Retracing Revolutionary Footsteps: The Legacy of the People's War in the Maoist Heartlands

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Retracing Revolutionary Footsteps
The Legacy of the People’s War in the Maoist Heartlands

Katherine Coetzer, SIT NPT, Fall 2022
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Asia, Nepal, Rukum & Rolpa

Submitted in Partial fulfilment of the requirements for Nepal: Tibetan and Himalayan Peoples, SIT Study Abroad, Fall Semester 2022
You can tear down Lenin’s statue
Rip Marxist doctrine to shreds
Bury the history of revolution
Why just the statue?
You might as well chop Lenin’s corpse into pieces
And feed crows and vultures …
It won’t make a difference
O prosperous beings of the world
O capitalists
You who are driven by revenge and rejoice in bloodshed
We are countries. Give us autonomy.
We are nations. Give us liberation.
We are the people. Give us revolution.¹

— Ahuti

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ABSTRACT

In 1996, Nepal was engulfed in a civil war when the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) — hereafter referred to as — launched a guerilla war against the state. In historical and political scholarship on the conflict, there has been a tendency to situate the conflict with a neat set of causes and consequences. In focusing on the macroscale changes, such narrations of “Big History” obscure the experiences of the Nepali people who were—and continue to be—impacted by war with the loss and violence endured clinically tallied in human right reports and social science studies. Within rigid analyses, the variegated reasons individuals joined the Maoists have either been simplified as resulting from their backwardness or collapsed by Maoist leaders as resulting solely from ideological affinity. This project, then, seeks to collate an oral history of the “People’s War” by centering Nepali people’s experiences, — especially those at the epicenter of the conflict in the mid-western hills of Nepal— to illuminate the complexity, contradiction and diversity of experience encompassed under the banner of the “People’s War.”
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project was born out of the support and generosity of countless individuals and communities. Firstly, I am indebted to my parents. Thank you for your ceaseless generosity in affording me the opportunity to pursue bold adventures. I apologize for any premature aging instigated by my travels...

To my sisters, Alex and Georgie, thank you for your encouragement and support. Your support is a constant presence in my life. It is always felt— even when unspoken.

To the SIT staff, Patty, Rinzi, Isabelle, Nazneen, Dechen, and Jigme, thank you for your guidance and assistance in helping me navigate this project. Special thanks must be extended to Nazneen and Patty for their endless supply of reading recommendations and draft feedback. Your reading recommendations remain eagerly welcomed in the future.

I am grateful to Surendra Rana and Prithibi Pun for accompanying me on my trip to Rukum and Rolpa. Surendra, your devotion to the Kham Magar people is immense and inspiring.

Finally, I cannot adequately express my appreciation for the people who opened their homes to me and took time out of their days to speak with me— often recollecting painful experiences they might otherwise seek to forget. The generosity and warmth I experienced in Rukum and Rolpa is truly unparalleled.

Thank you.
INTRODUCTION

Reflecting on the profound impact of the People’s war, the scholar John Metz writes, “If you can figure out the full causes, career and consequences of the Maoist movement in Nepal, you have mastered knowledge about contemporary Nepali society and history.” When I first encountered this quotation during my critical concept research, I was moved by the grandiosity of such an assertion which so clearly pinpointed the centrality of Maoist conflict in uprooting and remapping the political contours of contemporary Nepal. As my knowledge of conflict has deepened, I return to this quotation less reverent. My awe of Metz’s scholarly authority has transformed into apprehension. While Metz recognizes the conflict as possessing multiple “causes, career and consequences,” embedded in his words is an assumption that the full breadth of Nepali history and society can be readily distilled into a singular narrative and set of consequences—that it can be “mastered” as a scholarly subject. Contrasting this bloated scholarly claim to authority to narrate historical events according to neat sets of causes and effects, the 10-year conflict encompasses a multitude of experiences that resist a singular narrative. Like light striking glass, the Maoist war lit up Nepali society with its impact refracting along axes of location, class, ethnicity and gender to produce variegated effects and experiences. The Maoist war is a testament to the chaotic heterogeneity of history in which a ten-year conflict was experienced so differently by differing sects of Nepali society. Skeptical of Metz, then, I am more inclined to esteemed oral historian Gail Hershatter’s belief:” History is not fixed, but it is slippery in different ways and for different reasons from those that shape individual and community stories about the past.”

Undoubtedly, the Maoist movement’s import in shaping contemporary society should not be understated. The war contributed to the formal abolition of the monarchy and Nepal’s emergence as a democratic federal republic. Meanwhile the Maoists emerged as a major political force in contemporary Nepal. After 10 years of bloodshed, Maoist leaders readily accepted a seat alongside political parties whom they had sworn as enemies. Trading in their guns for a seat in government, they abandoned their goals of establishing a people’s republic in favor of settling for democracy. Since the 2006 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, the government having been headed by CPN(M) leaders from 2008 to 2009 and from 2016 to 2017 and 2013 to 2015. Yet, despite Maoist governance, many inequalities persist and the most recently promulgated constitution leaves much to desire regarding the rights of marginalized populations: most notably, women, low caste and indigenous populations—the very groups to whom the Maoists had directly appealed to and sought to mobilize. The wake of the

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4 Tika R Pradhan, “Civic group marches in Kathmandu to demand amendments to constitution.” The Kathmandu Post, September 20, 2021.
Maoist revolution has witnessed an outpouring of indigenous protests as the continue to push for meaningful political representation.

In his seminal historical overview of the Maoist movement, Adhikari situates this failure in the degeneration of the Constituent Assembly—intended to serve as mouthpiece for the people—to “an ideological battleground.” With an arrogant and unwavering self-importance, he observes, the Maoists dogmatically insisted that they alone could bring the necessary socio-economic transformation while entrenched parties were resistant to change. Thus, rather than addressing the immediate needs of the people they claimed to serve, the Maoists became consumed by dominating political power. Adhikari further writes: “for years, the Maoists had derided parliament as a ‘toothless debating club.’” Still, the Maoist should not merely be understood as Machiavellian power grabbers. Such a simplified account ignores the legitimate grievances that underpinned many villagers’ reasons for joining the movement, only furthering stigmatizing the Kham-Magar and Dalit inhabitants to whom the Maoist movement promised the revolutionary ideal of a just and equal society.

