

One Hundred Thousand Ears and Eyes: The Evolution & Legacy of the *Rondas Campesinas* in Peru

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It is a peculiar feature of the human condition that, from time to time, we can be so fully absorbed in the truth of an idea, and so convinced of its universal benefit and validity, that the thought of *asking* seems to completely evade us. The force of an idea can blur the line between thought and action, and convincing others of its benefit becomes secondary, unnecessary, and ultimately forgotten. Friedrich Nietzsche, the quintessential postmodern philosopher, spoke of the *Übermensch*: a being seeking to replace metaphysical knowledge with action; to create new values; to affirm itself in the face of eternal change and recurrence; and to literally move “over” its state of being into a greater height. The Peruvian Shining Path, an insurgent movement of self-assured Maoism, would appear to have taken up a self-conception much like that of Nietzsche's *Übermensch*. In the name of the impoverished and neglected peasantry, the Shining Path, or *Sendero Luminoso*, took up arms in 1980, vowing to raze the edifice of capitalism and colonial domination to its bare foundations, and refashion Peru anew. Sendero centralized this vision around the peasantry: their labours fed the country, and their suffering had weathered a long history of social, environmental, and political crises. This was to be their utopia. Yet such a millenarian vision, which sought so fervently to turn the historically established social and economic structures on their heads, bore no space for revisionism. With the papers of Sendero ideologue Abimael Guzmán drafted, and the peasantry downtrodden and precarious, Sendero held all

that it theoretically needed to “move over” the world and make revolution real.

Sendero's war drew out over nearly two decades, wreaking havoc on Peru's political order and social institutions, embedding terror into the hearts of peasants and city-dwellers alike, and leaving innocent death tolls in the tens of thousands. The complex nature of the war between guerrilla and professional military outfits could have seen the war run on indefinitely; however, it came to a sharp turn in the early 1990s due to the resistance efforts of a rather unlikely demographic: the peasantry. Held between the uncompromising force of Sendero Luminoso and the racist brutality of the Peruvian armed forces, the peasantry were compelled to form what would come to be known as *rondas campesinas*, or peasant patrols to organize the systems of self-defense and local reconstruction which would ultimately deal the critical setback to Sendero advances in the countryside.

Some years after the Peruvian government lifted their state of emergency, and the provisions for the *rondas campesinas* were removed from national legislation, the meaning of the Shining Path war bears the feeling of mournful irresolution. Any casual observer might note that the Peruvian state remains largely unreformed, the peasantry still suffers much of the same poverty and isolation it did prior to 1980, and, surely, Sendero Luminoso did not actualize their objectives; but in every loss, there is a lesson. The *rondas campesinas*, apart from their astonishing struggle during the war, have given the world a legacy to learn from, which I will attempt to describe in the following pages while considering, in a more Nietzschean sense, the ways in which the *rondas* themselves were able to create new values, overcome their state of being, affirm themselves in the face of immense adversity, and elevate the Peruvian peasantry to a new height.

Since the 16th century, the life of the Peruvian peasant has been synonymous with political exclusion and economic scarcity. Peru's economy was historically shackled to successive dictates of

Spain, England, and the United States,¹ and following some administrative staggering during the early 20th century, economic self-determination in Peru remained a myth until the 1960s.² Despite sweeping agrarian reforms during General Juan Velasco's military regime, by the late 1970s the state of affairs in the department of Ayacucho crystallized the failure of Peruvian government to establish an amicable economic agenda to improve the plight of the poor and disenfranchised. Ayacucho's acute lack of paved roads, electricity, news media and radio communication had kept the department isolated politically and economically,³ producing a veritable powder-keg of dissent and disillusionment. Moreover, a widely felt attitude of animosity toward the police – renowned for corruption, abuse, livestock theft, and the oppression of peasant mobilization efforts and land takeovers⁴ – coupled with an environment of poverty and political distrust to foster a relative openness to the advent of *Sendero Luminoso*.

Broadly speaking, peasants were superficially, though not necessarily ideologically, enticed by Sendero's initial actions, such as livestock redistribution, killing of notorious drunkards and thieves, and attacks on the police. However, their appeal was largely symbolic, and could not be sustained over the long run in the face of astonishing displays of violence against peasants, economic severance from the cities and prolonged commodity shortages,⁵ violations of traditional religious structure and ritual,⁶ and

¹ James Francis Rochlin, *Vanguard revolutionaries in Latin America: Peru, Colombia, Mexico* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003), 28.

