Interview with Dr. Miguel La Serna

CV: For those who do not know me, I am Casey VanSise, Thomas J. Davis Fellow at the Center for the Study of Force and Diplomacy (CENFAD) for the 2021-22 academic year, and I would like to welcome Dr. Miguel La Serna, who will be presenting on his book *With Masses and Arms: Peru's Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement*, which was published in 2020 by UNC Press, if I am not mistaken.

ML: Correct.

CV: I have also had the pleasure of encountering some of Dr. La Serna's other scholarship, so I would also love to bring that into the conversation inasmuch as we can today, but Dr. La Serna, thank you for joining us!

ML: Thanks so much! I am happy to be here!

CV: Wonderful! While I guess my first question would be one that I normally ask authors or presenters that are coming to CENFAD, which is just to give the audience and readership of the newsletter an overall impression of what the main thesis of your book is, the argument, and the subject matter in general. Obviously, I mentioned the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA), but could you just give people some context about what that is and how it fit into Peruvian history, and the importance of your book with regard to that?

ML: Alright, thanks. The book is really a look at the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement, or MRTA, as you say, which was a guerilla insurgency that was active in the 1980s and 1990s in Peru. It was one of two guerilla insurgencies there that were active at the time – there was the MRTA, and the Shining Path. So I have done previous work on the Shining Path, and the Shining Path is an insurgency that has actually gotten a lot of attention from scholars, journalists, and human rights groups in Peru. But as I worked on those other projects, I realized that there was not so much on the MRTA, with some pretty notable exceptions, but for the most part, there was not a comprehensive book that really just told the story and political history of the MRTA. So my prime objective was to just tell this story of this group that, in normal circumstances within a Cold War Latin American framework, probably would have received a lot more scholarly attention, but because the Shining Path was so destructive, unique, and had its own dogma,

that has kind of gotten a lot of the scholarly attention.

So I wanted to talk about this other group that otherwise was actually quite significant. One of the things I did in the book was just to tell that story, devoting effort to actually capturing the major players, episodes, and key moments in this history. But in doing so, I also tried to put forward some scholarly arguments as well, that engage in our understanding of war, the Cold War, the left, and the revolutionary left in particular. So what I did was tried to look at the symbolic realm, and how symbolism—symbolic acts that are sometimes invoking a shared sense of collective history, Peruvian history or what it means to be Peruvian—was part and parcel of this war. Therefore, rather than just looking at the military fighting, I was also looking at the way that they use symbols and they appropriated names like Tupac Amaru [II] himself, who was an eighteenth-century Amerindian rebel. So I looked at that, and that is kind of one of the main things I tried to do, and along the way, I look at other things about internal dynamics and everyday experiences of the insurgency, and how factors like race, gender, and other kinds of attitudes also impacted the trajectory of this insurgency.

CV: Right. Well, very fascinating. And obviously, as you were pointing out and I believe as you point out in the introduction of your book as well, the field of studying late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century political violence in Peru is classed under this catchall term, "senderology" [referring to the Shining Path, or *Sendero Luminoso* in Spanish], so it is great to see your work branch out and examine the MRTA in closer detail! And I mean going off of this theme that you are looking at regarding how a lot of indigenous culture was wedded to these Marxist insurgencies—both the MRTA and the Shining Path—and being familiar with, for instance, Jaymie Heilman's work [e.g., *Before the Shining Path*], and Orin Starn, with whom you co-authored another book [*The Shining Path: Love, Madness, and Revolution in the Andes*] actually the year before you published your most recent book – those scholars and authors, and yourself, have examined the ways that indigenous culture was sometimes uncomfortably wedded to this Marxist insurgency, unfortunately. So I was curious if you could, perhaps, elaborate more on the dynamics of that? I know that is sort of a broad question.

ML: No, but it is an important one too. And I am glad that you mentioned the other scholarship of people who have been really looking at the way that indigenous histories have been in dialogue and forming a dialectic with the leftist, Marxist insurgencies in the Cold War era. You mentioned the book by Jaymie Heilman, *Before the Shining Path*, and Orin Starn has done a number of works on that too, regarding the peasant counter-insurgency militias [*rondas campesinas*], as well as a scholar in Peru, Ponciano del Pino, who has written about the prehistory in Quechua-speaking communities and how that kind-of bled into the violence itself.