Given Nepal’s extensive modern history of feudalism and rigid caste discrimination, Dixit, himself, concedes that “Nepal has been ripe for revolution for quite some time.” Having suffered under the brutal rule of feudal landlords, it is unsurprising that the indigenous and low caste populations would be drawn to a Maoist doctrine that theorizes an agrarian revolution in which peasants directly overthrow the landholders who oppressed them. Political reform had done little to alleviate and meaningfully improve their lives. While by 1960, the caste system was formally abolished, “the upper castes continued to dominate state institutions… and the cultures and histories of other groups were not merely omitted from the official narrative but were actively suppressed.” Similarly, King Birendra formally passed land reforms in 1963, yet these were never actively pursued and enacted since they would undermine the material wealth of the king’s support base. Following Jana Andolan, a free press flourished, and development begun. However, this did little to uplift the people of Rukum whose primary injustices surrounding land were unaddressed. Still, in turning to arms to elicit change, the Maoists elicited heightened police presence in vulnerable areas. As much as the Maoists offered hope and change, they tangentially inflicted destruction and pain on large sects of the rural populations they claimed to serve.

5 Adhikari, The Bullet and the Ballot Box, 339.
6 Adhikari, The Bullet and the Ballot Box, 184.
8 Aditya Adhikari, The Bullet and the Ballot Box, 184.
9 Adhikari, The Bullet and the Ballot Box, 39.
10 Nepali term for “People’s Movement.”
In undertaking this project, I center a vast range of voices to illuminate the diversity of experience encompassed under the banner of the “People’s War.” Drawing inspiration from Kunda Dixit’s moving photographic documentation in *A People War* and Manjushree Thapa’s reflections of her own shaky relationship to the war as a “Kathmandu elite” in *Forget Kathmandu*, this project critically engages with the legacy of the “People’s War.” To do so, I spent two weeks in what has become known as the “Maoist heartlands” of Rukum and Rolpa, interviewing villagers who experienced the war most intimately—as active participants, witnesses and victims of unspeakable atrocity, and grieving mothers and sisters. In doing so, I have sought to illuminate the People’s War in its complexity and contradiction: its revolutionary promises and most heartbreaking betrayals.
“I mean they were just brainwashed.”

I feel my cheeks flush with emergent rage at this comment. Somewhat surprised by the cavalier conviction with which he commented on the Maoist conflict, I mumble a feeble response.

“I think it was more complicated than that…”

My peer’s opinion was hardly unique. It was one which I had encountered frequently both in casual conversation with expats living and working in Kathmandu as well as in scholarly writing on the People’s War. I realize that his uncritical willingness to view the revolution as inherently illegitimate was likely stemming from the revolution’s “Maoist” title. Ironically, however, the Chinese government at the time was closely aligned with the Nepali monarch. Instead, the Maoists drew inspiration and support from the Naxalite peasant rebellion in the forests of West Bengal in India. Unfortunately, with Mao’s notoriety, it’s an especially burly misconception to overthrow. Yet rather than the undertaking of some brazen ideologues, for many the conflict “was a fight against discrimination and oppressive social hierarchies—whether based on caste, gender, wealth, ethnicity, religion or even region.”

Given prevailing poverty, women’s lack of equal citizenship and continued marginal position of indigenous groups and lower castes in the midwestern hills, charges that the Maoist leadership exploited grievances are sound. The linguistic, political and socio-economic marginality of the area marked it as the ideal launchpad for revolution. Maoist decision-making was calculated and deliberate. Additionally, Maoist leadership—abiding by Mao Tse-tung’s theorization of revolution—did actively pursue indoctrination through enacting a “cultural revolution” and seeking to raise the people’s political consciousness.

Still, brainwash seems too absolute and arrogant a word. It implies a total emptiness of thought and capacity for reason on the part of the purported “brainwashed.” More concerningly, such a strong term blankety delegitimizes villagers’ reasons for supporting the Maoists. In her ethnographic research on the Maoist revolution, Ina Zharkeveich excavates a diversity of reasons that underpinned villagers’ decisions to support the Maoists. Rather than unwavering ideological affinity (an assumed product of

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brainwashing), Zharkevich traces Maoist support as rooted in distinctly local grievances, kinship networks and Maoist intersections with local power structures.\(^\text{12}\)

My initial decision to undertake two weeks of research “Maoist heartlands” was largely propelled by my peer’s derogatory comment. The sense of superiority embedded in such disparagements implanted my desire to write against assumptions that flow uncritically from places of privilege— places far removed from the precarious circumstances that might lead an ordinary person to raise arms.

In undertaking a distinctly political pursuit, however, my fieldwork quickly illuminated the ethical complexity of seeking to excavate a grassroots oral history. Indeed, I quickly learned that there is no singular “grassroots” perspective. Meanwhile, the perspectives I collected not only contradicted each other but harbored internal contradictions. One woman spoke of the war as the foremost source of pain in her life. Her life was severely disrupted by the conflict, and she lost her eldest son, a Maoist commander. Still, she remained unwaveringly supportive of the maobadi\(^\text{13}\)— the very force that she sees as the cause of her suffering. In a moment of intense disillusionment, I worried I might risk recapitulating the ignorant assumption of an outsider. To me, far removed from the political reality of Nepal, continued support for Maoists was unfathomable.

At the same time, stories of Maoist violence heightened my awareness of the danger of seeking to write from a distinctly Maoist perspective. I quickly realized that I risked engaging in a perverse form of “ethnographic refusal” in which many politically motivated scholars “romanticize resistance…read all forms of resistance as signs of the ineffectiveness of systems of power and of the resilience and creativity of the human spirit in its refusal to be dominated.”\(^\text{14}\) Such tendencies for romanticization ignore the way in which systems of power entangle with revolutionary movements. After all, despite claiming to serve marginalized communities, Maoist leadership was largely dominated by upper caste, educated Brahmin men. More problematically, the tendency for romanticization allow the revolutionary elite to speak on behalf of an entire swathe of people. Zharkevich observes that much scholarship in the region of Thabang has risks regurgitating “Maoist propaganda [which] wants us to believe…the whole Kham-Magar population [were] equally fervent about the revolution.”\(^\text{15}\)

Sitting with a collection of deeply moving testimonies of profound sacrifice and faith, I found myself overwhelmed by the responsibility to tell other people’s stories. *How to humanize and vindicate*

\(^{13}\) Nepali term for Maoists.  
\(^{15}\) Zharkevich, 168.
Maoist supporters without infantilizing them as puppets of cunning leaders or dismissing the unshaking grief of Maoist victims? How to illuminate the extreme circumstances that led to revolution without fixing villagers in the role of the pitifully impoverished?

In an especially terse encounter in Thabang, a former porter for the Maoists rejected my interview request. “People’s War is what all the people of Rukum and Rolpa experienced; now we are limited to that history,” he said. “Many people come to inquire about such things and do nothing but cry over the past.” His blunt response left me unnerved. How might I avoid similar pitfalls?

