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Beyond the Gonzalo Mystique: Challenges to Abimael Guzmán’s Leadership inside Peru’s Shining Path, 1982–1992

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(Received 02 December 2021; revised 04 November 2022; accepted 21 December 2022; first published online 05 June 2023)

Abstract

From the moment it launched its armed insurgency in 1980 until the death of its former leader in September 2021, Peru’s Shining Path mesmerized observers. The Maoist group had a well-established reputation as a personality cult whose members were fanatically devoted to Abimael Guzmán, the messianic leader they revered as “Presidente Gonzalo.” According to this narrative, referred to here as the “Gonzalo mystique,” Shining Path zealots were prepared to submit to Guzmán’s authority and will—no matter how violent or suicidal—because they viewed him as a messiah-prophet who would usher in a new era of communist utopia. Drawing on newly available sources, including the minutes of Shining Path’s 1988–1989 congress, this article complicates the Gonzalo mystique narrative, tracing the unrelenting efforts by middle- and high-ranking militants to challenge, undermine, disobey, and even unseat Guzmán throughout the insurgency. Far from seeing their leader as the undisputed cosmocrat of the popular imagination, these militants recognized Guzmán for who he was: a deeply flawed man with errant ideas, including a dubious interpretation of Maoism, problematic military strategy, and a revolutionary path that was anything but shining.

Keywords: Shining Path; Sendero Luminoso; Abimael Guzmán; Peru; political violence

Resumen

Desde el inicio de la lucha armada en 1980 hasta la muerte de su jefe máximo en septiembre de 2021, Sendero Luminoso ha llamado la atención a observadores tanto peruanos como internacionales. El grupo maoísta tenía una bien establecida reputación como un culto a la personalidad cuyos miembros eran fanáticamente devotos a su líder mesiánico, Abimael Guzmán, desde entonces conocido como el “Presidente Gonzalo.” Según esta narrativa, la cual llamaríamos la “mística Gonzalo,” los fanáticos senderistas eran dispuestos a someterse a cualquier acto violento o suicidio para satisfacer los autoritarios impulsos del líder Guzmán, ya que a éste lo consideraban un mesías-profeta que les guiaría a una nueva utopía comunista. Este artículo se base en nuevas fuentes, entre ellas las actas del Primer Congreso senderista de 1988–1989, para así complicar la mística Gonzalo. Detalla los infatigables intentos, de parte los senderistas de medio-alto y alto rango, de desafiar, socavar, desobedecer, y hasta derribar al jefe de partido durante la lucha armada. Lejos de verlo como el cosmócrata de la opinión popular, estos militantes reconocían quién era de verdad: un defectuoso hombre con ideas errantes, un equivocado concepto del maoísmo, una problemática estrategia militar, y un sendero revolucionario que era lejos de luminoso.

Palabras clave: Sendero Luminoso; Partido Comunista Peruano; Abimael Guzmán; Perú; conflicto armado interno

The spectacle captured the imagination. Women prisoners at Canto Grande, a maximum-security prison outside Lima, lined the yard dressed in red blouses, black trousers or pencil skirts, and berets. A giant mural of Abimael Guzmán, known as “Presidente Gonzalo” (*presidente* here means “chairman”) to his followers in the Peruvian Communist Party—Sendero Luminoso (PCP-SL), covered one of the brick prison walls. The visage of the Shining Path leader loomed large over an army of Andean peasants apparently marching off to the revolutionary battle. “Conquer power throughout the country!” read the caption. The phrase “Long live Marxism! Long live Leninism! Long live Maoism!” accompanied portraits of the three socialist icons on the adjacent walls. The demonstrators, prisoners of an all-Shining Path cellblock in the women’s section of the prison, sang hymns to their chairman as they marched behind a line leader holding a smaller painting of him. Then, in unison, they saluted the man in the mural.¹

The Canto Grande prison demonstration displayed the discipline, devotion, and deference that defined Shining Path throughout the armed conflict, which began in 1980 and continued through Guzmán’s capture in 1992. Together with countless other public displays of cultlike subservience, the 1991 women’s prison march gave the impression of a quasi-religious zealotry that distinguished Shining Path from other Latin American insurrectionary movements. This narrative of Guzmán’s apotheosis and of his followers’ unconditional and fanatical submission to his authority—which we refer to here as the “Gonzalo mystique”—would come to have a powerful influence over understandings of the Peruvian insurrection up through Guzmán’s death in 2021.

The Gonzalo mystique was certainly real enough. The politburo demanded blind submission to Guzmán and the strictest discipline when it came to carrying out his orders. However, this fanatical devotion was an aspirational goal. Party documents, including the previously classified minutes of the Primer Congreso del Partido Comunista del Perú—Shining Path’s first and only party congress—together with original interviews of former mid- and high-level militants and members of Guzmán’s inner circle, show the limitations of that aspiration. These sources show a leadership in frequent peril, one characterized by failures to carry out orders, open defiance of the politburo, and the questioning of Guzmán’s political, intellectual, and military authority. This study shows the power of the Gonzalo mystique, yet also explores the equally important internal dynamics of dissent within the party.

Shining Path in the popular imagination

Shining Path reinforced the Gonzalo mystique in its public-facing actions, discourse, and propaganda. During the twelve years between his self-declared Initiation of the Armed Struggle and his 1992 capture, Guzmán gave just one interview—it was to the party-controlled newspaper *El Diario*. When other Senderistas occasionally engaged the press, they reinforced the image of a highly disciplined, messianic sect. In February 1985, for instance, a group of young Senderistas in Huanta, a highland province of Ayacucho, spoke with *Caretas* reporter Abilio Arroyo.² “Two years from now we will be taking power,” predicted one of the rebels, “that is what Chairman Gonzalo said and his predictions

¹ “Sendero en Canto Grande,” *Caretas*, July 30, 1991, 34–39.

² Abilio Arroyo, “Más sangre ofrece Sendero,” *Caretas*, February 11, 1985, 22–25.

always come true.”³ Arroyo walked away from the encounter persuaded of Shining Path’s “popular messianism.”⁴

Among the few places where Shining Path displayed itself to outsiders was in prisons like Canto Grande and, before it was demolished in the brutal suppression of the 1986 prison uprisings, El Frontón (Aguirre 2013). The Peruvian penal system jailed prisoners convicted of Shining Path terrorism together in the same cellblock. Guzmán treated the prisons as another front in the war, heralding them the “Shining Trenches of Combat” (Rénique 2003). Party leaders also turned them into theaters of public relations, inviting journalists to view Cultural Revolution–style propaganda shows like the one at Canto Grande. During an early visit to El Frontón, journalist Gustavo Gorriti described “the combination of absolute faith and rage that compose Senderista fanaticism.” The inmates lined up around the patio, chanting, “Long live the guiding thought of Comrade Gonzalo,” who, according to one inmate, “brandishes the luck of an archangel’s sword” in striking down revisionism and inaugurating a fourth phase of Marxism known as Gonzalism. “Gonzalo,” the inmate said, “has magisterially transported . . . the concept of Protracted People’s War to global conditions.”⁵ Gorriti observed, “[Gonzalism] isn’t just an exaggerated version of the cult of personality, but a messianic vision What’s happening is that [Guzmán’s followers] have renounced reason before the empire of the bloody faith in Shining Path.”⁶ The journalist Robin Kirk (1997, 98) similarly described Canto Grande prisoners lining up to sing party hymns such as “Our Chief,” which praised Gonzalo “of the brilliant thought and action” who “develops our powerful ideology.”

What police found in raids on Shining Path safe houses reinforced the Gonzalo mystique. Following a 1985 raid on a La Victoria safe house, police found a wooden chest that had been hand-carved by Shining Path prisoners. The chest included an ornate engraving of Guzmán, stern faced and holding a flagpole with the communist flag, standing above a mass of armed peasants. The caption, “5 Years of Popular War!,” had been engraved into the wood, a revolutionary tribute to the chairman.⁷ The sheer quantity of paintings, poems, tapestries, and drawings in tribute to Guzmán reinforced the Gonzalo mystique, and Guzmán’s anointment as the “Fourth Sword” of Marxism after Marx, Lenin, and Mao.

