

## Review Essay

### Persevere, Have Courage, and Unite: The Story of Ka Bart Pasion<sup>1</sup>

*Living in Times of Unrest: Bart Pasion and the Philippine Revolution*, by Eduardo C. Tadem. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2019. Pp. 242. ISBN 978971542895-8.

Roland G. Simbulan

I first met Ka Bart Pasion during the mid-1990s when he was a community leader of Pinatubo lahar evacuees from Mabalacat, Pampanga and later as a mass leader of the local campaign for bases cleanup of the former US military base at Clark. He spoke for and on behalf of the evacuated Pampanga farmers and for the victims of toxic and hazardous waste contamination in the Mabalacat community which was affected by the irresponsible dumping of toxic and hazardous chemical waste left behind by the former US base authorities at Clark.

Some of my old relatives from the Simbulan and Pangan families in San Simon, Pampanga also served as Hukbalahap couriers (*pasa bilis*) and Huk intel during World War II. I have also personally known other peasant Huk and later New People's Army (NPA) leaders like Juanito Rivera or Ka Juaning of Sta. Rita, Tarlac. Then there was Diosdado Layug or Apung Layug whom I met as a fellow political detainee at the Ipil Detention Center at Fort Bonifacio. I am not sure if Ka Bart had ever met Apung Layug who was already 72 years old in 1974 when I met him, but his parents were both tenanted farmers in Capas, Tarlac. Apung Layug was still a teenager when he became a member of the Socialist Party of the Philippines in the late 1930s under Pedro Abad Santos, and became a Hukbalahap guerrilla during World War II, and later a Hukbong Magpapalaya ng Bayan

(HMB) guerrilla after the war. Imprisoned many times, he joined the reestablished Communist Party of the Philippines-New People's Army (CPP-NPA) in 1968, becoming a member of its military commission and central committee, and was an NPA commander in Tarlac and Isabela. At that time in 1974, he had the longest revolutionary record at the Ipil Detention Center.

Like Juanito Rivera and Diosdado Layug, Ka Bart was one of the few peasant leaders in post-World War II Philippine history to have become part of the national leadership of the local communist movement: in the late 1960s, he was a member of the pro-Moscow Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas' (PKP) politburo and secretariat, and the head of its Communist Revolutionary Intelligence Service Commission (CRISC), according to Eduardo Tadem.

Since Ka Bart was a committed Huk veteran, and was later a part of the resistance against the Marcos dictatorship, I am unsure, had he been given the choice, whether Ka Bart would have been happy to be laid to rest at the Libingan ng mga Bayani side by side military and police counter-insurgents who had murdered and assassinated many of his comrades. It is also the burial place of local Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) cannon fodder of US imperialist wars of intervention and aggression, and worse, now the resting place of Ferdinand E. Marcos who grabbed power for another 14 years of dictatorship, enriching himself and his family by plundering the economy and imprisoning and murdering his critics and the opposition. The remains of several bemedaled World War II United States Army Forces in the Far East (USAFFE) veterans were removed from the Libingan ng mga Bayani by their families to protest the burial of Marcos whom they consider not only to be a fake war hero, but as a tyrant who impoverished the country. Ka Bart's name deserves to be placed at the Bantayog ng mga Bayani in Quezon City, which memorializes those who dared resist the Marcos dictatorship during our nation's darkest hours. Nonetheless, I have to respect the wishes of Ka Bart's family on their decision.

In the Philippines, peasants have suffered perennial hunger and poverty. Land is the basic economic resource for farmers who feed the whole population as the backbone of our economy. They break sweat from dawn till dusk—a bit more and their body will bleed from

exhaustion. They are our true heroes. Because of the backwardness of agricultural production and rudimentary tools of production, they are deep in debt and are chained to poverty.

In his book, Eduardo Tadem utilizes Ka Bart Pasion as his key informant, who opened windows and allowed a panorama of his life and struggles in sharing his deepest thoughts and feelings about his past, his visions of, and hopes for tomorrow. The author puts Ka Bart's narrative in historical context. Tadem succeeds in capturing the essence and integrity of Ka Bart's life story. This book inscribed in the memory of the Filipino people, especially the youth, the life, struggles, sacrifices, and achievements of the patriot Ka Bart, which should serve as an inspiration for the current and future generation of Filipino activists and revolutionaries. Ka Bart had the courage to persevere in our people's struggle up to the very end. He dedicated his life to unite and organize the people against oppressors, tyrants, and invaders.

The format of the book reminds me of a book put out years ago by Alfred W. McCoy, titled *Lives at the Margin: Biography of Filipinos Obscure, Ordinary & Heroic* (2004). With various American and Filipino scholars contributing, *Lives at the Margin* follows an unexplored path by studying the lives of Filipinos, ordinary and obscure. Drawing on extensive field and archival research, the book's contributors focus on the men and women who emerged from the margins of Philippine society to mobilize a mass following. Some were predators or opportunists; a few mixed cunning and violence with charisma and courage. But most acted as self-conscious agents of change who led their constituents in a struggle for social justice (McCoy 2004).