Mulling over the stories I have collected; I realize that I cannot claim to have reached the “heart of the issue.” This is beyond my reach as an inherent outsider, a novice undergraduate researcher and given the confines of two weeks in the field. My endeavor, I realize, was less to untangle the contradictions and complexities involved in revolutionary movements that include armed struggle, but to show that they do exist. At the very least, I hope to have captured people’s experiences of revolution and war that are too often lost in the sweeping broad strokes of History. Tracing back to that encounter which propelled me toward the “cradle of the revolutionary movement,”16 I hope to have elicited understanding where there is a tendency for judgement, to have illuminated complexity where there is a tendency to impose “simple morality.”17

Descending into the Maoist Heartlands

As the bus winds along the hilly slopes of Rukum, passing the villages of Khabang and Lukum, I am struck by the serenity of the landscape. Traditional stone houses are interspersed among the more modern vibrant turquoise and pink homes. At their foothills, the slopes merge into stepped fields that amalgamate to form a patchwork of greens. Following a 20-hour bus ride, I am half-delirious. To my heavy eyes, the slices of land that reach toward the road blur into long tendrilled green fingers. In his seminal guidebook on the guerilla trails, Alonzo Lyons claims that the guerilla trails might also be referred to as the “Shangri-la trails.” While I harbor an uneasiness for the term “Shangri-la” with all its orientalist trappings, I am unsurprised that Lyons sought to out some paradisiacal term to describe the mid-western hills. It is difficult, then, to imagine that this seemingly pristine and tranquil location was once the site of profound fear and violence that ended less than twenty years ago. It is even harder to fathom that much of the violence was born from this region.

Already, my perceptions of the region are ruptured. While isolated, the area from a stagnant rural backwater, flush with activity. Along the main road through Rukumkot, women resting on the roadside hawk oranges, while tuk-tuks frequently passed through to collect and dispatch passengers. With the national elections mere days away, the local hotel verge on being overcrowded with election observers and political candidates making their final bids for support. In common perceptions of politics, political activity is seen as concentrated in urban centres, steadily decreasing the further one strays. Rukum disrupts this notion.

My co-researcher, Surendra Rana, explained that historically the region was challenging to access, entailing days of trekking. With the construction of mid-hill highway, however, the area has finally enjoyed its share of development — one of people’s central demands during the revolution.

**Raising Arms**

On February 13th the Maoists launched their rebellion by attacking three police stations dispersed across numerous rural outposts. Mahan—identifying himself by his *nom de guerre*—eagerly informs me of his own participation in one of these first attacks, proud to have participated in an event so esteemed amongst Maoist ranks. Initially, I am perturbed by his glee in regaling those attacks as well as other skirmishes with the police. I’m tempted to ask about the violence Maoist inflicted on ordinary people and profound infrastructure damage which—while crippling police capacity to inflict violence—severely hampered villagers’ access to vital facilities.

Mahan’s involvement in the communist party preceded the war. Many Maoist leaders visited local schools to teach their ideology. There were many influential leaders, Mohan notes, but most memorable among them were Krishna Sen, Lokendra Bhishda and Khadka Budha. The poet Krishna Sen, however, stood out. His poetry captured the injustices Mahan witnessed in his community. At the time, he lacked knowledge about communism, but was drawn to the Maoists because they opposed the monarchy.

“During those times,” he recalls, “there was poverty, poor education and not enough production.” People relied on subsistence farming but were often unable to yield enough to provide for their families and earn an income. Most vividly and intimately, however, Mahan was troubled by systemic marginalization of the region. He recalls the arduous work his parents endured as a result of their isolated position. Like many other villagers, Mahan’s parents were forced to walk a month to Butwal to collect salt and other necessities. Mahan joined the communists because they claimed to be “working for people.” As he passionately recollects the hardships his parents experienced, my opinion of him softens.

There’s a pernicious calculus in which certain forms violence—unleashed by the state—are legitimated purely by being “legislated.” It’s tendency which stems from the misplaced perception of “neutrality” on the part of state mechanisms. While I cannot imagine myself picking up arms, I also cannot fathom centuries of feudal oppression and systemic marginalization. The Maoists might have unleashed profound violence, yet it is worth remembering this was in response to unflinching state violence. I am reminded of Arundhati Roy’s incisive commentary the Naxalite-Maoist insurgency in the forests of West Bengal. As Arundhati cautions, there is danger in seeking to “[equate] the structural violence of the state with the violence of the armed resistance.”

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19 Adhikari, *The Bullet and the Ballot Box*, 84.  
20 Roy, 13.
Critics of the Maoists often cite the second Jana Andolan of 2006 as proof the futility of armed resistance and, thus, discredit the Maoists entirely. Kunda Dixit writes: “What Maoist violence couldn’t achieve in ten years and with 15,000 deaths happened in a spontaneous 19-day people power uprising.”\textsuperscript{21} To Dixit, the success of the Jana Andalon was indicative of the “moral victory of non-violent struggle.”\textsuperscript{22} Yet, such dramatic proclamations risk imposing a “simple morality.”\textsuperscript{23}


\textit{The Jana Andolan of 2006 signified growing collaboration between the Maoists and mainstream political parties following the signing of the 12-point agreement in New Delhi. Following King Gyanendra’s power grab, the parties united to depose the monarchy and reinstate democracy.}

Roy notes that “the decision whether to be a Gandhian or a Maoist, militant or peaceful… is not always a moral or ideological one… quite often it’s a tactical one.”\textsuperscript{24} In an analysis of what motivates social movements to favor either violent or non-violent tactics, Ches Thurber identifies “social ties” as a key determinant in shaping movement’s preference for civil resistance.\textsuperscript{25} Because of the social and geographic isolation of their support base, the Maoists lack the social network necessary for successful civil resistance. In the process of waging revolution, however, the Maoists expand their

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{21} Dixit, 14.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Dixit, 14.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Roy, 13.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Roy, 137.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Ches Thurber, \textit{Between Mao and Gandhi: The Social Roots of Civil Resistance}, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 5.
\end{itemize}
grassroots social network. Thus, Thurber argues that the decision to participate in the second Jana Andalon emerged “not because they had a change of heart about the morality of violence, but because changes in the social networks available to them led them to believe that civil resistance could now be effective.”

Civil resistance, Roy remarks, is “a kind of political theatre; in order for it to be effective, it needs a sympathetic audience.”

Many of the villagers residing belong to the Kham-Magar indigenous group or the Dalit caste. Speaking to Sumitra Manadhur, an NGO researcher, she explains that the marginalization of the communities of Rukum and Rolpa must be traced back to the formation of the kingdom of Nepal under Prithvi Narayan Shah in the 18th century. Prior to “unification” under Privthi Shah, the region now known as Nepal encompassed a diversity of kingdoms, ethnicities, cultures, and languages. The combination of such factors comprises a nation unto itself, she argues. Despite this, Privthi Shah sought to establish Nepal as “the only true Hindu kingdom.” Privthi Shah advocated for “one nation, one language. One king, one uniform.” Nationalist sentiment boldly proclaims that Privthi Shah “unified the whole nation of Nepal as it exists today.” Yet, while Privthi Shah united Nepal physically, Manadhur explains that he could not collapse the country into a singular national identity. In casting Nepal as singularly Hindu nation, Privthi relegated broad swathes of people who practiced religions other than Hinduism and spoke languages other than Nepali to second-class citizens. Nepal’s mountainous terrain facilitated this discrimination.