² *Ibid.*, 30.

³ German Nunez Palomino, "The Rise of the Rondas Campesinas in Peru," *Journal of Legal Pluralism and Unofficial Law* (1996), 90.

⁴ Mario Fumerton, *From Victims to Heroes: Peasant Counter-rebellion and Civil War in Ayacucho, 1980-2000* (Amsterdam: Rozenburg Publishers), 75.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁶ Carlos Ivan Degregori, "Harvesting Storms: Peasant Rondas and the Defeat of Sendero Luminoso in Ayacucho," *Shining and Other Paths*, ed. Steve J. Stern (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 133-4.

the fundamental one-dimensionality of Sendero ideology. In December of 1982, nearly three years after the first violent surges of Sendero insurgency in Peru, in light of the corruption, low morale, and often complete operational ineffectiveness of the police,⁷ the government dispatched the military, provoking another two years of unadulterated violence. The primary tactic of the military at this stage, similar to U.S. tactics in Vietnam, was known as "relocation", by which massive rural settlements were removed from their habitats and replaced into "strategic hamlets" in order to create vast, empty legitimate "killing zones".⁸ However, the boundaries were enormous, ambiguous, and many peasants were unwilling or unable to relocate. The coordination of relocation was both arbitrary and brutal, often seeing even the most casual disobedience by peasants met by summary execution. Much of this brutality was informed by the intrinsic racism of the marines, typically bred from coastal urban centres, who viewed indigenous Ayacuchans with a particular loathing and disregard.

Internal refugee migrations occurred at a tremendous rate,⁹ and the policy of relocation produced more open territory for Sendero to absorb, meanwhile aggravating the tension and sorrow felt by peasants caught between a formidable rock and a hard place. The words of one marine captain quite aptly summarizes the reality of the situation: "We don't have enough soldiers to patrol and control the countryside. We don't have the capacity."¹⁰ That said, the situation was more complex than numbers: the armed forces did not have the linguistic expertise, nor the territorial knowledge, nor the cultural sensibilities to continue their operations in the countryside. A new strategy was necessary.

The history of the peasant patrols in Peru extends beyond

⁷ Palomino, "The Rise of the Rondas," 94.

⁸ Fumerton, *Victims to Heroes*, 88.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁰ Mario Fumerton, "Rondas Campesinas in the Peruvian Civil War: Peasant Self-defense Organizations in Ayacucho," *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 20:4 (2001), 488.

the Columbian history of Latin America however, the modern tradition of the *rondas* took form in the northern Peruvian department of Cajamarca, a phenomenon which has been quite magnificently documented by Orin Starn. The Cajamarcan *rondas* emerged in the 1970s to combat livestock rustling and internal violence, but evolved into an entire alternative system of judicial arbitration and political organization.¹¹ The model of the Cajamarcan *rondas campesinas* provided both inspiration and namesake for the *rondas* of the south, however, they are distinctly different in nature, formation, and activity. The southern *rondas*, which shall remain the primary focus of my paper, were the outcome of a politically barren countryside, in which peasants struggled to maintain the every day processes of subsistence, while suffering the pressures of an “ideologically myopic”¹² guerrilla insurgency and an equally unsympathetic, almost “colonial”¹³ military.

The first *rondas* were organized by the military in 1983,¹⁴ with the task of patrolling the empty mountain corridors created by previous “depopulation” efforts. Within a decade, the *rondas campesinas* numbered an estimated 4,200 units, comprised of roughly a quarter million *campesinos*;¹⁵ a figure not terribly shy of the United States' Army National Guard's total head count. While being fundamentally concerned with routine patrols of strategic communities, or providing advanced guard for military operations, the functions of the *rondas* evolved continually until the turn of the millennium. Their internal relations and relations with exte-

¹¹ Orin Starn, “I Dreamed of Foxes and Hawks: Reflections on Peasant Protest, New Social Movements, and the *Rondas Campesinas* of Northern Peru,” *The Making of Social Movements in Latin America: Identity, Strategy, and Democracy*, eds. A. Escobar and S.E. Alvarez (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 90.

¹² David Scott Palmer, “Terror in the Name of Mao: Revolution and Response in Peru,” *Perspectivas Latinoamericanas*, no. 2 (2005), 95.