International media reporting on Guzmán’s death on September 11, 2021, reproduced the Gonzalo mystique in their obituaries. “Mr. Guzmán proved to be a charismatic leader whose followers—mostly students and small farmers—considered him a godlike figure . . . [with] mythical powers that made him impervious to the laws of the universe, let alone the laws of the nation,” read the *Washington Post*’s obituary.⁸ The *Wall Street Journal* affirmed that the Senderistas were “zealous followers” and a “cultish guerrilla force that considered [Guzmán] the heir to Marx, Lenin and Mao.”⁹ *Al Jazeera* noted that Guzmán’s followers “repeated his sayings as if they were biblical truths,” and Peruvian American writer Daniel Alarcón described Senderistas’ “fanatical commitment to violence,” adding that they “believed in Guzmán’s mystical powers, and sacrificed accordingly: they sang war

³ Arroyo, 25.

⁴ Arroyo, 25.

⁵ Gustavo Gorriti, “Sendero en el Fronton II: Gonzalismo y fanatismo,” *Caretas*, September 27, 1982, 34.

⁶ Gorriti, 32–35.

⁷ “El baúl de Abimael,” *Caretas*, April 22, 1985, 26–30.

⁸ Matt Schudel, “Abimael Guzmán, Leader of Peru’s Shining Path Terrorist Group, Dies at 86,” *Washington Post*, September 11, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/obituaries/abimael-guzman-dead/2021/09/11/0ecce938-131e-11ec-9cb6-bf9351a25799_story.html.

⁹ Ryan Dube, “Abimael Guzmán, Messianic Leader of Ruthless Peruvian Insurgency, Dies at 86,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 11, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/abimael-guzman-messianic-leader-of-ruthless-peruvian-insurgency-dies-11631375288>.

songs even as they died.”¹⁰ Clearly, the Gonzalo mystique has had a lasting grip beyond Peru as well as within it.

The Gonzalo mystique in historiography

Scholars of the Shining Path have written extensively about the figure of Guzmán and his role in the party (Gorriti 1994, 1999; Roncagliolo 2007; Degregori 2012; Portocarrero 2012).¹¹ Carlos Iván Degregori (2012, 88–89) insightfully described how Senderistas viewed their leader as a cosmocrat: “It is as if the militants stripped off their egos and siphoned them to the leader, whose own ego would grow proportionally.” Similarly, Gonzalo Portocarrero (2012, 50) showed that, for many of his followers, Guzmán represented a kind of biblical messiah, a prophet-leader who “lived like a chosen one, like a definitively superior being . . . We refer then to Christianity and the place that it gives to prophets and messiahs as special beings, chosen by God to raise consciousness, to announce the new good, the lifting of the people from their misery and suffering.” To be sure, this pseudoreligious exaltation of the male leader was nothing new in twentieth-century communism. In many ways, Shining Path’s promotion of Guzmán as a messianic leader shepherding the masses across what he called a “river of blood” to the socialist promised land emulated the attribution of Stalin, Mao and, to a lesser extent, Lenin to Dear Leader status. Yet as Degregori noted, Shining Path was different in that it insisted on exalting its leader before the party ever took power.

These and other studies have done well to illustrate the allure of the Gonzalo mystique. Indeed, Guzmán insisted that it was critical to maintaining party unity. Yet in emphasizing this aspect of party ideology, scholars have paid far less attention to the schisms that persisted throughout the war. In his seminal work, *The Shining Path*, Gustavo Gorriti (1999) chronicled early challenges to Guzmán’s authority, but we know little about the persistence of these challenges throughout the armed conflict.

It became harder for the party to maintain the Gonzalo mystique after police captured Guzmán on September 12, 1992. That Peru’s most wanted man had eluded capture for more than a decade contributed to the sensation of a larger-than-life rebel outlaw. According to Benedicto Jiménez, head of the police unit that captured Guzmán, the arrest served to humanize Guzmán in the eyes of his loyalists (de Onís and Yates 2001). The party hagiography of the erudite prophet was then juxtaposed to the television images of a heavy-set, middle-aged white man with psoriasis. When, a year after his capture, Guzmán surprised his followers by acknowledging his defeat and entertaining (ultimately failed) peace talks with the Fujimori government, many became disillusioned. “Thus,” Degregori (2012, 32) explained, “the astonishment when the god of war decided to become a human being again, a run of the mill politician, to be exact.” This point marked a division in Shining Path, with Óscar Ramírez Durand, a.k.a. Comrade Feliciano, leading a dissident faction that disavowed Guzmán (35–36).

Although Guzmán’s 1992 capture generated new and unprecedented problems in the party, this article argues that challenges to his legitimacy began much earlier and continued throughout the armed conflict. The entire trajectory of his insurgency, from his 1982 purge of the Central Committee until his capture, was defined by direct and indirect subversion of his power, unrelenting questioning of his ideological doctrine, and

¹⁰ “Abimael Guzmán, Head of Peruvian Rebel Group Shining Path, Dies,” *Al Jazeera*, September 11, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/11/abimael-guzman-head-of-peruvian-rebel-group-shining-path-dies>; Daniel Alarcón, “Peru Processes the Death of Abimael Guzmán,” *New Yorker*, September 19, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/postscript/peru-processes-the-death-of-abimael-guzman>.

¹¹ For an astute analysis that situates Shining Path’s political ideology and platform in the context of the Peruvian Left, see Hinojosa (1998).

second-guessing of his military strategy. Seen in this way, the political crises that ensued following Guzmán's capture were an extension of a much longer set of challenges to the party leader's authority going back to the war's beginning and even before. Some Senderistas may well have grown disillusioned after Guzmán's capture and capitulation, but others, particularly those in mid- and high-level leadership positions—Central Committee members, regional and subregional commanders, committee heads, and high-level party militants—already felt this way. They had long taken issue with Guzmán's insistence on political and military supremacy, and some had rebuffed his cosmocratic aspirations. His capture only hastened breaking with their leader for good.

In focusing on Shining Path's middle and upper leadership, this study makes an important contribution to the historiography on the Peruvian conflict. Recent studies have expanded our understanding of Shining Path's top level of leadership: the three-person Permanent Committee. For most of the war, this elite and powerful committee comprised Guzmán and two women: Augusta La Torre and Elena Iparraguirre. Augusta La Torre was Guzmán's wife and second-in-command until her untimely 1988 death. Elena Iparraguirre was the third-highest-ranking member in the organization before La Torre's passing, at which point she became Guzmán's top deputy, and Óscar Ramírez Durand joined the Permanent Committee as its lowest-ranking member. Iparraguirre and Guzmán became romantically involved, later marrying from prison. Several recent studies have enriched our understanding of this highest echelon of Shining Path's organizational structure (Heilman 2010b; Zapata 2017; Guiné 2019; Starn and La Serna 2019). Beyond these analyses of top-level leadership, there is a growing and rich corpus of scholarship on the experiences of Senderista supporters, foot soldiers, and base militants in Shining Path's urban (Burt 1998, 2007; Indacochea 2022) and rural (Yezer 2007; Heilman 2010a; González 2011; La Serna 2012; Theidon 2013; Del Pino 2017; Llamojha Mitma and Heilman 2016; Caro Cárdenas 2021; Aroni Sulca 2022) zones of operation. Nevertheless, we have much to learn about Shining Path's middle and upper management: regional committee heads, regional commanders, and members of the national-level Central Committee.