Zharkevich observes that for the Kham Magars, “Kathmandu was a remote place, situated in another country.” “‘Remoteness’ was thus not just about physical distance from the centre,” she explains, “but rather an exclusion from modernity and the modern nation state. So, ‘remoteness’ not only was politically produced but also had stark political consequences.” When the Maoists launched their revolution, Zharkevich argues, “the Maoists were waging their struggle not only against the Shah monarchy but also against the idea of remoteness…in the cultural sense of the word and the ‘backward’, ‘primitive’ habitus associated with it.”

To be sure, the Maoists should be held accountable for the human right abuses they committed. Yet, bourgeois political parties are also deserving of criticism for their continued and deliberate neglect of Nepal’s rural outposts. Structural neglect, too, is a potent form violence. Largely mirroring the

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26 Thurber, 105.
27 Roy, 137.
28 Zharkevich, 48.
29 Zharkevich, 51.
30 Zharkevich, 51.
dominant beliefs of the Kathmandu-based commentators, Dixit derides the Maoists as “impatient.”

According to the Kathmandu elite, the Maoists should have waited. Eventually, they say, development would have reached Rukum and other marginalized regions. After centuries of feudal oppression and systemic marginalization, however, how long were they expected to wait?

In her own investigation into the Maoist conflict, Manjushree Thapa recollects on her encounters with young female Maoist cadres. Describing a particularly striking encounter, Thapa remembers a girl telling her: “That is why I joined the movement. You see, there used to only be sickles and grass in the hands of girls like us. And now there are automatic rifles.”

Like many of Thapa’s informants, when Mahan regaled his military feats, I realize his excitement was rooted less in a glee for violence but in the power armed resistance proffered. For perhaps the first time, Mahan and his comrades felt that they might be able to force the state’s hand. For the first time, they grasped some semblance of power.

“Without militant resistance,” Roy posits, “the poor get pulverized.”

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31 Dixit, 6.
33 Roy, 137.
November 14th—Today marks the first “official” day of our trek. After a brief period spent trudging on mid-hill highway, we diverge onto the narrow footpaths that spread like dusty veins across the hills. The surrounding vegetation is dense and suffocating. Our trek is soundtracked by the oozing squelch of mud and the rhythmic whack of branches against my pack.

With the passing of time, some of the paths have been overrun by an outpouring of vegetation while others have intercepted and swallowed by streams. To follow the paths, you must first know they are there. I am suddenly immensely grateful I chose a co-researcher well-acquainted with the area. Signposts of any kind are absent.

Yet, this spell of adventurism is short-lived as we return to trudging on graveled roadsides. To divert my attention from the weight of my pack and the burning sensation in my lungs, I fixate on the rhythmic crunch of my boots on the gravel. Already, Surendra explains, many of the trails deployed by Maoist foot soldiers have been integrated into road developments.

Rather naively, I realize, I had come to the region expecting an underground legacy of pain and suffering cloistered away in private memory. A far more complicated and knotty legacy emerged in the region. The area had experienced noticeable development at the same time I witnessed visible conditions of impoverishment. For every freshly painted, concrete home we encountered, there were many others that utilized corrugated irons scraps, traditional mud construction and loosely secured wooden planks.

In global perceptions of Africa, the pre-eminent anthropologist James Ferguson discerns that often poverty is romanticized as “tradition.” The same held true in Rukum.

Along the route to Jeepu, Surendra abruptly halts in front of a traditional home built of mud and thatch. As he hastily unpacks the contents of his camera bag eager to snap a shot of the house, he adulates about the home’s “authenticity.” I eagerly joined him in scrabbling for my own camera. When we ready ourselves to leave, an elderly woman, who has been quietly perched nearby shifting the coals underneath a large cauldron-like pot, suddenly chided: “You photograph my old home. Now, are you going to build me a new one?” The woman evidently did not hold the same aesthetic appreciation for rural “authenticity.”

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**A Mother’s Sacrifice**

By chance, I was able to speak to Sita Acharya on my first evening in Rukumkot. As the Chief of Rolpa’s District Coordination Committee, Sita spends most her time in Libang, Rolpa’s headquarters. Yet, the upcoming elections had brought her to Rukumkot for campaign work alongside her husband.

Initially involved in the Nepali Congress’s national student union, Sita pivoted to the Maoist student wing upon attending a political rally hosted by the pre-eminent Maoist leaders: Krishna Bahadur Mahara, Jhakku Subedi, and Purna Gharti. It was there, Sita recalls, that the seeds of political consciousness were first planted in her mind.

Despite coming from an upper-caste Brahmin family, Sita was disillusioned by the inequality surrounding her—specifically societal stratification and marginalization. “During those days, women’s status was confined to the kitchen,” she explained. Sita was determined to blunt sexist perceptions which women could not plough fields or the overwhelming notion of menstruation as impure. She remembers that many women were not allowed in their own family homes while menstruating.

Likewise, Sita was frustrated with caste discrimination in which Dalits were not granted entry to certain temples because of their perceived “impurity.” When Sita married her husband, a Dalit, her mother refused to eat the food she cooked. According to the logic of the caste system, she became “less pure.” As she spoke, Sita shook her clenched hands to convey her conviction. Sita joined the Maoist because they claimed to be a “party of the people, the party of change.”

In their journalistic recollection of the Maoist conflict, Gyanu Adhikari and Saif Khalid argue that “perhaps no instrument beats closer to the hearts of Nepal’s hill people than the small drum known as Madal.” Realizing this, the Maoists mobilized music and cultural performances to spread their messages.

As member of the Maoist cultural wing, Sita was an active agent in the Maoist mobilization of music to “raise the conscience of the people.” Her responsibility involved traveling from village to village to perform cultural performances that mirrored Maoist teachings. She was told by party’s top cadres that her role was an especially important one.

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35 Adhikari et al.
For Sita, a dominant message disseminated was that women were equally strong as men and their active participation equally necessary in society. To illustrate this, the Maoists mobilized the analogy of chariot. Both wheels—men and women—are needed in equal measure for forward movement.

Despite a tendency among the center-left to dismiss the Maoist revolution as shameless and arrogant “adventurism” on the part of hardline ideologues, Sita emphasizes that the pivot to violence was not an impetuous decision nor sheerly born out of a lust for violence. “War is not good,” she emphasized, but “to change inequalities, it was the only way.”