¹³ Ponciano Del Pino, “Peasants at War,” *The Peru Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, eds. O. Starn, I. Degregori and R. Kirk (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 378.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 377.

¹⁵ Palomino, “The Rise of the *Rondas*,” 97.

rior groups continued to evolve as well.

Despite the vast spread of *rondas* throughout Peru, for the purposes of specificity as well as diversity of comparison, I would focus on those which operated in the departments of Ayacucho and Apurímac. While the similarities between the two groups are numerous, they can be easily distinguished by the extent to which each was able to fashion and exercise a degree of autonomy. In this sense, the Apurímac *rondas* represented a vibrant exception to the rule. Pre-existing community organizations in the region had established networks of communication and organization which allowed peasants to more readily refuse Sendero Luminoso, and organize to defend themselves when the time came. Apurímac *rondas* were often conceived independent of the armed forces, and thus able to elect their own leaders, obtain their own funding, purchase their own weapons, and feed their own communities.¹⁶ The key to the Apurímac *rondas*' sovereignty, however, was their ability to sustain financial autonomy from the Peruvian state through active trade with Colombian drug trafficking organizations. While prices for traditional exports such as coffee, peanuts, and cacao plummeted during the mid-1980s, the Apurímac *rondas* capitalized on a burgeoning demand for the export of coca paste.¹⁷ The subsequent revenues were used to acquire advanced rifles and medicine, establish health clinics, and pay for food or emissarial trips to Ayacucho or Lima.¹⁸ The organizational and combat efficiency of the Apurímac *rondas* was such that even the police and the military were required to request permission to conduct patrols in certain regions;¹⁹ all things considered, that they became a seminal inspiration for newborn *rondas* throughout the country is not so surprising.

By contrast, the various methods of autonomy exercised by the Apurímac River Valley *rondas* illuminate the fundamental

¹⁶ Fumerton, *Victims to Heroes*, 116.

¹⁷ Del Pino, "Peasants," 382.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 384.

¹⁹ Fumerton, *Victims to Heroes*, 144.

problems of the less developed, more dependent defense committees of Ayacucho. Compulsion is generally identified as the impetus for the formation of the *rondas campesinas*: the military responded to peasant communities hesitant to form patrols through defiant displays of violence and terror, and the sheer brutality of Sendero in turn strengthened the resolve of many communities to request, support, and consolidate a network of patrol and defense.²⁰ Generally speaking, the military assumed the organizational and logistical end:²¹ dealing orders, and leaving the *ronderos* themselves to carry them out. By this conception, the Ayacuchan *rondas* were – whether by choice or not – largely an extension of the military wing. The arms, financing, and autonomy conceded to the average *ronda* was scant. For nine years, the *rondas* were responsible for arming themselves, and were usually forced to do so illegally.²² In 1992, President Alberto Fujimori authorized the distribution of several thousand short-range shotguns among the *rondas*.²³ However, the types of weapons available for legal acquisition were not numerous, generally inferior to the arms possessed by Sendero, and the ratio of arms to *ronderos* pathetically low. In a most basic sense, the *rondas* were effective simply because the majority of the country would choose and support them over Sendero Luminoso.²⁴ While they enjoyed widespread affectionate support, many distrusted the notion of the *rondas campesinas*, and were actively engaged in undermining them, often even while encouraging their development.

There is a real sense of a continual dynamic surrounding the *rondas campesinas* which had nothing to do with “defense”, as such. However hushed or implicit, there was a notable discourse, and no doubt a watchful eye, over the *rondas*’ capacity to affect

²⁰ Ibid., 90.

²¹ Palmer, “Terror,” 115.

²² Adam Jones, “Parainstitutional Violence in Latin America,” *Latin American Politics and Society* 46:4, 141.

²³ Fumerton, “Rondas,” 488.

