The cult of personality and purges of party leadership are common phenomena in the development of Communist orthodoxy, although they are certainly not the exclusive preserve of the left. Similar developments can be found in fascist movements as well as in many authoritarian governments and their corresponding parties.

Nevertheless, it is in Marxism-Leninism that the cult of personality has been carried to its most complete and most seductive levels. The cults of personality surrounding Stalin, Mao, Kim Il Sung, and Enver Hoxha during their lifetimes are specific manifestations of how orthodox Communism was defined for more than forty years (and still is in the case of North Korea).

*This chapter combines much of the article “The War of the Philosopher King,” The New Republic, June 18, 1990, pp. 15-22, with permission of the author and the editors, with new material written for this volume. The new material covers the life and experience of Luis Kawata Makabe and the discussion of building and splitting the party. This material has been translated from Spanish by the editor and combined with The New Republic material to complete the chapter as it appears here.
This cult of personality in the orthodox Communist parties almost always developed after they took power, and was closely related to the struggles within the party leadership during the period when Communist Party authority was consolidating its control over the state. Throughout the revolutionary period of these Communist parties, especially those that had long and difficult guerrilla wars before taking power, the authority of the chief leader never spilled over into the excesses that often occurred afterward. Lenin in hiding, Mao in Yenan, and Tito during the partisan struggle were clearly the most respected first among equals of their organizations’ leaderships. But outside of this modest distinction, revolutionary life retained a studied equality among the leaders. Once power had been won and consolidated, however, everything changed, and these competing leaders were among the first to suffer the consequences. Trotsky’s relationship with Lenin, first, and with Stalin, later, is the clearest example on both counts.

Given this context, what is remarkable about the cult of personality within the Communist Party of Peru (Shining Path, Sendero, or SL) is that it has grown and developed during the party’s clandestine, revolutionary period. What distinguishes Sendero from other Communist parties is that it had an autocrat at the helm from the very beginning of the armed struggle, while the goal of taking power was very distant in the minds of even the most optimistic activists. Leadership stability under one person made for a more efficient organization and a much more tightly controlled process of internal debate concerning differences in revolutionary doctrine and strategy, among other things. Sendero looked much more like a revolutionary party at a much earlier stage than other movements.

This chapter considers two of the Communist Party of Peru’s key figures in the 1970s and 1980s, its Stalin and Trotsky, if you will, even though the comparison breaks down in some ways. Sendero’s preeminent figure since the mid-1970s has been Abimael Guzmán Reynoso. The individual often identified with the Maoist leadership as second only to Guzmán in the early years in Ayacucho was Luis Kawata Makabe, who later fell from favor, like Trotsky, and was thoroughly humiliated rather than killed, unlike Trotsky. In these two personalities various insights concerning the dynamic and the development of Sendero can be derived.