a clear example of Cold War-era U.S. intervention and propping up dictatorship out of fear for communist influence in the region. While the U.S. was not involved in domestic affairs to the same extent in Peru, Lori must have felt that the landscape was similar enough and that it may have been her duty, as an American, to fight against injustice caused in part by her country of origin.

Lori's story also says something about radical politics and what can draw those concerned about social justice to radicalize. For Lori, her involvement with an insurgent group didn't even occur in her own country or on behalf of her own people—she saw injustice and sought to support the fight against it. Lori had no personal connection to Latin America; she was simply exposed to the region and its injustices in a classroom setting. Was there an element to her personality, to her values, that meant her desire to see poverty and inequality remedied led her to a movement with a radical vision to solve these problems?

Finally, the fact that Lori joined the MRTA supports a sort of “exportability” of MRTA strategy. The group's employment of targeted violence, disillusionment with the political system

while not completely discounting it, and centering in Peruvian revolutionary traditions rather than theories such as Maoism or a cult of personality—like Sendero—that drew Peruvians to join also attracted Lori. These elements that led the MRTA to walk a certain line of radicalism and a sort of moderation appealed not only to a domestic audience.

Including Lori's story in a broader investigation into the MRTA adds a layer to this project and presents a new analysis to add to historical scholarship on the MRTA and on late 1980s Peru. Lori Berenson is also an interesting figure to me on a personal level. Lori and I were both born in Manhattan, raised in a liberal Jewish environment that stressed intellectual curiosity and social justice, and attended top U.S. universities where we gained an interest in Latin American history and politics. Lori, however, moved to the region and became involved with radical politics—I, I presume, will not. These similarities have stuck with me ever since I came across Lori's story. My interest in her experiences pushed me to try and understand her motivations in order to answer larger questions about why young people radicalize. This thesis will look closely at the many Peruvians, as well as this one American woman, who joined the Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement in an attempt to piece together their motivations.

Situating Within the Scholarship

This project has relied on the breadth of historical scholarship focused on late 20th century Latin America, 1980s and 90s Peru, and the MRTA. The most comprehensive work on the MRTA is Miguel La Serna's *With Masses and Arms: Peru's Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement*. La Serna considers this book "the first comprehensive history of the MRTA," and it has been a touchstone for my research. La Serna traces the MRTA from its inception, situating it in the context of Sendero Luminoso and Peruvian party politics. He details the experiences of

Túpac Amaristas through interviews and documents never published or made available to the public. La Serna worked with MRTA leader Víctor Polay Campos, who was in prison at the time and was not permitted to receive visitors. Nonetheless, Polay allowed his lawyers to send La Serna unpublished manuscripts and other documents that enrich *With Masses and Arms* beyond previous scholarship of the MRTA.

Mario Miguel Meza Bazán's History Doctoral thesis from Colegio de México, "El Movimiento Revolucionario Túpac Amaru (MRTA) y las fuentes de la revolución en América Latina" (The Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA) and the sources of revolution in Latin America) is another work that traces the MRTA's existence and situates it in the Peruvian context. Meza Bazán's focus on some of the MRTA's bases of recruitment was particularly crucial in providing a base for my research and directing me to further sources.

James D. Rudolph's *Peru: The Evolution of a Crisis* has been a vital tool for context on Peru up until the 1980s. Rudolph discusses the demographics and geography of Peru as a way to establish social conditions that inform the history covered in the book. This work provided critical detail on the policies of the governments of the 1980s up until the end of the García presidency.

Miguel La Serna's earlier book, written with Orin Starn and entitled *The Shining Path: Love, Madness, and Revolution in the Andes*, will help to provide further detail on the workings of Sendero Luminoso and the distinctions between the group and the MRTA. This book was my initial introduction to the radical landscape of late 20th century Peru and, along with *With Masses and Arms*, provides considerable inspiration for my own academic writing.

The work of Peter Klarén, Iñigo García-Bryce, Geraldine Skinner, Paulo Drinot, and Jan Lust has been vital in situating the MRTA in Peru's revolutionary and left-wing history. Kláren

and García-Bryce's discussion of APRA (American Popular Revolutionary Alliance), one of the strongest left-wing political forces of 20th century Peru and the party of president Alan García, enriches discussion of the MRTA's roots. Drinot and Skinner's writing on the Peruvian Communist Party, the party that would splinter and pave the way for Sendero Luminoso, elaborate on the changes and continuities in another branch of Peruvian leftist history. Lust's article on Peruvian guerrilla movements in the 1960s sets the stage for the MRTA's establishment by describing the different organizations that would later come together at the June 1980 Unity Conference.

Two social science articles, one written by Andreas E. Feldmann and Maiju Perälä and the other by Randy Borum, provide another layer of analysis for radicalization in late 20th century Peru. Feldmann and Perälä bring in the concept of "terrorism," often discussed in the landscape of late 20th century Peru, and present a definition that assists in differentiating between the violent acts of Sendero and the MRTA. Borum presents a number of theories of why young people radicalize, some that are particularly salient in the situation of the MRTA.

This thesis will bring together scholarship on the MRTA, of Sendero Luminoso, and of Peru and Latin America in the late 20th century to focus specifically on who joined the MRTA and why. The context and content provided by these sources have shed invaluable light on the many motivations for joining the movement.

Methodology

In terms of primary sources, this thesis focuses on MRTA publications, newspaper articles, published and televised interviews, radio broadcasts, and a number of other first hand accounts. Three digital archives have proven vital to my process: *Lugar de la Memoria, la*

Tolerancia, y la Inclusión Social (Place of Memory, Tolerance, and Social Inclusion, LUM), *Centro de Documentación de los Movimientos Armados* (Center for Documents on Armed Movements, CeDeMA), and the Documentary Collection on Political Violence in Peru (CEDOC) at the Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos, UNMSM. A push to collect and publish materials on Peruvian armed groups came in the wake of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission process that occurred in the early 2000s. Peru's Truth and Reconciliation Commission is considered one of the most successful of its kind, investigating a wide breadth of human rights abuses committed by both the state and non-state actors, mainly Sendero Luminoso and the MRTA. Sources pulled and translated from these archives provide the backbone of this project, specifically in the second chapter, which will examine how the MRTA's rhetoric generated mass appeal by speaking to specific groups and grievances.

Almost no memoirs exist that provide primary accounts of membership in the MRTA. While firsthand experiences would be the best sources to answer the question of why people joined the MRTA, this project has adapted to work with existing source material. A limited pool of firsthand accounts, interviews published in newspapers, and statements given as part of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission provide a vital grounding for this thesis's argument. This project has required closely scrutinizing the evidence that is out there, often attempting to piece together people's motivations for joining the MRTA from the group's own words. The three archives I have relied on hold every MRTA statement and press release ever published. These sources, when analyzed closely, reveal a considerable amount about how the MRTA employed specific rhetoric to attract different audiences. The fact that this propaganda was successful can be taken to mean that people joined the MRTA because the group spoke to existing grievances and presented a vision of a new Peru that was palatable and attractive to those who joined. This

seemingly roundabout way of answering the question of why people became involved with the MRTA works off of the assumption that the group *was* successful in attracting members and asks the question, “how?”

For the section on Lori Berenson, the memoir written by Lori’s mother, Rhoda, provides a close account of Lori’s experience with the Peruvian justice system. It also provides background information about Lori and the choices she made that can help to answer the question of how and why she ended up becoming involved with the MRTA. In this way, this book operates as both a secondary source and somewhat of a primary account from someone who knows Lori very well. Interviews with Lori, specifically after her release from prison, are the strongest evidence for understanding the extent of her connection to the MRTA and help to paint a picture of why she joined. Both Rhoda’s book and interviews with Lori and her parents must be read with an understanding of their primary goal of getting Lori out of Peruvian Prison. Not everything the Berensons have said may be the whole truth, yet there are still important takeaways yielded by their words.

I will not be interviewing Lori for this project. I have been told that she has led a very private, quiet life since her release from Peruvian prison and I do not want to disrupt that for an academic endeavor. I will argue that Lori as a figure is key to understanding the MRTA, its appeal, and its membership at a broader level. I seek to use Lori’s story as a piece of the story of the MRTA rather than passing any personal judgement or delivering a verdict on Lori herself. Regardless of her participation in the MRTA, Lori was denied justice or fair trial over and over again. She was a victim of the oppressive penal system that saw all left-wing political involvement as adjacent terrorism and rendered the MRTA and Sendero as one in the same. I do not see this project as adding to a vast body of criticism, nor praise, of her character.

The primary sources utilized for this project are mostly written in Spanish, with the exception of U.S. government documents and American newspaper articles, employed specifically to analyze perceptions of Lori Berenson's story. Unless otherwise noted, all primary sources have been translated by me, with assistance from online translation tools.

Chapters and Their Arguments

The structure of this thesis will lead the reader through an investigation of the MRTA. Chapter 1 will provide ample context for late 20th century Peru and the revolutionary traditions which the MRTA is rooted in. The reader will be introduced to both APRA and the Peruvian Communist Party and come to see how the former provided the foundation for the MRTA while a sect of the latter would branch off and form Sendero Luminoso. The guerrilla movements of the 1960s, the parties that eventually attended the Unitary Conference at which the MRTA was formed, will also be addressed. Primary sources will illustrate what MRTA leaders sought to achieve with the movement and with the declaration of armed struggle. Newspaper reports, MRTA publications, and broadcasts will paint a picture of the MRTA's actions and use of the media to generate support. I will also touch on the MRTA's relationship to different administrations, explaining that their truce with Alan García's government represents a willingness to respect the political system to some degree, creating a distinction between the MRTA and Sendero and providing a critical reason for why some may have been drawn to the MRTA's strategy. The presidency of Alberto Fujimori, the right-wing president who adopted an authoritarian style to crack down on radical groups and acts labeled as terrorism, will also be explained in relation to the MRTA. This chapter will tell the story of the MRTA, from beginning to end, to immerse the reader to the movement and situate questions about the group's

membership. I argue that the MRTA should be viewed as a natural progression of Peruvian revolutionary politics and a manifestation of Peruvian grievances as a result of successive governments that did not remedy poverty, inequality, and economic exploitation.

Chapter 2 will ask the question of why people joined the MRTA. A brief interlude will use existing scholarship to locate questions around radicalization and young people, as well as to define terrorism in a way that differentiates the MRTA from Sendero. Primary sources from the three key archives used in this project will be closely analyzed to see how MRTA rhetoric and how their propaganda appealed to different groups. The testimonies and writings of MRTA leaders Victor Polay Campos, Peter Cárdenas, and Rosa Luz Padilla will provide examples of personal motivations and speak to larger trends of the backgrounds and grievances of those who were drawn to the MRTA. This chapter argues that Peruvians joined the MRTA because shared grievances and anger led many to believe a radical solution was the only way for the country to change and that the MRTA positioned itself as the vision for a better Peru by reaching out to a variety of populations, distinguishing itself from Sendero, and describing itself as the organic successor to Peru's left-wing sociopolitical history.

Chapter 3 will introduce the reader to Lori Berenson and trace her story. The inquiry at the heart of this chapter is why Lori was drawn to the MRTA. This chapter will emphasize that we can learn something about the MRTA and why people were motivated to join when Lori is in the story that we miss when she is absent. Lori's decision to become involved with the MRTA was a result of her belief that the MRTA had the correct vision for a better Peru and could possibly achieve change for the country. She held this perspective due to previous participation in other similar Latin American political movements, her identity as an American and desire to

fight for social justice in part because of that background, and because the MRTA's platform and rhetoric attracted her just as it did Peruvian members.

Final Thoughts

This project has been a passionate and challenging deep dive into the world of a revolutionary late 20th century Latin America; a moment in which many across the region—and the world—believed that societal order was flawed and that only a radical solution could bring about change. Investigating what motivated people to join the MRTA provides a fascinating window not only into the political moment but into larger queries about why people radicalize. This thesis will make arguments about the pull of the MRTA in a manner very specific to the organization, yet the fact that so many radical groups were able to attract members and undertake similar goals in a stand against the state speaks to something bigger. My hope is that this project, which is the first to use Lori as a way to understand the MRTA rather than as a character in a larger story, will set in motion questions on radicalization. At a moment where we can see rampant inequality, exploitation, political anger, polarization, and disillusionment all around us, it is critical to ask questions about the solution to popular grievances and inquire whether radical activity should play a role in solving societal problems.

Chapter 1: The Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement

Introduction

In the latter half of the 20th century, Latin America saw the emergence of a number of leftist, radical groups whose stated goal was to foment revolutionary change. Movements framed their struggle through ideological frameworks such as Marxism or pan-Latin-Americanism, fighting against the forces of imperialism, predatory capitalism, corruption, economic inequality, and, at times, autocracy that they believed to be plaguing their countries and holding back their people. The Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (*Movimiento Revolucionario Túpac Amaru*, MRTA) declared war against the nation of Peru in 1982, defending its fight against a state that it saw as apathetic to economic inequality and a pawn of imperialist domination.

The MRTA asserted that it was fighting for the Peruvian people. The movement conceptualized its struggle within Peru's established leftist culture and history of rebellion against authority that failed the masses—all Peruvians, but especially the nation's poorest. The group carried out targeted armed action, striking law enforcement buildings, large corporations, and the residences of government officials, all of which they saw as symbols of exploitative capitalism. Neither the MRTA's membership nor violence ever reached the level of Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path), a contemporaneous revolutionary group that grew out of the Peruvian Communist Party and became known for its ruthless guerrilla warfare and cult-like devotion to its leader, Abimael Guzmán.

As noted in the Introduction, Peru's 2001 Truth and Reconciliation Commission attributed nearly half of the 69,280 deaths resulting from the Peruvian Conflict to Sendero

Luminoso, around 1.5% to the MRTA, and 30% to the Peruvian Armed Forces.¹⁷ These numbers reveal that the MRTA and its revolutionary violence, while on a smaller scale than Sendero Luminoso and the military, did play a role in this brutal civil conflict that marked Peruvian society in the 1980s and 1990s. The movement has received considerably less scholarly attention than Sendero Luminoso, largely because of the latter's spectacular violence. The MRTA was more similar to leftist movements of the Peruvian past and Latin American insurgencies fought in the preceding decades. It presents a fascinating study in radical attempts to solve social and economic problems through homegrown revolt against the state. This chapter will explain the MRTA and situate it in Peruvian history before going on to answer the question of what drew Peruvians to the movement. The MRTA was a radical coalition born out of the Peruvian revolutionary traditions of APRA, the PCP, and the guerrilla movements of the 1960s. The organization was formed in 1980, in the wake of military dictatorship and during a moment of deep frustration with insufficient socioeconomic progress for the Peruvian masses. After its formation, the MRTA would employ targeted violence and strategic publicity efforts to gain sympathy for its cause and fight against inequality and injustice in Peru in the last two decades of the 20th century.

Peruvian Leftist Traditions

The Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement was born out of the most radical elements of Peru's long-standing leftist tradition. Peru boasts a rich history of peasant mobilization and left-wing party politics dating back to indigenous revolts against Spanish colonial power. In the mid-20th century, the Peruvian left was dominated by two political forces, the *Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana* (American Popular Revolutionary Alliance, APRA) and the *Partido*

¹⁷ Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación, *Informe Final*, Annex 2: "Estimación del total de víctimas," 13.

Comunista Peruano (Peruvian Communist Party, PCP). The former was founded by socialist and revolutionary theorist Victor Raúl Haya de la Torre, and the latter by journalist and Marxist philosopher José Carlos Mariátegui, figures who have constantly been referenced by the Peruvian left as inspiration. The two argued over one main difference: Mariátegui believed in the existence of an “international revolutionary process” and felt solidarity with the Soviet Union and European communism, while Haya de la Torre believed international communism was “alien to the Peruvian experience” and advocated a revolution with a unique focus on Peru.¹⁸ This divide would continue to permeate discourse in revolutionary circles, going on to constitute one of the major differences between Sendero Luminoso and the MRTA.

APRA

Haya de la Torre founded APRA in 1924 while in exile in Mexico. He aimed for the continent-wide movement to unite Latin American nations against U.S. imperialism. Haya’s vision included nation-specific parties, which would work to solve local problems and protect domestic interests through nationalization of foreign-controlled industries. In this vein, he founded the *Partido Aprista Peruano* (Peruvian Aprista Party, PAP) in 1930. The PAP would be the only national Aprista party and the sole embodiment of Haya’s vision.¹⁹ Thus, the acronym APRA has essentially been adopted by the Peruvian political organization and will be used to refer to Peru’s Aprista party in this paper.

According to Haya, communism was not the way to work against imperialism for the betterment of Latin American people. The region, and Peru specifically, still lacked a developed

¹⁸ G.L. Vásquez, “Peruvian Radicalism and the Sendero Luminoso,” *Journal of Political & Military Sociology* 21, no. 2 (1993): 200.

¹⁹ Peter Klarén, *Modernization, Dislocation, and Aprismo: Origins of the Peruvian Aprista Party, 1870-1932* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1973), xiii.

working class, although the rise of mining and export agriculture were stimulating the growth of one. Thus, Haya did not believe that Marx's ideas could apply to the Peruvian context the way they applied to industrial Europe.²⁰ He envisioned APRA governance to follow a policy of socialism and economic nationalism, believing nationalization and "cooptavization" of foreign enterprises to be the best way for Peru to take control of its economic growth and raise the standard of living.²¹ In place of a figure like Marx, Haya looked to revolutionary traditions—including the Mexican Revolution, the Russian Revolution, British Labourism, and Chinese nationalism—to develop a homegrown model of reform.²²

Haya never delivered a clear answer on whether or not he wanted to pursue the path of armed struggle. He eagerly sought to cooperate with the Peruvian Military, possessing a desire to find officers who might help him orchestrate a coup that would bring APRA to power.²³ As hope of this faded, and as APRA was caught in a cycle of banishment and tentative tolerance by successive Peruvian governments, the party moved towards the political center and away from revolutionary struggle. APRA was first banned in February 1932 through a law passed by the administration of Luis Miguel Sánchez Cerro, who declared the organization illegal on the grounds that it was an "international party." APRA supporters, or Apristas, had protested Sánchez Cerro's defeat of Haya in the October 1931 presidential election and continued to stage violent uprisings across the country for months after.²⁴ The party remained officially outlawed for only about a year before a young Aprista assassinated Sánchez Cerro on April 30, 1933. Oscar Benavides, named by the Peruvian Constituent Assembly as Sánchez Cerro's successor, assumed the presidency and declared a period of political amnesty. However, after more APRA

²⁰ Klarén, *Modernization, Dislocation, and Aprismo*, 111.

²¹ Klarén, *Modernization, Dislocation, and Aprismo*, 113.

²² Iñigo García-Bryce, *Haya de la Torre and the Pursuit of Power in Twentieth-Century Peru and Latin America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 1.

²³ García-Bryce, *Haya de la Torre and the Pursuit of Power in Twentieth-Century Peru and Latin America*, 52.

²⁴ García-Bryce, *Haya de la Torre and the Pursuit of Power in Twentieth-Century Peru and Latin America*, 62.

uprisings in 1934, the amnesty was quickly rescinded.²⁵ APRA found itself forced to operate underground and with many members in exile until 1945.

In the early 1940s, APRA took its first turn to the right. Party leaders recognized the growing danger of European fascism, causing them to be wary of overly emphasizing their revolutionary and anti-U.S. activities. Furthermore, they hoped that persecution of the party would cease under Manuel Prado Ugarteche, who had been elected in 1939. While it remained officially banned, APRA was permitted to function informally for most of Prado's time in office.²⁶ When he was elected in 1945, Prado's successor José Luis Bustamante y Rivero granted the party partial legal status, giving APRA permission to participate in congressional elections—but not the presidential election.²⁷ In 1948, naval officers with ties to APRA staged an insurrection in Callao, a small port city directly east of Lima. After the Armed Forces quickly quelled the rebel activity, General Manuel Odría declared the mutiny as sufficient cause to overthrow Bustamante. Odría began his military rule shortly after the Callao episode and carried out the worst period of APRA persecution. Apristas were tracked down and thrown in jail while Odría attempted to use populist rhetoric to take away from the party's base of support.

Peruvian democracy was restored in 1956 with the re-election of former president Manuel Prado Ugarteche. At this point, an APRA severely weakened by the Odría dictatorship entered a period known as the *convivencia* (coexistence), during which many believe the party over-compromised and took another rightward turn.²⁸ In 1962, the Military threw out Prado and spent a year leading the country through a four-man junta. Elections in June 1963 saw the triumph of *Acción Popular* (Popular Action) party candidate Fernando Belaúnde Terry over

²⁵ García-Bryce, *Haya de la Torre and the Pursuit of Power in Twentieth-Century Peru and Latin America*, 70-71.

²⁶ James D. Rudolph, *Peru: The Evolution of a Crisis* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1992), 41.

²⁷ García-Bryce, *Haya de la Torre and the Pursuit of Power in Twentieth-Century Peru and Latin America*, 77.

²⁸ García-Bryce, *Haya de la Torre and the Pursuit of Power in Twentieth-Century Peru and Latin America*, 85-86.

Haya de la Torre. However, APRA also considered the elections a victory, as they won a plurality of seats in the Chamber of Deputies, even more than *Acción Popular*. Apristas decided to make an unexpected alliance with conservative deputies in order to ensure that Belaúnde did not receive credit for any reforms Haya had proposed, continuing the rightward turn that frustrated their left-leaning supporters.²⁹

APRA had a tense relationship with the leftist military governments of Juan Velasco Alvarado (who overthrew Belaúnde in 1968) and Francisco Morales Bermúdez, despite the fact that these regimes pursued agrarian reforms not unlike those proposed by APRA. Part of the tension was Apristas' view that the military governments were using their proposals and ideas in order to stay in power and continue undemocratic rule.³⁰ In 1978, Morales Bermúdez convened a Constituent Assembly to facilitate the transition back to democracy. Haya was elected president of the Assembly and oversaw the drafting of a new constitution, presenting a true victory for APRA—yet a post-*convivencia* APRA that many former supporters saw as de-radicalized.³¹ Haya had always desired to hold elected office and institutionalize APRA's power, a goal that would be eventually realized with the election of the first Aprista president Alan García in 1985. Yet for many Apristas, the party had played the political game for too long. APRA had moved closer to the center after years of having its radical activity stifled and occasionally banned, and had lost its revolutionary character in the compromise process. Those who had believed in Haya's vision of distinctly Peruvian socialism and economic nationalism and wanted to see radical institutional change were left wondering who to support.