The moving memoir of José Carlos Agüero (2021), the son of Senderista militants, offers a rare and harrowing portrait, as do some of the testimonies given to the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission.¹² Much more information is still needed on the experiences of these middle- and high-level leaders to fully comprehend both the party and everyday life within it. These leaders were the lifeblood of the organization: they ran logistics, commanded forces, administered finances, provided legal counsel, disseminated propaganda, and served as intermediaries with the peasant and urban bases. The very success or failure of the insurgency depended on them, and yet they were not always ready to toe the party line. That Guzmán and the politburo dedicated so much attention to quelling dissent, disillusionment, and indiscipline at this level of the party—and that this subversive behavior continued in spite of interventions—underscores the fragility of his political and ideological control, even at the height of the war.¹³

Early challenges to Guzmán's authority, 1982–1988

Just two years into the war, Shining Path had gone from a relatively unknown political party to a headline-grabbing guerrilla organization that had carried out, by its own

¹² See, e.g., CVR, Testimonio 770047, from a Villa El Salvador schoolteacher who was also a mid-level Shining Path commander.

¹³ Outside of the Permanent Committee, the politburo was the top leadership structure in Shining Path, usually consisting of the three Permanent Committee members and two trusted members of Guzmán's inner circle. For more on Shining Path's organizational structure, see Jordan (2016, ch. 6); Tarazona-Sevillano (1994).

estimate, some 3,500 attacks.¹⁴ Shining Path's Second National Conference of July 1982 served as an occasion for the party to adopt its strategy, "strike to advance toward the bases of support," which would entail disciplined, forceful attacks in the countryside to win over the peasantry.¹⁵ Before the conference, some regional commanders had disobeyed Guzmán's direct orders during incursions. This insubordination continued during the conference, prompting Guzmán to single out a comrade named Héctor for attempting to "take down the Leadership, take on the General Secretary and change the trajectory of the Party."¹⁶ Apparently, Héctor was not alone, as several other Central Committee members had also challenged Guzmán's leadership. "They think he's alone," Guzmán said, referring to himself in the third person: "Is the General Secretary alone? The Political Committee is with him. The Politburo is with him. Two-thirds of the Central Committee and the party's left are with him."¹⁷ Although this statement was intended to convey overwhelming support for Guzmán, it revealed that up to one-third of the Central Committee opposed his leadership. After lambasting his detractors, Guzmán subjected them to a "self-criticism," a highly performative *mea culpa*, before purging his detractors from the Central Committee.¹⁸ As Gorriti (1999, 181) notes, this moment established Guzmán's "physical and metaphysical dominance" in the party.

Shining Path's military outlook changed dramatically over the course of the following year. In late 1982, the government of Fernando Belaúnde Terry began dispatching military personnel into the countryside as part of a concerted counterinsurgency campaign. Then, in early 1983, Quechua-speaking peasants in some highland communities began taking up arms against the rebels, forming civilian defense militias popularly known as *rondas campesinas* (Starn 1998; Degregori et al., 1996; Fumerton 2002). The Permanent Committee spent the opening months of 1983 strategizing over how to respond to these twin military threats. According to Elena Iparraguirre, she and Augusta La Torre disagreed with Guzmán over how to respond. Guzmán, she recalled, favored moving away from a guerrilla militia model and toward a more structured rebel army, the Ejército Guerrillero Popular (EGP). La Torre, the only Permanent Committee member who had served in the rebel militia during the opening years of the war (Heilman 2010b; Guiné 2019), thought the move unnecessary. "We had fierce debates," Iparraguirre recalled of the deliberations.¹⁹

It was one thing for Permanent Committee members like La Torre and Iparraguirre to challenge Guzmán; it was another for middle- and high-level leaders to do so. To be sure, the Maoist conceptualization of a continuous struggle between the correct "red" line and the revisionist "black" one meant that some disagreement should be expected as a necessary part of party practice. Nevertheless, the issue of recalcitrance took center stage during the Third National Conference in July 1983. By then, Guzmán had assumed the title of chairman—the title that Mao and other Communist Party leaders held as heads of state—in an apparent effort to establish his authority. In practice, however, neither the new title nor the purges of the previous year generated any greater subservience among his middle- and upper-level commanders. During the conference, Guzmán lamented what he described as a lack of adherence to his orders, particularly when it came to embracing violence in the countryside. He reminded his commanders of their pledge to honor the "quota," a kind of blood oath that bound them

¹⁴ Documenting the Peruvian Insurrection, Group A, Box 2, Folder 2, PCP-SL, "Segunda Conferencia Nacional del Partido Comunista Peruano (SL)," July 1982, 13, Davis Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (DLUNC).

¹⁵ Documenting the Peruvian Insurrection, 1. For clarity purposes, the authors have added punctuation to the original sources cited in this article.

¹⁶ Documenting the Peruvian Insurrection, 6.

¹⁷ Documenting the Peruvian Insurrection, 8.

¹⁸ Documenting the Peruvian Insurrection, 8–20.

¹⁹ Elena Iparraguirre, interview with authors, December 18, 2016.

to welcome radical violence.²⁰ Specifically, he admonished them not to dwell on peasant casualties. “What good does it do to mourn the dead?” he asked. “The whole history of the peasantry is drenched in blood; the spilled blood fertilizes the revolution.”²¹

Guzmán’s response to his rebels’ April 1983 raid on the Ayacuchan village of Lucanamarca betrayed his impatience with his subordinates. The episode, in which a Senderista column massacred sixty-nine unarmed civilians, would later come to symbolize Shining Path’s contempt for Indigenous peasant lives. Apparently, it had been authorized by the Permanent Committee in reprisal for the killing of a Senderista column leader by villagers earlier that year. As Iparraguirre explained, Lucanamarca also held strategic importance: “If you control it, you control the whole region and can mount a better defense.”²² Yet the commanders who led the Lucanamarca attack appeared to have disregarded—or misinterpreted—Guzmán’s direct orders. “What happened in Lucanamarca . . . should never happen again,” he harangued attendees at the Third National Conference. “That is an expression of bad politics, that’s not how to behave . . . It’s erroneous to apply this line of attack because it can generate grave political consequences . . . Excesses can be accepted, but extremism never.”²³ Guzmán, it seems, had no qualms about sanctioning the killing of unarmed Indigenous peasants, but he was concerned that excessive carnage could damage the party’s image in Peru and abroad. That his followers had unleashed such wanton brutality in Lucanamarca had evidently not been his intention, and it signaled a breakdown in the chain of command.

Guzmán told a different story about the Lucanamarca massacre to the wider public. Five years later, in his first and only interview with the party mouthpiece *El Diario*, he took credit for the action and projected confidence that it had been appropriate. “They thought,” he said, referring to the army and its peasant allies, “that they could just wipe us off the map.” His action showed that “it wasn’t going to be that easy.”²⁴ In striking the peasants where it hurt, he said, the guerrillas had shown that Shining Path was “a tough bone to gnaw.”²⁵ Here, in other words, Guzmán maintained the mask of party cohesion under his own magisterial command when in real time he had rebuked his guerrillas’ bloodlust.

That his commanders disregarded party mandates was a recurring theme throughout the 1983 conference. “Be exigent in the comprehension of discipline; one shouldn’t permit setting it aside, opposing it, much less the negation of the Accords sanctioned by the Central Committee,” Guzmán said. “On this point one must be exceedingly strict and apply the full apparatus of the party.”²⁶ Later, while discussing the newly formed EGP, Guzmán revisited the theme of discipline: “Discipline and organization are invaluable . . . without organization and discipline there is no Popular Army.”²⁷ As with indiscipline, desertion jeopardized the war effort and was hardly uncommon. “There are commanders who abandon, desert,” Guzmán conceded.²⁸ In an early admission of the discrepancy between the party’s outward-facing messaging and its internal troubles, Guzmán explained that it was best not to address these desertions publicly. When recruiting peasants to the cause, he said, “one shouldn’t speak to them of deserters, treacherous traitors, etc.”²⁹

²⁰ Documenting the Peruvian Insurrection, Reel 2, Box 2, Folder 2, PCP-SL, *Tercera Conferencia Nacional del Partido Comunista del Perú (SL)*, 1983, 3–4, DLUNC. For more on Guzmán’s concept of the quota, see Gorriti (1999, 98–106).