Far from the undertaking of some brazen ideologues, Sita’s own sacrifices reveal the depth of commitment underpinning people’s participation. The revolution was a cause for which she felt willing to sacrifice her life. At 20 years old, when she became a member of the cultural wing, Sita left daughter in her parent’s care.

“I left my child in somebody else arms,” she stresses.

A Revolutionary Fervor

For many Maoist cadres, participation in the conflict provided an exhilarating sense of community and purpose. Adhikari and Gyanu observe that “For as long as they were fighting, the hierarchies of class, caste, sex and ethnicity didn’t matter.” When “young men and women from Nepal’s villages took part in the rebellion, Adhikari notes, “they were inducted into a tightly knit body of cadres with a fierce sense of mission and commitment.”

For a brief intoxicating period, the Maoist achieved a microscale version of the egalitarian society they sought to install at the national level. Zharkevich reminds us that revolution is not just an event but a process. In waging their revolution, the Maoist actively disrupted oppressive social structures. People of different castes fought, slept and ate together—actively blunting Hindu notions of caste “impurity.”

November 28th—Returning to Rukumkot from Syarpu, Surendra and I stop for lunch in Khabang. With the bus to Rukumkot hours away, we decide to visit a local weaving business recommended to us.

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37 Zharkevich, 5-6.
Niraka Magar, owner, perches over the loom, untangling pieces of thread and looping them over the wooden stakes. Upon our arrival, however, she readily pivots to stretching out the innumerable scarves and shawls over a bench, keen to point out the yarn quality and detail.

Originally from the rural outpost of Arthbiskot in West Rukum, Niraka moved to Khabang for her children’s education. Bored of housework and with her children in school, Niraka first learned the process of hem extraction through the local government’s community forest division thereafter receiving weaving training from an NGO. “I have to do something,” she thought.

As I explain my research project to Niraka, her eyes light up. She immediately divulges her own involvement as a PLA soldier. Niraka joined the Maoist student wing at 13 years old, because “Everyone is joining with friends and all.”

In “Girls in War,” Thapa nimbly interrogates the conditions which led girls as young as thirteen to join the war. Under unyielding patriarchal oppression, she conjectures that “joining the party had offered [girls] perhaps the best chance available for wider social engagement.” When Niraka so eagerly followed her friends to join the Maoists, I wonder if she was similarly drawn by the revolutionary promise of connection and purpose—of social connection beyond the confines of the household.

Initially involved in campaign work in the villages, Niraka eventually joined the PLA as a foot soldier. In the years that followed, she was repeatedly promoted, ascending to the title of platoon commander.

Brimming with excitement, Niraka informs me of her participation in the battle at Beni. During the battle, a small bullet struck her left leg. Still, Niraka emphasized “we [women] didn’t feel any pain.” For Niraka and her fellow cadres, the act of wielding arms served as a means for them to actively challenge and blunt suffocating gender roles.

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38 Thapa, “Girls in the war.”
In March, the PLA successfully broken into the police compound at Beni. The Maoists captured thirty-four other police personnel and two soldiers. Adhikari observes that “the attack on Beni was...a significant propaganda victory for the Maoists.” Yet, despite the battle’s reputation amongst Maoist ranks, Adhikari argues that the battle also showed “the limits of their military capability” given their failure to seize the army barracks.

Niraka was absorbed in a sense of community stemming from a shared purpose. Her richest memories of the conflict are those of camaraderie. Over bowls of roasted peas and mugs of spiced tea, Niraka recollects her experience of marching through expansive jungles and camping in frigid conditions. Whether washing dishes or preparing for battle, she remembers chanting the slogan: “Marxism Leninism, Maoism and Prachanda path.”

39 Adhikari, The Bullet and the Ballot Box, 175.
40 Adhikari, The Bullet and the Ballot Box, 179.
41 Adhikari, The Bullet and the Ballot Box, 178-179.
I don’t regret [my involvement] now,” she says. “I have fought for a cause.”

To Niraka, the empowerment she experienced is responsible for her position today not only in a personal capacity but in allowing women to assume more active roles in society. Following the CPA, Niraka and her comrades entered UN monitored cantonments. While she accepted a package of 6 Lakhs, many of her comrades joined the army. “So many women are in the army today,” she exclaims proudly.

Previously, “only men were only allowed to own property,” she explains. Women were subsequently reliant on and subservient to men. Today, however, Niraka remarks: “I’m standing on my own feet.”
Niraka’s woven scarves and shawls

Niraka’s shop/workstation
The next morning, our planned visit to Rukumkot’s war memorial is disrupted when we are informed of Kamala Aroma’s arrival. Having been featured in the 2008 documentary *The Sari Soldiers*, Kamala is a revered in the Maoist heartlands for her representation of female Maoist comrades. That I have been afforded the opportunity to meet her, I am told, is an incomparable opportunity. “You are very lucky,” Surendra exclaims.

Like Niraka, Kamala most vivid recollections from the war are centered on her experience of camaraderie and a sense of power that had otherwise been denied to local communities. Kamala served as brigade commissar but is involved in the standing committee of the Prachanda party today. Kamala looks back fondly on the parallel government structures implemented in Maoist-occupied areas. She felt that the Maoists “connected people to people.” “There was no external rule,” she recalls, “it was a people’s government.” Through Maoist alternative government, *jana Sarkar*42, Kamala felt that people were able to claim control over their own lives.

42 Nepali term for “people’s government.”
Bhawani Kumari Budha shouldn’t be alive.

The police were hunting her for her involvement in providing basic medical care to Maoist soldiers. She only narrowly escaped. When the police knocked on her door, she pretended to be someone else. Fortunately, the police could not identify her and prove otherwise. Bhawani was lucky that none of the villagers spied on her. “If not,” she says, “I would have been captured and killed.” Bhawani recalls that her main concern was not if but when she would die. As a first aid worker for the Maoists, Bhawani knew first-hand of the profound violence and atrocity inflicted during the war. Injured PLA soldiers from the Battle of Beni were taken to Kankri where she was stationed. All she remembers is “bullets and blood.” “I felt very bad seeing all that misery,” she says. “It is like a dream now.”

As much as Bhawani remembers the war as a time of profound misery and bloodshed, it was also a time of profound meaning. Bhawani’s husband is a former Maoist soldier. They were wed before an audience of their fellow Maoist cadres during. Bhawani recalls that they were wed alongside four other Maoist couples in the middle of the jungle. Looking back on the occasion, Bhawani laughs at the absurdity of a marriage under war-time conditions. “Usually people have a big feast,” she laughs. By contrast, she and her husband went the entire day without food. Moreover, they enjoyed no honeymoon as her husband was dispatched to Kol the following day. In her overall recollections of the war, she remarks: “this is the unforgettable memory.”
Despite her upset that their overarching goal of “total socialism” was not achieved, Bhawani welcomed the peace agreement. During the worst moments of the war, after all, she did not think she would live to witness peace. She could not conceive of a life beyond the war.