The Peruvian Communist Party

²⁹ Rudolph, *Peru: The Evolution of a Crisis*, 47.

³⁰ "Historia APRA," Partido Aprista Peruano, <https://apraperu.com/historia/>.

³¹ García-Bryce, *Haya de la Torre and the Pursuit of Power in Twentieth-Century Peru and Latin America*, 89.

José Carlos Mariátegui founded the *Partido Socialista Peruana* (Peruvian Socialist Party, PSP) in 1928 and the *Confederación General de Trabajadores del Perú* (General Confederation of Workers of Peru, CGTP) in 1929.³² Mariátegui had spent time in Europe, where he had met Marxists and gained exposure to Marxist works, equipping him to return to Peru and introduce this school of thought to the labor movement.³³ Mariátegui and Haya de la Torre, writing and organizing concurrently, diverged politically over the significance of anti-imperialism. For Haya, APRA was fighting a war against imperialism, for he saw that as the main factor limiting the Peruvian economy and people. Mariátegui, on the other hand, believed that anti-imperialism was only part of the socialist program, because it did not address class antagonisms and the plight of the working class.³⁴ Mariátegui recognized Haya's assertion that Peru lacked a substantial proletariat due to its emerging industrial workforce, leading to his decision to establish a Socialist Party until there was a solid base for a Communist Party.³⁵ Despite understanding that the Peruvian environment was not a perfect fit for the international Communist model, Mariátegui believed in following the Marxist path he had seen in Europe. This choice led historian Geraldine Skinner to conclude that Mariátegui's political program suffered from "too rapid digestion of Marxist theory," as Peru was not Europe and class consciousness could not be built in the same manner.³⁶

After Mariátegui's death in 1930, clerical worker and de facto PSP leader Eudocio Ravines changed the name of the organization to the *Partido Comunista del Perú* (Communist Party of Perú, PCP).³⁷ Over the next few decades, the PCP faced similar challenges to APRA,

³² Geraldine Skinner, "José Carlos Mariátegui and the Emergence of the Peruvian Socialist Movement," *Science and Society* 43, no. 4 (1979): 448.

³³ Skinner, "José Carlos Mariátegui and the Emergence of the Peruvian Socialist Movement," 448-449.

³⁴ Skinner, "José Carlos Mariátegui and the Emergence of the Peruvian Socialist Movement," 463.

³⁵ Skinner, "José Carlos Mariátegui and the Emergence of the Peruvian Socialist Movement," 467.

³⁶ Skinner, "José Carlos Mariátegui and the Emergence of the Peruvian Socialist Movement," 459.

³⁷ Paulo Drinot, "Creole Anti-Communism: Labor, the Peruvian Communist Party, and Apra, 1930-1934," *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 92, no. 4 (2012): 708.

with its activity limited by presidential limitations and bans. However, the alliance between the U.S. and the Soviet Union during World War II caused the PCP to take a more cooperative approach to operations, leading President Manuel Prado Ugarteche to declare the party legal once again.³⁸ The PCP and APRA took advantage of Prado's relative leniency, working together to form the *Confederación de Trabajadores Peruanos* (Confederation of Peruvian Workers, CTP) in 1944.³⁹ While the CTP was initially controlled by Apristas, Manuel Odría's disdain for APRA led the PCP to take control of the organization.⁴⁰ The situation further improved after Fernando Belaúnde Terry was elected in 1963 and granted the PCP enjoyed relative freedom to operate.

In 1964, the party followed the global Communist trend and split along a Sino-Soviet rift. The factions named themselves after their newspapers, with the pro-Soviet branch adopting the name PCP-U (with the U standing for *Unidad*, Unity) and the pro-Chinese party calling itself PCP-Bandera Roja (Red Flag).⁴¹ A 1965 CIA report on the state of Communism across Latin America described the fracture, noting, "This split has lowered the prestige and influence of the PCP almost to the level of the other numerous small parties of the far left which are also split into two, even three, competing factions."⁴² The CIA accurately observed that the splintering had rendered both factions of the PCP relatively weak. They would remain so until the 1960s, when PCP-Bandera Roja was co-opted by Abimael Guzmán and renamed *Partido Comunista Peruano-Sendero Luminoso* (The Communist Party of Peru-Shining Path, PCP-SL).

The Brief Guerrilla Moment

³⁸ Rudolph, *Peru: The Evolution of a Crisis*, 41.

³⁹ Deborah Poole and Gerardo Rénique, *Peru: Time of Fear* (London: Latin America Bureau, 1992), 111.

⁴⁰ Rudolph, *Peru: The Evolution of a Crisis*, 44.

⁴¹ Poole and Rénique, *Peru: Time of Fear*, 31.

⁴² Central Intelligence Agency, *A Survey of Communism in Latin America*. OCI No. 2397/65, November 1, 1965, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0001462211.pdf.

APRA and the PCP essentially monopolized the Peruvian left until the mid-1950s. At the end of the decade, revolutionary Hugo Blanco led the *Frente de Izquierda Revolucionaria* (Revolutionary Left Front, FIR) in organizing peasant uprisings. These revolts occurred across the country but were concentrated in Cuzco. Blanco and the FIR overthrew monopoly landowners and managed to secure some degree of agrarian reform for peasant workers' unions.⁴³ Inspired by the FIR, the 1960s saw the emergence of two guerrilla movements: the *Ejército Nacional de Liberación* (National Liberation Army, ELN) and the *Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria* (Revolutionary Left Movement, MIR).

The ELN was founded in September 1962 in Cuba by seven Peruvians who were deeply influenced by the model of Fidel Castro's socialist revolution. The group drew together a coalition of ex-communist party members, Peruvian students, and other revolutionaries who believed Peru would do well to follow the Cuban model. The faction sought to bring about socialist revolution through armed struggle and wage a war against the oligarchy and military control. Their initial strategy was to send two groups, one to the central departments of Cerro de Pasco and Junín and one to Cuzco in the south east. However, ELN action ended abruptly after the Military crushed the group's revolt in May 1963. The MIR suffered a similar fate. Founded in March 1962 by the son of a wealthy landowner and former APRA member Luis de la Puente, the MIR sought to pursue "a democratic revolution as the first step towards socialism."⁴⁴ The MIR also believed in armed struggle as the only path and subscribed to a Marxist-Leninist worldview. The organization's collapse came in 1964, also at the hands of the army.

⁴³ Jan Lust, "The Peruvian Guerrilla Movements of the 1960s," in *Latin American Guerrilla Movements: Origins, Evolution, Outcomes*, ed. Dirk Kruijt, Eduardo Rey Tristán, and Alberto Martín Álvarez (New York: Routledge, 2020), 63.

⁴⁴ Lust, "The Peruvian Guerrilla Movements of the 1960s," 66.

The ELN and the MIR suffered from acting too quickly without developing a strategy, especially in their rural theaters. The government also cracked down on guerrilla forces, preventing them from gaining control in Peru the way others had across the continent. The CIA report on the state of Communism in Latin America observed that by 1965 “A state of siege was decreed, the Armed Forces have been committed to the counterinsurgency effort, suspected Communists are under arrest, and Belaunde has been provoked into condemning Communist intervention in Peru.”⁴⁵ Once the Armed Forces had begun to see guerrilla activity as a threat, they took sweeping, brutal action. Peruvian Armed Forces had been specially trained, including by the U.S. Military, to stifle these guerrilla groups.⁴⁶ While the army had ended the immediate threat posed by guerrilla warfare, military and political leaders suspected that further destabilization was inevitable unless societal change were to occur. Thus, the ELN and the MIR left legacies that would shape the Peruvian political climate and a space for new leftist revolutionary movements to fill.

Leftist Groups Under the Revolutionary Government of the Armed Forces

From 1968 to 1975, Peruvian General Juan Velasco Alvarado presided over a regional novelty: a uniquely progressive military government that enacted agrarian reform, expropriated the holdings of the International Petroleum Company, and pursued “Peru-first” policies rather than trying to cozy up to the U.S.⁴⁷ While the “experiment” conducted by Velasco's Revolutionary Government of the Armed Forces did not last long, it marks a key moment in the history of the Peruvian left. Velasco's anti-imperialist and anti-oligarchy policies aligned with the

⁴⁵ Central Intelligence Agency, “Keeping Pressure on President Velasco of Peru,” Office of the Historian, Foreign Service Institute, United States Department of State, April 10, 1969. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve10/d591>.

⁴⁶ Lust, “The Peruvian Guerrilla Movements of the 1960s,” 68.

⁴⁷ Carlos Aguirre and Paulo Drinot, *The Peculiar Revolution: Rethinking the Peruvian Experiment Under Military Rule* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017), 2.

views of leftists, but were pushed through by a military dictatorship. After Velasco deposed Belaúnde in 1968, the PCP-U immediately threw its support behind the military government.⁴⁸ The more radical elements of the left, however, did not trust the administration. They refused to forget that the same Armed Forces running the country were the ones that had obliterated guerrilla resistance movements in 1965. Velasco shared this skepticism: his government worried that radical politics could threaten their control and ability to enact reform. The regime chased down radical groups such as the small Marxist party *Vanguardia Revolucionaria* (Revolutionary Vanguard) and banned publications including the New Left journal *Marka*.⁴⁹

APRA had a particularly tense relationship with Velasco, despite the fact that land reform and nationalization had been critical pieces of the party's platform since its founding.⁵⁰ Apristas wrote newspaper articles and broadcast over the radio to denounce the coup on the day it occurred.⁵¹ APRA had clashed with the army in the 1940s and, like other leftist groups, was wary of trusting a government—even one that was politically progressive—run by generals. A CIA memorandum from April 1969 discusses the conflict between APRA and Velasco. The report reads, “The APRA Party (American Popular Revolutionary Alliance) represents the only significant civilian political force in Peru. During March Velasco successfully forestalled any active opposition from APRA through a combination of frequent public threats, occasional punitive measures, and a draft Presidential Decree which, if and when issued, outlaws the APRA Party and exiles its leaders.”⁵² Velasco recognized and feared APRA's unique positionality as a

⁴⁸ Rudolph, *Peru: The Evolution of a Crisis*, 65.

⁴⁹ Florencia E. Mallon, “Chronicle of a Path Foretold? Velasco's Revolution, Vanguardia Revolucionaria, and “Shining Omens” in the Indigenous Communities of Andahuaylas,” in *Shining and Other Paths: War and Society in Peru, 1980-1995*, ed. Steve J. Stern (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 70.

⁵⁰ Klarén, *Modernization, Dislocation, and Aprismo*, 156.

⁵¹ Rudolph, *Peru: The Evolution of a Crisis*, 64.

⁵² Central Intelligence Agency, “Keeping Pressure on President Velasco of Peru.”

leftist yet not overtly radical force that stood for the same policies as his government, but was civilian-led.

APRA had not always aligned itself with the Peruvian left due its opposition to Communist framing and aversion to armed action. However, the party now found itself in the same position as other leftist groups who vehemently opposed military dictatorship for Peru. Morales Bermúdez, who deposed Velasco in 1975 and led the “second phase” of the Revolutionary Government of the Armed Forces for the next five years, steered the administration to the right. This pushed left-wing groups even further to join forces and take action against the regime.⁵³ After the transition back to democracy facilitated by the Morales Bermúdez government, Fernando Belaúnde Terry assumed the presidency again in 1980. As discussed in the introduction, Belaúnde’s democratic administration failed to prevent economic crisis and improve the socioeconomic conditions of most Peruvians. This fueled the belief held by the radical elements of the Peruvian left that only revolutionary change, carried out by armed struggle, could achieve progress for Peru.

Sendero Luminoso

Sendero Luminoso grew out of the most radical elements of the Peruvian Communist Party. The organization was founded by Abimael Guzmán, a professor of philosophy at Ayacucho’s National University of San Cristóbal de Huamanga in the southern Andean region of Peru. From a young age, Guzmán had been captivated by Peru’s political questions and had studied the debates between Peruvian Communists and Apristas, eventually joining the PCP. Guzmán moved to Ayacucho 1962 when was hired as a professor. It was in this poor, rural

⁵³ Mallon, “Chronicle of a Path Foretold?,” 70.

department⁵⁴ that he became convinced of the critical role played by the *campesinos* (rural peasants and farmers) and the political salience of Maoism. Following the Sino-Soviet split of the Peruvian Communist Party in 1964, Guzmán convinced the Ayacucho party committee of the PCP-BR (Bandera Roja) to adopt a Maoist stance.⁵⁵

In 1979, a faction of the PCP-BR broke with the rest of the party to become the PCP-Sendero Luminoso, named for the “Shining Path of Mariátegui.” Guzman would later refer to himself and the organization as the “sole heir” of Mariátegui’s political thought and his 1928 socialist party.⁵⁶ Sendero’s followers regarded Guzmán, who referred to himself as *Presidente* (Chairman) Gonzalo, as a larger-than-life, nearly spiritual leader. Guzmán coined his ideology “Gonzalo Thought” and explained it as the principles that resulted from applying Marxism-Leninism-Maoism to Peru. Gonzalo Thought drew particularly from elements of Maoism such as “ideological purification” and the designation of “revisionism” as a principal enemy.⁵⁷ Sendero labeled the MRTA and other left-wing factions as revisionists and denounced their political platforms. This stood in contrast to the MRTA’s approach of affirming revolutionary armed struggle as the answer to societal issues while expressing a willingness to work with other groups on the left, as well as Sendero, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

Sendero began its armed struggle on May 18, 1980, the day Belaúnde was elected president for a second time. Rebels marched into the market town of Chuschi in southern Ayacucho and burned ballot boxes. The action, while dramatic, did not gain a significant amount of attention, as the national focus was on the end of the military dictatorship. Sendero would continue to concentrate its armed revolt in Ayacucho, a setting they felt was primed for

⁵⁴ Peru’s 24 “departments” (*departamentos*) are the country’s political and administrative units, like states in the U.S.

⁵⁵ Poole and Rénique, *Peru: Time of Fear*, 33.

⁵⁶ Poole and Rénique, *Peru: Time of Fear*, 38.

⁵⁷ Poole and Rénique, *Peru: Time of Fear*, 46-47.

revolution due to its experience of economic deterioration, inequality, illiteracy, and large Indigenous peasant populations.⁵⁸ Through Sendero-sponsored university training programs, Senderista militants were sent to live in Indigenous communities where they learned the native language, spread a political message, and occasionally even married into Indigenous families.⁵⁹ Sendero operated mostly in the “provinces,” or rural areas of Peru. This meant that there was little interaction between Sendero and the MRTA, at least until the end of the 1980s when the MRTA sent factions into the countryside and Sendero planned more operations in Lima.

Sendero Luminoso saw violence as central to its fight for a more just Peru. In Senderist conception, anyone associated with the government and the ruling class was an “enemy of the people” and needed to be done away with. They planned murder campaigns against mayors, government officials, landowners, and businessmen. If rank and file Peruvians refused to cooperate with Senderistas, they too needed to be killed for the cause. In the early 1980s, Sendero was infamous for its murder sprees in Andean villages.⁶⁰ A Sendero press release from February 1982 entitled *Desarrollemos la guerra de guerrillas* (Let us develop guerrilla warfare) begins with the quote “He who is not afraid of being cut into a thousand pieces, dares to dismantle the emperor.”⁶¹ Senderistas were willing to die for the revolution and sacrifice themselves for the cause. This press release illustrates Sendero Luminoso’s belief in a “blood quota”: that their armed struggle required the blood of their own militants and enemies to be shed. The release continues, “We are combatants and we know that armed struggle requires a quota of blood; and, as the facts prove, we offer our lives as the people and the proletariat teach

⁵⁸ Rudolph, *Peru: The Evolution of a Crisis*, 86.

⁵⁹ Cynthia McClintock, “Why Peasants Rebel: The Case of Peru’s Sendero Luminoso,” *World Politics* 37, no. 1 (1984): 51.

⁶⁰ Rudolph, *Peru: The Evolution of a Crisis*, 88-89.

⁶¹ Partido Comunista del Perú-Sendero Luminoso, “Desarrollemos La Guerra de Guerrillas,” CeDeMA, February 1, 1982, https://cedema.org/digital_items/648.

us and as the revolution demands.” Thus, Sendero’s writings and messaging make it clear that bloodshed and brutality were “required” elements of their vision of war against the state.

In December 1982, after Senderistas shot the deputy mayor of Ayacucho in front of his family, the Belaúnde government called in the Armed Forces. The Military’s counterinsurgency campaign would be incredibly brutal, escalating the number of deaths in the zones where Sendero was most present. While the army targeted militants, their fervent desire to contain Sendero Luminoso violence often led to the killing of civilians who were not involved. Peru’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s third section focuses on the role of the military in the civil conflict. In the conclusion to this section, the report reads, “The Commission has found that the Armed Forces, which took over the fight against subversion by decision of the constitutional government through supreme decree issued on December 29, 1982, did so by applying a strategy that did not distinguish between members of the organizations subversives and population outside them...”⁶² The violence carried out by Sendero Luminoso (and, to a far lesser extent, the MRTA) along with the Military’s severe response resulted in 69,000 deaths from 1980 to 2000. For Peruvians, this period of brutality often blurred together and caused some to blame Sendero and the MRTA, perhaps equally, for all of the violence. However, following the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report and recent scholarly work on the Peruvian conflict, each actor’s role is better understood.

The Founding of the MRTA

After being defeated by the army in 1965, the followers of the MIR dispersed into smaller splinter groups. In 1978, leftists convened with the shared goal of railing against the existing

⁶² Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación, *Informe Final*, Volume II, Chapter 1, Section 1.3: “Las Fuerzas Armadas,” 376.

political order. Together they formed the party *Unidad Democrática Popular* (Popular Democratic Unity, UDP). Early UDP discussions exposed a rift between members around the question of whether to utilize the electoral process or pursue armed struggle. MIR-EM (MIR-“El Militante”) broke with the UDP and joined forces with a series of other splinter groups who preferred the more radical path. In 1980, the UDP and the *Partido Socialista Revolucionario* (Revolutionary Socialist Party, PSR) attempted unity once again, forming the *Izquierda Unida* (United Left, IU) to function as an umbrella organization for Peru’s leftist groups. The IU quickly made it clear that it would exclude radical groups such as MIR-EM and the PSR’s radical equivalent, PSR-ML (Marxist-Leninist Revolutionary Socialist Party). These two groups were denied affiliation, driving them together to find their own path between the leftist establishment and the extreme radical militancy of Sendero Luminoso.

At the June 1980 Unitary Conference mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, the PSR-ML-MIR-EM set forth a shared ideology that would go on to become the MRTA’s official platform. These conference notes were compiled and published in a pamphlet titled “*Nuestra posición*” (Our Position) that July. Context is provided in the introduction to the document:

“Nearly a hundred fellow workers, peasants, students, intellectuals, neighborhood leaders, self- management leaders and survivors of the historic MIR contributed their experiences in the search not only for a theory that would respond to the demands of the Peruvian revolution, that would be far from the dominant models such as Maoism, Trotskyism, pro-Sovietism...that would build the bases for an organization that would break with stagnation, legalism, parliamentarism and be consistent with what it said by renewing the methods of political action.”⁶³

Here, the MIR-EM and the PSR-ML express a shared vision for a Peruvian leftist movement. Like APRA and the MIR before them, they reject foreign Communist doctrine including “Maoism, Trotskyism, [and] pro-Sovietism,” committing to following “Marxist theory and

⁶³ MRTA, “Nuestra posición,” CeDeMA, June 1, 1980, https://cedema.org/digital_items/6773.

practice” and seeking to adopt a strategy that attends directly to the “demands of the Peruvian revolution.” For these two groups, these demands necessitated armed struggle, targeted at the “immediate and principal enemy... [of the] bureaucratic-military apparatus.”⁶⁴ The MIR-EM and the PSR-ML note later on in “Nuestra posición” that “...the possibility of direct intervention by imperialism...remains open,” demanding additional action targeted at imperialist forces. The anti-imperialist, anti-elite, distinctly Peruvian coalition formed by these two groups can be seen as a continuation of Haya de la Torre’s vision of a purely Latin American, non-communist, revolutionary party. However, whereas APRA had, in recent years, focused on becoming part of the electoral and legal system, the alliance that would go on to become the MRTA rejected this path. The MIR-EM and the PSR-ML believed that the only way to upend the status quo was through revolutionary struggle. They agreed on five “general objectives,” set forth in “Nuestra posición”:

1. “The construction of the Revolutionary Party that provides political and military leadership to the masses, through all forms of struggle, towards the seizure of power.
2. The construction of the National and Social Liberation Front.
3. The construction of the revolutionary army as a regular structure, and the popular militias as a mass structure, under the leadership of the party. Guerrilla warfare will be the initial form of armed struggle through which this army will be forged. It will gradually incorporate broader masses into the struggle for national and social liberation, passing through the stages of revolutionary war, until it becomes a strong and powerful army.
4. Achieving the unity of revolutionaries.
5. Promote revolutionary war at a continental level under the principles of revolutionary internationalism.”⁶⁵

The two groups joined forces to take the revolutionary reins in the fight for “national and social liberation.” These objectives outline the structures and specific values believed necessary to achieve social change. The groups situated their struggle in the Latin American continent and in Peruvian history. In another press release from the same conference, entitled “*Bases de la*

⁶⁴ MRTA, “Nuestra posición.”

⁶⁵ MRTA, “Nuestra posición.”

Unidad (Unity Bases) *del PSR-ML-MIR-EM*,” the two factions affirm their place in Peruvian history. They emphasize a focus on “Discovering our reality, not inventing or transplanting it,” declaring, “We strive to connect with the best traditions of our people in the struggle for liberation...”⁶⁶ ensuring those who came across their platform that they had strong roots in national history.