²¹ Documenting the Peruvian Insurrection (Tercera Conferencia), 4.

²² Elena Iparraguirre, interview with authors, December 18, 2016.

²³ Documenting the Peruvian Insurrection (Tercera Conferencia), 8.

²⁴ Luis Arce Borja, “La entrevista del siglo: Presidente Gonzalo rompe el silencio,” *El Diario*, July 24, 1988, 19.

²⁵ Borja, 20.

²⁶ Documenting the Peruvian Insurrection (Tercera Conferencia), 6.

²⁷ Documenting the Peruvian Insurrection (Tercera Conferencia), 6.

²⁸ Documenting the Peruvian Insurrection (Tercera Conferencia), 4.

²⁹ Documenting the Peruvian Insurrection (Tercera Conferencia), 5.

For some attendees, the problem lay with Guzmán's leadership. The meeting minutes revealed that some in the party apparatus still "Question Chairman Gonzalo's Plan. Question the Leadership."³⁰ These challenges appear to have come from within the Central Committee. The minutes do not include these critiques, suggesting that they did not occur within the public portion of the conference or, more likely, that the party scribe edited them out of the official record.³¹ Guzmán nevertheless responded to the criticisms at length. Some arose from a concern about the insurgency's rising death toll. These dissenters, Guzmán said, paraphrasing their objections, "suggest that we are marching toward a holocaust." He assured his doubters that no such genocide was underway. "That was with the Jews," he said. "Here the only ones dying are guerrillas and there haven't even been one hundred or one thousand . . . It's a modest sacrifice within the laws of war."³² At one point, he called out Comrade Renee, a regional commander, for proposing "a new Leadership, and cooptation of leaders, not the sole power of comrade Gonzalo."³³ Just as he had done the previous year, Guzmán subjected detractors to public "self-criticisms" that ended in their verbal acceptance of his dominion. He also reinforced his own supremacy within the party: "We (a) apply only one Plan, that of Chairman Gonzalo; and (b) we have only one Leadership and that is the Leadership of Chairman Gonzalo and the Party."³⁴

If Guzmán hoped the mutiny would end with the 1983 conference, he was mistaken. His mid- and high-level leaders would continue to challenge his authority, disregard his orders, scheme to unseat him from power, and question his intellectual stature in the coming years. Nevertheless, they would do so more covertly and indirectly so as not to incur his wrath. Juan, a former Shining Path leader who participated in a number of party meetings in the mid-1980s, spoke about this years later. At the time, Juan had concluded that it was simply not worth subjecting himself to Guzmán's public chastising. "If anyone questioned Abimael Guzmán's analysis, they were immediately accused of being a reformist, rightist," he recalled. "And nobody wanted that."³⁵ Yet while recognizing that the politburo made every effort to "brainwash [*te lavaban*]" his followers, Juan conceded that these efforts to "cut off your capacity to think" went only so far. Privately, he and other middle-ranking Senderistas questioned Guzmán's military strategy. For instance, when the party created a guerrilla front in Huallaga in the mid-1980s, the politburo elected not to purchase additional weapons to arm the troops. Juan disagreed, given that expansion into the coca-growing region brought cash that could finance much-needed munitions. Maoism, Juan argued privately, had laid out a framework for reassessing the party's finances and reallocating funding to help the war effort, but the politburo never bothered to do this. Juan felt the party leadership was not looking after its fighters. "[Senderista] soldiers slept two hours a day," he recalled, "they lived off of *chancay* [a highland bread] and plantains." But the most urgent need was for arms, as guerrilla columns often went into the field with only one or two guns and limited ammunition. "They never purchased weapons," Juan said of the politburo, "and the soldiers wanted to know why." In addition to vocalizing this concern, Juan said, soldiers and commanders demanded to know why the party lacked a more structured military apparatus. Although the party had created the EGP in 1983, most believed the guerrilla army to be poorly

³⁰ Documenting the Peruvian Insurrection (Tercera Conferencia), 9.

³¹ Elena Iparraguirre claimed in an interview with the authors that she and Augusta La Torre participated heavily in party meetings, yet their interventions are excluded almost entirely from the minutes.

³² Documenting the Peruvian Insurrection (Tercera Conferencia), 13.

³³ Documenting the Peruvian Insurrection (Tercera Conferencia), 2.

³⁴ Documenting the Peruvian Insurrection (Tercera Conferencia), 9.

³⁵ Juan [pseud.], mid-level Shining Path militant, interview with authors, July 30, 2016.

garrisoned, armed, and trained—a far cry from Mao’s Red Army. In failing at this, Juan and his soldiers argued, Guzmán was essentially “abandoning Maoism.”³⁶

Another of Juan’s criticisms had to do with Guzmán’s absence from the battlefield. This again flew in the face of Maoism. Juan and other commanders understood from Maoism that the leaders of the party “needed to be in the countryside,” the principal battleground of the revolution. Augusta La Torre had led incursions in Ayacucho in the first years of the war, but she had joined Guzmán and Elena Iparraguirre in Lima by 1983. This, Juan argued, created a “strategic problem” that jeopardized the party, undermined Mao Zedong Thought, and delegitimized the leadership. “Guzmán never even participated in a single [armed] action,” he complained.³⁷

A commander in Huanta named Francisca, who was also a field nurse for the party, felt the same way. “They didn’t know anything about the Andes,” she claimed years later.³⁸ While Francisca, Juan, and other commanders did not dare voice disapproval in open meetings of the party, they did share this opinion in their own committees. Francisca felt that Guzmán’s peace talks with the government after his arrest were the final betrayal. She joined Comrade Feliciano’s breakaway “black” Shining Path until her arrest in the mid-1990s. She was not alone. Speaking from prison years later, Elena Iparraguirre conceded that this dissent was both common practice and common knowledge. “Abimael was criticized from beginning to end,” she explained. “Everyone knew that he was being criticized” behind his back.³⁹

The party congress, 1988–1989

Written records pertaining to Shining Path’s first and only National Congress paint a picture of rampant disobedience and disloyalty within the Central Committee. At this point in the war, the party had gained strength, and there was considerable optimism about the prospects of victory. The congress served as an occasion to solidify the party’s resolve and lay the political and military groundwork for seizing power by adopting the Maoist strategy of encircling the cities from the countryside. Yet by contrast to the public image that Shining Path projected about both the Gonzalo mystique and the “historic feat” that the event represented, the congress’s proceedings reveal a party still in disarray and a beleaguered leader preoccupied with his Central Committee’s reluctance to deify him and his ideology.

Guzmán convened the congress in early 1988. It took place in different clandestine locations over three extended sessions over the course of the following year and a half. According to Iparraguirre, the Permanent Committee always sat facing the wider congregation of Central Committee members and leaders of the zonal committees.⁴⁰ Despite these optics, the congressional minutes suggest a tone and tenor very different from that which the party—and Guzmán himself—projected to the outside world. During his attention-grabbing “Interview of the Century” of the same year, Guzmán lauded the congress as a “victorious feat,” proclaiming that it had “established the basis of party unity” predicated on, among other things, his newly articulated “Gonzalo Thought.”⁴¹ Until then, Guzmán had referred to the application of Maoism to Peruvian conditions as guiding thought. The move to rebrand the party line was designed to reinforce Guzmán’s hegemony, generating “greater submission to the leadership of President Gonzalo, center

³⁶ Juan interview.

³⁷ Juan interview.

³⁸ Francisca [pseud.], mid-level Shining Path militant, interview with authors, May 10, 2022.

³⁹ Elena Iparraguirre, interview with authors, February 2017.

⁴⁰ Elena Iparraguirre, interview with authors, December 18, 2016.

⁴¹ Borja and Talavera, “La entrevista del siglo,” 2.

of party unification and guarantor of triumph.”⁴² That Guzmán felt the need to elevate his stature eight years into the war signaled a recognition among the politburo that previous maneuverings had yet to accomplish this.