I have always wanted to see in print the life stories of our peasant and labor leaders and rank-and-file organizers like this one. They are not too many because unlike the affluent and rich, their families cannot hire writers to produce biographies or hagiographies to memorialize the members of their families.

My favorite sociologist, C. Wright Mills ([1959] 2000, 3) wrote: "Neither the life of an individual nor the history of society can be understood without understanding both." Thus, we cannot understand

individuals like Ka Bart without understanding his background or the history and the context of his actions and thinking.

Even at present, our peasants are burdened with the Tax Reform for Acceleration and Inclusion (TRAIN) Law. The flood of imported rice in the Philippines—especially after the Rice Tariffication Law was passed—results in economic losses for the farmers. And when peasants and their families severely suffer from an economic crisis and unitedly cry out against anti-people laws and programs or against oppressive landlords, they are abducted and massacred.

The peasants cry for land, but they are answered with bullets—from goons of landlords, private armies and guns-for-hire of politicians, the AFP, and the Philippine National Police (PNP). As blood spills from the lives of butchered peasants, so will their strong determination to struggle for the realization of genuine land reform and social emancipation. This is because the armed conflict in the Philippines is deeply rooted in the issues of social inequality and injustice, especially in the rural areas.

For the past nine decades since Crisanto Evangelista established the political party of the working class, and its reestablishment and reinvigoration 50 years ago, the Philippine ruling class and the state have always construed the mainstream legal Left and the armed resistance of the people as prime targets of cowardly attacks, extrajudicial killings (EJKs), and military campaigns of suppression against the civilian population. The armed apparatus of the ruling elites and its reactionary state have used EJKs, forced disappearances, and arrests under various counterinsurgency OPLANS (operations plan), committing the most brutal violations of human rights. But the people are only more outraged, intensifying their resistance. The vicious attacks (i.e., state violence to respond to peaceful protest) by the military and the police of the ruling elite do not intimidate the people but incite them further to fight even more fiercely to wage all forms of struggle against tyranny and for social justice.

Academics have attempted to frame theories on social upheavals and rebellions using the relative deprivation theory and the resource mobilization theory. Relative deprivation theory attempts to explain the emergence of social movements, and assumes that social movements

are the outgrowth of the feeling of relative deprivation among large numbers of people who, like Ka Bart, believe that they lack certain things they are entitled to: better working conditions and political rights, among others (Gurr 1970). Resource mobilization theory, on the other hand, assumes that social movements arise at certain times, and not at others because some people know how to mobilize and channel popular discontent toward building organizations for social change. Leadership and organizational format become crucial ingredients in the effectiveness of a social movement. In my view, Ka Bart's biography by Ed Tadem borrows from and applies both theories.

Essentially, the life history of the revolutionary Ka Bart is a function of the conjunction of the conditions in his social milieu. In particular, Ka Bart's life history must be understood considering his personal circumstances, the nature of his experiences in his family and community before joining the revolutionary movement, and the conditions that prompted his decision to commit himself to the revolutionary cause. Ka Bart's father, Lorenzo Dizon Pasion, and his father's comrades had a profound influence on him. Such conjuncture influences and shapes perspectives about Philippine society and the revolutionary movement.

A window to the internal struggles within the PKP is opened by Ka Bart: in his struggles against Kumander Sumulong and his clique, who degenerated into local mafia-like gangsters in Pampanga, and also against the so-called "political settlement" of the PKP with the Marcos dictatorship, which saw Ka Bart and other PKP cadres who disagreed being expelled or meted with harsh disciplinary action. But one of the harshest internal criticisms that Ka Bart shares in the book was in the late 1960s when Ka Bart chided the "Manila intellectuals" in the PKP national leadership—Paco Lava, Dodong Nemenzo, and Merlin Magallona—for not being bold enough to commit everything to the idea of revolution and service to the people. This critique was in the context of Ka Bart's suggestion that leading PKP leaders should go full-time into party-building, thus inevitably resigning from their jobs in the government or the academe, which the three refused to do. Paco Lava, who was then the PKP general secretary, was a deputy clerk of court at the Court of Appeals, while Nemenzo and Magallona were professors at the University of the Philippines. Ka Bart, who argued that many peasant and worker cadres had gone full-time into party-

building and organizing, said: “A politburo member is a vanguard. You had to be a full time revolutionary. You cannot lead a vanguard while practicing your profession.” (p. 123) The targets of his criticism continued with their full time practice of their professions, which, for Ka Bart, was the reason why party work and organizing was slow (pp. 122–23). Without saying so, Ka Bart was heeding Lenin’s call for “professional revolutionaries” especially among the vanguard party’s leadership.