From the beginning, the MRTA built on Peru’s revolutionary past. They combined the weakened projects of APRA radicalism and the crushed guerrilla movements of the 1960s with a reference to national heroes such as José de San Martín, who led revolution against the Spanish in Southern Latin America, and Túpac Amaru II, the Inca leader of a large Andean rebellion against Spanish colonial forces.⁶⁷ Thus, on March 1, 1982, when the contingent met to choose a name, they landed on the *Movimiento Revolucionario Túpac Amaru*, a name that “express[ed] not only the new mentality resulting from the agreements of this contest, but also the historical continuity of the millennial struggle of the Peruvian people against oppression and injustice.”⁶⁸ The MIR-EM and the PSR-ML believed that “The lack of a revolutionary leadership is the main historical challenge that we must overcome in order to raise a political alternative capable of leading the current struggles...”⁶⁹ While previous efforts had been unable to see liberation through, this new contingent believed they could learn from past mistakes and build a force strong enough to reignite the revolutionary flame.

A vision of a movement had emerged out of the most radical elements of the Peruvian left. The MIR-EM and the PSR-ML had been rejected by the UI, who sought to change the Peruvian landscape through legal means. Nonetheless, “Bases de la Unidad” states that “The

⁶⁶ MRTA, “Bases de la unidad del PSR-ML-MIR-EM,” CeDeMA, June 1, 1980, https://cedema.org/digital_items/3981.

⁶⁷ Miguel La Serna, *With Masses and Arms: Peru's Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 16.

⁶⁸ MRTA, “Sobre el nombre,” CeDeMA, March 1, 1982, https://cedema.org/digital_items/625.

⁶⁹ MRTA, “Bases de la unidad del PSR-ML-MIR-EM.”

PSR-ML-MIR-EM has no enemies on the left.”⁷⁰ The alliance that would go on to become the MRTA recognized the need to be strategic and work alongside other organizations. Those present at early MRTA conferences knew of Sendero Luminoso and its unrelenting approach to armed struggle. For the emerging MRTA, Sendero’s near-theological Marxism/Leninism/Maoism/Gonzalo Thought, brutal employment of violence, and antagonization of groups on the left provided a model of what to avoid.⁷¹ The MRTA instead fashioned itself in the image of Castro’s Revolution in Cuba, the Sandinista struggle in Nicaragua, and Peru’s own radical past. The MRTA would go on to cooperate with similarly “homegrown” insurgencies such as the Chilean Miristas and Uruguayan Tupamaros.⁷²

Natural leadership seemed to materialize in the process of the MRTA’s founding. Víctor Polay Campos was born in 1951 to Aprista parents, setting him on a leftist course from a young age. Polay was involved with APRA throughout his time at the University of Callao. When the Velasco dictatorship began to crack down on young activists, Polay’s mother convinced him to spend time studying in Europe. He continued to be involved with APRA across the ocean, even rooming with young Aprista Alan García—who, little did he know, would go on to be the first APRA president—while studying in Madrid. Polay eventually moved from Spain to Paris, where he fell in with a radical circle that ultimately convinced him to denounce APRA and join the MIR.⁷³ Polay continued down a radical path, ultimately leading him to the Unity Conference where the MRTA was established.

In a brochure entitled “*El MRTA y la revolución peruana*” (the MRTA and the Peruvian Revolution) published in May 1985, a few years after the organization's founding, the MRTA

⁷⁰ MRTA, “Bases de la unidad del PSR-ML-MIR-EM.”

⁷¹ La Serna, *With Masses and Arms*, 16.

⁷² La Serna, *With Masses and Arms*, 27.

⁷³ La Serna, *With Masses and Arms*, 22-23.

reaffirmed its political and military strategy. The brochure begins, “Our people, peasant workers, employees, students and all those who are marginalized by the regime, suffer from a series of problems that make normal human development impossible in Peru.” The group clarified that these problems included the “scourges [of]...unemployment and underemployment, hunger and poverty, unhealthiness, lack of food and education, crime and widespread corruption” that were afflicting the Peruvian masses, while exploitative capitalist policy enabled “a small group of people” to get “rich by the handful as a result of this same policy, as well as a group of foreign companies, mainly North American, that exploit and plunder our natural resources and the cheap labor of our people.” In response to these grievances, the MRTA proposed that their fundamental goal should be “the conquest of political power” to implement revolutionary change.⁷⁴ The MRTA had launched a struggle that was situated in the history of the Peruvian left, took inspiration from Latin American struggles such as the Cuban Revolution, and stood up in the name of the masses to wage war on the status quo.

MRTA Operations

From the outset, political and militant action taken by the MRTA was distinctly dramatic, designed to draw attention to the group’s message and revolutionary struggle. The organization operated predominantly in Lima, later dispatching small factions to rural areas. Unlike Sendero, the MRTA avoided violent public attacks with mass casualties. They sought to confront those responsible for injustice, abuse, and brutality inflicted on the Peruvian people. The MRTA began its acts of rebellion in the beginning of 1984 with an attack on the Civil Guard station in the poor, informal neighborhood of Villa El Salvador. They saw the police, specifically in Villa El

⁷⁴ MRTA, “El MRTA y la revolución peruana,” UNMSM CEDOC, May 1985, <https://cedoc.sisbib.unmsm.edu.pe/biblioteca-digital/coleccion-documental/folletos/96>.

Salvador, as perpetrators of state violence. Therefore, planned assaults frequently targeted police stations and other elements of the Peruvian security apparatus.⁷⁵ The MRTA discussed the January 1984 Villa El Salvador attack in a press release in May, claiming that the operation was a step in “the realization of a campaign against repression” following recent police abuses in poor neighborhoods. The statement cites a few examples, including the suppression of university students, the shooting of a young girl while police were chasing a criminal in the neighborhood of San Juan de Miraflores, and an illegal eviction in Villa El Salvador that resulted in the shooting and injury of a pregnant mother.⁷⁶

Historian and leading expert on the MRTA Miguel la Serna explains that the movement sought to establish themselves as a sort of “watchdog” for poor Peruvians.⁷⁷ They did so socially and physically—such as in the case of the Civil Guard station attack—as well as economically, beginning with an assault on the house of Carlos Rodríguez Pastor, the Minister of Economy in the Belaúnde administration who had just stepped down. The MRTA saw Rodríguez Pastor as emblematic of the injustice and economic exploitation that befell the Peruvian poor, calling him “the gringo sent by international banking to manage its business in our country.” The attack was framed as “retaliatory” and the MRTA noted that “The operation was of great quality and was received by the popular masses with profound joy.”⁷⁸ In the eyes of Túpac Amaristas, figures like Rodríguez Pastor were far from innocent. An attack such as this one—which left Rodríguez Pastor and his family unharmed—was not designed to be a political assassination, but to raise the specter of a revolution against imperialism and exploitation.

⁷⁵ La Serna, *With Masses and Arms*, 29-30.

⁷⁶ MRTA, “La situación actual y las tareas en el proceso de la guerra revolucionaria del pueblo,” CeDeMA, May 1, 1984, https://cedema.org/digital_items/3921.

⁷⁷ La Serna, *With Masses and Arms*, 31.

⁷⁸ MRTA, “La situación actual y las tareas en el proceso de la guerra revolucionaria del pueblo.”

Attacks often targeted symbols of imperialism and predatory capitalism—businesses that made the rich richer and kept low-income Peruvians in poverty. In April 1986, the MRTA bombed the technology company IBM, the Peruvian-American Cultural Institute, three Citibank locations, Diners Club, ITT, Kodak, and the U.S. Embassy in a show of force against these companies that they believed were standing in the way of economic justice for the Peruvian masses.⁷⁹ A year before, in May 1985, the MRTA set fire to seven Kentucky Fried Chicken locations in a dramatic denunciation of American imperialism.⁸⁰ These attacks were largely symbolic: they were usually directed at buildings and not people, and while they sometimes resulted in injuries, they were not designed to yield any casualties and instead to make a statement about MRTA principles.

The MRTA also planned smaller-scale “Robin Hood” style attacks on businesses—to steal from the rich and give to the poor. Rebels would storm commercial retailers, distributing the food and other goods they plundered to poor communities in Lima. These types of acts, which were common practice among Túpac Amaristas, outnumbered the attacks on police, car bombings, and military weapons arsenal raids that the MRTA became notorious for.⁸¹

On November 5, 1986, the MRTA planned attacks throughout the capital to mark four years of fighting against the state. After an explosion killed two anti-terrorism agents, the Peruvian newspaper *El Nacional* reported, “This tragic event was the culmination of an early morning effort to defuse a total of seven homemade bombs left by the rebels in different places in Lima. Their explosions, as they made known in anonymous leaflets, were intended to commemorate the fourth anniversary of the founding of the MRTA...”⁸² This action successfully

⁷⁹ La Serna, *With Masses and Arms*, 57.

⁸⁰ La Serna, *With Masses and Arms*, 40.

⁸¹ La Serna, *With Masses and Arms*, 57.

⁸² MRTA, “MRTA sembró bombas asesinas en sangriento aniversario,” LUM, November 5, 1986, <https://lum.cultura.pe/cdi/periodico/mrta-sembro-bombas-asesinas-en-sangriento-aniversario>.

drew attention to the MRTA cause. While the November 5 attacks did not target any specific imperialist or capitalist institution, the organization sought to remind Peruvians that the revolution was alive and well, and they would not cease fighting for the masses.

Use of the Media

The MRTA strategically utilized the media to capture the attention of the Peruvian public. At the Unitary Conference, the PSR-ML and MIR-EM established that the newspaper *Venceremos* “would be the spokesperson for the new organization.”⁸³ *Venceremos*, Spanish for “we will prevail,” churned out regular issues containing articles about the ongoing armed struggle through the 1980s and 90s.

The movement also infiltrated mainstream media in order to gain recognition. In early December 1984, MRTA operatives kidnapped Vicky Peláez, a reporter for the news program *90 Seconds*. Túpac Amaristas forced Peláez and her cameraman, Percy Raborg, to broadcast an official MRTA statement to Channel 2 in which the group denounced the recent capture and torture of their comrades in Cuzco. While sequestered, Peláez herself requested an interview and taped a conversation with a hooded Polay. Pressure from the Belaúnde government prevented either broadcast from airing, yet the available transcript of the interview provides a window into how the MRTA desired to present itself to Peruvians at large.

Peláez’s first question for Polay asked about the similarities between the MRTA and Sendero Luminoso, an organization which Peruvians not only knew of but already associated with terror and extremism. Polay began by differentiating the ideology of the two groups, stating,

⁸³ MRTA, “Bases de la unidad del PSR-ML-MIR-EM.”

“...the MRTA does not belong to nor is it part of the Communist Party of Peru.”⁸⁴ Nonetheless, Polay conceded similarities, stating that the two groups had both taken up arms against the government and both believed that “in this country the only way to end hunger, misery, and overexploitation is to overthrow the ruling classes and their institutions through armed struggle...”⁸⁵ When asked about killing Armed Forces and police personnel, Polay responded by reasoning, “We, the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement, are not in revolt against the...subordinate personnel of the Armed Forces and the Police Forces. We are in revolt against the capitalist system...But in a war, in a battle, if they choose the path of defending the oppressors, the exploiters, the Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement must be relentless in combat.”⁸⁶ With this answer, Polay rejected the notion that the MRTA committed indiscriminate violence, which may have been the impression of anyone who had read newspaper coverage of their attacks in the previous year. He did not deny that the MRTA was responsible for the death of police, but labeled these members of law enforcement as “defending the oppressors.” While this interview was never screened for public eyes, it would have been an effective way for the MRTA to fully introduce themselves and their platform to Peruvians. Media strategy would continue to constitute an important pillar of MRTA activity.

The MRTA also co-opted radio station broadcasts to spread their message. On March 1, 1985, *Radio Inca* was taken over by MRTA broadcast. An *El Diario* account of the incident reported, “Four men and two women entered directly in front of the broadcasting booth...[and] politely demanded that the workers of said station transmit a cassette, in which they broadcast a message of a political nature.” This message was reportedly also sent to the *El Diario* office in

⁸⁴ Víctor Polay Campos, “La entrevista verdadera del secuestro de Vicky Peláez,” by Vicky Peláez, *Diario de Marka* (February 21, 1985): 5, Asociación Pro Derechos Humanos - APRODEH, LUM, <https://lum.cultura.pe/cdi/periodico/la-entrevista-verdadera-del-secuestro-de-vicky-pelaez>.

⁸⁵ Campos, “La entrevista verdadera del secuestro de Vicky Peláez,” 3.

⁸⁶ Campos, “La entrevista verdadera del secuestro de Vicky Peláez,” 5.

print form. Over the radio and in Peruvian newspapers, the MRTA denounced the Belaúnde government as a “bourgeois party,” declaring that there had been “no difference for the masses” in the transition of power from the Morales Bermúdez dictatorship to Belaúnde’s presidency.⁸⁷ Their intention was to speak to disillusionment with the political system and encourage Peruvians that their radical path was the only way to bring about change

Through Peruvian radio stations and newspapers, the MRTA was successfully able to disseminate its platform to an extensive audience. The group employed the threat of violence, often storming offices with weapons, in order to force the media to capitulate. Their Radio Inca takeover was a call to action and constituted a key strategy for captivating public attention. The group would go on to found their own radio broadcast, calling it Radio 4 de Noviembre after the anniversary of Túpac Amaru II’s 1780 rebellion.⁸⁸

The MRTA’s media strategy set the movement apart from Sendero Luminoso and its use of violence. While the MRTA used weapons to force media staff to do their bidding, this strategy vastly differed from employing violence to force civilians into membership—something Sendero was known to do.⁸⁹ Túpac Amaristas’ frequent utilization of media as a way to spread a message, compared with Sendero’s tendency to stay away from the spotlight and evade publicity, constituted one of the major practical differences between the two groups.⁹⁰

The MRTA and the García Administration

On July 6, 1985, the MRTA took over seven Lima radio stations in order to announce a “political truce” with Alan García’s APRA government. García had won the presidential election

⁸⁷ “Tupacamarus capturaron anoche radio Inca,” *El Diario*, March 1, 1985, Asociación Pro Derechos Humanos - APRODEH, LUM, <https://lum.cultura.pe/cdi/periodico/tupacamarus-capturaron-anoche-radio-inca>.

⁸⁸ La Serna, *With Masses and Arms*, 56.

⁸⁹ La Serna, *With Masses and Arms*, 38.

⁹⁰ Rudolph, *Peru: The Evolution of a Crisis*, 91.

on April 14, 1985 and was poised to take office at the end of July. A newspaper article on the radio station takeover relays, “In less than 90 minutes, the radio stations “Comas,” “El Sol,” “Sol Armonía FM,” “Oriente,” “1160,” “Unión” and “Agricultura” were indistinctly in the hands of the Tupacamaristas who, after threatening the operators and their announcers, broadcast their proclamation on the air.” The article describes men “well-dressed, with dark suits and black glasses” and a woman of “medium height, with blonde hair and glasses” storming radio station offices and “pointing their revolvers at the operators, announcers, administrative and security personnel, forcing them not to look at them, locking them in the bathroom and quickly recording the message on the tape recorders and leaving an explosive device.”⁹¹ MRTA forces once again strategically infiltrated a media broadcast to communicate to a wider Peruvian audience, using the threat of violence to ensure their message was heard.

A statement put out by the MRTA about the truce on August 1 discusses a recent “clandestine press conference” that was organized to determine the movement’s official reaction to the new Aprista president. The statement concurs, “Dr. Alan García came to power in these elections as a result of a majority vote. Respecting this majority, the MRTA will not carry out military actions against the APRA and the new government as long as it does not attack the people.”⁹² However, the statement also announced that “The MRTA maintains its political-military independence and as it has been doing, it will not stop participating actively in the defense of the standard of living and the political demands of the masses.” The MRTA reaffirmed its plan to continue to attack “imperialist companies,” demand trials for military officers who had perpetrated state terrorism and caused civilian disappearances, and fight any subsequent García policy that they deemed to work against the masses. The group’s promise to

⁹¹ “Tupacamarus capturaron anoche radio Inca.”

⁹² MRTA, “Primera Conferencia Clandestina: Suspensión de acciones militares,” CeDeMA, August 1, 1985, https://cedema.org/digital_items/3433.

hold off on armed action was certainly contingent. They would wait on the sidelines to see whether or not García would deliver on his campaign promises of stimulating the economy for all and bolstering social programs such as the Support Program for Temporary Income (PAIT).⁹³ If they began to disagree with his political actions, they would divert attacks and target the government once again.

This announcement of a political truce highlights one of the most significant differences between the MRTA and Sendero Luminoso. While the MRTA never walked away from armed struggle, they did not ignore the electoral political scene in the same way Sendero did. The MRTA did not believe that the political establishment could yield a solution to injustice and exploitation in Peru. Nonetheless, they also recognized that an APRA presidency brought new opportunities for change and were willing to accept the results of a popular vote. Sendero, on the other hand, expressed a tunnel-vision view of armed struggle. In a press release put out in February 1985, two months before the election that García would go on to win, Sendero urged Peruvians not to vote and to support guerrilla warfare instead. They express the belief that “the governments in Peru, civil or military, are nothing but the cliques in power, elected or not, that exercise dictatorship over the people...for the benefit of the dominant classes and of Yankee imperialism and totally against the popular and national interests...it will continue to be the same as long as we do not overthrow the prevailing order by force of revolutionary arms through a people's war.”⁹⁴ While the MRTA would agree with the incapability of government reform to solve Peru's economic and social crises, their statement accepting García's election as the will of the people negates Sendero's view that government was “exercising dictatorship over the people” regardless of whether or not it was elected.

⁹³ Rudolph, *Peru: The Evolution of a Crisis*, 102.

⁹⁴ Partido Comunista del Perú-Sendero Luminoso, “No votar, sino generalizar la guerra de guerrillas para conquistar el poder para el pueblo,” CeDeMA, February 1, 1985, https://cedema.org/digital_items/649.

The MRTA's position would grow closer to Sendero's as García's time in office went on. A February 1986 press release provided an update on the MRTA's view of the García administration:

“The MRTA considers that the government of Alan Garcia is not fulfilling the promises of change for which the people voted massively on April 14 of last year; rather, what is observed is a slide of the government down a slope crossed by multiple concessions to imperialism, to the native dominant classes and to the Armed Forces, giving the worrying impression that the government is not capable of advancing along the paths of change, despite the broad support of the popular masses. The government appears to be digging its own historical grave.”⁹⁵

Here, the MRTA expresses its distrust of García's government and its ability to fulfill its promises or distance itself from imperialist control. Later in the press release, the MRTA threatens that “If the APRA government of Alan Garcia does not take the necessary steps to bring about change...the people will rebel and withdraw their support. The MRTA will be at the head of this...defending our rights and achieving our aspirations with weapons in hand.”⁹⁶ This press release served as a warning to García's government, reaffirming that the MRTA would give the first APRA president, elected by the Peruvian people, only one more chance.

In just a few months, the MRTA had essentially given up on the APRA government. The May 1986 edition of *Venceremos* declared that “The demagogic posturing and anti-popular stance of this government, which calls itself “democratic, popular, and anti-imperialist,” are increasingly clear.”⁹⁷ They accuse García's administration of repression, failure to improve the economic situation of the poor, and devaluation of Peru's exported goods. With this denunciation

⁹⁵ MRTA, “¡Sin justicia ni libertad, la rebelión avanzará!” CeDeMA, February 20, 1986, https://cedema.org/digital_items/6596.

⁹⁶ MRTA, “¡Sin justicia ni libertad, la rebelión avanzará!”

⁹⁷ MRTA, “Basta de marchas, hasta de paros...se me acabó la paciencia,” *Venceremos*, no. 14 (May 1986), UNMSM CEDOC, <https://cedoc.sisbib.unmsm.edu.pe/biblioteca-digital/coleccion-documental/publicaciones-periodicas/54>.

of García's ability to be a president for the people, the MRTA resolved to continue its attacks against the government.

The MRTA and the Fujimori Administration

Alan García's presidency had been considered a failure by those on the left and on the right. His inability to solve the country's fiscal problems and the continuing threat of Sendero and the MRTA led voters to swing to the right, electing Alberto Fujimori in April 1990. Born in Lima to Japanese immigrant parents, Fujimori was an agricultural engineer and taught at the National Agrarian University in Lima.⁹⁸ In 1988, Fujimori had founded the *Cambio 90* (Change 90) political movement, bringing together the bases of evangelical Protestants and small-and-medium sized business groups to offer an alternative to the existing political arena.⁹⁹ Fujimori surged in popularity after he denounced neoliberal candidate and beloved Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa's economic shock campaign designed to combat inflation. He took the entire country by surprise in August 1990, just four months after he was elected, when he implemented an identical shock campaign often referred to as "Fujishock." This measure increased the price of consumer goods by between 300 to 1000% almost immediately. Fujishock ultimately proved successful in bringing down inflation, but it left vast amounts of Peruvians to struggle with unemployment, low wages, and food insecurity.¹⁰⁰

Fujimori's next scandal came in April 1992. The president announced to the country that he was shutting down Congress and the Judiciary due to their corruption and inability to fight the threat of Sendero Luminoso. He also suspended articles of the constitution that he did not

⁹⁸ Rudolph, *Peru: The Evolution of a Crisis*, 142.

⁹⁹ Cynthia McClintock, "Peru's Fujimori: A Caudillo Derails Democracy," *Current History* 92, no. 572 (1993): 113.

¹⁰⁰ Rudolph, *Peru: The Evolution of a Crisis*, 161.

consider “compatible with the government’s goals.”¹⁰¹ The president’s authoritarian turn was considered an *autogolpe* (self-coup) and drew criticism from parties across the Peruvian political landscape as well as from other countries. The military and police carried out policies of autocracy and repression drawn up by Fujimori. Immediately following the autogolpe, the Armed Forces arrested “enemy” congressional leaders and placed them under house arrest, attempting to do so to Alan García but failing to find him.¹⁰² Fujimori was also aided and advised by Vladimiro Montesinos, a former army officer, intelligence operative, and lawyer who was appointed director of the *Servicio de Inteligencia Nacional* (National Intelligence Service, SIN). Montesinos carried out a systematic campaign of bribery and blackmail in order to ensure politicians and judges were aligned with Fujimori.¹⁰³ His behind-the-scenes corruption was critical to cementing Fujimori’s authoritarian leadership.