²⁴ Rochlin, *Vanguard*, 69.

change – politically, economically, spiritually, and so on. To what extent would the *rondas* represent the status quo? To what extent would they represent a revolution of their own? In the majority of cases, the *rondas*' capacity to cultivate their power and ultimately affect broad change was metred out by the government and military, which might have seemed appropriately prudent at the time. Consider the case of the Guatemalan civil defense patrols, cultivated by the military to "[consolidate] military domination of rural communities, [and separate] civilians from the leftist insurgents in the highlands." These *patrullas*, which bore numerous similarities in makeup and spirit to the *rondas campesinas*, were responsible for 18% of the human rights atrocities committed during the 1980s.²⁵ The case of paramilitary self-defense groups in Colombia presents a similarly alarming picture, as well as a peculiar resemblance to *rondas* in the Apurímac River valley: initiated in the 1960s and 1970s to assist the military in counterinsurgency efforts, they gradually developed a formidable power base within the country's criminal and drug-trafficking networks, and over time, despite their outlaw, have outgrown the state's capacity for control. The conflict between left and right-wing paramilitaries at this stage is vastly more territorial than political, centring around drug-producing areas, where both groups now derive the vast majority of their income, and subsequent ability to purchase and expand.²⁶ The Colombian case, which saw roughly 23,000 murders between 1988 and 1997 at the hands of paramilitaries, exhibits little space for hope or optimism.²⁷

Adam Jones affirms that a paramilitary faction answerable to, but socially dissociated from, the military is an instrumental component of any military operation.²⁸ Peru is perhaps one of the

²⁵ Jones, "Violence," 139.

²⁶ Angel Rabasa and Peter Chalk, *Colombian Labyrinth: The Synergy of Drugs and Insurgency and Its Implications for Regional Stability* (Santa Monica: RAND Co., 2001), 55.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 56.

²⁸ Jones, "Violence," 143.

purest testaments to this grim truth. The *rondas campesinas*, in comparison to a plethora of disastrous paramilitary counterinsurgency endeavours elsewhere, were generally kept in close check by the ruling authorities. Against speculation that the *rondas* phenomenon could produce a new dirty war between paramilitary and government factions, from the outset, the Peruvian government was profoundly calculated with their containment of the rising ranks of counterinsurgents.

The governments preceding Alan García (1985-1990) and Alberto Fujimori (1990-2000) were openly hostile to the very notion of the *rondas campesinas*, ironically, fearing the development of parallel institutions,²⁹ when evidently it was an acute lack of government protection which had made the *rondas* necessary to begin with. This sentiment translated less overtly into most of the government legislation and military attitudes which followed the widespread creation of peasant patrols. The *Rondas Campesinas Act* (Law 2451), implemented only in November of 1986, fully legitimized the *rondas*, and granted them a margin of autonomy, and even granted them some weapons, but in turn placed them under the directional and political authority of the state. Laws 740 & 741 further described the responsibilities of the *rondas*, exploiting their organizational capabilities while restricting them to generally non-subversive activity.³⁰

Under Fujimori, the *rondas* were placed under direct control of the military, effectively making them a subordinate wing of the armed forces. Fujimori also restricted the *rondas'* to the use of shotguns and the bolt-action Mauser,³¹ an expensive long-range rifle which had been out of use since the First World War, and was more commonly found in European museums than battlegrounds by the 1980s. The ones possessed by the *rondas* were usually lacking in sights, and were often held together by no more than string and scotch tape; and many a *rondero* would wonder why his gov-

²⁹ Palomino, "The Rise of the Rondas," 117.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 118.

³¹ Fumerton, *Victims to Heroes*, 186.

ernment was legislatively under-arming the *rondas* against an enemy known to possess better long-range weapons. Why, if they were deployed to fight Sendero Luminoso, were they not equipped with the superior rifles and explosives technology of the armed forces? Instead, it is as though they were armed comparatively in relation to the Peruvian armed forces, in such a way that they would be a perpetually inferior force, technologically speaking.

The posture of the military, an organization composed of coastal recruits with little to no personal attachment to the defense of the countryside, mirrored that of the government. For the first decade of Sendero's insurgency, soldiers were loathsome and distrustful, and skeptical of the ability of rural indigenous communities to make effective use of their advice.³² The *rondas* were regularly forced to sell their scarce supplies of livestock to pay outrageous fees for the purchase of weapons from the military, often upwards of \$1000US for a rifle. They were even forced to purchase their own bullets; and as if to add insult to injury, the military adamantly maintained that the rifles "donated" to the *rondas* were to be returned following the cease of hostilities.³³ In the words of one *ronda* commander, "[i]t is just that a civilised country, in circumstances of social-political crisis, should sell arms to their own citizens? It's a horrible shame that, as a matter of necessity, so as to defend themselves from Sendero's attacks, the communities must sell their pigs and their cows in order to buy those Mauser rifles."³⁴

The role of the Peruvian military in the orchestration and administration of the *rondas campesinas* was one of routine day-to-day manipulation, often coupled with outright cases of abuse. Should a *ronda* become noncompliant, or fail to fulfill a dictate of the local authorities, soldiers would respond most commonly by confiscating all of the community's weapons, leaving it completely

³² Palomino, "The Rise of the Rondas," 97.

