Terrorism in Peru: The Shining Path Revisited by Geography

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Abstract

The terrorist phenomenon, because of its multidimensional nature, can be studied in different ways and according to different approaches: this article proposes, through the study of the evolution of the territorial strategy of the Shining Path in Peru from the 1970s to the 1990s, to consider the study of terrorism according to a spatio-temporal prism that leaves a great deal of room for empirical analysis and rigorous mapping.

Keywords: Shining Path, MRTA (Movimiento Revolucionario Túpac Amaru, rondas campesinas, terrorism, mapping terrorism, Peru

Terrorismo en Perú: Sendero Luminoso revisitado por la geografía

Resumen

El fenómeno terrorista, por su carácter multidimensional, puede ser estudiado de diferentes maneras y según distintos enfoques: este artículo propone, a través del estudio de la evolución de la estrategia territorial de Sendero Luminoso en el Perú desde la década de 1970 a la de 1990, considerar el estudio del terrorismo según un prisma espacio-temporal que deja mucho espacio para el análisis empírico y el mapeo riguroso.

Palabras clave: Sendero Luminoso, MRTA (Movimiento Revolucionario Túpac Amaru, rondas campesinas, terrorismo, mapeo del terrorismo, Perú

秘鲁的恐怖主义：从地理视角重审光辉道路

摘要

鉴于恐怖主义现象的多维性，其能通过不同方式、依照不同方法来加以研究。本文通过研究20世纪70年代至90年代期间光辉道路（秘鲁共产党）的领土战略演变，提出从时空角度研究恐怖主义，该角度为实证分析和严格制图提供了充足的空间。

关键词：光辉道路（秘鲁共产党），图帕克·阿玛鲁革命运动，农民巡逻队（rondas campesinas），恐怖主义，恐怖主义制图，秘鲁

This article is a continuation and confluence of two complementary approaches. First, it completes certain aspects of a piece of work that one of us published in *Sécurité Globale a* few years ago on the Shining Path and the consequences of its action on Peruvian society since 1980.[3] Secondly, it is part of the implementation of a scientific project aimed at the elaboration of a general theory of the terrorist fact solidly anchored in the empirical analysis of the space-time of different concrete terrorist complexes.[4] To do this, it is necessary to pay extreme attention to the history and historiography of terrorism, in order to construct a satisfactory periodization.[5] Finally, no less important, the research leading to a regionalization/spatialization of data, is based on cartographic tools that are constantly being improved.[6]

The case of the Shining Path allows us to deepen our general approach and, as we will see, to formulate some hypotheses that could improve our knowledge of the terrorist fact. After a very brief presentation of the current state of work on the geographical aspect of the insurgency in which the Shining Path was the main protagonist, we will try to identify its main spatial characteristics, before developing an interpretative hypothesis concerning two crucial moments of the conflict.

A state of the question

It is not our intention here to provide a detailed overview of all recent research on the Shining Path. On the other hand, it is necessary to briefly review some of the works that concern its geographical particularities, as well as publications that allow a better understanding of the importance of the self-defense organizations (*rondas campesinas*) whose role was decisive in the defeat of the in surrection *senderista*.

To our knowledge, there are no recent works on the geographical aspect of the work of the Shining Path (SL). Most of the information on this subject can be found, therefore, in older publications, which should be consulted. Notably the good study by Gordon H. McCormick[7] which deals with the urbanization of SL action around 1985; the pioneering article by Robert B. Kent[8] which shows the expansion of the insurgency from the mapping of areas progressively put under military administration (state of siege); and the text by Sergio Koc-Menard[9] which tests hypotheses on regional variations in SL implantation. With the possibility of using databases such as the *Global Terrorism Database* and now having an empirically proven methodology, it is possible to deepen the knowledge of the spatiality of the phenomenon that leads to SL. To do this, it is essential to begin by proposing basic cartographic representations, which in turn allow new hypotheses to be formulated based on controllable data. It is at this stage of the research that this article is dedicated.