Fujimori claimed that this power grab was an attempt to fight terrorism once and for all. He imposed new anti-terrorism laws and created a new branch of law enforcement, the DINCOTE (*Dirección Nacional Contra el Terrorismo*, National Anti-Terrorism Directorate), specifically to arrest and detain alleged terrorists. DINCOTE worked with the Peruvian Military to hunt down Peruvians with any suspected connection to radicalism and throw them in jail in droves. Anti-terrorist legislation and practices were incredibly harsh and flew in the face of previously held civil liberties.¹⁰⁴ Newly implemented judicial practices included trial by hooded judges, limitations on the rights of lawyers for accused terrorists, and restrictions on visitations along with increasingly brutal conditions in prisons for those who were convicted.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ Poole and Rénique, *Peru: Time of Fear*, 159.

¹⁰² Poole and Rénique, *Peru: Time of Fear*, 160.

¹⁰³ Suzie Baer, *Peru’s MRTA: Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement* (New York: The Rosen Publishing Group, 2003), 48.

¹⁰⁴ Baer, *Peru’s MRTA*, 15-17.

¹⁰⁵ Baer, *Peru’s MRTA*, 23.

This military and political crackdown succeeded in rounding up a number of MRTA leaders, including Víctor Polay Campos, who had been arrested in 1989 but had escaped in the July 1990 Canto Grande prison escape.¹⁰⁶ He was arrested again in 1992, the same year that DINCOTE captured Sendero Luminoso leader Abimael Guzmán, essentially marking the fall of the organization that had coalesced around Guzmán and his cult of personality.¹⁰⁷

Crisis at the Japanese Ambassador's Residence



Túpac Amaristas inside the Residence of the Japanese Ambassador

On December 16, 1996, fourteen Túpac Amaristas stormed the house of the Japanese Ambassador to Peru during a party thrown for his birthday. The guerrillas declared that they were taking as hostages the five hundred guests present at the party. The high-profile feat was a meticulously planned attempt by the weakened organization to protest against Fujimori while simultaneously securing a sort of bargaining chip. The MRTA's first official communication

¹⁰⁶ Baer, *Peru's MRTA*, 21.

¹⁰⁷ McClintock, "Peru's Fujimori," 112.

about the episode, written on December 17th, explains their rationale behind the attack: “We have carried out this military occupation in protest against the Japanese government's interference in the political life of our country, endorsing at all times the methods of human rights violations pursued by Mr. Fujimori's government, as well as his economic policy, which has only brought greater misery and hunger to the majority of the Peruvian people.”¹⁰⁸ The MRTA vowed to release the hostages if the government agreed to its demands, which are listed as follows:

“Commitment to change the course of economic policy to a model that seeks the well-being of the vast majority.

Release of all prisoners belonging to the MRTA and accused of belonging to our organization.

Transfer of the commando that raided the Japanese ambassador's residence along with all the MRTA prisoners to the central jungle. As guarantors, some of the captured figures, duly selected, will also be present, and we will comply with their release once they are in our guerrilla zone.

Payment of a war tax.”¹⁰⁹

Fujimori immediately responded that he would not give into the organization's demands. Over the next week, Túpac Amaristas released prisoners in groups, beginning with all of the women present in the building. By the start of the new year, 1997, the MRTA was keeping only 140 people representative of the elite inner circle: intelligence forces, members of the Fujimori administration, diplomats, and military commanders.¹¹⁰ For five months, the skeletal remaining MRTA forces negotiated with the Fujimori administration while the President planned a military operation in secret. On April 22, 1997, Operation Chavín de Huántar freed the remaining

¹⁰⁸ MRTA, “Comunicado No 1. Toma de la Embajada de Japón en Lima,” CeDeMA, December 17, 1996, https://cedema.org/digital_items/667.

¹⁰⁹ MRTA, “Comunicado No 1. Toma de la Embajada de Japón en Lima.”

¹¹⁰ La Serna, *With Masses and Arms*, 208.

hostages and took MRTA officials into custody.¹¹¹ Néstor Cerpa and the other thirteen Túpac Amaristas who were killed that day marked a major loss for the MRTA. The movement never quite recovered: leaders and rank-and-file members would write communications from prison, protest for better conditions, and continue to defend their vision of a greater Peru, but collective action was impossible with so many locked away.

Fujimori's rampant human rights abuses and corruption, failure to rescue the Peruvian economy, and increasing efforts to centralize power eventually elicited domestic and international criticism. Nonetheless, he is remembered by many Peruvians as a hero in the fight against terrorism: Sendero Luminoso and the MRTA essentially crumbled during his presidency, a legacy that complicates his authoritarian turn in the minds of many.

Conclusion

The Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement was rooted in Peruvian and Latin American leftist traditions, declaring war on the state in an attempt to foment radical change for the masses. Túpac Amaristas saw themselves as picking up where Mariátegui, Haya de la Torre, and the guerrilla movements of the 1960s left off. The organization harped on grievances held by many in the early 1980s including economic inequality and exploitation, military abuses, and imperialist control. The MRTA was distinct from its contemporary Sendero Luminoso in its choices around violence and movement structure, providing an alternative path for those who sought to be involved with radical activity but may not have approved of Sendero's style. The next chapter will delve into the membership of the MRTA and answer the question of why people became involved with the movement.

¹¹¹ La Serna, *With Masses and Arms*, 219.

Chapter 2: Recruitment, Rhetoric, and Reasons People Joined the MRTA

“Con las masas y las armas, ¡venceremos!” / “With masses and arms, we will prevail!”
– Slogan of the MRTA

Introduction

This chapter will seek to understand the motivations of those who became involved with the MRTA and the tactics the organization employed to recruit members. The MRTA was founded during a moment of particularly significant dissatisfaction with the Peruvian government. A number of organizations sought to enact change at this time, from church groups to student clubs to Sendero Luminoso. The simplest way to understand why people joined the MRTA would be to hear their stories and reflections. However, very few journals and memoirs, key primary sources in social history research, exist from Túpac Amaristas. A few interviews with leaders of the MRTA as well as scrutiny of the organization’s materials will provide the backbone for this chapter’s analysis. Individuals’ stories and movement recruitment strategies will be pieced together to suggest that those who joined the MRTA did so because they felt that the organization recognized their grievances with the state and sought to fight for their interests.

The nearly one thousand people who became involved with the Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement from 1980 to the late 1990s were primarily frustrated with an unjust social order, poverty, and staggering inequality. The organization sought to convey empathy, convince potential recruits of shared priorities, and portray the organization as a community fighting against injustice. The MRTA situated itself in Peruvian history and in an important moment for the left in Latin America. They voiced recognition of disillusionment with the Peruvian political system, emphasized their lack of extremism compared to Sendero Luminoso,

refused to completely denounce the mainstream left, and articulated a vision for a more just society. They recruited from a number of bases, including university students, the urban poor, workers, *campesinos* (rural peasants), and the political left, speaking to specific and shared grievances. The MRTA even attracted a handful of outsiders who were drawn to the movement's fight against government corruption, exploitation, and brutality. Through populist rhetoric that called civilians to action, the MRTA positioned itself as the only way to bring about justice and lasting, positive change for Peru.

Literature on Radicalization

In order to examine why individuals chose to join the MRTA, it is imperative to take a broader look at why Peruvians, and Latin Americans more broadly, radicalized on a large scale in the second half of the 20th century. There exists a body of social science research on radicalization and “terrorism” in the Latin American context that can provide some insight into the MRTA case. Terrorism, a vague concept often employed with political motivations, is defined in this research against the backdrop of guerrilla warfare and government repression. In their research on non-governmental terrorism in Latin America, Andreas E. Feldmann and Maiju Perälä define terrorism as “deliberate, indiscriminate attacks on noncombatants to instill terror in the population and undermine the power of political authorities.”¹¹² The term “indiscriminate” does not feel accurate to describe the MRTA's actions, as they specifically targeted government officials and businesses which they felt were enemies of the Peruvian people. Túpac Amaristas felt that they were attacking perpetrators of state violence—not true “noncombatants.” However,

¹¹² Andreas E. Feldmann and Maiju Perälä, “Reassessing the Causes of Nongovernmental Terrorism in Latin America,” *Latin American Politics and Society* 46, no. 2 (2004): 106.

Feldman and Perälä do discuss the MRTA's specific use of "...terrorism to rebel against the Peruvian state" to make a larger point about armed attacks from non-state actors.¹¹³

"Terrorism" is often viewed as the weapon of the weak against a much more powerful state. Scholars at large view poverty and economic stagnation, state repression, and racial and social conflicts between classes as the most glaring predictors for a rise in terrorism in Latin America.¹¹⁴ Feldman and Perälä's empirical study resulted in four significant factors associated with increased incidence of nongovernmental terrorism: when a state had a dismal human rights record, when political and civil liberties increased, with a higher number of terrorists acts in the previous year, and when unemployment rates were higher.¹¹⁵ These findings make sense in the Peruvian context: The 1960s had seen the brutal crushing of guerrilla groups, Peru had emerged from dictatorship and returned to democratic rule, the violence perpetrated by Sendero Luminoso and the MRTA generally increased each year in the 1980s and early 1990s, and unemployment was high during the Belaúnde and García presidencies.

Behavioral Scientist Randy Borum's investigation into why people radicalize is pertinent to understanding why people joined the MRTA. Borum reviews a number of social science theories, including some that are particularly applicable to the MRTA context. Social Movement Theory defines a social movement as "A set of opinions and beliefs in a population, which represents preferences for changing some elements of the social structure and/or reward distribution of a society," a definition fitting for an organization like the MRTA.¹¹⁶ Borum details the four tasks social movements must undertake to sustain themselves: "Forming mobilization potential, forming and motivating recruitment networks, arousing motivation to participate, and

¹¹³ Feldmann and Perälä, "Reassessing the Causes of Nongovernmental Terrorism in Latin America," 109.

¹¹⁴ Feldmann and Perälä, "Reassessing the Causes of Nongovernmental Terrorism in Latin America," 115-116.

¹¹⁵ Feldmann and Perälä, "Reassessing the Causes of Nongovernmental Terrorism in Latin America," 120-121.

¹¹⁶ Randy Borum, "Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories," *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, no. 4 (2012): 16-17.

removing barriers to participation.”¹¹⁷ Through publications, radio broadcasts, working with university groups and labor organizations, and a number of other strategies, the MRTA worked to accomplish all of these tasks and build a movement that would mobilize Peruvians to fight against the state through targeted armed struggle. This chapter will examine why Peruvians became involved with the MRTA. Social science research on radicalization and violence against the state in the Latin American context provides some background on the general causes of mobilization, while looking at primary sources will help answer questions around MRTA membership.

Leaders’ Motivations

The leaders of the MRTA during its nearly two decades of existence all believed that armed struggle was the only way to rid Peru of the scourges of poverty, inequality, and corrupt governance. Víctor Polay Campos, often thought of as the MRTA’s number one leader, recounted his motivations for joining the organization in an interview with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2003. Polay situates the MRTA in historical context, explaining, “Let us remember that in those years [the beginning of the 1980s]...the dictatorship had a series of measures that still left hunger [and] misery in our homeland...we were witnessing the closure of factories, massive layoffs, and increasing violence by all.”¹¹⁸ The military dictatorship, led first by Juan Velasco Alvarado from 1968-1975 and then by Francisco Morales Bermúdez from 1975-1980, had weakened the country’s democratic institutions and left chaos and economic devastation in its wake. For Polay, the MRTA was formed in 1980 to protect Peruvians in case

¹¹⁷ Borum, “Radicalization into Violent Extremism I,” 17.

¹¹⁸ “Testimonio: Víctor Polay Campos,” Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación: Sesiones institucionales de balance y perspectiva, April 4, 2003, 2:08-2:24, LUM, <https://lum.cultura.pe/cdi/video/testimonio-victor-polay-campos>.

the government failed to remedy socioeconomic injustices. After four years of democratic rule under Fernando Belaúnde Terry, little change was palpable. Polay recalls, “In 1984 we decided to join the armed struggle... We would say with great concern that after four years of internal conflict, the contenders did not offer the country an alternative. The country's popular masses suffered the consequences of political violence. Human rights were not respected...there was a deep contempt for human life.”¹¹⁹ Early MRTA leaders had lost hope that the return to democracy would bring about meaningful change. The Velasco dictatorship had promised to bring improvements for the masses, and while some land reform was accomplished, Peruvians still suffered from poverty, the economy lacked any stability, and the Military still held the power to arrest political dissidents and abuse civilians. Polay and his co-conspirators could not wait around to see if the Belaúnde government would eventually fulfill its promises. They sought to protect human rights and fight injustice with targeted armed struggle.

Peter Cárdenas Schulte, another MRTA leader, expresses a similar sentiment. In his interview with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, he notes, “After 12 years of military regime, the democratic opening brought with it the emergence and exacerbation of a conflict with very deep roots... a democracy weak in the sense that it did not represent an economic or political alternative to the central concerns of the majority population.”¹²⁰ For Cárdenas, between the weakness of the new government and the brutal insurgency of Sendero Luminoso, Peru was at a moment of crisis—and the MRTA was the solution. He explains that his involvement in leftist circles led him to “the popular struggles of the years ‘77 and ‘78,” and ultimately to the conference of leftist organizations where the MRTA was born.¹²¹ For both of these leaders,

¹¹⁹ “Testimonio: Víctor Polay Campos,” 3:06-3:42.

¹²⁰ “Testimonio: Peter Cárdenas Schulte,” Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación: Sesiones institucionales de balance y perspectiva, February 27, 2003, 2:46-3:10, LUM, <https://lum.cultura.pe/cdi/video/testimonio-peter-cardenas-shulte..>

¹²¹ “Testimonio: Peter Cárdenas Schulte,” 2:27-2:32.

concern with the conditions of Peruvian society, the feeling that the new democratic administration would not bring about change, and previous involvement in radical spaces led them to advocate taking up arms and, as they saw it, fighting for their country.

MRTA Rhetoric

The MRTA regularly released statements, longer publications, radio broadcasts, and other messages to explain their struggle to the Peruvian public and attempt to recruit members and sympathizers. Túpac Amarista rhetoric was populist in nature, calling people of all ages and backgrounds to action. They spoke to an anger felt by poor Peruvians, as well as those who were frustrated with U.S. presence and economic stagnation.

The populism utilized by the MRTA sought to stir up anger at the “haves” from the “have nots.” Their declaration “*El MRTA y la revolución peruana*” (The MRTA and the Peruvian Revolution) asserts, “...not everyone suffers misfortune as a consequence of this economic policy. We also see that in our country there is a small group of people who are getting rich by the handful...as well as a group of foreign companies, mainly North American, that exploit and plunder our natural resources and the cheap labor of our people, while controlling the entire national economy through large transnational banks, for the exclusive benefit of large transnational companies that control a significant part of the economy...”¹²² A 1980 statement from “*4 de noviembre*” (November), an MRTA publication, similarly notes, “While small groups of millionaires who have amassed their wealth through exploitation and their ties to multinationals squander their money in very expensive places, the people endure countless hardships to eat poorly.”¹²³ By pointing at “a small group of people,” “foreign companies,” and

¹²² MRTA, “*El MRTA y la revolución peruana*.”

¹²³ MRTA, “*4 de noviembre: La voz del Movimiento Revolucionario Tupac Amaru*,” UNMSM CEDOC, January 25, 1980, <https://cedoc.sisbib.unmsm.edu.pe/biblioteca-digital/coleccion-documental/volantes/63>.

“millionaires,” MRTA leaders sought to expose the economic exploitation of the Peruvian people and remind civilians of the unjust economic system that perpetuated inequality nationally.

MRTA messaging also utilized theory and history to legitimize armed struggle. They describe their revolutionary platform as fitting perfectly into a natural progression of events in Peru. Documents that came out of the June 1980 Unitary Conference where the MRTA was founded acknowledge their place in Peruvian history: “We strive to connect with the best traditions of our people in the struggle for liberation, from...Túpac Amaru to Mariátegui, the Trujillo revolution in 1932 and the uprising of the sailors in 1948, the peasant movements of 62-63, the guerrillas of 65 and the struggles of this decade, collecting our history and making ourselves part of it.”¹²⁴ The MRTA’s mission may have seemed less radical and extreme to Peruvians when explained with language that invoked history and revolutionary tradition. These statements likely attracted support by framing the idea of revolution as inevitable.

Túpac Amaristas connected their fight with revolutionary movements across Latin America. They wrote about examples of success to inspire confidence in their struggle: “The Cuban revolution in 1959, and more recently the triumph of the Sandinista revolution¹²⁵, have had extraordinary effects on the peoples of the continent and have revived the revolutionary forces, showing the correct path to victory...”¹²⁶ By reminding Peruvians of the recent success of radical movements across the continent, the MRTA positioned themselves as likely victors in their attack on the state. They also painted a picture of unity and emphasized that the MRTA could be part of a larger movement to fight injustice and benefit the Latin American people.

¹²⁴ MRTA, “Bases de la unidad del PSR-ML-MIR-EM.”

¹²⁵ Here, the MRTA is referring to the Sandinista National Liberation Front’s overthrow of the Somoza Dictatorship in 1978-1979. The Sandinistas would go on to fight against the U.S.-backed Contra army from 1981 to 1990.

¹²⁶ MRTA, “El MRTA y la revolución peruana.”

The nature of MRTA violence as targeted and strategically employed was constantly reiterated in the organization's messaging. Unlike Sendero, the MRTA only attacked, and rarely killed, when it felt its targets were symbols of imperialism and exploitation. The words used to describe MRTA action convey this. The "*4 de Noviembre*" publication states, "The Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement continues its campaign to punish the rich and fight hunger after the takeovers of radio stations and the actions against shopping malls and luxury restaurants where only millionaires go."¹²⁷ They banked on the fact that the Peruvian masses would not be particularly sympathetic to attacks on the haunts of the rich. They framed their attacks on American businesses in a similar way, emphasizing these companies' imperialist nature and blaming that for damage to Peruvian society. A letter from the MRTA to the U.S. ambassador to Peru explains, "The letter is to tell you that the attack is not directed against the American people, heir to rich traditions of independence and libertarianism...but against the government of "Killer of Children" Ronald Reagan, representative of the monopolies of war and hunger..."¹²⁸ The MRTA created a distinction between "us" and "them": the people and the rich, crooked, and powerful. Here, they specifically called out President Ronald Reagan, who had chosen to back anti-communist governments and forces in battles across Latin America. By framing violence as only directed at those who perpetuated exploitation and imperialism, and thus deserved retribution, the MRTA persuaded Peruvians that targeted violence would create a more just Peru.

MRTA communications often framed violence as a necessity. Túpac Amarista publications made statements such as, "War is nothing more than the practice of politics through other means...taking into account that they have fundamentally exhausted the legal means of

¹²⁷ MRTA, "4 de noviembre."

¹²⁸ MRTA, "Carta de la Dirección Nacional del MRTA al embajador de EEUU," UNMSM CEDOC, April 21, 1986, <https://cedoc.sisbib.unmsm.edu.pe/biblioteca-digital/coleccion-documental/volantes/77>.

struggle...”¹²⁹ They acted as if armed struggle was the only option, declaring that “...there is no other way to recover our dignity as a people and give our children a society where they can live as human beings and develop fully as such.”¹³⁰ Even those who did not love the idea of being part of a violent organization could be convinced by this language that framed violence as an unfortunate but necessary tool for change after other political means had been “exhausted.”

American writer Derrick Jensen, who is particularly interested in radical groups and their ventures into violence, had the opportunity to interview Isaac Velasco, who had been a Túpac Amarista since 1984 and fled Peru for Germany in 1988 after he was arrested and subject to beating. When Jensen asked Velasco why he himself “became politicized” and joined the MRTA, he answered, “I have long opposed capitalism and its effects on my people. I tried unarmed resistance, but soon grew to see that as useless. To witness the murder of one’s comrades, without a weapon to defend themselves, is a quick way to be convinced of that approach’s futility.”¹³¹ To Velasco, the MRTA did not instigate the violence: they were responding to the violence of the government and its persecution of those who sought to create change. The movement’s communications attempted to broadcast this notion and convince Peruvians that targeted violence was the only way to achieve change.

MRTA messaging spoke to a large audience while including statements targeted specifically at different groups. This is apparent in their ideological platforms that were printed and presented to the public. The MRTA’s 1980 “Platform of Struggle” included three main demands:

1. Break with the IMF, selective moratorium on the payment of the external debt.

¹²⁹ MRTA, “El MRTA y la revolución peruana.”

¹³⁰ MRTA, “El MRTA y la revolución peruana.”

¹³¹ Derrick Jensen, “Excerpt from *A Language Older Than Words*, Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (p.199),” *The official Derrick Jensen site*, <https://derrickjensen.org/language-older-than-words/tupac-amaru-revolutionary-movement/>.

2. Increase of the minimum wage adjustable in accordance with the rise in the cost of living. Freeze the price of fuel and tickets, as well as basic necessities and their control through popular organizations.
3. General amnesty for all political and social prisoners. End the state of emergency and the dirty war. Dissolution of the Sinchis, Llapan Atic and paramilitary groups. Prosecution of torturers and murderers such as Noel Moral and the officers of the Navy, GC, GR, and PIP, responsible for the genocide. Repeal of Legislative Decree 046. Trial of the traitors to the Homeland (Belaúnde, Ulloa, Kuczynski, Rodríguez Pastor, Elías Larosa), punishment of the corrupt.¹³²

This platform had something for everyone. It spoke to those who were aware of and angry about imperialist economic exploitation and foreign dominance, workers who would support minimum wage increases and an effort to decrease the cost of living, and those who already had a radical bent by mentioning support for political prisoners. When examining proclamations of the MRTA and Sendero side by side, the MRTA's are almost always shorter, employ less flowery language, and quickly get to the point. By writing a platform of a few lines that included grievances for a number of different groups, the MRTA successfully caught the attention of potential recruits from across Peruvian society with one publication. This strategy played a significant role in the success of their recruitment.