³³ Fumerton, *Victims to Heroes*, 188.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 187.

vulnerable.³⁵ No *ronda* was immune to the reality that they had become obliged to fulfill the necessary processes of patrol and defense, which was properly the obligation of the state, in what Orin Starn calls the “reinscription [sic] of Peru’s colonial hierarchy of town over country, state over peasantry.”³⁶ Political reliance on the *rondas* virtually disappeared following the defeat of Sendero. Fujimori’s government oversaw the arrest and imprisonment of dozens of innocent *ronda* leaders – many of whom were tied to the left and had become vocal critics of the regime’s authoritarianism and economic failure – on false charges of terrorism.³⁷ Opinion among development organizations came to falsely view the *rondas* as paramilitary death squads,³⁸ often leaving them excluded from discussions of community development. Indeed, most NGOs bypassed the *rondas* in their efforts to reforest, reseed and irrigate the countryside, and projects encouraged dependence on the government rather than the *rondas*.³⁹

The *rondas campesinas*, possessing the knowledge and sensibilities to get the job done, were valued by the state and urban society to the extent of a convenient political utility. Despite an indispensable role in the defeat of Sendero Luminoso, the peasant patrols were subject to a calculated denial of the arms and political sovereignty necessary to engage in broader forms of radical, subversive activity. They had their wings clipped, though among their own circles, it was affectionately held that “the *rondas* will end every injustice.”⁴⁰

Thinking about the legacy of the *rondas campesinas* on a more micro-political scale reveals some of the internal issues

³⁵ Ibid., 141.

³⁶ Orin Starn, “War and Counterrevolution in the Central-South Andes,” *Shining and Other Paths*, ed. Steve J. Stern (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 241.

³⁷ Starn, *Nightwatch*, 265

³⁸ Fumerton, “Rondas,” 493.

³⁹ Starn, *Nightwatch*, 265.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 270.

which characterize their history. What I find to be the most weighted among the critiques of the *rondas* is the position that women were systematically excluded from active, primary participation, and have been consequently excluded from the social revelry and pride which had supposedly befallen the countryside following the defeat of Sendero. The first half of this position is debatable; the second half is untouchably correct.

If one were to formulate that efforts against Sendero by the *rondas campesinas* were many parts comprising a whole, and *à mon avis* it is important to do so, it is even possible that women bore a heavier weight than men during the Shining Path War. To be straight, and perhaps largely due to the strict influence of the male-dominated Peruvian armed forces in the authorization of defense committees and patrols in Ayacucho, women were scarcely involved in patrolling. On the other hand, in Apurímac, the gender make-up of patrols was also predominantly male, thus one would deduce that the dispersal of roles within the struggle against Sendero Luminoso accrued from long-standing social conventions spanning most world cultures, by which men leave home to fight, and women stay behind to tend the home, children, and means of livelihood. To dispute the existence, nature, and details of this convention is not the intent of my paper. Rather, within the framework of this convention, it should be clearly established that while men left the homestead to walk with the *ronda*, women remained home, cooking, sewing, nurturing both children and crops, and ultimately providing a final line of village defense with nothing but “clubs and kitchen-knife tipped spears.”⁴¹ Mothers' clubs, as well, are associated as a female counterpart to the male-dominated *rondas*.⁴² Thus, I find it difficult to argue that women did not play a resilient, not to mention essential, role in defeating Sendero. The problem is that, without proper revelation and recognition, women might as well have stayed in bed all day; and

⁴¹ Starn, “War and Counterrevolution,” 240.

⁴² Fumerton, *Victims to Heroes*, 286.

this reality of “recognition” speaks to all moments and ideas in history.