Concerning the *rondas campesinas*, about which we already have a few studies of varying quality (see references in the article cited in note 2), a recent publication usefully sheds light not only on their conditions of possibility, but above all on the reasons that explain their effectiveness in resisting and finally defeating the SL.[10] Thanks to this contribution, it is possible not only to reach a more detailed knowledge of the *rondas campesinas* and to contextualize the few testimonies that come from them,[11] but also to draw all the lessons from Mario Fumerton's remarkable monograph on the Ayacucho region,[12]

We will return to this issue later in this article when we discuss the reasons for the shift in SL's primary business area beginning in 1985.

Spatial distribution of political violence in Peru between 1970 and 2019

The maps in Figure 1 provide a basic indication of the spatial distribution of acts coded as terrorist in the *Global Terrorism Database*.[13] This initial representation includes acts that are properly terrorist, as well as actions that are more guerrilla in nature, which will be differentiated later on according to the identity of the victims. In the same way, during this considered period the SL is not the only entity that participates in the insurrectional violence in Peru, and it will be necessary for us to also differentiate its actions from those that were organized, in particular by the MRTA (*Movimiento Revolucionario Túpac Amaru*), or by unidentified authors.

These maps represent the temporal evolution of terrorism in Peru according to four periods of unequal duration. The choice of the dates that limit them is based on decisions that are based both on the historical knowledge of the set of facts and on the natural distribution of the incidents that appears in the histogram at the top right of Figure 1. Thus, we distinguish:
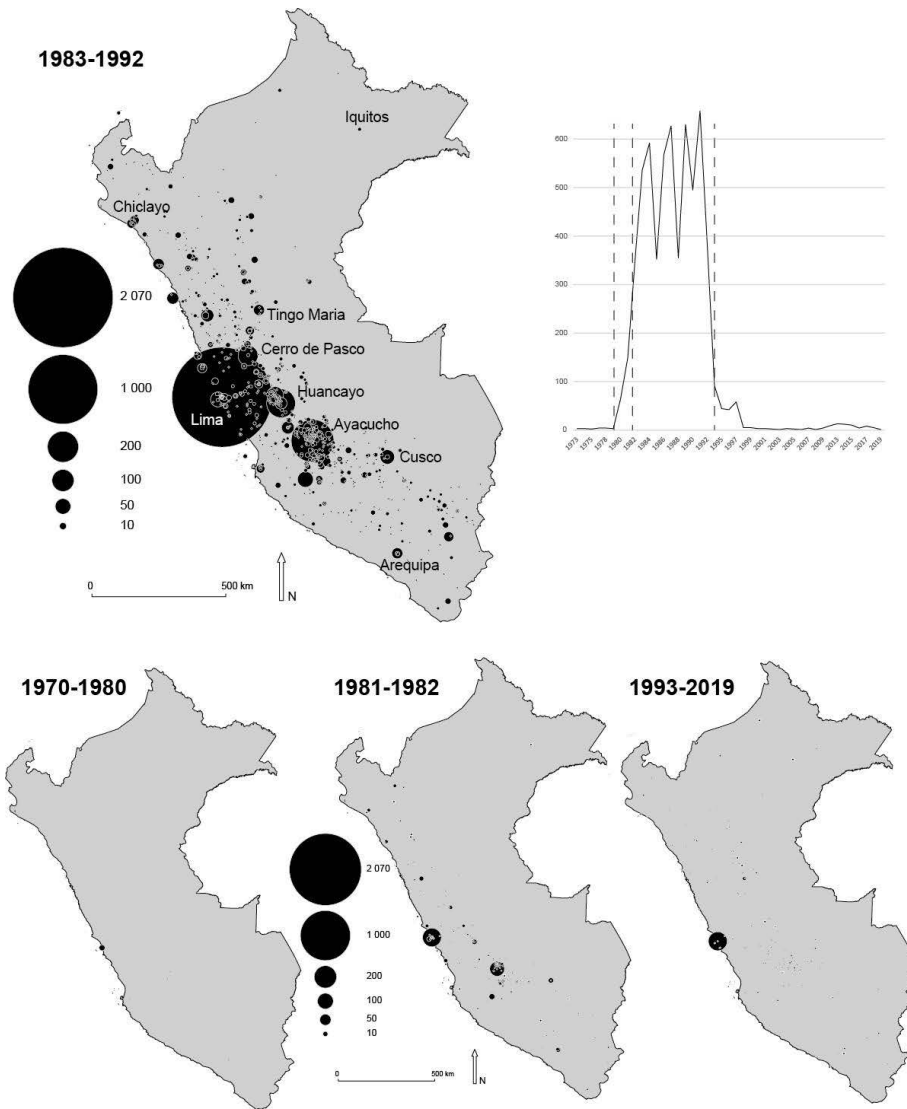
Figure 1. Spatial distribution of acts coded as terrorism in GTD,
for Peru between 1970 and 2019