“I never thought that I would have a small business— not even in my dreams.”
"Seeking Retribution"

In his investigation of conflict’s legacy, Prasiit Sthapit finds that “for many, the decision to join either side in the war was triggered by a desire for revenge.” Nowhere was this more apparent than in Jeepu. For Maoist supporters in the region, Maoist violence was just because it was responsive to the structural violence and structural neglect the area experienced as well as the more direct police violence. When inquiring about why people felt armed resistance was just, they frequently cited an infamous human rights atrocity which took place in the area— the murder of the Khatri brothers.

Seated adjacent to the fire, Mangali flips rotis on a pan before laying them on the coals for a final charring. She fixates on the fire, fully immersed in the process. Alongside her, her daughter and granddaughter shred leafy masses of saag. I can ask her anything, she says. Because she is old, she chuckles, “I’m living history.”

Her light-hearted nature belies the intense suffering she endured during the conflict.

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43 Prasiit Sthapit, and Roshan Maharajan, “Red is the Colour of Spring,” Caravan, October 01, 2021.
Mangali not only witnessed the atrocity, but—as a dangerous witness to state violence—suffered in its aftermath. On February 15th of 2006, mere days after the conflict started, six young boys were grazing their cattle and goats on Melgairi hill when they were brutally tortured and murdered by the police. They were lined up and shot for being “Maoists.”

Mangali and the other eight villagers who witnessed the atrocity were subsequently cattle rope and tortured. They were taken to the Khalanga Police Headquarters. Enroute, one of the witnesses succumbed to his injuries. Upon arrival at the station, the police charged the villagers for the murders. They spent seven days in police custody with the police attempting to coerce confessions through brute force. Mangalis’s daughter and her daughter’s father-in-law were amongst the other villagers. As a result of severe beatings unleashed by police, her daughter suffered a miscarriage while her father-in-law lost his hearing.

She later learned that the boys had been falsely accused of being Maoists by local NC supporters. The profound injustice of the event revealed the state’s perverse response to the Maoist’s waging of war. Instead of interpreting the conflict as symptomatic socio-economic injustice, the state classified the Maoist as terrorists—a security threat to be summarily stamped out. In his dissection of police brutality during the war, Aditya Adhikari discerns that “no distinction was made between a Maoist combatant and an unarmed party worker, a sympathizer, or an ordinary citizen who had provided rebels food or shelter.”

To Mangali, the atrocity was not only an unjust outcome of police excess in brutally killing innocent young boys, but also the persecution of Maoists and complete disregard for the marginalized communities residing the mid-western hills—a phenomenon that preceded the war. The Kham-Magar had long been disregarded as barbarous and “uncivilized mountaineers.” According to her, “people were afraid of this area.”

“Police wanted to wipe out the Maoists,” she remarks. The impact of the killing on the area was profound. It foreshadowed the endless violence and terror police forces enacted for next ten years.

In the immediate aftermath of the Khatri brothers’ murders, Mangali remembers that the area was engulfed in a piercing silence. “Even the dogs didn’t bark,” she explains.

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45 Zharkevich, 49.
Mangali and her family were staunch Maoist supporters. Maoist ideology coursed through their blood. Before the splintering of the CPN (Masal) and the breakaway formation of the CPN(M), they supported the Masal group. Both her son and on-in-law were commanders in the PLA while she frequently provided shelter to Maoist cadres, subsequently becoming a prime police target.

With her home no longer safe, she was forced to find shelter in the forests at night— for ten years. Yet perhaps the greatest hardship she endured— and continues to endure— was the loss of her son. In 2005, he died while engaged in battle She does not elaborate further and I, unfamiliar with navigating such emotionally fragile experiences am unsure whether it is appropriate to ask for further detail. I err on the side of caution. “If was he alive, he would have a very big commissar position.”

“Although there is peace, [my] wound cannot be recovered,” she laments.
Mangali (left) sits alongside her granddaughter and daughter.

Mangali’s home and my homestay for the evening.
Caught in the Middle

While it was the Maoists who ultimately triggered the war, the police and army responded with outsized forces. Villagers were trapped between two aggressors—caught in an ever-tightening crush. Perhaps the most universal experience of the war articulated by villagers was that of being harassed by both the Maoists and police.

Ranbir—a farmer from eastern Rukum village of Panga—fled to India at the war’s outbreak in 1996. He was 18 years old, and his parents feared that he would be recruited by the Maoists. The village was rife with rumors that young men would be forced to join the movement. After a year in India, he returned because such rumors had not come into fruition.

His perception of safety proved to be premature.

As Manandhar explains, the Maoists enacted a policy of "one house, one guerrilla.” Each home would be required to provide a foot soldier. No one was spared.

Ranbir’s family was forced to shelter and feed six Maoist soldiers. While he never witnessed Maoists torture, the threat of violence nonetheless lingered. As NC supporters, his family feared being decried as government informants. Simultaneously, they feared government reproach and torture for providing material support to the Maoists. So fearful of the threat posed by both sides of the conflict, Ranbir and other villagers frequently fled to the forests for shelter.

Dhariban, a UML supporter, likewise remembers that his livelihood was hampered by both sides of the conflict. He owned a small shop and boat rental service on Syrapu lake. When the Maoists passed through the region, they destroyed his boats—likely because of his affiliation with the UML. Meanwhile, the government confiscated and destroyed supplies he imported from Dang based on the suspicion that such supplies might be donated to the Maoists. The police confiscated goods such as lighters, fearful that the Maoist might use them in bomb constructions as well as food that might be used to feed to the revolution. Dhariban remembers watching the police destroy sacks of flaked rice he had ordered.

Dhariban was forced to participate Maoist development projects. Dispatched to Rolpa, he spent eighteen days toiling on the construction of the Martyr Highway. As he describes his experience, his wife interjects to share her own recollections of that period. She spent those days weeping, engulfed in the dread that her husband might not return.
Dhariban and his wife

Syarpu lake
Martyr’s Road, extending through the Rolpa district.

