

When rains became floods: A child soldier's story. Gavilán Sánchez, Lurgio. (2015). Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 128 pp. ISBN: 9780822358428 (hardcover); 9780822358510 (paperback).

Critics commonly condemn the Sendero Luminoso or Shining Path guerrillas that ravaged Peru in the 1980s as pathological killers. A Truth and Reconciliation Commission documented 69,000 dead from the civil war between 1980 and 2000, with about two-thirds of the total attributed to the Shining Path. Despite the size and extent of the insurgency, we have very few memoirs from participants in the conflict. Senderologists, those who make a career out of studying the conflict, have long commented on the irrational nature of a guerrilla movement that failed to make public declarations on its ideology, goals, and strategies. More careful observers, however, noted that the Shining Path leaders were quite open and public with their agenda, but the problem was that urban-based intellectuals had little interest in listening to or understanding the demands of a movement rooted in a remote, rural world that was foreign to their realities. The difficulty that author Lurgio Gavilán Sánchez faced in publishing his memoirs highlights the possibility that many more participants are willing to discuss their role in the conflict, but that stories from marginalized societies hold little interest for mainstream culture.

Gavilán Sánchez was only 12 years old when he followed his older brother into the Shining Path. He rose through the ranks of the guerrilla army until two years later, and still only 14 years old, he became a political leader. The achievement is remarkable not only due to his young age, but also because he was mostly a monolingual Quechua speaker and largely illiterate. Yet, according to this autobiography, he was conversant with the basic tenets of Marxist, Leninist, and Maoist ideologies. His story underscores a commonly misunderstood gap between literacy and education on one hand, and a person's intelligence or understanding of ideology on the other, particularly in terms

of how these are experienced in traditional or marginalized societies.

After two years with the guerrillas, and with their forces hungry and decimated under the military's brutal counter-insurgency campaign, an army officer took Gavilán Sánchez prisoner in an ambush. Still only 14 years old, he now joined the military. Over the next several years, Gavilán Sánchez also rose through the ranks of the military, eventually becoming a monitor, a type of drill sergeant. Eventually he left the military to become a Franciscan friar. After several years in a monastery, he left the Catholic priesthood to study anthropology at the Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico and to start a family. This very short memoir, barely 100 pages in length, is organized into four chapters around these four experiences: guerrilla fighter, military soldier, Franciscan friar, and anthropologist who returns to his village of birth.

Gavilán Sánchez wrote his autobiography between 1996 and 1998, with subsequent additions and revisions before publication. Particularly the first chapter on his years as a guerrilla fighter, the longest and most compelling part of the book, is written almost as a field diary as if the author attempted to recapture his experiences and emotions as he lived them. Each subsequent chapter becomes shorter and more distant, and it is not until the final chapter when, as an anthropologist, Gavilán Sánchez engages in any significant reflection on his life experiences. The result is a largely flat book on which readers seemingly can project their own thoughts and ideologies, rather than the author attempting to interpret his experiences for an external audience.

Gavilán Sánchez lived the first three phases of his life (guerrilla, soldier, friar) under highly authoritarian structures. In the third chapter, he reflects on the similarities of the discipline and expected obedience in each phase. "Just

as in the army,” he writes, “you had to obey unquestioningly, in silence” (p. 72). What is missing, however, is an analysis of how one person could seemingly move so seamlessly between three ideologically very distinct institutions. While senderologists almost universally condemn the guerrillas’ brutal and authoritarian tactics, Gavilán Sánchez describes a world in which, at least during the early part of the war in the first half of the 1980s, villagers did not need to be coerced to join the insurgents and peasants willingly provided their material base of support. As command structures, both the guerrillas and the Peruvian army did not broach any dissent, but nothing that the guerrillas did would seem to approach the dehumanizing actions that Gavilán Sánchez recounts when as a military drill instructor he literally had the troops under his command eat their own shit.

Senderologists have also condemned the guerrillas for their class, racial, and gendered divisions between an urban, educated, and male leadership and a rural and impoverished rank and file. In Gavilán Sánchez’s memoir, however, the Shining Path in this and other ways appears similar to any other peasant army. Most famously, in Chiapas, Mexico, in 1994, the blue-eyed professor known as Subcomandante Marcos led the largely Mayan troops into battle. Those neo-Zapatista troops, as with the Shining Path, also included a large percentage of women who joined the guerrillas as a way to free themselves from the brutality of a patriarchal society. In both cases, the guerrilla forces were largely based in isolated

populations that primarily spoke aboriginal languages. Although outsiders would interpret these as Indigenous communities, their fight was not motivated by an ethnic consciousness but by historic patterns of economic marginalization that were informed by a good deal of racial discrimination.

Ideological statements or philosophical reflections are largely missing from this work. Beyond loyalty to his brother and a vague notion of social justice, Gavilán Sánchez gives little indication of why he joined the Peruvian Communist Party, the name by which the Shining Path guerrillas called themselves. Motivation only emerges buried in a footnote and at the very end of the last chapter that he writes as an anthropologist. Here Gavilán Sánchez acknowledges how little of the leaders’ politics he could have been expected to understand as a child, and whether as children they could be held responsible for the consequences of the war they fought. “All we wanted was a more just and egalitarian society,” he writes (p. 119n8). The book concludes with a lament that if the communists had achieved their desired goal of an egalitarian society without exploitation, the poverty that still plagues the Peruvian highlands would no longer exist.

Review author

Marc Becker, Professor of Latin American History, Truman State University, Kirksville, Missouri, USA.
Email: marc@yachana.org

Remaking Pacific pasts: History, memory, and identity in contemporary theater from Oceania. Looser, Diana. (2014). Pacific Islands Monograph Series 28. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai‘i Press. 305 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8248-3976-5.

In this beautifully produced book, Diana Looser, a sixth-generation New Zealander now resident in the United States, has made a major contribution to the still small amount of scholarly

literature on theatre and performance in the Pacific region. As the title indicates, Looser’s approach is to focus on the question of how certain dramatic texts and their productions,