It is therefore no secret that war and militarization essentialize and confine the roles of gender, and the necessity of “hypermasculinity” which becomes associated with warfare isolates women from both violent participation in war, as well as recognition for their non-violent contributions.⁴³ In light of the newfound respect by the Peruvian national community for the peasant patrols, Kimberley Theidon remarks, “[i]f the war has permitted subaltern sectors of the rural population to seize the national stage in a slow and intermittent construction of citizenship, then armed participation against [Sendero Luminoso], and the relationship the *rondas campesinas* formed with the armed forces have reinforced patriarchal relations within these villages, resulting in an unequal exercise of rights and sense of belonging to that imagined community called the nation.”⁴⁴ In a game of *futbol*, it is the sustained struggle of eleven players on the field which culminates in a goal; half the players on the team will quite possibly never notch a goal in their careers, even though their efforts contribute to every goal and every moment of victory that their team enjoys. In other words, history is truly a game of recognition, with severe “intergenerational implications.”⁴⁵

The *rondas campesinas* perpetuated an age-old Andean ideology of female subordination and second-class citizenship⁴⁶ – and this much I shall not dispute either, for it formed their single most crippling and unforgivable flaw – yet these conceptions exist within a certain realm of “recognition”. The tragedy that history and social perspectives frame gender as they do might have been beyond the scope of the *rondas*’ project; and in this way, the *rondas campesinas* might not seem so overcoming, or postmodern, at all.

⁴³ Kimberley Theidon, “Disarming the Subject: Remembering War and Imagining Citizenship in Peru,” *Cultural Critique*, no. 54 (Spring, 2003), 71.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁴⁶ Starn, “War and Counterrevolution,” 240.

In a similar manner, due in part to a variety of social and political pressures, the *rondas* were never able to form a larger network among themselves to coordinate defense, or on a broader scale, to represent the interests of the indigenous peasantry. The extent and range of differences between the *rondas* which developed from Apurímac to Ayacucho certainly represents this fact. Within themselves, the *rondas campesinas* were never connected or coordinated on a national scale; instead, the Peruvian government and armed forces formed the unifying bond between the *rondas*, severely limiting their potential to become significant national organizations. The Peruvian state, with the exception of the Velasco regime (1968-1975), has historically been hostile to peasant demands for political representation and land reform,⁴⁷ manifesting this hostility in attempts to localize and isolate peasant organizing efforts. Deborah Yashar posits that, “[w]ithout sustained political liberalization and a sustained developmentalist state in the countryside, it has been difficult to construct a national peasant movement. And without peasant networks, it has been difficult to construct indigenous identity and organization that transcends their localized referent.”⁴⁸ Had there existed a network of peasant organizations, for example, at the advent of Velasco's land reform to engage in the political discourse over needs and distribution, the reform of 1968 might have been a remarkable success.

That the *rondas* do not tie into a broader campaign for change in the countryside forms one of their larger, albeit more debatable, shortcomings. As far as faith in national politics is concerned, voter turn-out in areas where the *rondas* were most active is at a peculiar national low.⁴⁹ Following the decline of Sendero, and the ensuing reinsertion of international development organizations, the *rondas* were continually sidelined first by a government less than keen on their expanded political inclusion, and sec-

⁴⁷ Deborah Yashar, “Contesting Citizenship: Indigenous Movements and Democracy in Latin America,” *Comparative Politics* 31:1 (October, 1998), 37.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁴⁹ Starn, “War and Counterrevolution,” 214.

ond, by the international opinions generated therefrom. Peasant and *ronda* leaders were rarely consulted on development projects during the post-Sendero era; instead, peasant efforts were directed towards reconstruction of pre-existing infrastructures, schools, clinics, and so on.⁵⁰ There is an opinion among some scholars, however, that, “given time and with skills training for its members, the [*rondas campesinas*] might have been able to transform themselves into appropriate vehicles for the pursuit of developmental priorities, and so obtain financial and organisational support from external aid donors and the local non-governmental agencies they sponsor.”⁵¹ However, they were not given time; they were not given much at all. Instead, the *rondas* remained a localized force for reconstruction, which despite its intrinsic worth, still fell short.

At the same time, much of the successes and contributions of the *rondas* can be credited to their very localized nature. As isolated, individualized organizations, each *ronda campesina* faced its own unique challenges and circumstances, and their histories are as tragic as they are inspiring. The politics of postmodernism reject a reading of history as meta-narrative or teleological. Rather, the investigation of a phenomenon such as the *rondas campesinas* requires a cellular reading, which appreciates the specificities and challenges of each case.