The congressional records support this conclusion. To be sure, committee leaders performed their obligatory genuflection to Guzmán. The commanders of the Ayacucho Zonal Committee, for instance, pledged to “give their blood for the application of the [party] line,” “Learn from Chairman Gonzalo,” and “Embody Gonzalo Thought.” Other zonal leaders also verbalized that only “subjugation to the Leadership of the Party guarantees triumph.”⁴³ Beneath these performative declarations, however, noncompliance was commonplace.

In preparation for the congress, Guzmán had assigned his Central Committee a collection of “fundamental documents” regarding Marxism-Leninism-Maoism and Gonzalo Thought. According to Elena Iparraguirre, she and Augusta La Torre had prepared these documents as study guides for the middle- and high-level leadership.⁴⁴ When it came time for each zonal committee to deliver its report, Guzmán discovered that most attendees had disregarded their assignments. “Some organisms have presented, others were turned in late, so we haven’t even seen them,” he complained. He noted that the Ayacucho Zonal Committee was the only one to submit its report on time, an ironic observation given that its leader, Óscar Ramírez Durand, had already become disaffected with Guzmán’s leadership.⁴⁵ Others turned in partial reports or presented material other than that which they had been assigned. The secretary of the Huancavelica Zonal Committee had even expressed “opposition to the assignment.”⁴⁶ “Is incomplete work acceptable? Or late work, or hidden content?” Guzmán retorted. “Who are you trying to fool?”⁴⁷ He dressed down the committee secretaries for not completing their most essential task in preparation for the Congress: studying the five basic tenets of his new political line—“It’s absurd that you are shamelessly saying that you don’t know how to apply it. What, then, is the point in studying? To orate?”⁴⁸

Although no longer challenging Guzmán’s authority as directly as in years past, nearly every zonal leader offered criticisms for the chairman on behalf of their committees. For instance, while conceding “subjugation” to the application of Maoism to Peruvian conditions, the Regional Committee of the North suggested that Guzmán and the politburo were “overestimating themselves.”⁴⁹ Guzmán voiced frustration with his Department of Propaganda’s report that some of its members had requested that he “not establish the [party] line and not lead the revolution.”⁵⁰ Even Osmañ Morote, alias Comrade Nicolás, long considered a Guzmán loyalist, reported the opinion among his committee that the party leadership was “up for grabs.”⁵¹ Guzmán suspected, reasonably enough, that his comrades were hiding behind their committees to veil their own criticisms of his leadership. “That’s how those who speak here bring up criticisms among their bases. [You]

⁴² “Informe sobre el estudio, debate y aplicación de los documentos fundamentales en los comités,” Documentación de la Organización Terrorista “Sendero Luminoso,” vol. 31, 1er Congreso del Partido Comunista del Perú, August 1988, 12, Archivo de la Dirección Contra el Terrorismo (ADINCOTE).

⁴³ “Informe sobre el estudio,” 31.

⁴⁴ Elena Iparraguirre, interview with authors, February 19, 2017.

⁴⁵ “Informe sobre el estudio,” 13.

⁴⁶ “Informe sobre el estudio,” 13.

⁴⁷ “Informe e intervenciones de Dirección durante el debate y la lucha de dos líneas librada en la primera parte del Primer Congreso del Partido Comunista del Perú,” Documentación de la Organización Terrorista “Sendero Luminoso,” vol. 31, 1er Congreso del Partido Comunista del Perú, January 29–February 2, 1988, 37, ADINCOTE.

⁴⁸ “Informe e intervenciones,” 37.

⁴⁹ “Informe e intervenciones,” 34.

⁵⁰ “Informe e intervenciones,” 35.

⁵¹ “Informe e intervenciones,” 40.

send out deceiving questions to obscure [your] positions and skillfully put your words in others' mouths to say what [you really] believe. You deceive: 'Unquestionable boss,' but you question him. Another says, 'known all over the world,' but you don't recognize him here, you question him."⁵² Guzmán may have been attributing subversion within his committees to the people carrying the message. He would certainly not be the first autocrat on the Left or Right to persevere over perceived disloyalty among his sycophants. Mao himself was continually concerned about betrayal and palace coups (Zhisui 1994). Whether the conference attendees were trying to have it both ways—questioning the party leadership while avoiding public chastising—or merely reporting actual criticisms from within their ranks, the preponderance of committee-level challenges to Guzmán's authority was a legitimate cause for concern.

Other Central Committee members do appear to have owned their challenges to Guzmán's authority during the congress. Perhaps because the minutes of the congress were the official record, ultimately redacted by Elena Iparraguirre and, until her death, Augusta La Torre, the specifics of the discord are not recorded. But it is clear from Guzmán's reactions that such dissent was voiced repeatedly. For example, Guzmán referred to comrade Juana's unrecorded concern that the Permanent Committee was attempting to form an unchecked bloc to prevent opposing opinions from becoming the majority. He readily dismissed the allegation as an effort "to divide the Congress between the CP [Permanent Committee] and the rest of the comrades in the Congress."⁵³ He also accused Óscar Ramírez Durand of working behind the scenes to "marginalize" the leadership's proposals, an allegation that squares with Ramírez Durand's *ex post facto* criticisms of the Permanent Committee. "If you have such bastard thoughts," Guzmán reprimanded Ramírez Durand, "why in the hell did you put the BP [politburo] in charge of the Congress?"⁵⁴ Meanwhile, Comrade Noemí had cited academic works referring to Shining Path as a cult of personality in an apparent attempt to delegitimize the chairman.⁵⁵ Defending their leader, two Central Committee members proposed allowing the politburo to take control of the congress and eradicate all dissenting voices. The politburo responded that no such move was necessary, as the subversives were still in the minority: "The Leadership of the Congress isn't in question just because one imbecile or 4 have proposed changing the Leadership."⁵⁶ As much as the politburo downplayed the challenges, it was effectively admitting that at least some Central Committee members had advocated for this change in leadership. According to Elena Iparraguirre, this "anarchist" streak had always existed within the Central Committee.⁵⁷

Others disputed Guzmán's intellectual superiority. In particular, they questioned the viability of Gonzalo Thought. One opinion circulated among the Shining Trenches of Combat, the committee representing Shining Path prisoners, that Gonzalo Thought was "just one more thought." One anonymous member of Socorro Popular (Popular Aid), the committee responsible for providing legal services to party members accused of terrorism, reportedly professed, "I don't see the value of Gonzalo thought."⁵⁸ At least one committee reported the view that Gonzalo Thought was simply "the ideological fusion of mlm [Marxism-Leninism-Maoism]," implying that it lacked ideological innovation.⁵⁹ Others

⁵² "Informe e intervenciones," 42–43.

⁵³ "Informe e intervenciones," 44.

⁵⁴ "Informe e intervenciones," 44.

⁵⁵ "Informe e intervenciones," 43.

⁵⁶ "Otras intervenciones," Documentación de la Organización Terrorista "Sendero Luminoso," vol. 31, 1er Congreso del Partido Comunista del Perú, 2nd sess., August 27–September 16, 1988, 156, ADINCOTE.

⁵⁷ Elena Iparraguirre, interview with authors, December 18, 2016.

⁵⁸ "Informe sobre el estudio," 15.