This road was the most notable development campaigns implemented by the Maoists during the war. While intended to “win the hearts of the people,” the road was constructed by forced labor.
Both sides were evidently aggressors yet there is a danger in equating the two as equally destructive. Despite a tendency to perceive the Maoists as marauding terrorists, the Maoists displayed cunning strategy. Broad-based people’s support, the Maoists knew, was essential to the revolution. In theorizing revolution, Mao posited that “The guerrillas must move amongst the people as a fish swim in the sea.” In its report, the International Crisis Group concedes that, as the war progressed, “the Maoists concentrated their attacks on military targets and the proportion of civilian killings fell. In contrast, state attacks on civilians increased.” It was this reality which often spurred villagers—caught between the two forces—to align with Maoists. As Sthapit surmises, “the harder the state pushed, the more the Maoists’ People’s Liberation Army and its affiliates succeeded in recruiting people.”

Following gruesome state-sponsored atrocities murder of the Khatri brothers, Mahan stresses that “even the trees were Maoist.”

Dhan, a local farmer on Maring Hill, emphasized he was most appreciative of the Maoists because of the protection they provided. During the war, police frequently raided the village under the cover of night in search of Maoists. In an especially violent raid, Dhan remembers that the police killed eleven villagers. Contradicting the dominant narratives emerging from Kathmandu in which the Maoists were barbarous savages ravaging the countryside, for many villagers the Maoists were a necessary bulwark against the state forces dispatched to protect the bourgeoisie from a looming attack on Kathmandu.

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46 Adhikari, The Bullet and the Ballot Box, 189.
48 Sthapit et al.
Since its founding in 2007, Dhan has worked for the Maring Agricultural Research Centre. To him, the Centre was reflective of Maoist ideological emphasis on communal ownership and. According to Dhan, under the centre’s supervision, privately owned property was converted to communal land with villagers all contributing labor and material support. For the past 25 years, Dhan has dedicated himself to experimental research on which crops grow well in the area.
Homestay on Maring Hill.

Many homes in Rolpa still lack basic facilities.
Developing the Hinterlands

November 19th— After days of trekking, my legs are stiff; I am suddenly exceedingly conscious of the weight of my boots and pack. Each step is an exercise of physical exertion and mental tenacity. Descending Maring hill, we pass old stone homes and lush fields. The trail is empty beyond the occasional shepherd and their goats and cattle. As they pass us, they gently tap their stick at the goats’ feet and yell “yaaaa” to urge their livestock forward. Their lilting voices carry long after they are no longer visible.

While slogging through dense foliage, we stumble upon an old man seated on a rocky outcrop. His face is weathered and leathery, an indicator of the years dedicated to harvesting and herding. He owns a shop in Marabang, he explains, but is returning to his home village of Gunang to vote in the election tomorrow. Rather amusingly, he confesses that he has yet to decide which party or candidate he will support. He stills needs to consult with his neighbors.
With the signature of the 2006 CPA and the Maoists’ absorption into mainstream “bourgeoisie democracy,” the Maoists were defanged of their radical edge. Since then, journalist Tika R Pradhan remarks that Prachanda’s party—renamed CPN (Maoist Centre) upon merging with other leftist parties—faces an identity crisis: “whether to revive its old ideology or formulate a new guiding principle.”

The Maoists suffered from factionalism even during the war with conflict over whether to align mainstream political parties or the monarchy. Since the CPA, however, this factionalism has resulted in the frequently splintering and re-merging of Maoist parties. Indeed, the leadership’s steady collaboration produced numerous fractures with hardliners perceiving the disbandment of the PLA as the ultimate betrayal.

With Maoist hardliners’ formation of the CPN-Maoist Maoist—known as the Biplap party—Prachanda can no longer claim to the party of “revolutionaries.” Rather, Pradhan argues that “today’s Dahal, however, is known more as a ‘revisionist,’ someone continually trying to seek revisions of

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50 Adhikari, The Bullet and the Ballot Box, 361.
fundamental Marxism premises with an alliance with the bourgeoisie, who he once was fighting against, than a revolutionist.”

“The Maoists’ major concern at present,” he argues “is their diminishing voter base.”

Contrasting this national trend, however, people I encountered in Rukum and Rolpa proclaimed undying support for Prachanda’s party. While aware of the Maoists shortcomings, they argue that at the very least the Maoists have brought changes to the area where the other political parties remain absent. Many villagers draw a direct line between the development they have enjoyed following the war and the conflict itself. “Before the Maoists,” Dhan explains, “there was no development and [we were] isolated compared to rest of the country.”

Telephone lines strung over the fields of Jeepu. Many villagers credit the Maoists with bringing development to the region.

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51 Pradhan, “The revolution has stalled.”
52 Pradhan, “The revolution has stalled.”
Victims of the Revolution

The Maoists often brought devastation to the marginalized communities they claimed to serve. While alleging a commitment to overthrow feudal systems which exploited peasants through taxes, the Maoists themselves were an extractive force. In order to supply and sustain their revolution, they demanded that villagers provided food, shelter and—in some instances—taxes or financial donations.\(^5\) To garner these resources, the Maoists were willing to resort to force. Moreover, the Maoist demanded unwavering loyalty with anything short of such expectations greeted with suspicion. Subsequently, those who were not politically aligned with the Maoists were subjected to unthinkable cruelty.

Ishya sits peeling potatoes. She is quiet and submissive. Now fifty-three, she reflects on the conflict as a time of unspeakable pain. Her father was killed by the Maoists. “They blamed him for informing,” she explains. She suspects that her father was killed for being an NC supporter. After her father’s murder, Ishya’s siblings left the village, fleeing to Dang and Kathmandu. Unsurprisingly, they no longer felt safe. Ishya did not have the opportunity to follow a similar path. Today she still has pain inside, she says.

Hearing Ishya’s story, one might expect her to remain bitter and unwaveringly opposed to the Maoists. Yet, she explains that she grateful for the “better things” the Maoists have brought to villages like Mahat—roads, electricity, and water facilities. Today, she supports the Maoists.

\(^{53}\) International Crisis Group, 17.
Like Ishya, when Janu remembers the war, she remembers “that was a terrible time.” In 1997, her brother-in-law was kidnapped and killed by the Maoists for being an NC supporter. At the time, she and her husband were living in Delhi. They were forced to return to care for her parents-in-law. They were frail and her brother-in-law—now dead—had served as their caregiver.

Yet Janu’s suffering did not end with her forced return to Nepal. During the conflict, she was kidnapped and forced to hand over 3000 rupees to the Maoists. As a NC supporter, Janu felt marginalized and resented in the community. “Everyone in the village supports the Maoists,” she explains. “People hardly supported me.” So fearful of being attacked for her ideological differences, Janu refused to sleep in her own home. Instead, she spent the night in the stables alongside the animals.
Janu, 56.

Mahat village
Kamala was twelve years old when the conflict started. Like many other ordinary villagers, she recalls being caught in a crush between the Maoists and state forces. In the later stages of the war, Kamala remembers was walking to school to sit an examination when she witnessed a group of villagers being captured by the police. They were marched to the other side of the school.

Minutes later, she heard the ring of gunshots.