- *The first period (1970–1980)*, which precedes the outbreak of the SL insurgency (May 17, 1980) and begins in 1970 due to the availability of GTD data, is practically free of terrorist action, except for some isolated incidents in Lima, which took place during the progressive military regime (1968–1980).

- *The second period (1981–1982)* is that of the beginning of the armed action of SL in the zone of Ayacucho, and of terrorist activity that was of average intensity in Lima. SL was only partially responsible (or not claimed by this organization).

- *The third period (1983–1992)* corresponds to the maximum intensity of the insurgency. As we will see below, it is not homogeneous in relation to the spatial logics implemented, and it comes to an abrupt halt following the capture of Abimael Guzmán on September 12, 1992.

- *The fourth period (1993–2019)* is mainly characterized by a residual terrorism of SL and some of the actions MRTA, which disappeared following the denouement of the spectacular hostage taking at the residence of the Japanese Ambassador, in Lima between December 17, 1996, and April 22, 1997.

A few figures allow us to complete the graphic information. The first (Table 1) show that the maps in Figure 1 are based on very heterogeneous volumes of acts, which confirms the choice of the periodization adopted.

Table 1. Total number of acts coded as terrorist by the GTD. Peru, 1970–2019

Period	Number of acts
70-80	18
81-82	545
83-92	4 935
93-19	322

Secondly, it is also useful to know that 52% of the attacks listed were carried out with bombs and/or explosives (3,031 cases out of 5,820), followed by armed attacks (21%).

Continuing our analysis, let us now turn our attention to the organizations responsible for the bulk of the (mostly) political violence during the period under consideration. Figure 2 once again shows the spatial distribution, the perimeters calculated according to the concentration of acts from a threshold[14] and the barycenter corresponding to SL, MRTA and unknown (or unclaimed) perpetrators.

Several points deserve a brief comment here. They concern the characteristics of the MRTA, its spatial footprint which clearly differentiates it from SL, and some hypothetic reflections about the category of "unknown" authors which concerns a significant number of acts.

Table 2 shows the quantities involved.

