

Review Essay

The Two Images of Luis Taruc¹

Born of the People: An Autobiography by Luis Taruc. New York: International Publishers, 1953. Pp. 286.

He Who Rides the Tiger: The Story of an Asian Guerrilla Leader by Luis Taruc. New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967. Pp. 188.

Francisco Nemenzo

Ghostwritten autobiographies are not unusual. What is unusual is to have two autobiographies of the same person by two ghostwriters with diametrically opposed ideologies.

Born of the People: An Autobiography by the American communist William Pomeroy and *He Who Rides the Tiger: The Story of an Asian Guerrilla Leader* by the British anti-communist Douglas Hyde both intended to use Luis Taruc as a weapon of propaganda for the opposing sides of the Cold War. A composite portrait of the man based on the two books is a creature no one can recognize. To see Taruc as a human being, the two portraits have to be viewed separately and set in different contexts.

Before discussing the two books, let me confess where I am coming from and how I had to wrestle with my conscience to dispel my initial prejudices. When I was in high school in Cebu in the early 1950s, I hero-worshipped Luis Taruc—I even dreamed of joining him in the mountains when I got older. The Huks then were riding high and I imagined Taruc as Andres Bonifacio reborn to redeem the betrayed revolution. But when I arrived in Diliman as a freshman, the Huks were already on the run and Taruc had ignominiously surrendered.

As a graduate student in the University of Manchester in England, I was proudly surprised that my new acquaintances (mostly communists and partisans of the Labor Left) had read *Born of the People* and spoke of Taruc with awe and admiration. Eager to learn more about the Huks, I rushed to London when Pomeroy arrived there to

reunite with his Filipino wife.² We became close friends. My wife and I would stay with them while in London, and they would spend holidays with us in Manchester. I therefore had ample time to ask Pomeroy about the Huks. To my disappointment, he debunked the good things he wrote about Taruc in *Born of the People*.

When I returned to the Philippines in 1965, my contact with the underground gave me a pamphlet entitled *Portrait of a Careerist*, a party document damning Taruc as an attention-seeking, treacherous, mendacious, and egocentric scoundrel. With this, I got my first party assignment: to “expose” Ka Luis in the open forum following his talk in the University of the Philippines (UP). I knew nothing about his “crimes” beyond what I heard from Pomeroy and read in the *Portrait of a Careerist*. Yet, as a new party member, I was anxious to demonstrate party loyalty. I performed the nasty task to the wild applause of an audience packed with Kabataang Makabayan (KM), the Student Cultural Association of the University of the Philippines (SCAUP), and Bagong Asya students.³ But my conscience bothered me soon after. I vilified a man without having checked the charges against him. I put party duty above my duty as a scholar. So I sought an occasion to apologize privately.

The first chance for a private apology came when Taruc and I were detained at the NRI facility in Camp Crame under martial law. However, his abominable behavior in captivity dulled my sense of guilt.⁴ I shared the sentiment of Ernie Granada (the acerbic *Manila Chronicle* columnist) who was also detained at NRI, when he told Ka Luis bluntly that his greatest tragedy was to live too long. “Had you died earlier,” Ernie said, “we would remember you as a hero. Now we just see you as a dirty old man.”

But in the 1980s, when I was beginning to be conscious of mortality, I exerted an extra effort to make amends. I accidentally met Ka Luis and Ka Reg (his brother) just before I assumed office as UP president. They invited me to the HukVets office along Kalayaan Avenue to talk about Reg’s project proposal to revive the abaca industry. I thought reviving a fiber whose value has been replaced by plastics seemed to be a foolish idea. Nonetheless, it was a chance to hear his side of the Huk story. Looking back, I suspect that neither was Ka Luis interested in abaca farming as we discussed the subject for just a few minutes in our first meeting. I readily accepted his invitation to come again. That started a series of long conversations, sharing and analyzing our experiences in the communist movement.

Let me give a brief background to his first “autobiography.” William Pomeroy joined the American communist party as a young worker in uptown New York. Although he did not have a university degree in journalism, he taught himself to write fiction and poetry, and later worked part-time for the *Daily Worker*.

He first came to the Philippines as a GI, a US army sergeant, attached to the historical unit of Douglas MacArthur’s invading force in Leyte. On his way home after Japan’s surrender, he took a leave to write about the devastation of Manila; in truth, his true intention was to seek out the communist guerrillas.

