

Marie Lecomte-Tilouine, ed. 2013. *Revolution in Nepal: An Anthropological and Historical Approach to the People's War*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Revolution in Nepal: An Anthropological and Historical Approach to the People's War, edited by Marie Lecomte-Tilouine, is a collection of essays by a diverse group of academics and public intellectuals that offers a nuanced, multifaceted (if sometimes abstruse) view to the People's War that gripped Nepali society for over a decade (1996–2006). All the authors bring to their essays a remarkable level of contextualization, theoretical grounding, and research, and the book is a stunning intellectual accomplishment in its ability to cover so much ground with such finesse in less than 500 pages. In her introduction to the book, Lecomte-Tilouine claims that “immersion at the grassroots level and as close as possible to the actors themselves” is especially important in the context of war, “with all the great complexity and passion it involves” (p. 2), and this ethos is reflected throughout the contents of the volume. The authors painstakingly engage with local dynamics, villagers' voices, and the rich and varied histories of the contexts under discussion to ultimately present analyses of the war that hold a great deal of novel insights and explanatory power.

The book is organized into three sections: “Eastward,” “Westward” and “Within the Party.” The first two sections containing four essays each, provide historical and ethnographic accounts of the Maoist movement (and its precedents), while the third section containing three essays delves deep into the workings of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist).

“Eastward” contains essays by John Whelpton, CK Lal (disclaimer: this is the reviewer's father), Martin Gaenszle *et al.* and Pustak Ghimire. Whelpton

writes about the history of political violence in Nepal, Lal provides a political biography of a significant Madhesi figure in Nepali politics, Ram Raja Prasad Singh, Gaenzle *et al.* discuss the “Chintang Incident” of 1979 and the ways in which its memory has survived, and Ghimire provides a case study of Khotang in understanding Maoist penetration into villages in eastern Nepal.

Themes that emerge as important in this section include: continuities of history and their impact on contemporary circumstances, centrality of ethnicity and violence in political consciousness, the role of unlikely alliances in perpetuating state power, and the ways in which resistance movements in Nepal have built upon each other, capitalizing upon the legacy of antecedent movements. Whelpton, in a chapter that succinctly manages to engage with hundreds of years of political history, argues that Nepal has “been the victim of a vicious cycle in which the successful use of violence encourages others to try and repeat that success” (p. 64). Lal adds a dimension to this argument by detailing how Singh’s enchantment with violence deserves special recognition because his status as “a symbol for guerrilla fighters” (p. 92) and his unapologetic emphasis on the centrality of violence in politics foreshadowed the success of the Maoists. Authors in the volume have contrasting interpretations of events that have transpired: Whelpton holds the Maoists culpable for unnecessary violence by claiming that “the Maoist leadership bears particularly heavy responsibility for choosing to move outside the system in the mid-1990s rather than to work in alliance with other leftist forces” (p. 65) while Lal is more forgiving of the violent revolutionary route and asserts that while peaceful politics could have been an effective way of doing away with the monarchy, “Perhaps the process would have taken rather longer or democratic aspirations could have ultimately tamed the all-powerful king and turned him into a rubber stamp” (p. 93). The heterogeneity of the authors’ opinions is valuable because it exposes the reader to multiple perspectives.

Gaenzle *et al.* and Ghimire’s engagements with the histories of Chhintang and Khotang allow them to challenge totalizing views about “absolute Maoist hegemony.” Gaenzle *et al.* show how Maoists exploited reverberations of leftist sentiments from the Chhintang incident, and conclude that the “Maoist policy of invoking the past and seeking to revenge the historical defeat” (p. 112) ultimately worked out. Ghimire summarizes the vast anecdotal evidence he draws upon with the assertion: “The Maobadis’ game was, thus finely tuned: those not against them were with them, whether

they liked it or not” (p. 137). Despite its many strengths, it is perhaps worth noting that Ghimire’s chapter has a major weakness – lofty statements that are too generalizing about a certain “culture.” An example of this is when he claims: “the Nepalese village society differs radically from Western societies...in a district with no television, images of violence, visions of warfare and bloodshed – all of which is rendered banal in the West by news, films, or television – are foreign to the common culture” (p. 118).