⁵⁹ Documentación de la Organización Terrorista "Sendero Luminoso," vol. 31, 1er Congreso del Partido Comunista del Perú, February 6, 1988, 438, ADINCOTE.

concluded that a better approach would be to decouple classical Marxism-Leninism-Maoism and Gonzalo Thought. A parenthetical note in the congressional minutes elaborated further on this point: “some say this is because Chairman Gonzalo, the leadership, are being questioned, others say it’s because the leadership is being questioned and others because it runs contrary to Maoism.”⁶⁰

Others questioned Guzmán’s military and political strategy. According to Guzmán’s own reading of the report, the Shining Trenches of Combat advocated “bureaucratic socialism,” a position that directly contradicted his insistence on revolutionary violence and the blood quota. Later in the congress, he acknowledged that the “local and base forces” of the EGP had critiqued the politburo’s absolute power to make military decisions. According to this view, EGP members had argued against Guzmán’s sole control over “the line of construction of the army” and the strategy of “arming the masses,” in addition to his control over the guerrilla army.⁶¹ Nor was the EGP alone. Although the minutes do not record Osmán Morote’s interventions, they do note one side of an exchange between him and Guzmán in which Morote appears to have proposed arming the middle classes over the peasantry. Referring to Morote by his alias, Guzmán asked, “With respect to the peasantry, Nicolás, do you think that by neglecting the peasantry one can make the petty bourgeoisie the principal force?” Answering his own question, Guzmán continued, “That’s a lie of the highest order, because without peasants there is no hegemony of the proletariat, which is why what you are proposing is the leadership of the petty bourgeoisie.”⁶² From prison, Elena Iparraguirre later spoke of Morote’s intransigence, claiming that he had been working laterally with his counterparts in the Central Zonal Committee, thus sidestepping the chain of command and creating a “circuit break.”⁶³ Iparraguirre was not the only one who viewed Morote in this way. In 2001, Eduardo Salas, a former militant in the North Zonal Committee who worked closely with Central Committee members, told the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that Morote had a reputation within the party as having a “sinuous trajectory as a ‘Gonzalo’ questioner.”⁶⁴ Meanwhile, members of Socorro Popular, which worked mostly in Lima, criticized the politburo’s decision to create an urban front, arguing that such a move would derail the progress the party had made in the application of Maoism.⁶⁵ These were differences not just of interpretation but also of practice. Commanders of the Northern Zonal Committee disobeyed orders by retreating from battle to avoid casualties.⁶⁶ In Huancavelica, after commanders delayed armed action, Guzmán asked, “How much longer with the foot-dragging?”

Guzmán batted down these challenges. He rejected the cult of personality characterization as “a rotten, revisionist Khrushchevist position that is used to combat leaders and bosses and principally the leadership.”⁶⁷ He dismissed the insinuation that he overestimated himself as “not true,” adding, “I think that’s a bastardized personalist vision of bourgeois roots from those who look at things through the individual.”⁶⁸ He reiterated the political and strategic importance of centralized leadership. The party, he said, “begins and ends with the Central Leadership and whoever heads the Party . . . Centralism is key, of course it’s key.” It was not the time for shared governance. “Democracy is very

⁶⁰ “Informe sobre el estudio,” 15.

⁶¹ “Informe sobre el estudio,” 20.

⁶² “Informe e intervenciones,” 44.

⁶³ Elena Iparraguirre, interview with authors, December 18, 2016.

⁶⁴ CVR, Testimony of “Eduardo Salas” [pseud.], testimony number suppressed at informant’s request, December 2001.

⁶⁵ “Informe e intervenciones,” 34.

⁶⁶ “Informe e intervenciones,” 43.

⁶⁷ “Acerca del Pensamiento Gonzalo,” Documentación de la Organización Terrorista “Sendero Luminoso,” vol. 31, 1er Congreso del Partido Comunista del Perú, February 5, 1988, 224, ADINCOTE.

⁶⁸ “Acerca del Pensamiento Gonzalo,” 224.

restricted,” he said, allowing, however reluctantly, “I’m not saying it should be ignored.”⁶⁹ The chairman also took issue with the challenges to Gonzalo Thought. The notion that his ideology was just “one more thought,” he said, “implies that there are other [competing thoughts] or implies that it’s something unimportant.”⁷⁰ But he was most dismissive of the claim that he should not establish the party line or serve as chairman of the party. “Well, whoever said that,” he said, “has a couple screws loose.”⁷¹

When it came time for Guzmán to deliver his response to the zonal reports, he did not mince words. “We’ve never heard such collective stupidity, or such cowardice as what they’ve put together in their own reports,” he told the delegates. “Such debate, who do they think they are? Parliamentarians?” He derided one attendee, Comrade Arturo, for proclaiming, no doubt in an attempt to appease the chairman, that the congress was progressing brilliantly. “Is this brilliant?” Guzmán asked. “No agreement here.” How could he agree, when members of his Central Committee were “going around . . . pitting [me] against Mariátegui?”⁷² As far as Guzmán was concerned, the delegates had not risen to the occasion. “Keep in mind that we are in Congress, but we’re not even to the level of a simple meeting of the [Central Committee]—and don’t blame it on the fact that you’ve never been in a Congress because I haven’t been in one either. Congress is the highest level of the Party. It’s the supreme level. Don’t confuse Congress with Parliament. Or are you just frustrated parliamentarians?”⁷³

Guzmán harangued his critics. “You are all like flies,” he said, “you don’t even know what you’re hitting The majority of you have openly hit [Gonzalo Thought] You’ve even hit Maoism, that’s the epitome of fly behavior, of class stupidity.” Although Guzmán was no stranger to hyperbole, his suggestion that the majority of congressional delegates had resisted Gonzalo Thought suggested that the problem was more widespread than he had earlier acknowledged. He singled out the individuals he held most responsible for the insubordination. He mocked Juana, the comrade who had accused the Permanent Committee of conspiring to form an impenetrable political bloc. “You, Juana, only concerned with how you look,” he said.⁷⁴ That, however, was not his main concern. “Named for grand designs, a Joan of Arc in the making,” he later added, accusing her of attempting to divide the party for personal power: “She must think she’s a candidate for diplomat, but since there are none here, she wants to knock over others. What does she want to be? Chairperson of the Party? Chiang Ching of the head? With what merits? What are her merits? More capacity for getting ahead than capacity of conditions.”⁷⁵ He later turned to Osmán Morote, “the guy who is always looking for someone to join with, elicit, attract, team up with. That’s his law, and since he doesn’t get Maoism, he doesn’t get the problem of transforming.”⁷⁶ Augusto, the one who had invoked Mariátegui, he denounced as an individualist and egoist who “will say, ‘I deny Maoism, I question Gonzalo Thought.’”⁷⁷ As for Óscar Ramírez Durand, he was a “Guevarist,” committed to guerrilla adventurism as opposed to party building.⁷⁸ Later, Guzmán would accuse Ramírez Durand of being susceptible to arguments that “paint everything black.” “If they tell you

⁶⁹ Documentación de la Organización Terrorista “Sendero Luminoso,” vol. 31, 1er Congreso del Partido Comunista del Perú, February 6, 1988, 346–47, ADINCOTE.

⁷⁰ “Acerca del Pensamiento Gonzalo,” 208.

⁷¹ “Acerca del Pensamiento Gonzalo,” 224.

⁷² “Informe e intervenciones,” 34.

⁷³ “Informe e intervenciones,” 37.

⁷⁴ “Informe e intervenciones,” 39, 53.

⁷⁵ “Sobre la lucha de dos líneas,” Documentación de la Organización Terrorista “Sendero Luminoso,” vol. 31, 1er Congreso del Partido Comunista del Perú, February 2, 1988, 53, ADINCOTE.

⁷⁶ “Sobre la lucha.”

⁷⁷ “Sobre la lucha.”