So, one of the things that is interesting with the MRTA is that they kind of appropriated this figure, Tupac Amaru II [José Gabriel Condorcanqui], who led a rebellion against local Spanish officials in the 1780s, and this was a figure who was really popularized, particularly in Peru in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the military regime [there at that time]. But it was a figure that was really seen as a nationalist sort of figure, and even almost a proto-nationalist figure in some ways, because he was seen as one of the precursors for [Peruvian] independence [from the Spanish Empire], which would

happen about forty years later. And so the MRTA kind of seizes on this figure, almost stating that they are finishing the rebellion that this indigenous leader started. [Tupac Amaru II] was, of course, killed and martyred, and did not succeed. But the MRTA saw themselves as embodying this kind of figure, and finishing this kind of anti-colonial movement that he engaged in.

Andean indigenous history was really at the forefront of what the MRTA was doing with the rebellion, but many of their leaders and members were *mestizo*, or even white, and they were not people who were indigenous Andeans themselves. And so one of the interesting stories not just about Peru, but with leftist insurgencies of this period in general, as you said, is this kind of inherent contradiction between wanting to, in some ways, fight for the indigenous populations—who tended to still be incredibly marginalized, and that has been the colonial legacy—but also at the same time not really having a clear sense of how to form meaningful relationships and be in dialogue with indigenous people. So the MRTA was a group that tried to appropriate symbols, and tried to fight for something they believed would be for improving indigenous lives, but at the same time, they are mostly *mestizo*, they actually do not really have a stronghold in a lot of indigenous communities, and when they do come into contact with indigenous groups, a lot of times they still harbor these colonial attitudes that manifest themselves in the way that the violence plays out.

CV: Yeah. And I mean, obviously, with the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) back in 2000, their breakdown of wartime casualties was that fifty-four percent of these were attributed to the Shining Path originally—though these figures have been challenged a little bit by some later scholarship, such as Silvio Rendon's paper—and then the government was attributed with thirty-seven percent of the casualties by the TRC. If I am not mistaken, the MRTA was held responsible for around 1.5 percent of the casualties. So I am curious, how does your account illuminate how the MRTA played into this picture of political violence, and to what extent your book perhaps holds them responsible for human rights violations or not? What does your research have to say about that?

ML: Yeah. First of all, incredible job on the figures! You are accurate. So that is exactly right. You got all of the statistics from the Truth Commission correct. They published their final report in 2003. This was kind of a transitional justice moment for Peru, because the previous president, who was an autocrat, [Alberto] Fujimori, had left after a scandal and a trail of human rights abuses from the government side, so he ended up fleeing the country to Japan, which is the country of his parents' origin. And so this created a kind of moment where the real impact of the violence could finally be explored. The government commissioned this Truth and Reconciliation Commission that ends up investigating the extent of the atrocities there.

In 2003, they published their final report, which was incredibly extensive. It was nine volumes, about ten thousand pages of reporting that they had collected about 17,000 testimonies, so it was a very, very comprehensive report. And they found that the death toll was much higher—tens of thousands higher, actually—than originally estimated. It was upwards of 70,000 people that had died throughout this conflict, and the majority were Quechua-speaking indigenous peoples who lived in areas like Ayacucho, which was the wellspring of the

violence. And in a departure from the other Truth Commissions [throughout Latin America] but also in a departure from the histories of other Latin American insurgencies at that time, the Truth Commission found, as you said, that the Shining Path was responsible for more than half of the casualties, about fifty-four percent. So this kind of made the Peruvian situation unique, because in other cases, it is usually the government forces that are responsible for upwards of ninety percent [of casualties]. This was a dramatic turn, and it has been disputed by some, but it does seem to be probably the most accurate estimate that we have right now.

So "what is the role of political violence from these different actors?" is something that I have been kind of interested in throughout my work. But yet at the same time, as you said, the MRTA was responsible for only 1.5 percent of the total deaths. So despite being a pretty significant group, because it focused on symbolic wars and struggles like that, it tended not to engage in the same types—or the degree, I should say—of brutality that, say, the Shining Path or the forces of the government had engaged in at the time. But, yeah, they still did engage in human rights abuses. One of the stories that I tell in this book is about how the MRTA started from these kind of noble intentions, in terms of trying to correct some of the many injustices that persisted in Peru in the 1980s and had never been addressed even during the return to democracy in 1980, but then as they do this, they find themselves enveloped in this political conflict and civil war, and increasingly taking decisions that are more authoritarian and become more dismissive of human rights protections. And it puts them in a situation where they are, in some ways, indistinguishable from the Shining Path, at least in the public imagination, when in reality they are very different in terms of how they conducted themselves and the kinds of violations that they did. So it is really a story of a group that started trying to distinguish itself as more respectful of human rights [than the Shining Path], and then at the end, it is really almost indistinguishable from the Shining Path in the public imagination. And that is why the MRTA is not able to be more successful, because it can never really quite delink itself from the legacy of atrocity by the Shining Path.