For Kamala, the war was exceedingly disruptive. She lost a year of education, ultimately being forced to relocate to Rukumkot to complete both year 11 and 12 the following year.

Kamala assures me that life is better because “now everything is peaceful.” Still, she is frustrated that the two sides of the conflict fought for so long only to ultimately working alongside one another. She asks: “Why did they fight to become friends?”

Kamala. Today she runs a shop selling clothes.
An Unrequited Revolution

Despite overwhelming support for the Maoists, there exist former Maoist cadres who feel abandoned by their leaders, subsequently shifting their political affiliations. While the Maoists promised a total overthrow and restructuring of an oppressive state, they readily abandon their revolutionary goals in favor of a position alongside the bourgeoisie political parties they had decried. In doing so, they betrayed the revolutionary goal of forming “a people’s democracy.”

Unlike the likes of Niraka and Kamala who willingly joined the Maoists, Ressam is what Zharkevich refers to as a “reluctant rebel.” He was pushed to join the Maoists because “all the people are Maoists.” To oppose the Maoists would bring him difficulty in the village of Thabang.

While Ressam did not actively join the Maoists, he nevertheless warmed to the Maoist message and goals. Thabang— as the “crucible of the revolution”— was subjected to intensive police raids. Ressam recalls that government forces repeatedly returned to the village and lit people’s homes on fire, forcing a mass exodus of people into the surrounding forests. Each time the police return only to unleash more brutish force. During the war, Ressam served to spread Maoist ideology. Reflecting on his experience, he is proud of his involvement because he garnered “huge respect in the community.”

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54 Zharkevich, 52.
Ressam was especially disappointed by the signature of the CPA. “We didn’t get anything,” he remarks. For Ressam, the Maoist leadership’s greatest failure was its inability to sustain and expand its jana sarkars. During the revolution, Maoist cadres enjoyed shelter and food. By contrast, the money soldiers received upon exiting cantonment camps was insufficient to sustain them. When the Maoists disbanded their revolution, they simultaneously removed the material support that had become a fundamental safety net for their supporters.

Adhikari discerns that “the peace agreements had led the Maoist leaders to abruptly abandon the organizational structures that had enabled the vast corps of cadre to exercise power and gave their lives meaning.”

“The constitution was flawed not because of any of its provisions,” he explains, “but because it signified a betrayal of the revolutionary promise: that the war would sweep away all obstacles and lead them to a realm of freedom and abundance.”

While Mahan continues to support the Prachanda’s party, he is not blind to their shortcomings. Mahan remains loyal to the party because they remain connected and attentive to people on the ground. To an

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56 Adhikari, “A Maoist Dream deferred.”
extent, the Maoists were successful in achieving “federal and social restructuring.” Yet, the full “People’s Revolution has not been attained,” he explains.

To Mahan, the leaders “have forgotten martyrs and what they endured.” Since joining the mainstream political process, Mahan believes that the Maoist leadership were “slowly becoming capitalist and living a more sophisticated life.” They were “happy to make wealth” at the expense of the people.

“If it continues then there maybe another revolution,” he says.
Conclusion: Where the Trails Fade...

When I first embarked on my trek, I expected to find stagnant communities where the conflict dominant legacy was private grief and disillusionment. These experiences do exist, yet they do not account for the full diversity of perspectives harbored in the midwestern hills. The political terrain of the region is far knottier than both Kathmandu elites and Maoist leaders claim.

In hindsight, I realize my own initial expectations largely stemmed from my time spent in Kathmandu where misconceptions about the war remain rife. In Kathmandu, many of the expats I encountered spoke of gruesome Maoist violence. They focused on the outpouring violence that emerged rather than injustices that produced it.

As an outsider, I too was disillusioned by the continued support for Maoists in the region. As many scholars and Kathmandu elites were quick to point out: today the Maoists are Maoists only in name. Meanwhile, Sumitra Manadhur commented that the Maoists “proved themselves to be as corrupt as everyone else.” Initially, I viewed the people of Rukum and Rolpa as falling into that category of marginalized people who are patronizingly understood as “voting against their own interests.” It is worthy to ask, then, who actually serves their interests? Certainly, it is unsurprising that many remain skeptical of the mainstream political who continue to neglect their plight.

While the Maoists failed on numerous fronts, Zharkevich stresses that: "the Maoist conflict made [marginalized] areas visible on the political map of the country not only by bringing them into the national imagination and political discourse but also through the development of infrastructure, such as roads, mobile towers, and electricity, which were virtually non-existent in the area prior to the conflict." For many villagers, the Maoists sustained presence in the region was a sufficient reason to remain loyal to the party.

According to Sthapit, “memory [of the conflict] lies not just in people but also in the landscape itself.” The same is true of the war’s impact. The landscape proved just as insightful as the oral accounts I collected— revealing the conflict’s contradictory legacy. In as much as the area had experienced noticeable development, with power lines and roads, poverty lingered in the form of ramshackle housing and minimal facilities. Still, this marked an improvement from the period before the war— when there were practically no facilities at all.

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57 Zharkevich, 48.
58 Sthapit et al.
Evidently, the conflict resists the simplified narratives both the Kathmandu elite and Maoist leadership have sought to impose upon it. As many of the narratives collected reveal, not all villagers were equally fervent about the revolution despite Maoist claims. Yet, whereas Kathmandu elite readily dismiss the conflict as a brief period of senseless violence to be summarily forgotten, the conflict holds a knottier legacy in the Maoist heartlands. The conflict unleashed profound suffering at the same time it ignited people’s hopes for change. For many villagers, the conflict was at the center of how they understood their position in Nepali society.

“What is now Nepal,” one Maoist supporter remarked, “is due to the revolution.”
APPENDIX

Methodology

To garner insight into the Maoist conflicts, I relied extensively on interviews. I largely conducted my interviews on an *ad hoc* basis, speaking to people I encountered while trekking the guerrilla trails. Some interviews, however, were organized through mobilizing Surendra’s local contacts. Rather than drawing on a list of predetermined questions, I asked interviewees about their relationship to and involvement in the conflict before allowing the conversation to flow naturally. Insights provided by interviews were supplemented by observations drawn from trekking and homestay experiences. Given the sensitivity of my topic, where necessary, respondents names have been identified by a pseudonym.

Suggestions for further research

As somewhat understudied regions, Rukum and Rolpa are exciting sites for future research. Given the areas are reliant on farming, future research on the impact of climate change would undoubtedly be fruitful and meaningful to local communities. Meanwhile, those interested in craftsmanship might be interested in studying hemp weaving. Development in the region is relatively. An interesting project examine local people’s perceptions of development. Finally—and I must confess my personal bias—another project on *maobadi* might explore the conflict’s legacy in a single village.
WORKS CITED