Table 2. Quantity of acts by organization following the GTD. Peru, 1970–2019

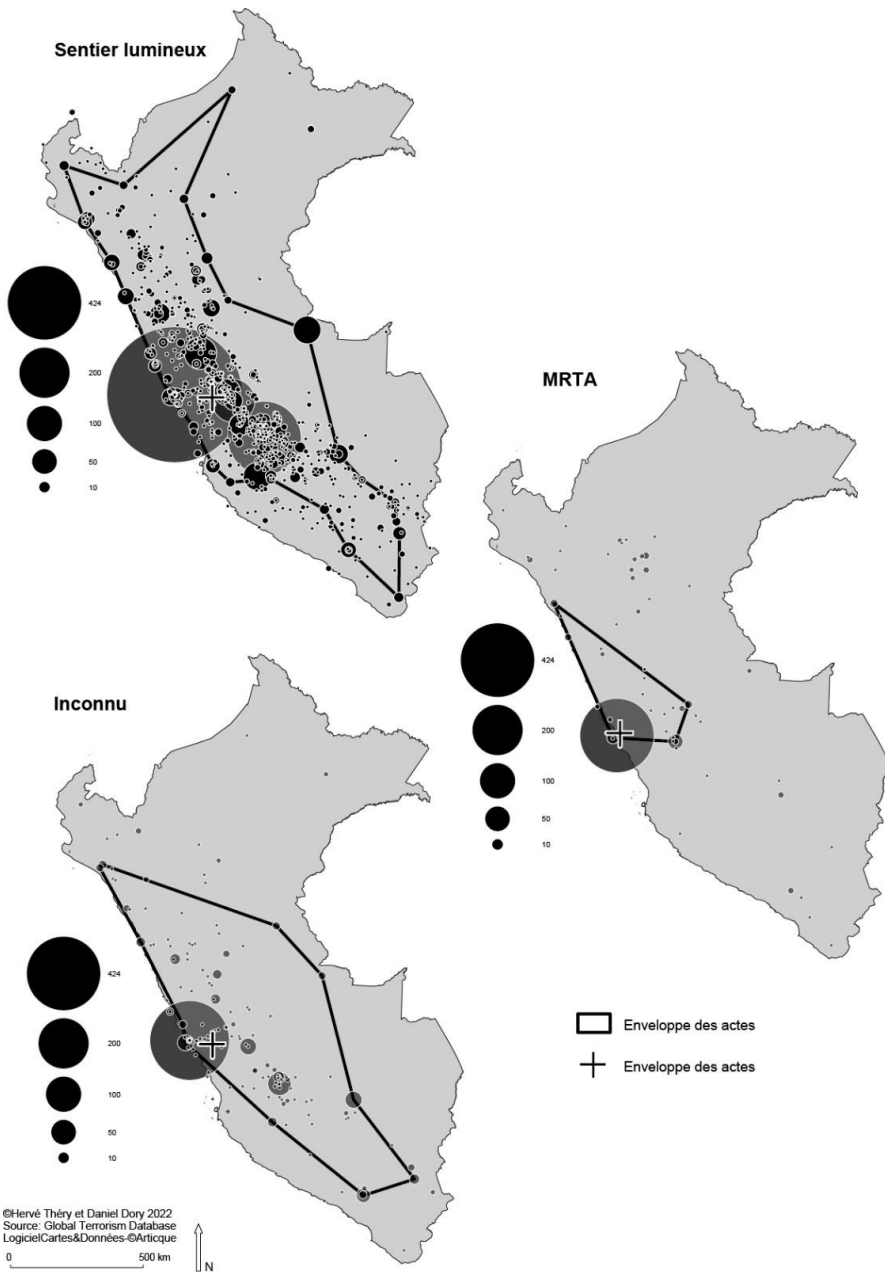| Organization:	Path of Light	MRTA	Other	Unknown
Acts:	4302	545	102	871

Figure 2. Distribution of acts coded as terrorism in the GTD,
by responsible organization, Peru, 1970–2019

The MRTA was the subject of quite poor work at the time of its activity.[15] This makes Gordon H. McCormick's well-done study[16] even more valuable, and its content is both updated and confirmed by the present study.[17] Indeed, as the map corresponding to this organization in Figure 2 shows, the MRTA, during its years of operation (1984–1997), had a very different spatial footprint than the SL,

even though the two entities were in fact competing for the capture of a fairly similar social base. This fact corresponds in large part to the difference between the revolutionary and organizational models implemented by each group, a fact that McCormick has analyzed very well. While the MRTA was inspired by the Cuban/Guadarist model of spontaneous mass mobilization based on the military success of guerrilla columns, neglecting the organizational factor, the SL owes its (relative) success to its organizational effort to build parallel hierarchies that replace the state presence in ever-expanding territories, in accordance with the Maoist model. And this contrast can be clearly seen in the maps in Figure 2. The MRTA initially only managed to have an urban presence (especially in Lima), later attempting to establish itself in the department of San Martín (north-central part of the country), before being replaced by SL. In contrast SL deploys, more or less intensely, on a big part of the Peruvian territory following a spatial logic of "oil spot." We will return, later, on the geostrategic implications of this fact in connection with the general strategy of SL.