In August 1988, the MRTA convened its second Central Committee (referred to in MRTA writings as *II Comité Central*). The conference was held to discuss the state of the revolution and attended by MRTA affiliates from across the country. A number of documents came out of the II Comité Central, including a reassessment of the MRTA platform, the political situation, and the conditions of militant action. The group also produced a number of press releases, targeting different audiences and written in a similar format. Analysis of these messages will highlight the rhetoric and tactics used by the MRTA to attract different groups to the revolution. These

¹³² MRTA, "Comunicado del Movimiento Revolucionario Túpac Amaru," UNMSM CEDOC, 1980, <https://cedoc.sisbib.unmsm.edu.pe/biblioteca-digital/coleccion-documental/volantes/56>.

messages, all released following II Comité Central, will be discussed throughout this chapter in reference to the populations they were written to.

Recruitment in Universities

The MRTA saw university students as optimal targets for recruitment. These students often hailed from a middle-class background, had been exposed to Peru's inequality and corruption through their education, desired to fight for social injustice, and were at a less secure and stable stage of life. The MRTA's "Message to the Youth," written at II Comité Central, provides a window into the motivations of the many young Peruvians who joined the movement. This message spoke to specific elements of the young adult psyche and attempted to arouse anger through populist language. It reads, "Peru is a young country. However, within this capitalist system, young people are the ones with the fewest opportunities. Those who manage to complete secondary school and are not forced to work from childhood to survive and help their families, face the terrible drama of discovering that this society offers them no way out or hope."¹³³ This messaging speaks directly to educated, relatively well-off Peruvian youth—not those who directly feel the effects of economic devastation and rampant social inequality, but those who have become frustrated by a nation that is unjust, economically stagnant, and offers a lack of opportunities. The MRTA provides this audience with an answer to why they are angry, worried about their future, and lack direction: it is the fault of a capitalist society, and the only solution is to "join the revolutionary ranks." This message provides clarity into how the MRTA was able to recruit students from Peruvian universities to fortify their organizational base. Effective messaging targeted young, middle-class Peruvians, whose education had given them awareness of Peru's social and economic issues and who sought to find community and purpose.

¹³³ MRTA, "Mensaje a la juventud," CeDeMA, August 1, 1988, https://cedema.org/digital_items/4588.

Peruvian universities were strong bases of support and pools of recruitment for the MRTA in part because of the strong leftist presences on campuses, a quality shared by universities across the globe. A few leftist organizations dominated university circles, including the *Unidad Democrática Popular* (Popular Democratic Unity party, UDP), *Pueblo en Marcha* (People on the March, PM), *Bloque Popular Revolucionario* (Popular Revolutionary Bloc, BPR), and *Movimiento Patria Libre* (the Free Homeland Movement, MPL).¹³⁴ The two main hubs of radical activity were *Universidad San Marcos* in Lima and *Universidad del Centro* del Perú in the central province of Junín. Three other universities around Lima were considered to be leftist hotspots: *Universidad Enrique Guzmán y Valle*, *Universidad Nacional de Ingeniería* (the National University of Engineering), and *Universidad Católica del Perú* (the Catholic University of Peru).¹³⁵

In August 2002, Peru's Channel 8 interviewed Rosa Luz Padilla, a former MRTA member who spent thirteen years in prison for her involvement with the organization. When asked why she joined the MRTA, Luz Padilla spoke about her time at Universidad San Marcos. As a student, she became involved with the MIR (*Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria*, Revolutionary Left Movement,) and was introduced to the MRTA principally as "this group that began to question the actions of Sendero."¹³⁶ Luz Padilla relays, "And well, up to there, my participation was not much of an entry into politics, per se, because before that I participated in student marches, and those things because I did want to know and I wanted to learn and I also wanted to participate..."¹³⁷ She saw few differences between the MIR and the MRTA (recall that

¹³⁴ Mario Miguel Meza Bazán, "El Movimiento Revolucionario Túpac Amaru (MRTA) y las fuentes de la revolución en América Latina," (El Colegio de México, 2012): 317.

¹³⁵ Meza Bazán, "El Movimiento Revolucionario Túpac Amaru (MRTA) y las fuentes de la revolución en América Latina," 318.

¹³⁶ "Entrevista a Rosa Luz Padilla sobre su participación en el MRTA," *La Hora N*, August 14, 2002, 4:18-4:21, LUM, <https://lum.cultura.pe/cdi/video/entrevista-rosa-luz-padilla-sobre-su-participacion-en-el-mrta>.

¹³⁷ "Entrevista a Rosa Luz Padilla sobre su participación en el MRTA," 4:38-4:57.

the armed wing of the MIR had been one of the organizations that would go on to form the MRTA in 1980) and believed that joining the MRTA was just a small step up from her previous student activism.

Luz Padilla references revolutionary struggles in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Colombia as events that framed her understanding of the MRTA. Alongside these examples of armed struggle, she notes that “a peaceful way had been attempted in Chile, with Allende...” For educated, politically conscious young Peruvians like Luz Padilla, the U.S.-supported coup d’etat that had removed popular, democratically elected socialist politician Salvador Allende from office and installed the repressive dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet created a disillusionment with non-violent political activism. Luz Padilla saw the appeal of the MRTA’s revolutionary platform and believed in the method of armed struggle. She recalls, “In practice, well, it also justified the means, we wanted the revolution and so everything was justified, right?” and remembers being told that armed action was “going to guarantee the political will of the people.”¹³⁸ Later, Luz Padilla would become critical of the MRTA’s militarization. While she eventually lost faith in armed action, Luz Padilla had at one time embraced the MRTA’s socialist, distinctly Peruvian vision of a more just society and the targeted attacks that would achieve this goal. Rosa Luz Padilla, like many Peruvian university students, sought to be part of the fight for justice that she observed on a national and continental level. After joining a leftist student movement, she was introduced to the MRTA and came to believe that the organization, in its targeted employment of violence to achieve revolutionary change and criticism of the more radically violent Sendero, was the best way to join that fight.

¹³⁸ “Entrevista a Rosa Luz Padilla sobre su participación en el MRTA,” 7:53-9:00.

The MRTA and the Working Class

MRTA members were not all middle-class and university educated: a number hailed from poor and working-class backgrounds. For those whose communities had long faced exploitation and injustice at the hands of the government, the MRTA's call to action held significant appeal. In the message addressed to "the Working Class and the Popular Movement" drafted at II Comité Central, Túpac Amaristas spoke directly to a group often ignored by politicians. The message begins by reaffirming "the historical, ideological and political role that corresponds to the working class in the direction of the revolutionary struggle of our people" and noting that "the working class has been at the head of the struggles of the oppressed sectors against the different governments in power." The proclamation goes on to praise labor unions and the "strikes, mobilizations and factory takeovers" they planned in the 1970s, leading the MRTA to conclude that "the latest generations of workers knew how to lead important days of struggle..."¹³⁹ In speaking directly to workers and Peruvians at the bottom of the economic hierarchy, the MRTA accomplished the simple task of acknowledging the working class, a group that was often marginalized and left out of the political conversation. This praise was designed to make workers feel recognized and elicit a desire to join a community where their role in pushing for progress in Peru was appreciated. The MRTA ended its message with a call to action:

"For these reasons, we reiterate our call to the working class, the peasantry and the Peruvian people so that, in each union, community, *Pueblo Joven*, university and school, we strengthen ourselves and prepare for future battles against the exploiters. The natural organizations of the Peruvian people, such as the Defense Fronts, the CGTP, the CCP and the National Popular Assembly, have the responsibility of assuming this task."¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ MRTA, "Mensaje a la Clase Obrera y al Movimiento Popular," CeDeMA, August 1, 1988, https://cedema.org/digital_items/2975.

¹⁴⁰ MRTA, "Mensaje a la Clase Obrera y al Movimiento Popular."

With this statement, the MRTA reaffirmed its respect for working-class organizations and urged groups not involved with political struggle to join them. The MRTA spoke directly to marginalized Peruvians and utilized language that indicated the movement's emphasis on community. Their rhetoric targeted a demographic who had long felt ignored by politics, angry at the government's abuses, and victimized by economic inequality, asserting that they were vital to the revolutionary struggle. Linguistic choices and expressions of empathy positioned the MRTA to attract members of the Peruvian working class who desired to be a part of political change as well as a political community that valued them.

Recruitment in *Pueblos Jovenes*

The MRTA capitalized on poverty and discontent in Peru's informal settlements, often referred to as *barriadas* across Latin America and *pueblos jovenes* (young towns) in Peru specifically, in order to gain support for their armed struggle among the poorest Peruvians. The largest of Peru's *pueblos jovenes*, Villa El Salvador, began to be built during the Velasco military dictatorship when migrants from rural areas traveled to Lima in search of economic opportunity. The Velasco government directed all newly-arrived families to a desert area south of Lima and facilitated a model of self-management that would characterize the neighborhood throughout the 1980s.¹⁴¹ As economic conditions worsened through the 80s and the end of the decade experienced significant hyperinflation, Villa El Salvador suffered from a lack of resources to provide and update infrastructure for the community. Both Sendero and the MRTA jumped at the opportunity to capitalize on dissatisfaction and frustration in Villa El Salvador, adopting different strategies to achieve the same goal of roping the community into their organization.¹⁴² In an

¹⁴¹ Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación. *Informe Final*, Volume V, Chapter 2, Section 2.16: "La Batalla por las Barriadas de Lima: El Caso de Villa El Salvador," 487.

¹⁴² Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación, "La Batalla por las Barriadas de Lima," 490.

analysis of each group's strategy, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 2003 report entitled "The Battle for The Barriadas of Lima" explains that Sendero attempted to jump on existing rifts and "stir up contradictions" within the community, while the MRTA mainly "sought to generate sympathy" and work with already existing left-wing groups in barriadas. Túpac Amaristas formed alliances, working alongside community-based movements to convey a sense of respect. Through this strategy, the MRTA was able to position itself as "the defender and armed representative" of the Villa El Salvador community and recruit residents into its ranks more formally over time.¹⁴³

Recruitment in Rural Areas

While the MRTA's operations were founded and largely concentrated in Lima, the movement attempted to create a rural presence. In 1987, the MRTA captured the town of Juanjuí in the San Marín Department, in the central-northern part of the country. Eighty uniformed insurgents rounded up law enforcement officials and spoke to locals, reciting their revolutionary platform and attempting to garner support. The following year, MRTA forces ventured into the departments of La Libertad, Huánuco, Junín, Ancash, Pasco, and Ucayali.¹⁴⁴ While the Juanjuí event drew attention from the press, it did not mark the beginning of a strong rural component of the MRTA. The movement eventually realized that venturing further into the countryside would force them to contend with both Sendero Luminoso and the Peruvian Armed Forces, who had essentially divided up control over Peru's rural departments.¹⁴⁵

Despite lacking control over rural areas, the MRTA continued to recruit from the

¹⁴³ Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación, "La Batalla por las Barriadas de Lima," 485.

¹⁴⁴ Gordon H. McCormick, *Sharp Dressed Men: Peru's Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1993), 36.

¹⁴⁵ McCormick, *Sharp Dressed Men*, 43.

countryside, speaking to economic and social grievances held by *campesinos* (peasants), a group often left out of Peruvian politics. The MRTA's "Message to Peruvian Campesinos" from II Comité Central follows a nearly identical structure to their message to the working class. The message opens with a commendation of peasant uprisings that live on in the memory of Peruvian radicals, in which "thousands of peasants have given their lives and their blood." After this recognition of *campesinos*' role in pushing for social change in the past, the MRTA spoke to the most pressing issues repeatedly voiced by *campesinos*: unequal distribution of land and exploitation of labor. The message relays, "For centuries, you have been subjected to a regime of brutal exploitation within an unjust and inhumane system; you have been stripped of your lands, denied or haggled over wages or the fruits of the earth that were rightfully yours..."¹⁴⁶ By recognizing grievances around land and wages, the movement spoke strategically to a marginalized demographic they wished to recruit. The MRTA was founded and predominantly in Lima, rendering the urban-working class their more natural audience. However, by recognizing the specific injustices faced by *campesinos*, the organization was able to attract members using language very similar to that of their other recruitment propaganda.

Sistero García Torres was the leader of the MRTA's Northeastern Front and organized operations in San Martín. He detailed his involvement with the MRTA in an interview with Peru's Channel 5 in June 2003. García Torres recalls, "The MRTA was an organized force, with a structure; it was a guerrilla that had all the romanticism of the ideal..."¹⁴⁷ For many *campesinos*, radical action in the 1980s called back to the guerrilla uprisings two decades before. García Torres expressed his view that the MRTA had built on the weaknesses of these movements and created a more structured organization that remained idealistic and committed to social change.

¹⁴⁶ MRTA, "Mensaje a los campesinos peruanos," CeDeMA, August 1, 1988, https://cedema.org/digital_items/4048.

¹⁴⁷ "Testimonio de Sistero García Torres del MRTA," *Panorama*, June 29, 2002, 4:46-4:58, LUM, <https://lum.cultura.pe/cdi/video/testimonio-de-sistero-garcia-torres-del-mrta>.

He speaks to his decision to become involved with the MRTA, reflecting, “I always say that I have had my ideals for change, my ideals to change the situation, and I put them into practice, risking to the extent possible, risking to defend the cause, the most humble class...”¹⁴⁸ Like Peruvians around the country and across class boundaries, campesinos and residents of rural areas were drawn to the MRTA because of its promise to create change when so many desperately felt they needed it. The MRTA recruited in the countryside by speaking to this desire for change, specifically voicing opposition to injustices around land and labor.

Distinctions Between the MRTA and Sendero Luminoso

The MRTA and Sendero Luminoso were the two largest revolutionary groups in late 20th century Peru. They operated during the same years and both believed that armed revolution was necessary to liberate the masses; they were both anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, and held a Marxist vision for societal change. They fought to recruit from some of the same bases, especially on university campuses and in the countryside. However, for all their similarities, the two movements possessed important differences. Investigating why people joined the MRTA instead of Sendero is a critical piece of understanding the MRTA’s membership. Sendero was larger and far more violent; their actions fit Feldmann and Perälä’s definition of terrorism as “deliberate, indiscriminate attacks on noncombatants to instill terror in the population and undermine the power of political authorities.” Their violent attacks, especially in rural, indigenous communities, were far more extreme than those of the MRTA. While Sendero sought to instill fear in the population to encourage Peruvians to join their ranks, the MRTA preferred to inspire their fellow citizens to join the fight for societal change.¹⁴⁹ Sendero was not only Marxist

¹⁴⁸ “Testimonio de Sistero García Torres del MRTA,” 14:58-15:14.

¹⁴⁹ Sandra Woy-Hazleton and William A. Hazleton, “Sendero Luminoso and the Future of Peruvian Democracy,” *Third World Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (1990): 26.

but framed their struggle through “Marxism-Leninism-Maoism-Gonzalo thought.” “Gonzalo” referred to “Chairman Gonzalo,” nom de guerre of the group’s leader Abimael Guzmán, who was worshipped as the “fourth sword of Marxism.”¹⁵⁰

This view of Guzmán’s leadership led Sendero to operate with a far more cult-like, hierarchical structure than the MRTA. An article written in the Lima newspaper *Caretas* in December 1995, quoted in an FBI communiqué, comments on these discrepancies. Fernando Rospigliosi, author of the article titled “The Resurrection of the MRTA,” writes, “One very important difference between Shining Path [SL] and the MRTA is that the latter has had leaders, not demigods.”¹⁵¹ While Sendero treated its members as direct followers of Abimael Guzmán, the MRTA never had one single leader; none of its commanders were viewed or treated as “untouchable,” to use the article’s language. Rospigliosi links this discrepancy in movement structure to the many disputes and rifts within the MRTA. He indicates that while the organization may have occasionally been weakened without one primary leader, this also enabled it to last longer and withstand a changing political landscape. The MRTA’s structure was likely attractive to new members, especially youth, who might have viewed Sendero as cult-like and would not have wanted to bow down to an older, intellectual figure like Guzmán.¹⁵²

Despite the differences between the two groups, the MRTA sought to keep peace with Sendero. Their II Comité Central “Message to the militants of PC del P (SL) [to the Communist Party of Peru (Sendero Luminoso)]” expresses frustration with the enmity between the organizations. The MRTA voices its belief that the two “share a common action: the armed struggle for the seizure of power and the construction of a new society,” while possessing

¹⁵⁰ Federal Bureau of Investigations, “Appeal of MRTA in Absence of Political Parties Noted,” December 1995, 2, LUM, <https://lum.cultura.pe/cdi/documento/appeal-mrta-absence-political-parties-noted-atractivo-del-mrta-en-la-ausencia-de-partidos>.

¹⁵¹ Federal Bureau of Investigations, “Appeal of MRTA in Absence of Political Parties Noted,” 2.

¹⁵² Federal Bureau of Investigations, “Appeal of MRTA in Absence of Political Parties Noted,” 3.

“ideological and political differences.” However, they contend, “...the recognition of these differences has not led us to the wrong path of considering you as our enemies and confronting you as such...The leadership of your party has not had the same behavior.” MRTA leaders accuse Sendero of painting their organization as an enemy and even assassinating MRTA militants.¹⁵³ Through this communication, the MRTA differentiates itself from Sendero, presenting its respect for the group’s efforts and reasoning that there need not be hostility between the two organizations. Sendero did not share this view: they constantly referred to the MRTA as “revisionist” and saw the group as not truly revolutionary—thus, a sworn enemy.¹⁵⁴ When examining the MRTA and Sendero Luminoso side by side, it is evident that the MRTA was more willing to cooperate with other groups and imagine the revolution as bigger than just themselves. This rationality was likely a draw for those who chose to join the MRTA over Sendero when deciding between getting involved with one of the two.

In addition to Sendero, the MRTA was willing to work with other left-wing groups and did not see those who chose the path of nonviolence as enemies. The organization maintained a relationship with the mainstream political left. This is apparent in their II Comité Central “Message to the rank and file of the *Izquierda Unida* (United Left, IU),” the coalition of leftist political parties that had excluded the two groups that would join together to form the MRTA: the MIR-EM (the military wing of the *Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria*, [Revolutionary Left Movement, MIR]) and the PSR-ML (Marxist-Leninist Revolutionary Socialist Party). In a message to the “rank and file” members of the IU, the MRTA stressed their respect for the IU’s political work. The message acknowledges, “Perhaps some social researchers are not wrong when they agree that just as the most important guerrilla movements in Latin America are

¹⁵³ MRTA, “Mensaje a los militantes del PC del P (SL).”

¹⁵⁴ Partido Comunista del Perú-Sendero Luminoso, “Sobre las dos colinas (Documento de estudio para el balance de la III Campaña),” CeDeMA, January 1, 1991, https://cedema.org/digital_items/709.

developing in our country, the most significant experience of the legal left on the continent is also taking place. The space occupied today by the IU is a popular conquest.” They did, however, follow this praise with the criticism that their efforts did not go far enough: “...IU, and in particular its leadership, has gradually relegated to the background the links with the popular movement that gave it life, and has become, solely and exclusively, an electoral alliance.”¹⁵⁵ Here, the MRTA is subtly pitting IU members against the party’s leaders, saying that those in charge have ceased to work for the masses.

The message reiterates the necessity of revolutionary struggle, specifically due to the risk that “false expectations” around the 1990 elections may lead popular mobilization to be “wasted or diverted.”¹⁵⁶ The MRTA likely knew that the IU would not join the armed struggle and “convert their organization into a revolutionary mass front,” as they urged. However, the more radical of IU’s members, perhaps those who felt frustrated by IU’s political position or ignored by its leaders, may have read this message and felt inspired to learn more about the MRTA. This message illustrates the MRTA’s civility towards the Peruvian political left while also highlighting the organization attempting to poach members.

As asserted in Chapter One, the MRTA occupied a space between the mainstream political left and Sendero’s completely anti-establishment militancy. The same sense of moderation that the MRTA displayed in its willingness to work with other left-wing groups and to avoid hostility with Sendero was apparent in its decision to declare a “political truce,” essentially a ceasefire declaration, with the government of APRA candidate Alan García after his election in 1985. This decision was strategic: García had been voted in by a majority of the population, putting it in the MRTA’s best interest to avoid creating an enemy before García had

¹⁵⁵ MRTA, “Mensaje a las bases de Izquierda Unida,” CeDeMA, August 1, 1988, https://cedema.org/digital_items/4598.

¹⁵⁶ MRTA, “Mensaje a las bases de Izquierda Unida.”

the chance to prove himself. The choice to call a truce was vehemently opposed by Sendero. Referring to the truce with the García administration, Abimael Guzmán said in a 1988 interview that “The MRTA has positions that should make one think...”¹⁵⁷ indicating that the group’s willingness to accept the results of the 1985 election and give the new president a chance rendered the organization unrevolutionary. Nonetheless, the MRTA’s willingness to both scrutinize the political system and commend the efforts of the political left likely held appeal for many. Those who chose to get involved with the MRTA often referenced its differences with Sendero, namely its lack of extremism, as a factor in their decision.

Recruitment in Later Years and Disillusionment with García Government

Over the course of Alan García’s presidential term (1985-1990), the MRTA capitalized on disillusionment with a government that many Peruvians expected to be a left-wing advocate for the poor and the working class. The February/March 1988 issue of *Voz Rebelde*, the official publication of the MRTA, declared that the García government was no longer working for the Peruvian people. Under the heading “APRA takes off its mask,” the publication describes, “A little over two years [after the election], APRA and Alan are showing their naked bodies. There are no more supposed reforms, no tricks in the magician’s hat. The crisis management has failed and the economy is collapsing even more than it already has. The inflation rate is estimated by some at 20%, by others at 300%, but nobody really knows.”¹⁵⁸ The MRTA relied on the fact that poor Peruvians had not seen improvements to their quality of life from a president they may have voted for. They stressed the dire state of national socioeconomic conditions to highlight that

¹⁵⁷ Abimael Guzmán, “Entrevista al Presidente Gonzalo (I),” *El Diario* (July 1, 1988), CeDeMA, https://cedema.org/digital_items/655.