Ka Bart aired these internal criticisms in the context of the reestablishment of the Marxist-Leninist-Maoist party led by Jose Ma. Sison in 1968 and later, on March 29, 1969 of the NPA when many students, farmers, and workers went full-time to build a new revolutionary underground party nationwide. Sison and other leading youth, worker, and peasant cadres, who joined the new party, came from the PKP. Faced with this split, the PKP had to reorganize itself, and had to face competition from the more aggressive and full-time leaders of the Maoist CPP-NPA.

Today, the mainstream revolutionary movement continues to recruit members, cognizant of its own rich experiences during the past administrations since the Marcos dictatorship, as well as of its own issues on theory, strategy, alliance work, and the hierarchical relationship between underground and above ground structures.

There is a recent book by an AFP intelligence analyst Lieutenant Colonel Ryan N. Severo, published in 2016 by the US Army Command and General Staff College, titled, *Philippine Counterinsurgency During the Presidency of Magsaysay, Marcos and Ramos: Challenges and Opportunities*. He cites, with envious admiration, the resilience of the reestablished and rectified CPP and its people’s army, attributing this to the fact that it is highly disciplined and deeply rooted among the masses. This is what has made the CPP-NPA insurgency the longest running armed insurgency in the world, which is still considered as the most serious security threat by the US, the European Union, and the Philippine government. The AFP intelligence analyst even opined that “the insurgents even have an effective parallel diplomatic service in many countries of the world” (Severo 2016, 97).

One of the US Embassy cables leaked out by Wikileaks a few years ago states: “The NPA remains a deadly threat throughout the Philippines, and AFP targets to end armed insurgency have been set and reset by various presidents since the time of Marcos.” The leaked US Embassy cable dated July 17, 2014 concluded that the Philippine government cannot beat the CPP-NPA: “The insurgency is apt to remain deadly and long.” Comparing the PKP and the reestablished CPP, the US Embassy said that the main difference is that the CPP has a sound mass base in both rural and urban areas. It also said that, “total victory over the insurgents in the foreseeable future remains unlikely.” The leaked cable was addressed to the Pentagon, Central Intelligence Agency, National Security Council, US Pacific Command in Honolulu, and US Diplomatic Missions in Asia.

In the recent Country Reports on Terrorism 2018 of the US State Department, the US Intelligence Community estimates that “the CPP/NPA still has approximately 4,000 well-armed members, which retains a significant amount of support from urban areas and from communities in rural areas in the Philippines. Due to its very organized underground structure and effective united front policies throughout the Philippines, it remains the number one security threat and has presence even in Manila and is still active throughout the country.”

In a recent study of the Philippine revolutionary movement, French academic Dominique Caouette, in his chapter in *Emancipatory Politics: A Critique*, observes that after almost five decades of waging a protracted people’s war, the revolutionary movement has survived because it has established deep roots among the millions of landless peasants in the countryside (Caouette 2015). The peasant movement and the armed defense in the hinterlands—by what they consider the guerrilla army of the poor—continues to organize to advance its own version of genuine land reform and to destroy the political power of the land-based exploiters and perceived oppressors of farmers, workers, and indigenous peoples.

The Philippine Left’s survival and persistence—despite all the possible versions of total war countermeasures and counterinsurgency OPLANS launched by the government and the military under various administrations, attacks against the legal Left, and others—can be attributed to its ability to genuinely address the worsening Philippine

situation and offer alternatives that allow access to basic services. As intimated above, the system of inequality, injustice, repression, and impunity only provide the breeding ground for patriots like Ka Bart and for peoples' resistance and armed conflict. Again, last December 31, 2019, the timetable for the complete defeat of the Philippine armed insurgency set by President Rodrigo Duterte's generals lapsed and again, for the nth time, the timetable was reset for a future date. In the most recent newspaper report, the timetable has yet again been reset to the end of 2022 (Jerusalem 2019).

Social injustice, state violence against peaceful dissent, impunity, and the continuous erosion of the people's faith in government and its legal system contributes more than anything to the growth and persistence of the armed insurgency. Tyrants are the armed insurgency's best recruiters; the capture or death of insurgent leaders will not stop the guerrilla army of the poor from becoming a bigger and more effective force. Thus, as intimated above, the system of social inequality, injustice, repression, and impunity only provides the breeding ground for peoples' open resistance and armed defense. Yes, as book's title states, we are still "living in times of unrest." Today, more than ever, we all need to work harder to build a strong and united front as we face the darkness that grows on our land.

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**Roland G. Simbulan** is a Professor in Development Studies and Public Management at the University of the Philippines Manila. He has written articles on the Philippine Left, the Philippine anti-US bases, anti-nuclear movements, and indigenous communities' resistance to corporate mining in the Philippines.

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## Note

1. This revised review was originally read during the book launch held at Holy Angel University, Angeles City, Pampanga on November 28, 2019.

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