The map showing the distribution of acts whose perpetrators are "unknown" also deserves a brief comment. This is not so much because of the exceptional nature of this phenomenon, which is found in a very large number of situations,[18] as because of the distribution of cases. And the examination of the corresponding map shows a strong similarity (perimeter and barycenter) with that of SL. Knowing that, depending on the location and circumstances, SL often opted not to claim its actions, it is possible to attribute most of these acts to this organization with a reasonable degree of probability. At its core this contrasts with the MRTA, whose actions were mainly driven by the intentions of being recognized by the public and were therefore almost always claimed.

The difference in targets, and thus the nature of the acts, between SL and MRTA is also apparent when we examine the maps in Figure 3.

If we consider as specifically terrorist the acts that target the civilian population, as opposed to those that attack members of the institutions of the Peruvian State (military, police, civil servants, etc.), we can make the following observations:

First, as mentioned above, both the volume and the distribution of the actions of the two organizations then in competition were very different. Then, we see for SL a clear zone of concentration of the terrorism in a perimeter including Ayacucho, Huan cavelica, Huancayo and, especially, Lima. On the other hand, in the expansion zones (north and south) of the SL, guerrilla actions aimed at eliminating the state presence predominate. Here again, the MRTA offers a different picture, with a generalized predominance of terrorism, regardless of the time and place of the actions.

From this basic observation, it is now possible to refine the analysis and formulate some solid hypotheses about a major turning point in SL activity.
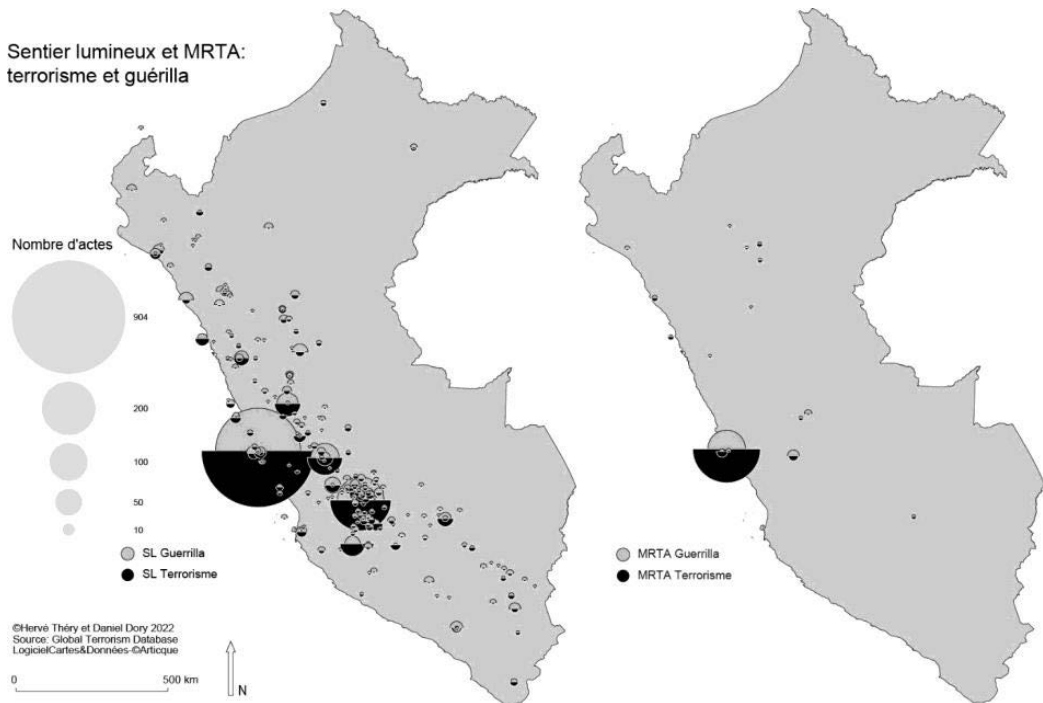
Figure 3. Distribution of acts coded as terrorist in the GTD,
according to their targets. Peru, 1970–2019