Fascinated by his newfound Filipino comrades, Pomeroy thought of expanding his *Daily Worker* articles into a full-blown history of the Hukbalahap. James Allen, the president of International Publishers, the publishing house of the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA), commissioned him to return to the Philippines to collect more materials for the book project.⁵ As operational cover, he enrolled in UP Diliman under the GI Bill of Rights.⁶ The Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (PKP) politburo assigned its only woman member, Celia Mariano, to be his guide and interpreter.⁷ They fell in love and planned to settle in the US. But the PKP would not let Celia go. As loyal communists, they agreed to stay in the Philippines for good. This necessitated drastic changes in the book. Pomeroy would blow his cover and he would surely get deported if the book appeared under his name and published by the American communist party in the heydays of McCarthyism.⁸ Thus, he hurriedly rewrote it as an autobiography of Taruc and retitled it to *Born of the People*.⁹

The change in format entailed some anomalies, which only the participants in those meetings, rallies, and battles recounted in the book could detect. In the rewritten version, all heroic episodes and all quotable quotes were attributed to Taruc, who then appeared as a quick-witted and omnipresent superman. The episodes in *Born of the People* were factual, but Taruc’s role was grossly exaggerated. In short, Pomeroy romanticized Taruc to make him look like a true communist.

The other portrait of Taruc by Douglas Hyde ought to be taken in the context of a fierce internal debate ensuing from the capture of the Manila-based politburo in 1950 and the subsequent government counteroffensive. The debate raised basic questions: Does a revolutionary situation still exist? After suffering tremendous losses, can the Hukbong Mapagpalaya ng Bayan (HMB) still withstand the

relentless military operations? Or is it time to shift gears and pursue another form of struggle?

Luis Taruc, his brother Peregrino, and Ignacio Dabu, who were based in Central Luzon, took the realistic view that the backbone of the HMB had been crushed and the remaining combatants were thoroughly demoralized. To persist in the armed struggle under such circumstances meant losing whatever was left of the party and the people's army.

By contrast, PKP general secretary Dr. Jesus Lava and secretary for military affairs Casto Alejandrino, who were based in the Southern Tagalog, stubbornly insisted that the Huks had only suffered a setback, which could be reversed by a determined counteroffensive. Abandoning the armed struggle in response to tactical reverses was to betray the revolution.

The debate came to a head when Taruc announced that he was available for press interviews in his mountain lair. He presented his personal opinions to the media as if they were the official HMB positions. These unilateral actions prompted Dr. Lava to spread the word that Taruc had been divested of the authority to speak on behalf of the party and HMB.

Taruc also claimed that Lava ordered his execution, a charge Lava denied. According to Taruc's close-in security (who was later assigned to me), he heard of the execution order only from Taruc himself. Had he and the other bodyguards received it through the party channel, they would have been obliged to kill their boss. Whether true or imagined, the threat to his life provided Taruc an excuse for surrendering to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) agent Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino Jr.

Taruc claimed that he surrendered because of Ninoy's assurance of presidential clemency. President Ramon Magsaysay, however, reneged on the promise because Taruc failed to deliver what was expected of him, that is, the laying down of arms by the entire HMB. Since he acted on his own without consulting the politburo, even his bodyguards refused to go with him along that shameful path.

I cannot be too harsh on Ka Luis, even if I deplore the way he ended his revolutionary career. He was a charismatic figure who was sincerely committed to the legitimate cause of the peasantry. Despite his capitulation, no one can delete from history his role in the struggle against fascism and the neocolonial government.

Sadly, he negated his contributions to the revolutionary movement in a vain effort to placate the ruling class. The process of self-destruction started with the visit of Douglas Hyde to Camp Panopio, where Taruc was kept away from his hardline comrades.

Douglas Hyde had no relation to Mr. Hyde in Robert Louis Stevenson's horror novella, but he resembled the evil alter ego of the gentle Dr. Jekyll. Douglas Hyde transfigured himself more times than Dr. Jekyll: from being a minister of the Methodist Church, he shifted to communism,¹⁰ then converted to Roman Catholicism, and, before his death, proclaimed himself an "agnostic Christian" (whatever that means).

In Camp Panopio, Hyde proposed to retouch Taruc's public image into a repentant sinner, a god-fearing liberal. Thinking perhaps that a public act of contrition would get him out of jail, Taruc authorized Hyde to write *He Who Rides the Tiger*. In this bogus autobiography, Hyde tells an incredible story of a devout Catholic whose passionate love for the peasants made him an easy prey to communist manipulation. In all innocence, he joined the armed rebellion, but deep inside he remained religious and cherished the values of American liberalism.

It is obvious from his pronouncements, even before he turned renegade, that he had little understanding of Marxist theory. But that is not unusual in the communist movement. Only a few party members actually studied Marx and Lenin. Most Filipino communists are like most Filipino Christians who never read the Bible. Driven by hatred for their masters rather than fear of eternal damnation, they gambled their lives in the armed rebellion.

During the years I was in the party, I met several comrades who wore rosaries like amulets, indulged in self-flagellation during Good Fridays, venerated all sorts of supernatural beings, and fervently aspired for eternal bliss. These pseudo-Christian pagan practices imbued them with extraordinary courage. But they were no less trustworthy than the atheists. If cultural anthropologists speak of "folk Christianity," we can also speak of "folk Marxism"—both are outcomes of indigenizing foreign ideas (Nemenzo 1984).