¹⁵⁸ MRTA, “Organicemos respuesta popular: contra la ofensiva del hambre y la represión,” *Voz Rebelde: Órgano Oficial del Movimiento Revolucionario Tupac Amaru*, Nro. 10, February-March 1988, 2, CeDeMA, https://cedema.org/digital_items/8513.

García was not making good on his promises to facilitate economic recovery. He had promised to limit spending of Peru's export earnings on debt payments to 10%, making available more currency that would bolster governments social programs, aid national industry, and increase real wages. The administration was not able to follow through on this plan and eventually made aid deals with the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, the same foreign financial institutions he had decried as exploitative.¹⁵⁹ Voz Rebelde speaks to the disappointment voiced by many on the lack of economic improvement and follows it up with a call to action:

“The MRTA, which has been advancing on all fronts of the struggle of our people, as our own motto says: "WITH MASSES AND ARMS," calls upon all revolutionary, democratic, progressive, patriotic sectors, upon the APRA members who, disillusioned with their government, are ready to fight, upon the patriotic and conscious sectors of the Armed Forces and the Police to join forces to confront this offensive of the regime: in defense of the basic demands of our people...in defense of human rights and against militarization, in defense of our natural resources and the life of our people.”¹⁶⁰

Here, the MRTA paints itself as the answer for those who may be frustrated with the García's shortcomings. By specifically naming different groups who are “disillusioned with their government,” this appeal speaks directly to potential recruits. Reiterating the MRTA's demands reminds readers of the principles at the core of their struggle and further encourages those who care about “human rights,” “natural resources,” and “the life of our people” to align themselves with the movement. The article also scrutinizes the actions of Sendero Luminoso in order to prove that the MRTA is the better option for those interested in joining a revolutionary struggle:

“From another sector of the left, the PCP (SL), is trying to regain presence in some popular sectors, which reveals that there is an interest in modifying its relationship with the masses. However, the problem is that they do so with a wrong conception and method: they try to impose their hegemony on popular organizations, subordinating them and even destroying them to build their own organizations, even using fear and threats against leaders who do not share their positions; and they divide the popular sectors by

¹⁵⁹ Poole and Rénique, *Peru: Time of Fear*, 128.

¹⁶⁰ MRTA, “Organicemos respuesta popular,” 4.

separating the supposedly "classist and revolutionary" from the rest; this means in practice not working for the unity of the people."¹⁶¹

The MRTA's allegation that Sendero Luminoso was "not working for the unity of the people" by sowing the seeds of division among the left indicated to Peruvians that the MRTA was the only organization committed to fighting for the masses against an unjust government. This targeted criticism of Sendero's tactics may have influenced someone considering involvement with one of the two organizations. By convincing *Voz Rebelde* readers that Sendero was not committed to unity and utilized fear to exert control, the MRTA painted themselves as the best and only solution to Peru's national struggle. Furthermore, they framed themselves as a community, and one that stressed unity in the face of injustice.

The MRTA also spoke directly to Apristas in an attempt to attract more radical party members who may have shared a sense of disappointment with Alan García's performance. The MRTA saw García as having failed the Peruvian masses but believed APRA members could be potential partners in their struggle. In the "Message to APRA Militants" written at II Comité Central, the MRTA acknowledged that many Apristas hail "from the popular background and that, therefore, they suffer first-hand the effects of the exploitation of this inhuman capitalist system," conveying their respect and reminding those involved with APRA of shared grievances. MRTA leaders considered themselves to be fulfilling the legacy of early Apristas and wanted to remind the party of its radical roots: "In the early years and during times of harsh persecution, the APRA people fought and shed their blood for a true popular revolution."¹⁶² As revolution was a key piece of APRA's history, the MRTA believed it could encourage party members to hark back to radicalism and join their fight against the state in the present. While the MRTA had

¹⁶¹ MRTA, "Organicemos respuesta popular," 6.

¹⁶² MRTA, "Mensaje a los militantes del APRA," CeDeMA, August 1, 1988, https://cedema.org/digital_items/4041.

denounced García, they publicly expressed their wish to work with Apristas in pursuit of societal change.

Foreigners and the MRTA

While the MRTA was chiefly composed of Peruvians, a handful of foreigners joined the organization's fight against the Peruvian state. A number of Chileans specifically moved across national borders to become involved. They were drawn to the MRTA's call for revolution due to their experience with repressive dictatorship, the countries' proximity and cultural overlap, and the similarities between the MRTA and Chile's *Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria*, Revolutionary Left Movement (MIR).

In October 1993, four Chileans were arrested by The National Anti-Terrorism Directorate (DINCOTE) for their connection to the MRTA. One of the four was thirty-six year old Jaime Castillo Petrucci who told his story to Chilean newspaper *La Tercera* in November 2016. His father was a liquor merchant and activist who ran in the same circles as socialist president Salvador Allende. Castillo Petrucci recalls that "poverty bothered him from a young age," clarifying the left-wing leanings that led him to join the MIR as a university student in 1972. The 1973 coup that toppled Allende and replaced him with military dictator Augusto Pinochet pushed Castillo Petrucci further into radicalism. Out of fear of military reprisal for his involvement with the MIR, he fled to study in France, where he met Víctor Polay Campos and was introduced to the wider Latin American radical left. In 1977, Castillo Petrucci went back to Chile to join MIR action against the Pinochet dictatorship. The rebellion was crushed mercilessly, convincing him to seek help from the Latin American network he had discovered in France. Castillo Petrucci

officially moved to Lima in 1991 and coordinated the special unit of the MRTA that was in charge of planning kidnappings and other attacks directed at wealthy businessmen.

When asked by Alfredo Castro of *La Tercera* “Some people consider the MRTA a terrorist group. Are you a terrorist? What does terrorism mean to you?” Castillo Petruzzi responded: “Terrorism exists when the civilian population is involved against its will and harm is caused. Neither the MIR nor the MRTA had a policy of including the civilian population in their resistance policies. We have been raised to respect the laws of war.”¹⁶³ For Castillo Petruzzi, like many Peruvians involved with the MRTA, repressive governments and the elite constituted legitimate targets of armed action. Castillo Petruzzi’s experience with military dictatorship in Chile pushed him to aid armed struggle in a neighboring country that was also fighting against a government it did not believe served the masses. The young Chilean did not see his involvement in kidnappings and attacks as terrorism: he subscribed to the MRTA’s claim that the revolution was being waged on behalf of the Peruvian people. Castillo Petruzzi fought and served time in prison for a nation that was not his. However, for Castillo Petruzzi, and for others, the struggle resonated with his political beliefs; the cause was just and important. His previous involvement with the MIR, exposure to left-wing circles, and conviction to fight against injustice drew him to MRTA militancy.

The stories of other foreigners who joined the MRTA largely remain untold. Neither information on their involvement nor firsthand accounts of their experiences are publicly accessible, despite the fact that it is confirmed that the MRTA drew some international membership. One particular American’s story, however, is well known: that of Lori Berenson, a young woman from New York City who was arrested in 1995 for her involvement with the

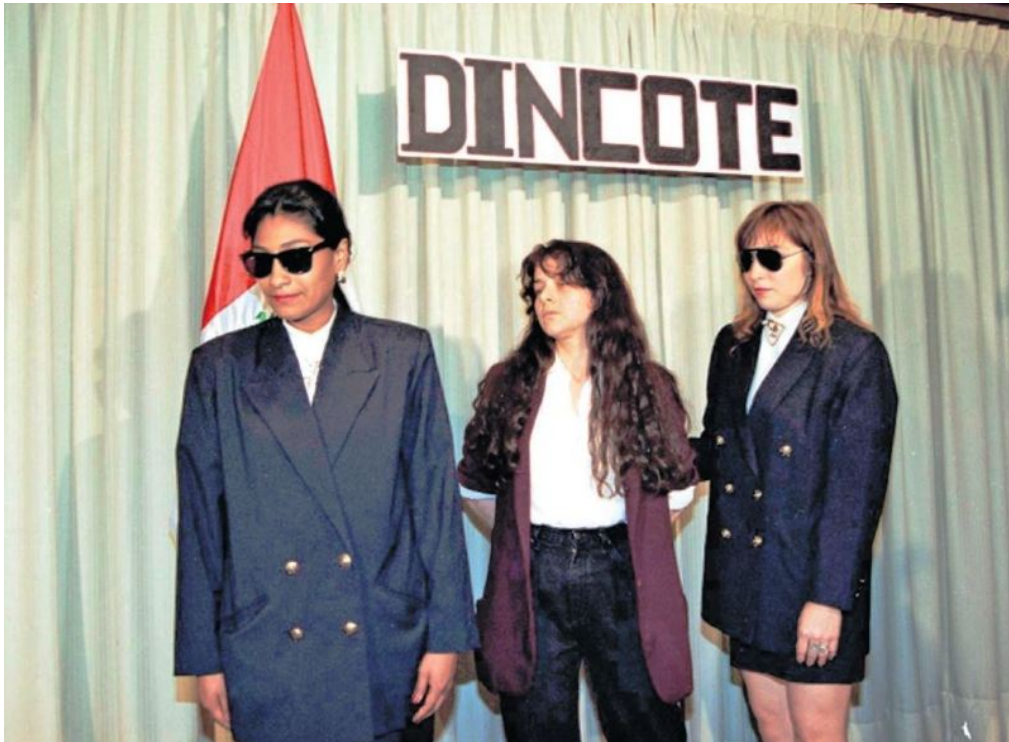
¹⁶³ Alfredo Castro, “The armistice of Jaime Castillo Petruzzi,” *La Tercera*, November 19, 2016, <https://www.latercera.com/noticia/armisticio-jaime-castillo-petruzzi/#>.

organization. Lori's arrest and detainment received significant attention from the media in Peru, in the United States, and across the globe. She was held up as both a symbol of terrorism and a symbol of Peruvian government repression and abuse. However, the question of why Lori became involved with the MRTA has not ever been fully addressed by scholars. The final chapter of this thesis will tell Lori's story in detail in order to examine and explain her connection to the organization. Understanding why outsiders like Jaime Castillo Petruzzi and Lori Berenson joined the MRTA enriches analysis of the movement's larger appeal and messaging.

Conclusion

The MRTA was able to build a revolutionary army by capitalizing on anger and grievances, both shared and distinct, felt across Peruvian society. They worked to attract university students, the working class, and the urban and rural poor by speaking to their experience and positioning the MRTA as the only option for combatting injustice and bringing about change. Their stark differences with Sendero Luminoso attracted those who sought to be part of the fight for a better Peru but disdained the violence, extremism, and cult-like culture of the Guzmán's movement. People became involved with the MRTA because of tremendous anger at the Peruvian government and the feeling that things would not get better without change on a massive scale—change that the MRTA promised to bring. The movement appealed not just to Peruvians, but to a few foreigners, such as Chilean Jaime Castillo Petruzzi and American Lori Berenson, whose story will be the subject of the next and final chapter of this project.

Chapter 3: Rebel, Journalist, Conspirator? An American in Peru



Lori Berenson in DINCOTE Custody, January 1996

Introduction

Lori Helene Berenson was born on November 13, 1969 to Mark and Rhoda Berenson. Lori and her sister Kathy, who is two years older, were raised in New York City, in an apartment in the East Midtown Plaza complex between 23rd and 25th street and First and Second Avenues.¹⁶⁴ Her childhood can be characterized as comfortable and middle-class; her parents were both professors—educated, intellectual, reform Jewish, and creative. Rhoda taught physics at Nassau Community College and was an avid researcher, while Mark worked at Baruch College and lectured on statistics, specializing in health-care management.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴ Rhoda Berenson, *Lori: My Daughter, Wrongfully Imprisoned in Peru*, (New York: Context Books, 2000), 59.

¹⁶⁵ Berenson, *Lori*, 3-4.

Lori was always a strong student. After attending her local public elementary and junior high schools, she was accepted to Stuyvesant High School, the Bronx High School of Science, and the LaGuardia High School of Music and Art and Performing Arts. While the former two often battle for the title of New York City's top public school, LaGuardia appealed to Lori because it allowed her to combine her academics with her love of music.¹⁶⁶ In 1987, Lori graduated from LaGuardia and left for Boston to attend the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T.) It was here that Lori's interest in Latin America took hold. While working closely with Latin American Anthropology professor Martin Diskin, Lori was introduced to the injustices surrounding U.S. involvement in Central America. Lori traveled to El Salvador for a student exchange program in January 1989, and by April, she had told her parents of her plan to leave school and return to Central America.¹⁶⁷ After spending a few years in first Nicaragua and then El Salvador, Lori moved to Peru in 1994. Just a year later, she was pulled off a public bus in Lima and arrested, accused of treason and participating in terrorism with the Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement, the MRTA.

This chapter will delve into Lori Berenson's story, one that received considerable attention from the Peruvian, American, and international press. Lori has been both reviled as an example of terrorism and regarded as an emblem of the human rights abuses committed by Fujimori's government under his brutal anti-terrorism policies. Although she has been asked about her move to Peru and her connections with the MRTA in a few interviews, and a number of journalists have pointed to gaps in her story of how she came to be arrested and charged with treason, a thorough analysis of Lori's motivations for collaborating with the MRTA remains lacking in scholarship. Through examination of interviews with Lori, articles written about her in

¹⁶⁶ Berenson, *Lori*, 59.

¹⁶⁷ Berenson, *Lori*, 69.

the wake of her arrest and during her time in prison, a book written by her mother, and her own writings from Peruvian prison, the culminating chapter of this thesis will examine how and why Lori Berenson moved to Peru and fell in with the MRTA. This chapter will seek to connect her story with Chapter Two—the general motivations of those who joined the organization. In one sense, as a foreigner, Lori was an outlier in the movement; yet she shared qualities, values, and experiences with the Peruvian members of the MRTA. Lori Berenson came to collaborate with the Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement because of prior experiences with revolutionary groups in Central America, her desire to be part of the fight against injustice outside of the political system, and her belief that she could be part of creating change.

Lori's Story

Lori's parents recall that, from a young age, their daughter was attuned to and concerned with inequality and injustice. Mark and Rhoda Berenson raised their children with values and principles that encouraged this worldview. In an interview with the *Jewish Journal*, Rhoda relays, "Lori was not arrested because she was Jewish...but Jewish ideals are what brought Lori to Central America and Peru."¹⁶⁸ The Berensons' religious and cultural background, as well as immersion in the world of academia, encouraged curiosity and compassion in their children. Rhoda offers an anecdote to mark the moment when this consciousness began: when Lori was fourteen, her junior high school chorus recorded a commercial for the international humanitarian organization CARE. Lori herself did the voiceover, which asked listeners to consider donating to starving children around the world.¹⁶⁹ Rhoda also recalls Lori being deeply angered in elementary school when she witnessed a teacher playing favorites with students, using that as an

¹⁶⁸ Murray Polner, "Freedom for Lori Berenson," *Jewish Journal*, September 21, 2000, <https://jewishjournal.com/commentary/opinion/3314/>.

¹⁶⁹ Berenson, *Lori*, 30-31.

example for her empathy for others.¹⁷⁰ Her parents firmly believe it is this quality in their daughter that ultimately persuaded her to travel to and live in Latin America.

In her freshman year at M.I.T., Lori worked with professor Martin Diskin on research concerning land and wealth distribution, immigration, and political asylum requests in El Salvador.¹⁷¹ Diskin was an academic with an activist record: he had been a vocal critic when El Salvador's National University was shut down by the government in 1983 and was arrested while protesting President Ronald Reagan's policy towards Nicaragua in 1985.¹⁷² That spring break, Lori decided to join a group of Quaker women on a trip to El Salvador, where she witnessed the impacts of U.S. intervention in the Salvadoran Civil War.¹⁷³ Lori's experience in El Salvador compelled her to get involved with the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES) on campus for the remainder of her freshman year and the first semester of her sophomore year.¹⁷⁴ It was ultimately this trip that convinced Lori to return, first for the semester-long student exchange program in early 1989 and later to move to Nicaragua 1990.

Rhoda Berenson speaks about one specific incident that she believes highlighted for Lori the injustice she was surrounded by in Central America that ultimately convinced her to stay. During Lori's exchange program, she stayed with the Flores family in El Salvador. On February 2nd, 1989, she went to meet Martin Diskin and his travel companion, Massachusetts congressman Jim McGovern, for lunch. When Lori returned to the Flores house, she was told that the father of the family, Mario Flores, had been taken by the National Guard. His body was found the next day; it was clear that he had been tortured before being brutally murdered. Being

¹⁷⁰ Berenson, *Lori*, 100.

¹⁷¹ Berenson, *Lori*, 60-61.

¹⁷² "MIT Anthropology Prof. Martin Diskin dies at 62; was expert on Latin America," *MIT News*, August 4, 1997, <https://news.mit.edu/1997/diskin-new>.

¹⁷³ Berenson, *Lori*, 60-61.

¹⁷⁴ La Serna, *With Masses and Arms*, 193.

so close to an event like this—and wondering whether if she was home her presence could have prevented the National Guard’s actions—shook Lori deeply.¹⁷⁵

After Mario Flores’s death, any work Lori could do in Central America likely felt more urgent than her studies. She decided to take time off from school and moved to Nicaragua, which was, at the time, a far safer place to live than El Salvador. She worked with Salvadoran refugees and eventually landed a job as a secretary for the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), the group of left-wing rebels fighting against the right-wing, U.S.-backed military government in El Salvador whose headquarters were in Nicaragua.¹⁷⁶ She gained fluency in Spanish and aligned herself with an important political cause. In a 2000 interview with Peter Van Sant of CBS News, on the topic of her involvement with the FMLN, Lori affirms, "I sided with the search for justice."¹⁷⁷ While she had learned about Latin American politics in the classroom, and seen the civil war play out on the ground for a year, working for the FMLN was Lori’s introduction to left-wing political action. The FMLN had begun as a guerrilla movement but had gained significant legitimacy since the war began in 1979. By the time Lori was working as a secretary, the group’s political wing was sending representatives to international meetings and negotiating a peace treaty. In January 1992, the United Nations-brokered Chapultepec Accords ended the bloody civil war in El Salvador. Lori’s mother relayed that her daughter, who had continued her work as an FMLN secretary during the UN-brokered process, felt a sense of accomplishment for her small contribution to peace. Following the peace process, Lori moved from Nicaragua to El Salvador, which had become a safer place to live after the war’s end.

¹⁷⁵ Berenson, *Lori*, 62.

¹⁷⁶ Berenson, *Lori*, 64.

¹⁷⁷ "Lori Berenson's 2000 Prison Interview," CBS News, May 26, 2010, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/lori-berensons-2000-prison-interview/>.

In Nicaragua and El Salvador, Lori met a number of people involved with human rights work. She was briefly married to a Salvadoran economics student named Walter Mejía—a relation which is barely documented in sources about Lori and only mentioned in one *New York Times* article on her case.¹⁷⁸ Rhoda, who never met Mejía, told reporter Lizette Alvarez that “It was a justice of the peace kind of thing.”¹⁷⁹ Walter Mejía may not have been a particularly important character in Lori’s story. However, his last name remained part of Lori’s legal name, which would be used in official court documents regarding her case.

After working for the FMLN through its transition to the governing party of El Salvador, observing elections and performing duties as a secretary and translator, Lori decided to move to Peru.¹⁸⁰ According to Rhoda, “She went [to Peru] for the same reason she had gone to El Salvador. She went because she had to see for herself, to learn about the people and the politics by living there.”¹⁸¹ Lori’s parents recall her talking about Sendero Luminoso and warning that, as of 1991, Peru was not a safe place to travel. However, by 1994, Lori assured her parents that Sendero Luminoso leader Abimael Guzmán’s capture had dramatically improved the landscape of Peru. She believed that it was a safe place for her to move and use as a base for traveling around South America and decided to move in November of that year.¹⁸²

In January 2016, Lori was interviewed by Amy Goodman of *Democracy Now!* Early in the conversation, Goodman asked Lori, “What brought a young woman who is a freshman at MIT first to [El] Salvador and then to Peru?” She answered that moving to Central America and getting involved with social justice work felt more important than academics at the time. As she

¹⁷⁸ Jennifer Egan, “The Liberation of Lori Berenson,” *New York Times*, March 2, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/06/magazine/06berenson-t.html>.

¹⁷⁹ Lizette Alvarez, “Gramercy Park Woman Is Held as a Rebel in Peru,” *New York Times*, December 6, 1995, <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/12/06/nyregion/gramercy-park-woman-is-held-as-a-rebel-in-peru.html>.

¹⁸⁰ Berenson, *Lori*, 64.

¹⁸¹ Berenson, *Lori*, 67.

¹⁸² Berenson, *Lori*, 66.

saw it, “you could get a degree and then you become part of the system...and I didn't want to be part of...absorbed by the system...”¹⁸³ Lori’s compulsion to push back against “the system” led her to activism against repressive dictatorship and U.S. involvement in the region. She recalls, “in the case of El Salvador...a fundamental reason...was, how could my government that talks about democracy be doing this.”¹⁸⁴ Lori felt that, as an American, she played a role in perpetuating violence because of U.S. support for the Salvadoran government in the civil war. After this motivated her to move to Central America, to Nicaragua and El Salvador, she chose to move to Peru. Lori acknowledges to Goodman, “It was a very different context than when I got to Peru...”¹⁸⁵ saying little more about what led her to choose the country as a destination.

This is where Lori’s story becomes complicated. Many Americans, especially those who know a bit about Latin American history, U.S. involvement in the region, and the destruction it so often caused, can understand Lori’s decision to move to El Salvador. CISPES had chapters on a number of university campuses in the 1980s and many left-leaning Americans took to the streets to protest U.S. intervention in the civil war. But her choice to move to Peru is a little more mysterious, a little less clear. In Peru, U.S. policy had always been to support its own interests. This meant wearily backing the left-wing military governments of the 1960s and 1970s while protecting copper and oil interests.¹⁸⁶ In the 1990s, the U.S. backed Fujimori and his neoliberal economic policies as the “safe” alternative to communism that threatened to expropriate U.S. holdings and push another country into the Soviet Union’s sphere of influence.¹⁸⁷ Sendero Luminoso and the MRTA both called out American imperialism as a primary enemy, but this

¹⁸³ Lori Berenson, “Lori Berenson After Being Held 20 Years in Peru: ‘My Objectives Were to Achieve a More Just Society,’” interview by Amy Goodman, *Democracy Now!*, January 4, 2016, 1:15-1:48, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2myg7E_zn3Q.