CV: Yeah. Well, thank you for those insights into that! Earlier, you were mentioning the Peruvian military government—that being the Revolutionary Government of the Armed Forces (GRFA) under Juan Velasco Alvarado (1968-75) and then Francisco Morales-Bermúdez (1975-80)—which is very relevant to what I am researching in my prospective dissertation. In the case of Velasco, he was sort of a more left-leaning military leader than was typical in Latin America at the time, and I am curious to what extent was the MRTA formed as a result of disappointments resulting from either Velasco's government itself or the subsequent period of more right-leaning, Operation Condor-aligned governance under Morales-Bermúdez?

ML: Yeah. So that is a very great question, because it is important to understand the context in which these groups emerge. And so in the 1960s, and throughout Latin America, as you know, this is a period where guerilla insurgencies start to really become more common. There are a number of reasons for this. One of them is the success of the Cuban Revolution, which showed that the armed path to revolutionary change was actually something that was viable, or at least appeared to be. And so you have other groups saying "well, we have

similar conditions, and government structures, in some cases, in our countries – why can we not have similar kinds of movements that will bring about real, meaningful change?"

So the 1960s is a period where you start to see that, and it is also a period where this Revolutionary Government of the Armed Forces (GRFA) under Juan Velasco Alvarado takes power in a coup in 1968. But unlike the other Latin American countries in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as you said, this is a left-leaning military government, which is very different. This is a government that tries to carry out some of the social reforms that several people on the left were clamoring for. In 1969, the government carries out an extensive agrarian reform—the most extensive one in Peruvian history—and it does other things like mandating the learning of Quechua in public education. Yet many people on the left saw this as insufficient, and they also saw this as still happening within the context of a military dictatorship. Some people were initially attracted to the promise of the GRFA, but others saw this as not the right way to go about [reform]—that it was not truly liberating—and some on the left even accused the government of really being a fascist regime.

So this experience with the military government really sets up people like Víctor Polay Campos, who actually protested the government and was arrested for it, to end up becoming the founders and leaders of the MRTA. This is the context that really helps explain why that was insufficient, but then in 1980, when the military government returns to their barracks and allows for democratic elections, some people on the left also said, "well, this is not really sufficient – just because we are turning to democracy, the structures and systemic problems that we have in this country are so persistent, and any kind of democratically-elected government is not really addressing this." So this is where you see groups like the Shining Path and the MRTA, as well as others that are starting to say "the armed path is really the only viable one."

CV: I guess we do not have a lot more time with the interview, but I did want to ask you one final question, and that is, just in general, with the subject matter that you are examining, what lessons does it hold for historians, international relations scholars, political scientists, and people in different disciplines, who are examining subject matter outside Peru? In general, what insights can you take away regardless of your discipline, which I realize is a pretty big question?

ML: Right, but I think it is one all historians should be asking themselves. Like, "if I do not study twentieth century Peru, why should I care about this, or how is this meaningful for me and my scholarship?" And I would say we should all, of course, be scholars of twentieth century Peru if I had my way, but I know that is not going to happen. But I try to do a couple of things.

One is to show the everyday experience of civil war during the Cold War period. My book really tries to show what daily life was like on all sides of the conflict. So not just people in the MRTA—though I do give insight into the lived experiences of people who were involved in that movement—but I also show the stories of folks who were on the counterinsurgency side, as well as people like civilians, who were kind of caught in-between. And so it is really a story of the lived experience of the Cold War in the Global South. If the Cold War was "cold" for the Soviet Union and the United States, it was "boiling hot" in the Global

South, as other scholars have pointed out. And so this is kind of an analysis of what that looks like on the ground, and in doing so, I show that the experiences of discrimination and injustice are things that, on the one hand, compel people to join these movements, but on the other hand, these movements are insufficient in addressing them. Therefore, I show the contradictions with respect to race, gender, and similar factors that seep into these movements that, on the surface, are trying to create a more just society. So that is one of the kind of things I do.

And then I also think that the MRTA really tells us about both the promise of these revolutionary movements during this period, but then also the limitations of those promises, and how those dreams were left somewhat unfulfilled. I really question about whether or not they ended up getting the kind of meaningful change that they wanted in the end, or did they actually contribute to exacerbating the problem? This is one of the questions that we all grapple with, and it is one that I try to illuminate in the book.

CV: Well, very good, and thank you for your time! So I just want to mention to our audience once again that the book is by Dr. Miguel La Serna, and that is *With Masses and Arms: Peru's Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement*, published by UNC Press in 2020. I would encourage everyone and anyone to go acquire a copy of that. Thank you, Dr. La Serna, for agreeing to this interview!

ML: My pleasure, and thank you!