Peru is not so different politically today than it was in 1980, which, if nothing else, seems to illuminate the great chasm that exists between historical thought, and actual historical revelation. I feel comfortable positing that people, in general, are innately adverse to political change which will not materialize within their lifetimes, or perhaps the lifetimes of their children. The Shining Path War presented Peruvians of all walks with a one-dimensional ideological struggle, with no foreseeable end short of wholesale slaughter; it was a revolution that few but a dedicated minority

⁵⁰ Fumerton, *Victims to Heroes*, 269-70.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 270.

could truly buy into. Real change takes lifetimes. This in mind, we come back to the concept of the *Nietzschian Übermensch*, or “overman”; the being which affirms itself in the face of eternally recurring change and adversity. If, as Nietzsche writes, we live in a universe of finite matter and space, and infinite time, then history becomes a cyclical process, in which only the *Übermensch* can affirm each of his actions, forge on, and be truly happy. However, the *Übermensch* itself is a myth, or a “journey” by which humanity strives toward self-mastery. There is no such physical thing as the *Übermensch*, and the self-assuredness of Sendero Luminoso, more specifically Abimael Guzmán, as having mastered eternal recurrence was a true manifestation of hubris, one which reaped the lives of 69,000 people, and unalterably affected many more.

The poor and disenfranchised of Peru watched the *rondas campesinas* fight the police, abusive merchants, cattle thieves, corrupt judges, drunk husbands – in other words, the real perceived enemies of the peasantry – in the same way Sendero had, yet in a way which did not require a “war machine,”⁵² and they were truly inspired. The *rondas* were able to show the countryside a way of life beyond eternal victimhood,⁵³ becoming “a rallying point for identity and pride, and...a vehicle for autonomy and self-government in the valley.”⁵⁴ Apart from patrols against Sendero, many *rondas* were able to expand to form local democratic assemblies to elect community leaders, arbitrate family and land disputes, supervise small public works projects, and construct health clinics.⁵⁵ During the war, they organized delegations to the cities for medicine and aid, as well as work parties to irrigate communal crops, and construct defense structures around villages.⁵⁶ Some *rondas* reactivated parent-teacher associations and women's

⁵² Degregori, “Harvesting Storms,” 135.

⁵³ Starn, “War and Counterrevolution,” 247.

⁵⁴ Del Pino, “Peasants,” 382.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Starn, “War and Counterrevolution,” 245.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 252.

groups, and even organized *fish-frys* and *futbol* tournaments.⁵⁷ Historian Ponciano del Pino has called this phenomenon of the *ronda* weaving itself into the everyday fabric of Andean life *interiorización*;⁵⁸ whether imposed or not, the institution became an integral node of every day life in the Peruvian countryside for almost two decades. *Interiorización* came to represent the internalization of the struggle to overcome and strive on a most fundamental basis. Orin Starn has commented further that,

“...in light of the tremendous, sometimes almost preposterous, courage demanded to make even modest gains against the grain of the savage dangers of the contemporary order...from shantytown soup kitchens in Honduras to indigenous federations in Ecuador to the *rondas* in northern as well as southern Peru, activism from below means the margin of survival in daily life as well as a challenge to the very terms of cultural domination and political exclusion between the elite and the dispossessed, the white and the brown, the rulers and the ruled.”⁵⁹

A consensus among scholars of Peru during the 1990s seemed to have been that the *rondas* would survive the Shining Path War, and carry on into the 21st century,⁶⁰ however, on New Year's Day 2000, Alberto Fujimori officially dissolved the *rondas campesinas* from national legislation. In an address on that day, he extended deep gratitude to the Clubes de Madres and Comedores Populares for their continued efforts in resisting Sendero Luminoso, yet somehow, with particular magnificence, managed to make no mention of the *rondas campesinas*.⁶¹ What place does this leave them in history?

Against the self-assuredness of Sendero Luminoso, the *ron-*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 245.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 242.

⁶⁰ Fumerton, *Victims to Heroes*, 281.; Del Pino, “Peasants,” 384.

⁶¹ Fumerton, “Rondas,” 494.

das campesinas presented a markedly divergent attitude and position, one which was constrained by innumerable social and political factors, yet found meaning within its own striving to discover and overcome. The *rondas* were shown every obstacle and disadvantage, and they won. In spite of their flaws and shortcomings, they undertook to overcome, so to speak, with “preposterous courage,” as well as tremendous loss, and from this legacy is passed on a myriad examples and teachings for social movements to come. In every loss, there is a lesson; and here we have a humble case in point.