Anyone who knows the tortuous processes of recruitment and promotion in an underground party cannot believe that Taruc was never a communist, as he claims in Hyde's "autobiography." And he was not an ordinary cadre; he was for many years a member of the central committee, the politburo, and the secretariat.

Ka Luis was not naive, as Douglas Hyde painted him. He was street smart, even if unsophisticated. He feigned humility and spoke in the servile style of a Filipino peasant, sprinkling his talk with the respectful Tagalog word *po*. He typified what Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Marxist theoretician, called an “organic intellectual.”

He was not exactly a military man. His former bodyguards recalled that when caught in tight situations, they always followed their instincts because they had little faith in the “supremo’s” tactical judgment. Taruc’s role in the movement was that of a spokesman and rallying symbol rather than a commander. Few could match his eloquence in mass meetings and his persuasiveness in private chats. In a rebel army whose survival depends on people’s support, such talent is a great military asset. The common folks genuinely loved him while he was in the movement. Even when he was already consorting with the enemy, the rank and file Huks still regarded him with affection.

In our long conversations at the HukVets headquarters, Ka Luis convinced me of the correctness of his assessment of the political situation in 1951 to 1953. Jose Lava’s decision in 1950 to seize power in two years was indeed an adventurist error, for which the movement had to pay a very heavy price.

But I vehemently disagreed on the wisdom of his decision to enter into peace talks with Magsaysay’s emissary without consulting the other members of the party leadership. The timing was utterly wrong. An honorable political settlement is possible only when the enemy realizes that he remains vulnerable unless he grants political and economic concessions not only to the rebels but also to their mass supporters.

Despite heavy losses, at the time Taruc surrendered in 1954, the remaining HMB contingents, although fragmented and disoriented, still had the capability to strike the government forces with small-scale guerrilla operations. If the oversized field commands were broken up into small mobile units, the Huks could have created favorable conditions for a genuine political settlement. But by negotiating on his own, as well as ignoring his colleagues in the collective leadership, Taruc inadvertently showed the public that he was not in command of the HMB.

After giving himself up, even those who sympathized with his belated complaint that the government betrayed its promise of presidential clemency turned their backs on him. Magsaysay and the Joint US Military Advisory Group (JUSMAG) were not interested in

Taruc alone; they wanted nothing less than the surrender of the entire Huk army.

Had the politburo planned an orderly retreat, discarding the “early seizure of power orientation” and aiming at the more modest goal of making the neocolonial government conscious of its vulnerability, perhaps there could have been an honorable, not a humiliating end to the civil war. And Luis Taruc might have emerged as the champion of the peasant cause, not the repentant rebel pleading for mercy from a government he once denounced as oppressive, subservient, and corrupt.

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Notes

1. This is an expanded version of a paper delivered at the post-screening forum of “Alipato: The Luis Taruc Story,” at Cine Adarna on October 29, 2019. Since the four panelists had only 10 minutes to speak, I deleted several paragraphs in my presentation but restored them here.

2. After serving 10 years in prison for rebellion, Pomeroy was deported to the US but the US would not allow his Filipino wife to enter “the land of the brave and the free.” The British government granted them political asylum in 1963. They lived in London until they died a few years ago.

3. KM was the legal youth organization of Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (PKP), SCAUP was the mother organization of KM, while Bagong Asya was an organization of the UP Institute of Asian Studies (now the Asian Center) students which became a close ally of KM and SCAUP.

4. He would spend hours peeping through a crack on the wall separating the male and female detainees. I was deeply annoyed because one of the female detainees was my wife.

5. James Allen had a special interest in the Philippines. He came here as a correspondent of *Pacific Affairs*. In the course of his work, Allen befriended President Manuel Quezon and was recruited as consultant for the social justice program of the Commonwealth government. He was instrumental in the merger of the PKP and the Socialist Party of Pedro Abad Santos. I had a brief interview with him when he was a guest of the Pomeroy family in London.

6. In UP, Pomeroy took up AB English, joined the UP Writers' Guild, and became the editor of the *Literary Apprentice* before going underground to join the Huks.

7. Celia was a UP graduate and a former English teacher.

8. *Born of the People* was republished in India, Czechoslovakia, Cuba, and other communist countries before Taruc broke with the PKP.

9. Pomeroy entrusted the original manuscript to Prof. Gabriel Bernardo, director of the UP Library, before he went underground. He requested me to retrieve it, but I was told that Mrs. Bernardo had donated all PKP documents to Ateneo. Unfortunately, the Ateneo librarian could not find it among the Bernardo papers.

10. Hyde was the news editor of the London *Daily Worker* before becoming a Catholic and a darling of British intelligence.

Reference

Nemenzo, Francisco. 1984. "The Millenarian-Populist Aspects of Filipino Marxism." In *Marxism in the Philippines: Marx Centennial Lectures*, edited by the UP Third World Studies Center. Diliman: Third World Studies Center.