How and why the Shining Path urbanizes its offensive

There is general agreement in the literature about the concentration of SL actions in the cities, especially Lima, in the mid-1980s. It remained to evaluate the volume and the dynamics, and to try to understand better the motivations, beyond the reproduction of the Maoist strategy of encircling the cities by the countryside.

To do this, three maps were constructed. The lower ones show the actions of the SL in two periods (Figure 4). The first one covers the years 1980–1985, that is, the beginning of the insurgent process centered mainly in the region of Ayacucho and in Lima and its surroundings. The second (1986–1992) includes the years of maximum SL activity, also marked by a significant shift in its territorial center of gravity.

The upper map synthesizes, for the first time, the spatial dynamics of the SL insurgency by contrasting the two major periods that characterize it. We can see very clearly a loss of base in the central Sierra (cordillera) (Ayacucho, etc.) and a concentration of actions towards Lima, which the displacement of the barycenter expresses without ambiguity. This despite a simultaneous extension of the zones where SL affirms its presence. Three series of factors of unequal importance can explain these facts.
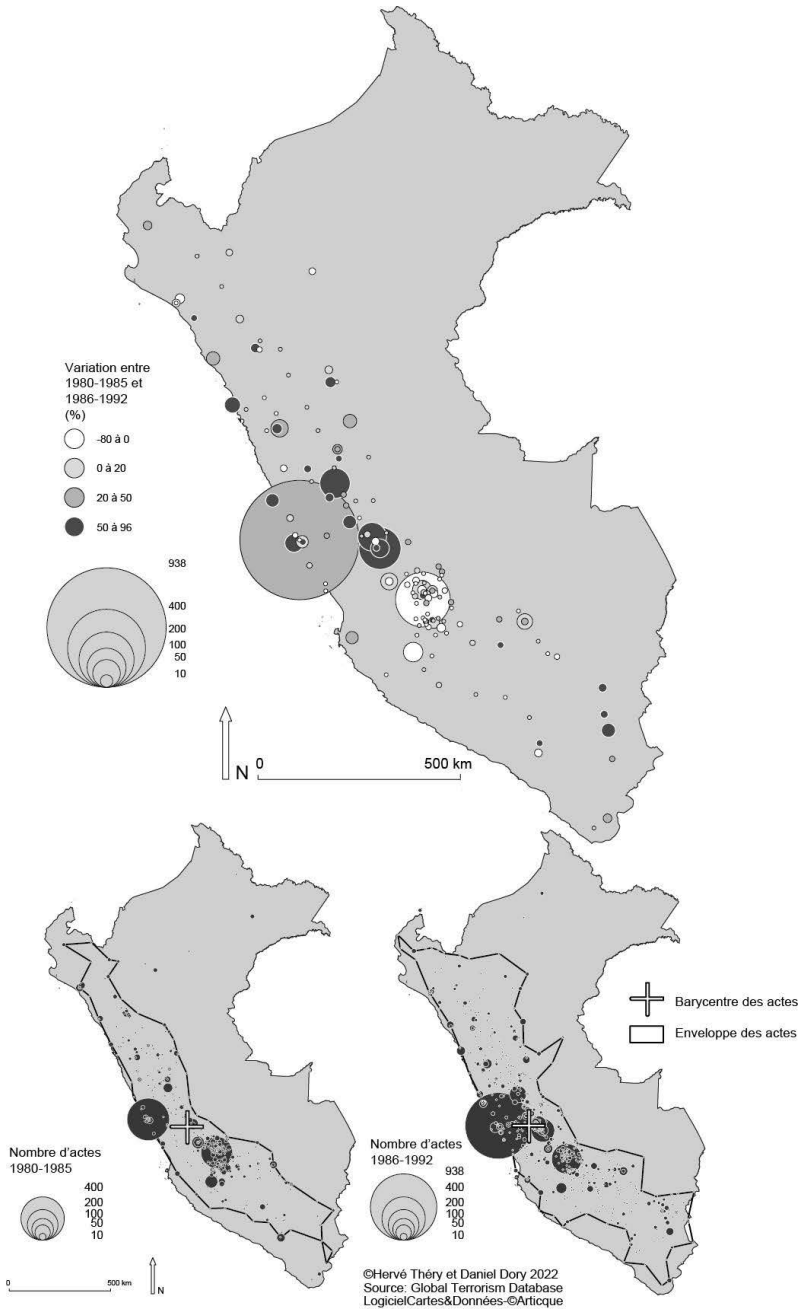
Figure 4. Spatial and temporal distribution of Shining Path
actions between 1980 and 1992