¹⁸⁴ Berenson, “Lori Berenson After Being Held 20 Years in Peru,” 2:27-2:35.

¹⁸⁵ Berenson, “Lori Berenson After Being Held 20 Years in Peru,” 2:23-2:25.

¹⁸⁶ Brands, “The United States and the Peruvian Challenge, 1968-1975,” 471.

¹⁸⁷ Poole and Rénique, *Peru: Time of Fear*, 132.

U.S. imperialism was not specific to Peru. The American government was not directly involved in Peru in the 1980s and 1990s. While the U.S. offered tacit support, it was not directly involved with the brutal counterinsurgency campaign that led tens of thousands to lose their lives at the hands of the Peruvian Armed Forces. Given the absence of direct U.S. complicity in Peru's civil conflict, why did Lori choose to move to Peru?

Accounts of Lori's life in Peru before her arrest are relatively sparse; one might even say murky. Lori had written press releases and reports in El Salvador and sought to use this experience to write about poverty, women, and human rights in Peru. She contacted two small magazines, *Third World Viewpoint* and *Modern Times*, in the hope of writing freelance journalism for them. Two months before her arrest, she received press passes with her name and photo on them—identification Peruvian authorities would later claim to be forged.¹⁸⁸ Lori paid close attention to Peruvian politics, occasionally visiting the Peruvian Legislative Palace to observe debates and discussions.¹⁸⁹ In her interview with Amy Goodman, Lori recalls about the days around her arrest, "I was following a series of debates—actually very important debates on narcohouses or something."¹⁹⁰ The Peruvian National Terrorist Police would later spin these visits to characterize them as research for the MRTA's plan to bomb the Congress building. They would accuse Lori of drawing a floor plan of Congress—something her lawyers denied.¹⁹¹

On Thursday November 30, 1995, Lori Berenson visited the Legislative Palace with a photographer she knew, a woman named Nancy Gilvonio. The two had press passes to enter the building and observed a session of congress before leaving together and getting on a public bus. During the ride, the two women were abruptly pulled off of the bus and into an unmarked car by

¹⁸⁸ Jonathan Levi and Liz Mineo, "The Lori Berenson Papers," *The Nation*, September 4, 2000, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/lori-berenson-papers/>.

¹⁸⁹ Berenson, *Lori*, 69-70.

¹⁹⁰ Berenson, "Lori Berenson After Being Held 20 Years in Peru," 6:41-6:47.

¹⁹¹ Pam Belluck and Calvin Sims, "A Puzzling Path: From P.S. 40 to a Cell in Peru," *New York Times*, January 22, 1996, <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/01/22/world/a-puzzling-path-from-ps-40-to-a-cell-in-peru.html>.

men in plainclothes who they soon figured out were DINCOTE agents; Peruvian police specifically employed by the National Anti-terrorism Directorate (Dirección Nacional Contra el Terrorismo).¹⁹² The American press did not publish an article about Lori's arrest until five days after she had been taken into DINCOTE custody. On December 5, Robert D. McFadden wrote in an article for the New York Times,

"A 26-year-old New York woman has been arrested in Lima, Peru, on suspicion of aiding a band of Marxist revolutionaries who were captured last week in a siege that left three guerrillas and a police officer dead, Peruvian authorities said last night."

The article continues,

"Hugo Sayers, a spokesman for Peru's National Antiterrorist Police, said by telephone from Lima last night that Ms. Berenson had not been formally charged, but was under investigation on 'the presumption of an act of terrorism' by hiding the rebels and supporting them with food, money and other supplies."¹⁹³

Lori's parents jumped into action immediately after receiving a call from the American Embassy, delivering the news of their daughter's arrest. Rhoda Berenson is quoted in McFadden's December 5 article, and other relatives are mentioned in articles published in the following days. Lizette Alvarez writes for the *New York Times* on December 6,

"She was always curious about Latin American culture and sympathetic with the downtrodden, family and friends said, but Ms. Berenson was not someone who spoke of politics. The word Marxism, they say, never came up, not when she was an A student at La Guardia High School of Music and Art and Performing Arts, not when she was studying anthropology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. And the notion of violence repelled her."¹⁹⁴

¹⁹² La Serna, *With Masses and Arms*, 194.

¹⁹³ Robert D. McFadden, "Peru Arrests U.S. Woman, 26, Linking Her to Guerrilla Group," *New York Times*, December 5, 1995, <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/12/05/world/peru-arrests-us-woman-26-linking-her-to-guerrilla-group.html>.

¹⁹⁴ Alvarez, "Gramercy Park Woman Is Held as a Rebel in Peru."

This description attempted to represent Lori as an innocent, sympathetic character, a compassionate young woman and strong student with no inclination towards radical activity. For the Berenson family, portraying Lori this way in the press was vital to her release.

A few hours after Lori was arrested, DINCOTE officers drove her to the house she had been living in for a year, a four-story building in the middle-class La Molina neighborhood of Lima. Lori's name was on the lease, along with that of a Panamanian man named Pacífico Castrellón. However, a number of other people lived there as well. While Lori sat in the car, police raided the house and engaged in a shootout with the people inside that lasted until daybreak. In the early morning of Friday, December 1, DINCOTE took 15 suspects into custody. One officer and three people, later to be determined MRTA rebels, were killed in the shootout.¹⁹⁵ The most notable figure taken into custody was Miguel Rincón Rincón, considered at the time to be the number two leader of the MRTA. A State Department cable from the day after the shootout provides background: "Rincón assumed command of the 'Fuerza Especial' of the MRTA, an elite group entrusted with carrying out the most important operations." The cable also notes that police had recovered a "cache of arms" including "25 FAL and AKM rifles, 100 grenades, dynamite, a mortar, and about 50,000 rounds of ammunition."¹⁹⁶

Rincón's capture was considered so significant that Lori Berenson was not even mentioned in this initial State Department message. However, another cable dated December 1 reported on her arrest.¹⁹⁷ Lori's story would quickly attract publicity, especially after President

¹⁹⁵ Embassy of the United States of America in Lima, "MRTA leader surrenders after all-night shootout in Lima residential neighborhood," December 1995, 2, LUM, <https://lum.cultura.pe/cdi/documento/mrta-leader-surrenders-after-shootcut-lima-lider-emerretista-se-rinde-luego-de-tiroteo-en>.

¹⁹⁶ "Peru: Number 2 leader of MRTA surrenders," December 1995, LUM, <https://lum.cultura.pe/cdi/documento/number-2-leader-mrta-surrenders-lider-numero-2-del-mrta-se-rinde>.

¹⁹⁷ Embassy of the United States of America in Lima, "MRTA leader surrenders after all-night shootout in Lima residential neighborhood," 2.

Alberto Fujimori was shown on Peruvian television on the morning of December 1 waving Lori's passport on the air and referring to the captured American as "*gringa terrorista*."

Lori was detained by DINCOTE for another month. During that time, her parents, Mark and Rhoda, were permitted to visit and assist in finding her a lawyer. However, those with knowledge about the Peruvian justice system told them that it was likely Lori's charge of treason would lead her case to be tried in front of a military tribunal, which would almost definitely lead to a conviction.¹⁹⁸ Lori's primary Peruvian lawyer, Grimaldo Achahui, was permitted less than two hours to look through the two-thousand page case file that contained information about the twenty-one individuals who were being tried together as codefendants.¹⁹⁹ The Berensons had selected Achahui due to his familiarity with DINCOTE and his willingness to take Lori's case. Rhoda Berenson writes that "Based on what he heard, read, and read between the lines, Mr. Achahui believed Lori was innocent and wanted to defend her...Mr. Achahui was also the only lawyer interviewed...who actually *wanted* to defend Lori."²⁰⁰ DINCOTE was also familiar with Grimaldo Achahui: Colonel Juan Gonzales Sandoval, the notorious officer put in charge of Lori's investigation, claimed that the only reason Achahui was willing to defend supposed members of the MRTA was because he himself was involved with the organization.²⁰¹

A significant part of DINCOTE's case against Lori hinged on the testimony of Lori's housemate, Panamanian architect Pacífico Castrellón. Lori had met Castrellón in Panama City and the two had decided to travel around the region together. Rumors abounded in the press that they were lovers, something both denied. However, they admitted to sharing hotel rooms and renting the La Molina house together. Castrellón would claim in his deposition that the two were

¹⁹⁸ Berenson, *Lori*, 11.

¹⁹⁹ Berenson, *Lori*, 49.

²⁰⁰ Berenson, *Lori*, 21.

²⁰¹ Berenson, *Lori*, 39.

introduced to the MRTA together while traveling to Ecuador, and that Lori routinely brought food up to the rebels living on the top floor of the house. He told authorities that he and Lori transported weapons for the MRTA and did various other favors.²⁰² Lori and her lawyers would argue time and again that Castrellón was lying; that he was simply trying to get his own sentence shortened and shift public attention to the American woman.

On January 8, 1996, Achahui took the stand to argue for Lori's innocence. However, the two could not communicate and Lori was not asked any questions. After Achahui's summation, Lori was presented to the press and permitted to make a statement to a crowd of reporters. She spoke for less than a minute, but her words and manner would mark her as a terrorist in the eyes of many Peruvians—and Americans—and follow her through her trial. Rhoda Berenson recalls, "She was screaming, her face distorted as she yelled. She was disheveled. Her eyes looked like they belonged to someone else. I knew Lori's eyes and these weren't her eyes. At first I thought she had been drugged. She looked so angry."²⁰³

Lori's statement, delivered to the press in Spanish, can be translated as follows:

"I am to be condemned for my concern about the conditions of hunger and misery which exist in this country. Here nobody can deny that in Peru there is much injustice. There is an institutionalized violence that has killed the people's finest sons and has condemned children to die of hunger. If it is a crime to worry about the subhuman conditions in which the majority of this population lives, then I will accept my punishment. But this is not a love of violence. This is not to be a criminal terrorist because in the MRTA there are no criminal terrorists. It is a revolutionary movement.

I love this nation. I love this nation and although this love is going to make -- cost -- me years in prison, I will never stop loving, and never will lose the hope and confidence that there will be a new day of justice in Perú."²⁰⁴

²⁰² Clifford Krauss, "In Peru Trial, Ex-Associate Contradicts New Yorker," *New York Times*, April 13, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/04/13/world/in-peru-trial-ex-associate-contradicts-new-yorker.html>.

²⁰³ Berenson, *Lori*, 50.

²⁰⁴ "Lori Berenson's Remarks at her "Presentation," *Committee to Free Lori Berenson*, January 8, 1996, Internet Archive, https://web.archive.org/web/20150915145704/http://www.freelori.org/herownwords/96jan08_lori.html.

Lori later reported that she yelled only because DINCOTE officers told her that there was no microphone and she had to raise her voice or she would not be heard.²⁰⁵ Lori's appearance can be explained by days of sleeping in DINCOTE jail, sharing a cell with a woman who had been shot in the La Molina raid and was suffering complications related to her open wounds. In a letter sent to her mother a few years later, Lori explains the moment of her "presentation," writing,

"I had been deprived of all my rights and my dignity for forty days. I knew that I was going to be tried and condemned without any evidence, without anyone showing that I was guilty...I was angry because I saw acts that should never be permitted by civil society, acts that clearly would rouse indignation and anger in anyone, even more so when one knows she is impotent to do anything in the face of this monstrous injustice. Similarly, I felt indignation at the misery and hunger in which the large majority of the Peruvian people and people in the Third World live, the institutionalized violence and injustice that has become the norm in these people's lives. I knew that January 8, 1996, was the last time I would be able to speak out about this reality."²⁰⁶

Lori had a number of reasons to be angry, so she probably felt that expressing this was the right thing to do. Nonetheless, some of her words are difficult to explain. Her defense of the MRTA is confusing in the face of her legal defense that she had no idea that the people living in her house were affiliated with the MRTA, did not have any contact with the organization, and was simply living in Peru as a socially-conscious journalist. If she was trying everything to prove her innocence, why did she defend the organization that DINCOTE, along with many Peruvians, believed to be a terrorist group? The answer may be that Lori knew she was going to be convicted and sentenced to prison and thought she might as well speak out against the injustice she had observed in Peru. However, it may also be that she sought to defend the MRTA because she was a part of it—not a leader as she was accused of, not even a formal rank-and-file member, but a sympathizer, involved in some way with the group and their fight for a just cause.

²⁰⁵ Berenson, "Lori Berenson After Being Held 20 Years in Peru," 8:34-8:40.

²⁰⁶ Berenson, *Lori*, 74.

On January 11, 1996, Lori was sentenced to life in prison with no possibility of parole. Her presentation to the press was cited as evidence of her guilt.²⁰⁷ She was shortly moved to Chorrillos, a maximum-security prison in Lima. For the next fifteen years, Mark and Rhoda Berenson would lead an incredible fight for their daughter's freedom, enlisting the help of American lawyers, congressmen, governors, and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. Figures from John McCain²⁰⁸ to Jesse Jackson²⁰⁹ spoke out in support of Lori. In August 2000, Lori's life sentence was revoked by Peru's top military court. She was granted a new civilian trial, charged with "illicit association" in place of "terrorist collaboration" and was re-sentenced in June 2001 to twenty years in prison. During the trial, Lori would maintain her innocence, reiterating, "I am not a terrorist and I condemn terrorism." She continued to refuse condemnation of the MRTA while claiming to have no relation to the organization nor knowledge of any of their plans.²¹⁰

Lori began her incarceration at the Chorrillos women's prison in Lima before being transferred to the Yanamayo Prison in Puno, a small city in the Southern Andes atop a mountain. She endured frigid cold, high altitude, and harsh restrictions on what she could do, say, write, and receive. In October 1998, after three years at Yanamayo, she was moved to the Socabaya prison, west of Puno in Arequipa, still in the mountainous south of Peru. She would remain there for two years before being transferred back to Chorrillos until December 2001, to the Huacariz Penitentiary in Cajamarca, in northwest Peru, and finally to another prison in Lima where she

²⁰⁷ Berenson, *Lori*, 77.

²⁰⁸ Anthony Lewis, "Abroad at Home; Why Not Speak Out?," *New York Times*, April 15, 2000, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/04/15/opinion/abroad-at-home-why-not-speak-out.html>.

²⁰⁹ Anthony Depalma, "Jesse Jackson Confronts Leader Of Peru Over Prisoner's Case," *New York Times*, September 9, 2000, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/09/09/nyregion/jesse-jackson-confronts-leader-of-peru-over-prisoner-s-case.html>.

²¹⁰ Clifford Krauss, "20-Year Sentence for New Yorker After 2nd Terrorism Trial in Peru," *New York Times*, June 21, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/06/21/world/20-year-sentence-for-new-yorker-after-2nd-terrorism-trial-in-peru.html>.

would spend the remainder of her sentence.²¹¹ Lori was officially released on May 25, 2010. She had spent fifteen years in Peruvian prisons and was required to remain in Peru for another five years while on parole.²¹²

While imprisoned at Yanamayo, Lori met Aníbal Apari Sánchez, a former member of the MRTA charged with terrorism and sentenced to fifteen years in prison. During the year the two overlapped at Yanamayo, they began a love affair that would lead them to marriage in 2003. By that time, Apari had been released and Lori was incarcerated at Huacariz. In 2008, Mark Berenson announced that his daughter was pregnant, with Apari being the father. On May 6, 2009, Lori gave birth to a son, Salvador Anespori Apari Berenson.²¹³ The baby boy spent a year with his mother in prison before her release. After five years of marriage, Lori and Apari separated but remained friends and coparents. Apari became part of Lori's legal team and spoke in defense of her right to parole before it was officially granted in 2010.

Lori's activism did not halt when she was incarcerated. In 2002, she joined a hunger strike of prisoners at the Huacariz Prison in protest of Fujimori's ongoing human rights abuses and repressive anti-terrorism legislation. She signed onto the strike's statement and demands which reflect the pursuit of social justice she had always claimed to be fighting for. The statement reads, "Throughout history those in power have maintained their privileges at the expense of the peoples' misery. Faced with poverty and injustice, groups of Peruvian people formed various organizations with the goals of changing that situation, improving the economic, political, and social rights of the people, and restoring their dignity." The demands specifically reference the MRTA, noting, "The corrupt and criminal Fujimori-Montesinos government

²¹¹ Egan, "The Liberation of Lori Berenson."

²¹² Simon Romero, "Peru Frees American Held Since 1995," *New York Times*, May 25, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/26/world/americas/26peru.html>.

²¹³ "Jailed U.S. citizen Lori Berenson gives birth to baby boy," *Peruvian Times*, May 7, 2009, <https://www.peruviantimes.com/07/jailed-us-citizen-lori-berenson-gives-birth-to-baby-boy/2797/>.

wanted to depict an organization such as the MRTA as ‘terrorist’ in an attempt to erase who they are -- people who seek political and social change.”²¹⁴ Lori’s continued defense of the MRTA exhibited here, coupled with her denial of any involvement in the organization, is striking. In the next section of this chapter, Lori’s involvement with the MRTA will be analyzed in order to determine the extent of her affiliation with the movement as well as what drew her to it.

Lori Berenson and the MRTA

From the moment of her arrest, Lori would claim she was innocent of everything she was accused of. Many believed she was pretty clearly innocent of the charges originally brought against her: that she was a leader of the MRTA, that she helped the group smuggle weapons, and that she was deeply involved with MRTA plans to attack the Peruvian congress. However, in the early years of her imprisonment, Lori denied affiliation with the movement at large. In a 1998 statement written to the members of the Community of Organizations for Human Rights, Lori affirms, “I have never been a member of the MRTA; I have never participated in the planning of a violent act, neither with the MRTA nor anybody else; neither have I ever promoted violence, and, what is more, I do not believe in violence and it would not be possible for me to participate in violence.”²¹⁵

Lori insisted that she was merely a socially-minded, culturally-curious journalist, possessing no connection to the MRTA. While *Third World Viewpoint* and *Modern Times* both confirmed that Lori was working on articles for them and wrote official letters stating this, Lori

²¹⁴ “Lori Berenson’s statement on beginning a hunger strike,” *Committee to Free Lori Berenson*, February 18, 2002, Internet Archive, https://archive.ph/20120802002427/http://www.freelori.org/herownwords/02feb18_hungerstrike.html#selection-233.1-233.206

²¹⁵ Lori Berenson, “Letter to the human rights community,” *Committee to Free Lori Berenson*, August 22, 1998, Internet Archive, https://web.archive.org/web/20150915150231/http://www.freelori.org/herownwords/98aug22_letter.html.

was just beginning freelance writing and was not really an investigative journalist. She therefore could not rely on this as a strong alibi or exculpatory narrative. *The Nation* reporters Jonathan and Liz Mineo note that “The Committee to Protect Journalists, which had successfully sprung Jeremy Bigwood when he was arrested for photographing the MRTA, found it difficult to make more than a token protest on behalf of a woman who had yet to publish a single piece of journalism.”²¹⁶ While a true interest in reporting on social and political affairs could have drawn Lori to Peru, she could not be protected by saying she was a journalist.

Rhoda Berenson’s 2000 book, *Lori: My Daughter, Wrongfully Imprisoned in Peru*, constantly reiterates Lori’s innocence. She writes that “Lori had met with many people, at many places, while in Peru. If some were members of the MRTA they would not have identified themselves as such or revealed their real names or their positions in the organization. And speaking with them did not make her a member of the group.”²¹⁷ This may have been true: Lori could very well have met educated young Peruvians inclined towards social justice who did not tell her about their involvement with a radical organization. However, Lori’s presentation to the press confirmed that she had some knowledge of the MRTA. This knowledge indicates that Lori likely met people involved with the movement who portrayed it as a sympathetic organization fighting for a just cause. Her decision to deny knowing anyone affiliated with the MRTA was likely a strategic element of her defense throughout her trial.

Rhoda would firmly deny that her daughter had rented the house in La Molina. She writes, “Lori did not sign the lease. She did not rent the house after all. Lori lived in an apartment in San Borja, nowhere near La Molina.”²¹⁸ Nonetheless, Lori herself later admitted to being the one to rent the house. When describing the night of her arrest to Amy Goodman in her

²¹⁶ Levi and Mineo, “The Lori Berenson Papers.”

²¹⁷ Berenson, *Lori*, 37.

²¹⁸ Berenson, *Lori*, 33.

Democracy Now! interview, she recalls “...I was taken to the house which I had helped rent, um, a time earlier, and...the shootout started.” Goodman asks, “The police held you in the car as a shootout took place between the police and the MRTA?” to which Lori responds, “Yes.” Goodman follows up with, “At the house that you had rented?” and Lori nods.²¹⁹ Thus, it is clear that Lori did in fact rent the house where the police arrested Miguel Rincón Rincón and a number of others affiliated with the MRTA.

Those who read about Lori’s story find a few contradictory details that are hard to reconcile. Rhoda claims that Lori “had never even visited the sublet portion of the [La Molina] house, had absolutely no knowledge that members of the MRTA were living there, and certainly knew nothing of any plans to kidnap members of the Peruvian congress.”²²⁰ It has never been proven that Lori knew of plans involving an attack or plot at the Peruvian congress building, and it is completely possible that she would have had no knowledge of this regardless of her involvement with the MRTA. Rhoda’s other two assertions, however, seem less credible. Lori had never been to the upstairs portion of her house? She had *no idea* that people she lived with were involved with a radical group? In her trial deposition, Lori said something similar, recalling, “I knew there were people upstairs...I don’t know who let them in. Although I used the kitchen, I never noticed anyone preparing a large quantity of food.”²²¹ Furthermore, Lori did not just live with rank-and-file MRTA members, she lived with Rincón, who had been detained by police and accused of terrorism in April 1989 but was released due to insufficient evidence.²²² Would Lori have been completely oblivious to living with such a prominent figure and someone with so much authority in the MRTA?

