**Peruvian Terrorism by Sendero Luminoso**

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**Abstract**

Abimael Guzman overcame many obstacles in his young life to become the leader of the most feared terrorist group in the history of Peru, called Sendero Luminoso (SL). In 2008, SL was still considered “by far the largest and most successful” terrorist group and security threat in Peru (McCormick, 2008). Guzman became radicalized and began his domestic terrorism against the Peruvian government in 1980, and quickly gained power and fear (Sullivan, 2021). Guzman became known as the “Fourth Sword” of communism, following Marx, Lenin, and Mao (Sullivan, 2021). It is believed that in its first six years, SL launched 12,000 terrorist attacks and murdered an estimated 10,000 people (McCormick, 2008). SL was so successful in their domestic terrorist campaign against the Peruvian government that martial law was ordered in 1992 (Sullivan, 2021).

*Key words:* Sendero Luminoso, Peruvian Terrorism, Maoism, Abimael Guzman, Andean mysticism

**Introduction**

Sendero Luminoso (SL) also known as Shining Path is still the leading terrorist group in Peru, as of the 2020 statistics released by the State Department. SL originated in the Peruvian Andes mountains which is 300 miles away from Lima, the capital of Peru (McCormick, 2008). This area of Peru is known as one of the poorest regions politically, culturally, and most importantly economically (McCormick, 2008). The peasants in the Andes mountains were readily mobilized by the inspiring philosophy professor Abimael Guzman (Sullivan, 2021).

**Root Cause and Timeline**

McCormick (2008) describes SL ideologies as a mix of Andean mysticism, Maoism, and the views of the original leader Abimael Guzman. Stanfield-Mazzi (2013) provides some history to the evolution of the Andean Mysticism, which changed when Spain took over Peru in 1532 and forced them to convert to Christianity. It is believed that the Andean religion predated the birth of Christ by a few millennia and was never a monolithic religion. “Andeans worshiped a multitude of named sacred beings, known as *huacas*, who were often understood to inhabit sacred sites within the landscape” (Stanfield-Mazzi, 2013, p.2). Being forced to alter and change their religious beliefs by outsiders is a common reason for terrorism (Combs, 2018). Sullivan (2021) describes Maoism as a form of communism created by Mao Tse Tung that “uses violence and armed insurrection as a means to capture State power” (para. 1).

Abimael Guzman was born in 1934, the bastard son of a rich businessman, and was abandoned by his mother at a young age (Sullivan, 2021). In his teens he became interested in politics and by age 28 (in 1962) he was appointed professor of philosophy in Ayacucho, an isolated and very poor province made up of peasants. Here, he began his political propaganda career by holding weekly political discussions encouraging the peasants to rebel against the Peruvian society (Sullivan, 2021). Guzman believed he could transform Peru into a modern communist country and went to China multiple times from 1965-1967 to learn how to launch his own revolution (Sullivan, 2021). “Seeing Mao’s theories put into practice radicalized Guzmán, and he returned to Peru convinced that a rapid violent revolution was necessary to destroy Peru’s existing government and institute a peasant dictatorship” (Sullivan, 2021, para. 4).

By 1988 SL controlled the majority of the Peruvian countryside through controlling the drug trade, and they then set their sights on Lima (Sullivan, 2021). “For four years, the Shining Path made steady gains as its bombing campaigns and assassinations immobilized the capital, and the country was brought close to anarchy” (Sullivan, 2021). “In April 1992 Pres. Alberto Fujimori suspended the constitution and declared a state of emergency, effectively placing the country under martial law” (Sullivan, 2021). By September 1992, Guzman was apprehended along with 14 of his top commanders and swiftly received a life sentence in prison, where he later died in 2021 (Sullivan, 2021).

**Obstacles**

Why did it take so long to apprehend Guzman or at least slow the progress of this domestic terrorist organization? McCormick (2008) describes SL as clandestine, ruthless, has a lack of discrimination in their targets, fanatical with extreme parochialism. The Oxford dictionary (2022) defines clandestine as “kept secret or done secretively, especially because illicit”. Due to their location in the remote Andes mountains more than 300 miles from Lima, this enabled them to remain isolated and difficult to infiltrate. The Oxford dictionary (2022) defines ruthless as “having or showing no pity or compassion for others”. “Guzmán regarded anyone with the slightest connection to the state as a potential target, and the Shining Path did not hesitate to torture and kill anyone it perceived as an enemy, including civilians” (Sullivan, 2021). As of 2003, it was estimated that 69,280 people had been murdered from 1980-2000 (Hernandez and Church). It is estimated that 56% of those deaths were farmers, 79% occurred in rural settings, and 54% were murdered by the SL (Hernandez and Church, 2013). Miriam Webster (2022) defines fanatic “a person who is extremely enthusiastic about and devoted to some interest or activity”. The Oxford dictionary (2022) defines parochialism as “a limited or narrow outlook”. Guzman reportedly had a unique “ability to inspire complete devotion in his followers, especially in his officers—college-educated middle-class intellectuals” (Sullivan, 2021).

**Solutions**

In 2008, Peru finally began emergency preparedness and planning for terroristic events by starting its first emergency medicine residency program and began construction of the first trauma center in Lima (Hernandez and Church, 2013). Prior to this, Peru had a “largely underdeveloped” emergency planning and preparedness for terrorism (Hernandez and Church, 2013). On December 2, 2020 after a five-year investigation, the Peruvian National Police (PNP) executed a large-scale attack on two branches of SL called the Movement for Amnesty and Fundamental Rights (United States Department of State, 2020). This major operation involved almost 800 PNP officers and 100 prosecutors and they were able to capture and detain 77 people (United States Department of State, 2020).

**Conclusion**

To summarize the SL, they are an isolated, secretive organization that is very enthusiastic about showing no compassion or pity to their enemy and have a very narrow or refined enemy, which is the Peruvian government. This group of peasants lead by Guzman was able to bring the Peruvian government to their knees, as evidenced by them retracting their constitution and enacting martial law. The Peruvian government did not begin to invest in disaster and emergency planning and preparedness until 2008, despite significant domestic terror activities since the 1980’s. In 2020, it appears the Peruvian government has begun to make headway in their fight against the SL terrorist group.

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