On the night of May 17, 1980, the eve of Peru’s first presidential elections in seventeen years, a group of youths broke into the town hall in the small Andean town of Chuschi. They took ballot boxes and voting lists, and burned them in the town plaza. The incident was lost in the avalanche of election news. Over the following months, while the press reported the theft of dynamite from a few mines, isolated bombs began to go off here and there. No one paid much attention until the end of that year, when the situation acquired a folkloric if sinister dimension: Early risers in Lima began to find dead dogs hung from


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traffic lights and lamp posts. They were adorned with signs that read “Deng Xiaoping, Son of a Bitch.”

The Communist Party of Peru, known as Shining Path (SL or Sendero), points to that remote May 17 as the beginning of the “People’s War.” In the years since then, Sendero has emerged as the most important armed movement in contemporary Peruvian history. No one attached much importance to the first skirmishes because in 1980 Shining Path was a small regional organization that had not played any role in the great social movements that shook the country between 1976 and 1979 and forced the military government (1968-1980) to withdraw to the barracks.

Beginnings

Sendero was born in the Andean department of Ayacucho, one of the nation’s poorest and most backward, where until midcentury bankrupt landowners persisted in the serflike exploitation of “their” Indians. Ayacuchans, however, did not have their backs turned to the modern world; they migrated by the thousands and flocked to schools to escape their misery and oppression.¹ Their desire for education was so great that, unlike other Andean departments, the principal social movement in Ayacucho between 1960 and 1980 was not for land but in defense of free education, which the military government tried to cut back in 1969.

Ten years earlier, in 1959, San Cristóbal de Huamanga University in Ayacucho, the only school of higher education in the region, reopened its doors. (Founded in 1677, it had been closed since 1885.) The tiny regional committee of the Peruvian Communist Party (PCP) operating in Ayacucho took off soon after, when a group of professors signed up. The committee chair was a young philosophy professor named Abimael Guzmán Reynoso, today the supreme leader of Shining Path.

Soon Guzmán, together with his most faithful followers, formed a clandestine Red Faction within the PCP, which was to be the forerunner of Shining Path. In January 1964 the PCP split into a pro-Soviet faction and another that was Maoist. The Red Faction aligned itself with the latter, and in a few years it gained influence in the student federation and among the faculty. It also helped set up a municipal federation of community organizations and a People’s Defense Front, which took the lead in the massive movement in