Like Gaenzle *et al.* and Ghimire, all the authors in the second section of the book, “Westward,” focus their attention on regions – Benoit Cailmail: Pyuthan, Anne de Sales: Thabang, Marie Lecomte-Tilouine: Deurali, and Satya Shrestha-Schipper: Jumla. All the authors in this section follow the anthropological methodological tenet of “thick description.” Cailmail aims to find an explanation for why the Maoists could not establish themselves firmly in a region “adjacent and historically linked to their place of birth” (p. 141) and ultimately, the hypothesis he offers is that Maoist intimidation tactics were unsuccessful because residents had the option to seek help from the Communist Party of Nepal (Masal) if they were threatened by the Maoists. de Sales’ chapter on Thabang serves as a detailed primer on how the locality gained nation-wide fame as the “anti-king village” (p. 175). Amongst the many things that she touches upon, one of particular interest is how the Maoist leaders, despite being disproportionately Brahman and Chhetri, succeeded in recruiting Magar ethnic activists. According to her, they “knew how to occupy the ideological vacuum and made this population the spearhead of their revolution” (p. 201).

Lecomte-Tilouine is concerned with the residents of Deurali village in northern Gulmi and their experience with the realities of living in a Maoist stronghold. She argues that despite being awarded the status of a “model village” by the Maoists in 2005 (p. 212), Deurali has not seen great socio-economic progress, something one might have expected from the “‘democratic’ and egalitarian ideologies” (p. 216) behind Maoist reforms. She talks about forced membership into the party, negative effects of the Maoist policy specifically on Dalits and Magars, abduction of teenagers, and general coercion and terror to demonstrate that life under Maoist governance was far from rosy.

Like Lecomte-Tilouine, Shrestha-Schipper is concerned with the understandings of villagers (in this case, the Jumlis). She believes that there was a “half hearted welcome” for Maoists, particularly in the Sinja Valley,

and support in the region was not about socio-economic marginalization. Instead it came from a mixture of vehement hatred for the Nepali Congress and fear. In Shrestha-Schipper's assessment, Jumlis have generally remained loyal to the king for a long time.

The last section of the book, "Within the Party" helps readers see the Maoist party as more than just a bureaucratic, tyrannical structure – it humanizes the members of the PLA (People's Liberation Army). Sam Cowan, a retired general of the British Army, uses video footage from the battles of Khara (April 2005) and Pili (August 2005) to provide a military assessment of the PLA. He seems to be of the general view that PLA combatants had "levels of toughness, resilience, and commitment that one looks for in the best of military organizations" (p. 329), and they were often let down by woeful lack of manpower and lousy, arrogant leadership. Cowan blames Prachanda for PLA's heavy losses in the battle of Khara.

Laurent Gayer talks about "Love-Marriage-Sex" in the PLA, noting that libidinal politics is a topic of exploration that, although important, is rare in the study of insurgent movements throughout the world. His emphasis is on how the PLA members' feelings were mobilized, formatted and tamed for the purpose of collective action, and he draws upon Lewis Coser's idea of "greedy institutions" to think about the regulation of "love" in the Maoist movement. He devotes a good chunk of the chapter talking about Comrade Parvati (Hisila Yami)'s particular brand of martial feminism, and explains the reasons why the Maoist approach to love-marriage-sex is radical and unique in some senses while incredibly puritanical in others.

The final chapter in the volume by Anna Stirr is an ethnomusicological account of the deep-rooted, historical ties between particular kinds of (hill-region based) music and nationalism in Nepal. She claims that "while the relationship between music and concerns of national unity is strongly associated with the Panchayat years of one-party monarchical rule and state-run musical production, this relationship continues into the present day..." (p. 371). Stirr analyses five Maoist songs, and offers a rich account of the ways in which the songs were a tool for promoting emotional unity in a time of instability for PLA members as well as high-ranking Maoist officials.

Although the scope of study in this volume is vast, the level of analysis is anything but superficial. All the chapters have something unique to offer and key motifs emerge that, when pieced together, help readers form their own coherent understanding of what actually happened during the long conflict.

The volume appears to be directed at students of social sciences and for a general reader, parts of the book that delve into theory may be tiresome. Also, the fact that the book is focused on the Maoist side of the People's War means that references to the role of the Nepali Army are tangential, and readers who are interested in the government's role in the war might want to look elsewhere. Nevertheless, for anyone with a desire to gain a deeper understanding of the Maoist conflict, *Revolution in Nepal* is definitely a worthwhile read.

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