⁷⁸ “Sobre la lucha,” 53–54.

something three times you change your mind. Where's the stance in that? Don't fall for siren songs or calls to paint it black," he said.⁷⁹ There was a sense of sarcasm that crept its way into Guzmán's criticisms of his comrades. Yet as Iparraguirre recalled, this was no laughing matter: "These criticisms were serious."⁸⁰

Just as he had done in 1982, Guzmán proposed a purge. "The Congress is going to have to consider if the conquest of Power in the whole country is going to require a purge first of the [Central Committee] and then of the whole Party."⁸¹ He proposed another self-criticism "and definition before the Party" by four comrades, Nicolás [Morote], Juana, Sara, and Augusto, and that three others, Feliciano [Ramírez Durand], Noemí, and Arturo "take a position." The proposal passed unanimously within the politburo.⁸² After the performance, Guzmán concluded that the four who had undergone the self-criticism could remain in the congress with their voting privileges revoked.⁸³

Afterward, Guzmán doubled down on the need to establish his absolute authority: "The main thing is that there should be one boss, one single head that rises sharply, well above the rest, and that's what we have to understand. And it isn't anyone's will, it's the very reality of the revolution, of the class and of the Party, that demands and promotes that conformation." This, Guzmán reminded his listeners, was nothing new in Marxist tradition. "If we speak of a boss, we have for example Marx If we speak of the Great Lenin . . . Mao Should they be unquestioned leaders? Yes, for the [sake of] the red line, but for those who question and those who deny, [this should be their] daily bread."⁸⁴ Why should the Peruvian case be any different? "In our case, in our Party, [circumstance] has specified Chairman Gonzalo. We can like it or not, comrades. I don't like summers, but they don't care, they keep coming. Do you understand what I'm saying?"⁸⁵ These were not the assertions of an undisputed leader. Rather, they had an air of uncertainty, desperation even. Eight years into the insurgency, Guzmán had still failed to consolidate any complete authority over the war he had launched.

As the congress progressed, Guzmán decried the rampant lack of discipline in his ranks. In one case, a comrade had received written orders to move to the south. Rather than report for duty, however, she "simply ordered herself to move, left her combat post." The comrade eventually made her way to the Ayacucho town of Huancapi, never reporting for duty. "That can't be permitted, comrades," Guzmán said, suggesting that the regional commanders track down the rogue guerrilla "and ask what the hell's wrong with her, what's going on?"⁸⁶ In another case, a comrade named Justo had requested to leave his post in the Cangallo-Fajardo front of Ayacucho so that he could take two college courses at the Universidad Nacional San Cristóbal de Huamanga, in the departmental capital. The commanders granted the request, and Justo never renewed contact. "He didn't show his face," Guzmán bemoaned, "he was found by chance and even then he wasn't asked to [submit a leave request]."⁸⁷ For Guzmán, there was only one solution to this problem: total submission to the party. "We must forge, then, to be prepared to go wherever the Party sends . . . Wherever the party sends!"⁸⁸

⁷⁹ "Informe e intervenciones," 45.

⁸⁰ Interview with Elena Iparraguirre, Piedras Gordas prison, Ancón, December 18, 2016.

⁸¹ "Informe e intervenciones," 45.

⁸² "Informe e intervenciones," 47.

⁸³ "Sobre la lucha," 54.

⁸⁴ "Acerca del Pensamiento Gonzalo," 146–47.

⁸⁵ "Acerca del Pensamiento Gonzalo," 151.

⁸⁶ "En cuanto a la construcción," Documentación de la Organización Terrorista "Sendero Luminoso," vol. 29, 1er Congreso del Partido Comunista del Perú, February 6, 1988, 346–47, ADINCOTE.

⁸⁷ "En cuanto a la construcción," 350.

⁸⁸ "En cuanto a la construcción, 349.

Even the Shining Trenches of Combat, which had grabbed headlines for their militant order and devotion, had shown signs of disciplinary breakdown. Prisoners were expected to maintain a regimented schedule of marches and sing daily hymns to the chairman. Yet as Guzmán noted, they did neither consistently: “If the party doesn’t march, how does it exert its direction, and what’s the point?” Worse still, the Canto Grande leadership had not held a committee meeting “in months.” Instead, Guzmán had received reports of prisoners “doing a bunch of idiotic things,” such as hosting parties in casual attire. This behavior, he insisted, was “unbecoming of communism.” “That’s stupidity,” he said, “and in a prison, no less. How?”⁸⁹

Guzmán blamed his committee leaders for the crisis. For starters, they had ignored the accords of the national conference in which all had agreed to work for “the Power of the Party, not for personal power.” Yet “in the majority of the party apparatuses there is feudalism and personal power in different ranks.”⁹⁰ On another occasion, he singled out Osmán Morote for falling into this trap of seeking personal accolades for his operational successes in the north.⁹¹ This contradicted the party’s insistence on the abolition of the ego. When they were not taking credit for Shining Path victories, regional commanders were relaxing standards of conduct: “Leaders are relaxing, they aren’t imposing the line, they let things go, let things pass, fall into pessimism, construct lax apparatuses, and what does that generate? Capitulation.” He stressed the need to root out these “poisonous weeds,” affirming that the party must remain “consciously disciplined with organic systems.” “Can a lax apparatus lead a war?” he asked. “Of course not, comrades, so we must be concerned with this.”⁹²

Guzmán came down hardest on two committees whose indiscipline had endangered the entire party. The first was Óscar Ramírez Durand’s Zonal Committee of Ayacucho, whose transgressions he considered “the most serious of all.”⁹³ Ayacucho commanders missed deadlines, ignored the party’s organizational structure, liberally granted militants’ requests for leaves of absence, sent combatants into the field without falsified documents, and forced the sick and wounded into battle.⁹⁴ The indiscipline of this committee, Guzmán argued, was “blowing up the party system.”⁹⁵ The second committee was Socorro Popular, which, among other duties, offered legal counsel to political prisoners. The committee had recently hosted an anniversary barbecue for the Association of Democratic Attorneys, a Shining Path-supporting legal group, with hundreds of guests, many of them Senderista militants. The gathering got so out of hand that the police came to break it up. Fortunately for Socorro Popular, the attendees dispersed without being detained. Nevertheless, as Guzmán said, the social event directly and dismissively violated “the norms of secret work” established by the party, jeopardizing the clandestine status of every militant who attended. He asked Comrade Sara, the Central Committee member in charge of Socorro Popular, how many militants had been in attendance for the barbecue. She replied, “250 militants.”⁹⁶

This, Guzmán concluded, was a problem, as the party would have to assume that all 250 had been identified by police; some may have even caught a police tail.⁹⁷ He asked Sara to explain this egregious break in party protocol.

“Chairman Gonzalo,” she explained, “with respect to the incident that occurred, it’s been analyzed in the report, but I think that analysis was very superficial.” She

⁸⁹ “En cuanto a la construcción,” 347.

⁹⁰ “En cuanto a la construcción,” 347.

⁹¹ “Intervenciones durante el desarrollo de la lucha,” ADINCOTE, Documentación de la Organización Terrorista “Sendero Luminoso,” vol. 29, 1er Congreso del Partido Comunista del Perú, January 29–February 2, 1988, 43.

⁹² “En cuanto a la construcción,” 348.

⁹³ “En cuanto a la construcción,” 349.

⁹⁴ “En cuanto a la construcción,” 350.

⁹⁵ “En cuanto a la construcción,” 350.

⁹⁶ “En cuanto a construcción,” 367.