First, the strategic logic elaborated by Abimael Guzmán,[19] based on the Maoist concept of "protracted popular war" which, in its geostrategic aspect, includes the encirclement of the cities by the countryside. However, this general framework does not explain the choice of when SL will start to concentrate its action in the urban areas.

Second, it is possible that SL's decision to focus more intensely on Lima (especially) was also motivated by the beginning of MRTA's actions in 1984. It was then a question of trying to counter as quickly as possible the threat represented by this competing organization, whose development prospects seemed promising at the time.

Third, and most importantly, this shift in the territorial logic of SL's insurgency can be attributed to the rise of the *rondas campesinas* in the central Sierra during the second half of the 1980s. It is clear from the upper map in figure 4 that the concentration of actions in Lima and its surroundings correspond to a clear decrease in SL's presence in its original regions. It is not, therefore, an enveloping movement towards Lima from consolidated rural rear bases that we have assisted from 1986 onwards. But well to a displacement towards Lima of the center of gravity (see the barycenter) of the action of SL because of its progressive defeat in the Sierra due to the conjunction of the peasant mobilization and the application by the Peruvian army of a new counterinsurgent doctrine, finally effective. This point is crucial, because if the changes in the military system (the end of the brutal and blind repression, and encouragement to the peasant mobilization against SL) that led to the timely collection of indispensable information are well known,[20] the role of the *rondas campesinas* must have been undermined for a long time. The contribution of new publications on the subject has therefore been decisive in better understanding the accumulation of facts that led to the final defeat of SL. The cartographic work that we present in this article finally provides the basis for the formulation of solid explanatory hypotheses.

Conclusion

The case of the Shining Path, by its duration and by the extent of the damage caused (it is attributed to about 35,000 deaths) represents an episode that is somewhat out of the ordinary in the history of terrorism. Thirty years after the capture of Abimael Guzmán the scientific research is still far from having made light on this insurrection. It was therefore interesting to take on the subject once again, this time with the help of cartographic tools already proven on other objects. The result is not only a more precise overview, but also a new means of constructing hypotheses that can account for the decisive shift in SL's territorial logic in the mid-1980s. It is hoped that these results will serve to provide a rigorous framework for the design of future research programs aimed at deepening the knowledge of the many aspects of the reality of the Shining Path.

Endnotes

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3 Daniel Dory, "The Shining Path: a laboratory for the study of terrorism," *Global Security*, No. 16, 2018, 93–112. A basic bibliography and factual data are provided in this article, which we did not consider useful to reproduce here.