²¹⁹ Berenson, “Lori Berenson After Being Held 20 Years in Peru,” 7:07-7:31.

²²⁰ Berenson, *Lori*, 37.

²²¹ Levi and Mineo, “The Lori Berenson Papers.”

²²² “Peru: Number 2 leader of MRTA surrenders,” December 1995, LUM, <https://lum.cultura.pe/cdi/documento/number-2-leader-mrta-surrenders-lider-numero-2-del-mrta-se-rinde>.

Lori was arrested with Nancy Gilvonio, a photographer who Lori knew as Rosa—her legal name in Bolivia, her country of origin. Nancy Gilvonio was married to Néstor Cerpa, an MRTA leader and one of the organizers of the 1996 hostage-taking episode at the Japanese Ambassador’s residence, discussed in Chapter One. Lori claimed that she knew nothing of this marriage, nor that Gilvonio had any connection to the MRTA.²²³ Pacífico Castrellón asserted in his testimony that he and Lori had met with Cerpa in Ecuador in 1994 and that this encounter constituted their introduction to the MRTA.²²⁴ Lori would vehemently deny this, just as she denied most of Castrellón’s testimony.

Inconsistencies in Lori’s explanation of her time in Peru are apparent relatively early on. While she vigorously denied to have any affiliation with the MRTA, a *New York Times* article written on January 9, 1996, two days before Lori was sentenced, includes the following statement about Lori’s presentation to the press

"Membership in a group is not a crime," said Ramsey Clark, the former United States Attorney General who is one of Ms. Berenson's lawyers, in a telephone interview from New York. "Her statement today was one of solidarity with those who want to change things. She has told us from the beginning that she doesn't want to separate herself from the rest of the group, and that's what she was doing today."²²⁵

What would cause Lori’s lawyer to make a statement like this while she was denying any connection to the MRTA? It may have been that Clark made this statement before Lori and her family realized she would likely be sentenced to multiple decades in prison and sought to create the strongest defense possible.

Four years later, in 2000, when Lori was interviewed by CBS News, she was asked why her name appeared on the list of prisoners demanded for release in exchange for the hostages

²²³ “Lori Berenson's 2000 Prison Interview.”

²²⁴ Levi and Mineo, “The Lori Berenson Papers.”

²²⁵ Calvin Sims, “U.S. Woman in Peru Expecting Long Sentence,” *New York Times*, January 9, 1996, <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/01/09/world/us-woman-in-peru-expecting-long-sentence.html>.

held at the Japanese Ambassador's residence in December 1996. Berenson replied to Peter Van Sant, "I actually don't know. I'm not a follower. I'm not a comrade." Yet, in the same interview, when discussing her infamous presentation to the press, Lori was asked if she would denounce the MRTA. She responded, "I don't see why I have to denounce the MRTA...To murder innocent people, I'm not saying that is correct. But what I'm saying is, in the general context, trying to change one's life is not necessarily... wrong."²²⁶ Lori would stand by her defense of the MRTA but continue to deny involvement with the organization. However, over the years, Lori's words to reporters, statements made by those fighting for her release, and the tone of press coverage would change.

A *New York Times* article written after her civilian court conviction in June 2001 states, "Although the evidence suggests she may indeed have aided the violent Marxist guerrilla group, the sentence is unduly harsh in light of her marginal role in the conspiracy and the case's tainted and tortuous history."²²⁷ This second trial charged Lori as a collaborator, rather than a leader, of the MRTA. While few considered it a fair trial, the prosecutors had far more evidence that Lori had collaborated with the organization rather than been a leader of it. However, Lori again denied participation in the MRTA in her closing statement at the trial:

"Yes, I jointly rented a house with Pacifico Castellon, but I did not do so to hide anyone or for any reason related to the MRTA, and there is no evidence to the contrary. Yes, I did know on a social, human basis, several people who wound up being part of, or somehow related to the MRTA. I knew them with other identities and I had absolutely no reason to doubt the truth of who they said they were."²²⁸

²²⁶ "Lori Berenson's 2000 Prison Interview."

²²⁷ "Lori Berenson's Sentence," *New York Times*, June 23, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/06/23/opinion/lori-berenson-s-sentence.html>.

²²⁸ Lori Berenson, "Closing Statement of Lori Berenson," *Committee to Free Lori Berenson*, June 20, 2001, Internet Archive, <https://web.archive.org/web/20150915144807/http://www.freelori.org/herownwords/01jun20.html>.

She again asserted that she never went to the fourth floor of the La Molina house, despite the fact that she had rented the entire house, out of a sense of privacy and respect.

After Lori's appeal of her second conviction failed, press coverage of her case became more sparse. Lori's name resurfaced in Peruvian and American media after her marriage to former MRTA member Aníbal Apari Sánchez in October 2003. Lori, however, did not make a public statement about her marriage. Some believe that Apari's confirmed official membership in the MRTA is incriminating for Lori, but no one claims that the two met before 1997 when they were both imprisoned at Yanamayo.²²⁹

In a *TimesCast* news report in November 2010, Lori told journalist Simon Romero, "I certainly am saddened, and I'm sorry that I have been part of something that was considered so damaging...My participation has been collaborating. You know, I rented a house. I shared ideological things..."²³⁰ At this point, Lori had served fifteen years in prison and was out on parole. Her sentence was nearly finished; her case was closed. Lori may have decided it was the moment to apologize for her small role in a group that contributed to the violence Peru faced in the 1980s and 1990s.

Lori's January 2016 interview with Amy Goodman is her last recorded interview to date. Lori had only recently returned to the United States after having been required to stay in Peru to finish her parole until 2015. This conversation between Goodman and Berenson reveals more about the nature of Lori's participation in the MRTA than any previous interview. Goodman asked Lori, "What was it about the MRTA that you were drawn to, that got you involved?" This time, far from denying her involvement, Lori answered, "They were very similar to the

²²⁹ Reuters, "American Jailed in Peru Is Married To Ex-Prisoner," *New York Times*, October 3, 2003, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/10/03/world/american-jailed-in-peru-is-married-to-ex-prisoner.html>.

²³⁰ Zena Barakat, "TimesCast | November 24, 2010," *New York Times*, November 24, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/video/continuous/1248069371392/timescast-november-24-2010.html>.

organizations I've been familiar with, in Central America, but more than that it was my sense that they were in a very difficult situation, a lot of people in prison, and they were looking for a way out."²³¹ The fact that she had been compelled by the MRTA and had become in some way involved was not something Lori had acknowledged before.

Goodman goes on to bring up the report written by the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación), which found that the MRTA was responsible for 1 to 1.5% of deaths during the Peruvian civil conflict, while Sendero Luminoso and the Peruvian Military were responsible for the vast majority. Lori expresses the belief that the numbers allocated to the MRTA seem high to her, but that nonetheless,

“...horrific things have happened in Peru, and I think...that's why I say I take responsibility for having collaborated with an organization that...has committed crimes. I think that is...and that's why I was in prison. So I think-you know, yes it was secondary collaboration, I wasn't involved in any specific act, but yes I do take my responsibility...”²³²

Lori's admission of having collaborated with the MRTA is surprising based on her earlier statements. She does not go into the specifics of her participation or connection, but even calling herself a collaborator and saying that she takes responsibility for her involvement is a major jump from previous denials of being affiliated with the group. This interview was conducted after Lori had been released from prison and moved back to the U.S., so she likely felt it was a safer time to reveal more about her story. Lori hints at, but does not really explain, what led her to get involved with the MRTA. The final part of this chapter will focus on answering this question.

What Led Lori Berenson to the MRTA?

²³¹ Berenson, “Lori Berenson After Being Held 20 Years in Peru,” 4:00-4:17.

²³² Berenson, “Lori Berenson After Being Held 20 Years in Peru,” 16:28-16:46.

Lori's story is that of a bright, compassionate, social justice-minded American woman whose interest in Latin America began in the classroom and led her through the Americas. She did collaborate with the MRTA, although it is unclear if anyone will ever know the exact details of her involvement. While Lori's choice to move to El Salvador and work with CISPES and the FLMN can be explained in part by U.S. involvement in the Salvadoran civil war, it is far less clear what led Lori to align herself with a Marxist revolutionary group in Peru. Lori's own words indicate that she collaborated with the MRTA out of a desire to fight against injustice in Peru. She believed in the movement's vision of this fight in part because she connected working alongside the MRTA with involvement in the FMLN. Like many young Peruvians, Lori was drawn to the MRTA's radical politics, which seemed to mark a divergence with the unjust status quo. Finally, her involvement with the MRTA occurred after the height of their armed action against the state; thus, she may have believed she was collaborating with a peaceful, ideological movement.

While in El Salvador, Lori had witnessed firsthand an incredible turning point. She had been involved with the FMLN, an organization that was once considered a leftist guerrilla fringe group but eventually came to democratically represent the Salvadoran people in place of a right-wing authoritarian government. Rhoda Berenson writes about her daughter's time in Central America, "In these few years, Lori's work as a secretary, translator, and human rights activist had enabled her to contribute, at least in a small way, to the peace process and the end of a twelve-year civil war. She was barely twenty-two years old."²³³ Lori's experience in El Salvador directly relates to her future association with the MRTA. Working with the FMLN during the peace process had shown Lori an example of political progress, and had potentially instilled in her an inflated sense of her own personal ability to create change.

²³³ Berenson, *Lori*, 64.

Lori told Jennifer Egan, when the two spoke in depth for a *New York Times* article written in March 2011, that her work after the peace process felt unsatisfying. “In civilian life, the urgency wasn’t the same...Since I had dedicated 12 hours a day — almost 24 hours — exclusively to a project that was positive, once I stopped having that level of dedication, I felt as though there was something wrong.”²³⁴ This reflection clarifies the fulfillment that Lori derived from being part of a high stakes political project. After the peace process in El Salvador, Lori missed the fight for justice. She had certainly met a number of like-minded young people through CISPES and the FMLN, and it is entirely possible that one of them introduced her to another just cause; an organization fighting for the masses against a repressive government: the Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement of Peru.

In her 2016 interview, Lori told Amy Goodman that she did not want to just “become part of the system.”²³⁵ Leaving an elite university like MIT and moving to Latin America allowed Lori to become involved directly with the issues of poverty and inequality that she had studied with Professor Diskin. Those who joined the MRTA shared Lori’s sentiment about not wanting to become part of “the system,” a system they saw as furthering corruption, inequality, and injustice in Peru.

The MRTA was not Sendero Luminoso, a group that Lori’s parents noted she had been familiar with. Sendero employed brutal violence and essentially worshipped Abimael Guzman, an intellectual who did not necessarily represent the people of Peru. While the MRTA also carried out violent attacks, including a few kidnappings and assassinations, they were fewer in number and far more targeted. It is also possible that Lori was not aware of the MRTA’s killings, and that symbolic actions such as bombing Kentucky Fried Chicken locations perhaps even

²³⁴ Egan, “The Liberation of Lori Berenson.”

²³⁵ Berenson, “Lori Berenson After Being Held 20 Years in Peru,” 1:46-1:48.

aligned with her stance against American imperialism and economic exploitation of Latin America.

Lori tells Goodman that the MRTA was “looking for a way out.” When asked what she means by this, Lori responds by explaining that the MRTA was looking for a solution that mirrored the peace process in El Salvador; that they were seeking to end their fight against the Peruvian state peacefully.²³⁶ However she aided the MRTA, she may have truly believed that the group was attempting to make peace with the state and hoped to see some of their vision for a more just society implemented.

Lori Berenson spent fifteen years in Peruvian prison for her involvement with the MRTA. She would claim her sentence was for caring about injustice and the Peruvian people, yet she herself did make the choice to collaborate with the movement. Lori became entangled with the MRTA out of the belief that the group was fighting against injustice in Peru, a view largely informed by her positive experience with the FMLN and witnessing the peace process in El Salvador. She was a young American who desired to disavow her country’s harmful military intervention and economic imperialism, to move to a new place rich in culture, and to pursue the possibility of creating radical change.

By virtue of being an American, Lori was an outlier in the MRTA. However, her background, values, and experiences closely aligned with those of many involved in the movement. Lori grew up in a middle-class household and had access to quality education, like the number of university students connected to the MRTA including leaders Víctor Polay Campos and Rosa Luz Padilla. Like Polay’s involvement with APRA and the Peruvian MIR (Revolutionary Left Movement) and Jaime Castillo Petrucci’s participation in the Chilean MIR, Lori had been associated with the FMLN and had seen a radical movement achieve peace and

²³⁶ Berenson, “Lori Berenson After Being Held 20 Years in Peru,” 4:16-4:35.

become part of the mainstream electoral system. She shared with MRTA members and sympathizers a concern for social justice and desire to be part of a community and movement actively fighting for change.

Lori had no prior affiliation with violence, yet was moved by the MRTA, a movement that did use violence albeit sparingly. The fact that she was drawn to the MRTA speaks to the line walked by organization between radicalism and reasonability, between the mainstream left and Sendero Luminoso's extremism. This appeal was not exclusive to Lori: the choices made by the MRTA in terms of rhetoric and action were a major factor that drew young Peruvians to the movement. Lori is neither completely typical of nor entirely distinct from MRTA members at large. Her story adds another layer to our perception of the movement and what drew people to it. Lori Berenson is not the first young American to be concerned with social justice, believe in the power of social movements to push for change, and become involved in radical activity, nor will she be the last. She faced severe consequences for her involvement with the MRTA. Lori may have been naive when she decided to collaborate with a foreign radical movement, and she likely romanticized the clandestine nature of the organization. Nonetheless, Lori held a genuine desire to be part of creating social change, to forfeit her place in an unequal system, and to fight out injustice where she observed it.

Conclusions

Operation Chavín de Huántar, the Peruvian military campaign to storm the Japanese Ambassador's Residence and free the remaining hostages held by the MRTA, immutably crippled the movement. The April 22, 1997 operation killed all fourteen MRTA militants inside the building.²³⁷ The death of the top leader not behind bars, Néstor Cerpa Cartolini, struck a blow to the movement that it could not recover from. In a communication put out the day after Chavín de Huántar, MRTA prisoners inside Canto Grande wrote, "We did not want things to end this way, but in this confrontation, not only our will counts, but also that of the government, which opted for a military solution, abandoning the talks and prioritizing military intervention as a means of overcoming the profound political crisis it was experiencing." For Túpac Amaristas, the military operation was just another piece of evidence that the government was unable to prioritize the needs and welfare of the masses. They believed the military to be an organ of repression and Fujimori's neoliberal policies to widen the gap between rich and poor. This communication reiterated the MRTA's commitment to fight for social change, stating, "we reaffirm to our people the continuity of the struggle undertaken to achieve levels of justice and the establishment of a society where all Peruvians can fully realize themselves." The military's efforts to annihilate the movement would not be realized; the MRTA would not give up on the Peruvian people. Their communication ended on a somewhat somber note:

"At the same time, we affirm that what has happened is a political victory for all our people. We have not been able to fully crown it. However, we have provided an education; we have taught the world a lesson about the just and noble ideals embodied in our struggle, to which we are all committed."²³⁸

²³⁷ Miguel La Serna, *With Masses and Arms: Peru's Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 232.

²³⁸ MRTA, "Ante la intervención militar a la Residencia del embajador de Japón," CeDeMA, April 23, 1997, https://cedema.org/digital_items/3224.

Despite denying that the fight would continue, the MRTA's words indicate that they knew their struggle was drawing to a close. By acknowledging that they had "*provided* an education," the movement seems to recognize that it had made its impact on Peruvians. It is likely that the MRTA knew a turning point had been reached—it would be impossible for the weakened movement to engage in armed struggle as it once had. I cannot help but read this as an acknowledgement of a chapter ending, a recognition of the "lesson" taught by the MRTA about the need to fight for social justice and the legacy they hoped to leave.

While Túpac Amaristas would attempt to carry out further action and political campaigns, April 22, 1997 is widely recognized as the date of the movement's demise. The organization had almost made it to the end of the 20th century, marking a larger regional and political turning point. Preeminent MRTA scholar Miguel La Serna writes in the conclusion to his book *With Masses and Arms*, "Operation Chavín de Huántar was the symbolic death knell not just for the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement but also for the Peruvian Cold War."²³⁹ I would argue that the MRTA also marked the end of the Cold War in Latin America at large. While left-wing movements and political instability would continue into the 21st century, the MRTA was arguably the last insurgent group formed in the mold of the Cuban Revolution, adopting a simultaneously Marxist and nationalist political outlook seen in countries such as Uruguay, Chile, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. While social movements in Latin America would continue to rise and push for change to entrenched poverty and inequality, they would take a slightly different form.

This thesis has argued that the MRTA was born out of Peruvian leftist traditions, both from factions on the mainstream left and guerrilla movements of the preceding decades. It was created to push for social change through armed struggle and to fill the space between left-wing

²³⁹ La Serna, *With Masses and Arms*, 234.

political groups and the radical extremism of Sendero Luminoso. People were drawn to the MRTA because of the unjust socioeconomic order they observed around them, disillusionment with a Peruvian state that had been under military rule back and forth for nearly a century, and because of the foreign and domestic economic exploitation permitted by successive leaders. Groups with various grievances felt seen and heard by the MRTA, who attempted to rally different sectors of the Peruvian population through propaganda. The MRTA successfully positioned itself as a radical organization that would use targeted armed action to push for a more just and inclusive society at a time where many felt revolution was the only way to change Peru's sociopolitical situation. Lori Berenson, an outsider, was attracted to the movement because she had seen firsthand the ability of revolutionary social movements in Latin America to achieve peace and be incorporated into the political system. Furthermore, she held a strong desire to create change where she saw injustice.

Epilogue

Lori's story adds another dimension to scholarly understanding of the MRTA and how it fits into the larger landscape of 20th century Latin American social movements. Like the FLMN, the organization Lori worked closely with in El Salvador, the MRTA fought against repressive government to create political change. Túpac Amaristas did not turn their backs on the political system, but pushed the state to make real transformations according to their vision of a more just Peru. There is no evidence that Lori was a proponent of large-scale violence; even though she likely knew of the MRTA's employment of violent tactics, she may have condoned them out of an understanding that sometimes grand actions need to be taken to drive grand changes.

This project has honed my interest in the radicalization of young people and has led me to seek out stories similar to those of Víctor Polay Campos, Rosa Luz Padilla, and Lori Berenson. I recently listened to a podcast about Bernardine Dohrn, former leader of Weather Underground, a far-left militant student organization that operated in the United States in the late 1960s. The podcast was created by Bernardine Dohrn's son, Zayd Ayers Dohrn, who investigates and narrates his mother's story. Early on in the first episode, Ayers Dohrn comments on what exactly drew his mother and her Weather Underground counterparts to become involved in radical action. He deduces, "...they were all convinced their privilege put them on the wrong side of history. To get on the right side, they were willing to blow up the world they were supposed to inherit."²⁴⁰ Ayers Dohrn's assertion struck me immediately: this sentiment is apparent in the decisions of young Peruvians who joined the MRTA as well in Lori Berenson.

²⁴⁰ Zayd Ayers Dohrn, "Chapter 1: The Most Dangerous Woman in America," June 9, 2022, in *Mother Country Radicals*, produced by Crooked Media, 5:59-6:09, <https://crooked.com/podcast/chapter-1-the-most-dangerous-woman-in-america/>.

Many MRTA members were born into privilege and comfort, attending universities where they were exposed to Peruvian history and leftist political thought and introduced to student social movements. Those who were not, who grew up working-class or in a rural *campesino* family, experienced injustice and state failure firsthand and sought to be part of changing Peru for their children. Lori Berenson was born into a middle-class American family. The values of compassion and curiosity were instilled in her from a young age, as were Jewish traditions of fighting for social justice. An interest in Latin American politics and culture, coupled with the resolve to confront injustice, brought Lori to El Salvador. The feeling that being an American put her on the “wrong side of history” in the case of the Salvadoran Civil War was a strong driving factor in Lori’s choice to move. Once there, she was introduced to the potential of radical social movements to drive political transformation. Wherever and however she was introduced to the MRTA, she must have seen the organization in the same light. While the U.S. was not involved in Peruvian domestic affairs, Lori witnessed stark inequality and government repression in Peru and sought to be part of the fight to foment change. As argued in Chapter 2, the MRTA’s rhetoric and ability to speak to specific and widespread grievances was effective. The movement positioned itself as the only solution to creating a better and more equal Peru.

The MRTA is just one of many movements that compelled young people to radicalize for social change. I was drawn to the topic of this thesis for a few reasons. I have studied Latin American social movements since high school and learned about political currents that deeply questioned society. Upon learning about the MRTA, I was immediately caught by its differences with Sendero Luminoso and the fact that the two operated at the same time. Not one, but two radical movements had a hold on Peru in the final decades of the 20th century. My interest in the topic does not dismiss the horrific violence experienced by Peruvians in the 1980s and 1990s.

The fact that I had not even heard of the Peruvian Civil Conflict before beginning this research is a large piece of why I wanted to write about it. But radical, violent groups do not usually come out of nowhere. After digging into Peru's history, starting with Spanish colonization and weaving through military dictatorship, corrupt democratic administrations, and through to the 1990s statewide policy of neoliberalism, I came to see how deeply inequality is ingrained into society. The MRTA spoke to true anger and frustration from those at the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy, as well as the desire to be on the right side of history from those with more privilege. Upon beginning this thesis, I embarked on a journey to explain what exactly drew people to this movement.

When I first heard about Lori Berenson, I could not help but be struck by our similarities: Jewish women born in Manhattan to well-educated parents who imbued in us empathy and curiosity that would drive desires to create change. Lori and I both attended top American Universities where we developed an interest in Latin America, particularly captivated by societal injustice and popular efforts to fight it. Lori's decision to move to Latin America and join the fight for radical change caused me to really think deeply about my life and where my interests and values would take me. Unlike Lori, I have not chosen a radical path. Through my education, I have been exposed to issues and ideas that will shape how I engage with the politics of social change. As this project draws to a close, I have concluded that maybe we do not need to "blow up" the world that we are supposed to inherit—but we must never cease to question the status quo and fight for change.

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