⁹⁷ “En cuanto a construcción,” 351.

recommended suspending Comrade Eustaquio, the militant she held responsible for the breakdown, for two months.⁹⁸

Later during the congress, Guzmán reflected on this recommendation, calling the punishment “very benign, politically benign.” For starters, he said, “There is no reason why it falls on you, on comrade Sara who is in charge of the apparatus, to administer the punishment.” The buck, after all, stopped with her: “As good a secretary as you are, they have the obligation of punishing you and most of all because you are the head.” By not punishing herself, then, “Socorro [Popular] is not fulfilling its duty, don’t you think?”⁹⁹

This breakdown in discipline and protocol violated the most fundamental principles of party militancy. “In synthesis, these are serious violations of the five necessities: subversively bypassing secret work in favor of open work and [not understanding] their relationship; not preserving the Party; working with masses and supporters; prisoners denying that they are communists; and not preserving [the purity of the Shining Trenches of Combat].”¹⁰⁰ These and other actions demonstrated that “the levels of Leadership are not being respected, that’s a problem.”¹⁰¹ For Guzmán, there was only one solution to it all: “Submission to the leadership of Chairman Gonzalo and hanging on to the slogans: Embody Gonzalo thought! And Learn from Chairman Gonzalo!”¹⁰²

After the congress, 1989–1992

After the congress, Guzmán still struggled to get middle- and high-level leaders to toe the party line. A 1990 internal report revealed that these leaders continued to commit “grave errors that shouldn’t be committed.”¹⁰³ It described a situation that had occurred between June and September of the previous year in Apurímac, in which the “grave negligence” of the zonal committee had led to dozens of otherwise avoidable casualties, injuries, and imprisonments across guerrilla columns. More combatants had also deserted or defected. Elsewhere, an entire Senderista column had been arrested after its members had used the dynamite reserved for operations to hunt river trout. In another instance, a column leader named Loque had gotten arrested alongside eleven of his fighters because they had neglected to put out sentries.¹⁰⁴

A letter discovered in the 1990 police raid of the party’s Monterrico safe house testified to more insubordination within the ranks. One whistleblower denounced “the questioning of the leadership by one Solís,” a militant in Shining Path’s northern zone. According to the letter’s author, Comrade Solís had been drinking beers in February 1990 with two former coworkers from the textile factory of La Unión when he divulged his true feelings about the Gonzalo mystique: “Do you guys see Chairman Gonzalo as the be-all and end-all? What is he, a God or something?” Later, the author alleged, Solís questioned Guzmán’s legitimacy as someone who had never been in combat. “I was the initiator of the ILA,” Solís reportedly declared. “I was in the countryside, I was also in the [Shining] trenches three months and now, what am I? Nothing! Are [Guzmán and the politburo] ever going to fight?”¹⁰⁵

⁹⁸ “En cuanto a construcción,” 367.

⁹⁹ “En cuanto a construcción,” 373.

¹⁰⁰ “En cuanto a construcción,” 372.

¹⁰¹ “En cuanto a construcción,” 355.

¹⁰² “Informe sobre la construcción,” Documentación de la Organización Terrorista “Sendero Luminoso,” vol. 31, 1er Congreso del Partido Comunista del Perú, 2nd sess., August 1988, 24, ADINCOTE.

¹⁰³ “Sobre el balance de la Aplicación de la primera campaña del plan de impulsar el desarrollo de las bases de apoyo,” Documentación de la Organización Terrorista “Sendero Luminoso,” vol. 35, February 14, 1990, 128, ADINCOTE.

¹⁰⁴ “Sobre el balance,” 128.

¹⁰⁵ “Sendero de quejas,” *Caretas*, June 25, 1990, 32.

The party attempted to police this kind of dissent. After promoting Eduardo Salas to a “special militancy” within the Middle North Zonal Committee in 1989, the party placed him in charge of “defining positions,” that is, identifying other middle-command leaders who deviated from Gonzalo Thought. As Salas told the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2001, he would pore over the minutes of different committee meetings, underlining subversive statements and synthesizing them in a report for the politburo.¹⁰⁶ The fact that the party dedicated a special position to this task suggests that the politburo still saw disloyalty among the mid-level leadership as a problem ten years into the war. This situation only intensified in the months to come. According to Iparraguirre, she and Guzmán spent much of 1991 and 1992 on the run, bouncing from safe house to safe house and occasionally sleeping in attics or on rooftops to avoid detection from counterterrorism police. Iparraguirre recalled long bouts in which they felt “up in the air,” cut off from the party apparatus.¹⁰⁷

Even those members of the inner circle with whom they maintained contact had no illusions that Guzmán was some godlike prophet. “He wasn’t more intelligent than the rest of us, but we needed someone to incarnate the movement,” explained Elena Iparraguirre, who loved and admired Guzmán without putting him on a pedestal.¹⁰⁸ When they were captured in 1992, Iparraguirre and Guzmán had been living in the top floor of the house of a sympathizing middle-class couple, architect Carlos Inchaústegui and dance instructor Maritza Garrido. Before taking on this task, Inchaústegui had wondered whether Guzmán really existed or was just some sort of myth or hologram. A self-declared “anarchist” in the sense that he questioned authority and power structures, Inchaústegui made no exception for “El Número Uno.” He claimed later that he had never really bought into the whole apotheosis of Guzmán or the idea of consolidating absolute power in one person, and he would regularly challenge the chairman on each of these points during private conversations. Whenever he did this, Guzmán, joined by Iparraguirre, would tear down his argument just as during meetings with other Central Committee members. Perhaps because Inchaústegui had not raised his objections in the public setting of a party meeting, Guzmán spared him the diatribe. “Look,” Guzmán told him after one particularly grueling debate about the viability of Gonzalism, “we obviously have a difference of opinion on this. And it’s clear that there’s nothing you can say to change my mind, and there’s nothing I can say to change yours, so let’s agree to disagree.”¹⁰⁹ Still, Inchaústegui displayed considerable loyalty and affection for Guzmán, as did others.

Yet when counterterrorism police captured Guzmán and members of his inner circle in September 1992, the trope of the Gonzalo mystique carried the day once again. Benedicto Jiménez (2012, 357), head of the unit, wrote that a distraught Inchaústegui had declared, “Kill me, kill me, I don’t want to live,” supposedly distraught for failing to protect his chairman.¹¹⁰ When Peruvian authorities dressed up Inchaústegui and Elena Iparraguirre for their media unveiling, they held their heads high. To the public, they appeared every bit the fanatics that the popular narrative had made them out to be. Few would have guessed that both had argued often with Guzmán without fear of reprisal or condemnation, or that the party was not quite the monolith so many imagined it to be.

Conclusion

This critical engagement with Shining Path’s internal dynamics seeks to take scholarly inquiry into Abimael Guzmán’s role in the party beyond the well-established narrative of

¹⁰⁶ “Sendero de quejas.”

¹⁰⁷ Elena Iparraguirre, interview with authors, 7 June 2015.

¹⁰⁸ Elena Iparraguirre, interview with authors, December 18, 2016.

¹⁰⁹ Carlos Inchaústegui, interview with authors, December 19, 2016.

¹¹⁰ Inchaústegui denied having said this in an interview with the authors, on December 19, 2016.

the Gonzalo mystique. The expectation of internal dissent may have been baked into the idea of Maoist doctrine of rooting out “revisionism” at every turn. Yet the disaffection within Shining Path went beyond any ritualized “two-line struggle.” As much as many middle- and high-level leaders indeed saw Guzmán as a great revolutionary prophet, others clearly did not. They repeatedly frustrated their chairman by scheming to overthrow him, undermining his authority, and disobeying his orders. Guzmán, who unlike Mao and Stalin remained a fugitive with limited power to enforce his orders or a state apparatus to quell intractability, could do little about it. The history of the party tells of centripetal forces seeking to bind the party together under its chairman even as centrifugal ones of dissent, disorganization, and disrespect threatened to weaken it beyond repair. Carlos Iván Degregori (1994, 53) described Shining Path as a “dwarf star,” small in size yet burning brightly. Of course, dwarf stars are always on the edge of implosion. The Gonzalo mystique was part of a frustrated effort to bind the party together to prevent that from happening.

That the Gonzalo mystique has dominated the conventional narrative of the Peruvian conflict is a testament both to Shining Path’s tight control over public relations and to scholars’ limited access to key records of the party, most of which remain housed at Peru’s counterterrorism police headquarters and unavailable to the wider public. These records, together with new interviews conducted with Shining Path leaders and militants in and out of prison, enable us to see a party in constant turmoil and with a chairman who understood the precariousness of his political and ideological hegemony. Ultimately, moving beyond the Gonzalo mystique enables us to unpack the messy, quarrelsome intricacies of a movement that left a devastated Peru yet was never the lockstep war machine it appeared to be in the first place.

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Cite this article: La Serna, Miguel, and Orin Starn (2023). Beyond the Gonzalo Mystique: Challenges to Abimael Guzmán's Leadership inside Peru's Shining Path, 1982–1992. *Latin American Research Review* 58, 743–761. <https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2023.25>