4 The main conceptual and methodological elements of this approach have been outlined in: Daniel Dory, "L'analyse géopolitique du terrorisme : conditions théoriques et conceptuelles," *L'Espace politique*, N° 33, 2017, (online); Daniel Dory, "Le terrorisme comme objet géographique : un état des lieux," *Annales de Géographie*, N° 728, 2019, 5–36; Daniel Dory; Hervé Théry, "L'approche géographique du terrorisme : ques tions de méthode," *L'Information géographique*, Vol. 86, N° 3, 2022, 29–48 ; Hervé Théry ; Daniel Dory, "L'étude géographique du terrorisme : nouveaux apports cartographiques," *Sécurité Globale*, N° 30, 2022, 21–29. See also: Daniel Dory & Jean-Baptiste Noé, (Dirs.), *Le complexe terroriste*, VA Éditions, Versailles, 2022.

5 The main lines of this problem have been formulated in: Daniel Dory: "L'Histoire du terrorisme: un état des connaissances et des débats," *Sécurité Globale*, N° 25, 2021, 109–123.

6 See, for example: Hervé Théry; Daniel Dory, "Solhan : cartographier le terrorisme et la dynamique territorio riale d'une insurrection," *MappeMonde*, N° 131, 2021, (online).

7 Gordon H. McCormick, *From the Sierra to the Cities. The Urban campaign of the Shining Path*, RAND, Santa Monica, 1992.

8 Robert B. Kent, "Geographical Dimensionss of the Shining Path Insurgency in Peru," *The Geographical Re view*, Vol. 83, No. 4, 1993, 441–454.

9 Sergio Koc-Menard, "Fragmented Sovereignity: Why Sendero Luminoso Consolidated in Some Regions of Peru but Not in Others," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 30, N° 2, 2007, 173–206.

10 Edwar E. Escalante, "A Self-defense Network against Terrorism and Crime: Evidence from Peru," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2021 (preprint available online).

11 For example: Valérie Robin Azevedo, "¿Verdugo, héroe o víctima ? Memorias de un rondero campesino ayacuchano (Perú)," *Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Études Andines*, Vol. 43, N° 2, 2014, 245–264.

12 Mario Fumerton, "Rondas Campesinas in the Peruvian Civil War Peasant Self-defence Organisations in Ayacucho," *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, Vol. 20, N° 4, 2001, 470–497.

13 We have discussed elsewhere the characteristics and limitations of this database, which despite its limitations is by far the best source currently available for the geographical study of terrorism. For more details, see the references mentioned in note 3.

14 The perimeters delimit the space within which the terrorist acts are located (above a certain threshold), the barycenters their center of gravity (taking into account the number of acts in each place).

15 Later, only the extremely mediocre little book by Suzie Baer, *Peru's MRTA*, Rosen, New York, 2003, can be mentioned.

16 Gordon H. McCormick, *Sharp Dressed Men. Peru's Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement*, RAND, Santa Monica, 1993.

17 It is not without interest to note that this approach, which aims to submit old works to the test of a later verification, according to data now available, opens new perspectives in the field of the history of terrorism.

18 See, on this point: Erin M. Kearns, "When to Take Credit for Terrorism? A Cross-National Examination of Claims and Attributions," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 33, No. 1, 2021, 164–193. The author assumes that only 16% of the acts that appear in the GTD are claimed. The Peruvian case is therefore not atypical and is rather in a low range.

19 An acceptable biography can be found in: "Abimael Guzmán (Comrade Gonzalo)," in: James and Elisabeth Outman, *Terrorism Biographies*, U-X-L, Detroit, 2003, 142–151. By the way: this book, which contains 26 brief biographies, is a useful resource for research into the history of terrorism.

20 See in particular: Alberto Bolivar, "Peru," in: Yonah Alexander (Ed.), *Combating Terrorism. Strategies of Ten Countries*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Harbor, 2002, 84–115.