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“Subversive Lives”: Memories of Struggle and Despair in the Philippines - A review

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***Subversive Lives: A Family Memoir of the Marcos Years.* Susan F. Quimpo and Nathan Gilbert Quimpo. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2016. 485 pages, index. Reviewed by Alex de Jong.**

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In the foreword to (*Subversive Lives: A Family Memoir of the Marcos Years*, the authors write it “was not intended to be about communists and communism”—still the book provides remarkable insights into the Philippine communist movement. The book is a collective memoir of the surviving Quimpo family, relating their lives during the years of the Marcos dictatorship from the early seventies to the mid-eighties. With many of the siblings involved in the revolutionary movement, their memories furnish stories of underground organizing, imprisonment and torture, repression and resistance.

The name Quimpo would be familiar to students of the history of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). Nathan Gilbert Quimpo, one of the main authors of the book, was, in the early eighties, a leading cadre in the movement on Mindanao. The second largest and southernmost major island of the Philippine archipelago, Mindanao became a bulwark of the communist rebels during those years. Although the movement, and especially its guerrilla wing, has diminished since then, it remains powerful, especially in Mindanao.

Under various pen names, Nathan Quimpo wrote several papers in the early eighties criticizing the CPP’s Maoist strategy of “protracted people’s war,” or PPW in the often-used short-hand. The PPW strategy argued that the party should build up armed strength in the rural areas until its guerrilla forces were strong enough to defeat the government army in regular battle, encircle the cities, and take power. Inspired by the example of the Nicaraguan revolution and the rapid development of militant mass movements in Mindanao, Quimpo, on the other hand, argued for a strategy in which urban protests and insurrection would play a decisive role.

Such debates were of literal life-and-death importance for Philippine leftists. On September 21, 1972, President Ferdinand Marcos had declared martial law, making himself dictator. Under Marcos, the Philippines became a model of crony capitalism; state power and policies were crafted to the benefit of the Marcos family, relatives, and friends. Democratic freedoms were abolished, opposition activists were jailed, and often tortured and murdered—everything to keep Marcos and his allies in power. The declaration of martial law followed a series of militant protests in the early 1970s against the government’s increasing authoritarianism, corruption, and subservience to U.S.

imperialism.

This “First Quarter Storm” also drew the first of the Quimpo siblings into radical politics. The movement was set off by student protests but rapidly escalated. Protesters stormed the U.S. embassy, hurled a burning effigy of a crocodile (symbol of corruption) at Marcos, and hijacked a fire truck to ram the gates of Malacañang Palace, the presidential residence. For many of the participants, it felt as if they were involved in a dress rehearsal for a revolution that would sweep away the ills plaguing the Philippines, such as the dominance of the United States and the stranglehold of the local oligarchy on democracy. The police responded with deadly violence, killing several over the span of these weeks.

When the protests broke out, the Philippine left was still at a low point. A guerrilla insurgency led by the Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (PKP) was defeated in the fifties, partly because of U.S. support for the Philippine state. The PKP barely survived. Just before the First Quarter Storm, the party had started to reorganize itself, setting up legal organizations that would draw new people into the movement. But some of the new radicals attracted to the PKP, inspired by Mao’s China, favored restarting the armed struggle. In 1968, a small group “refounded” the party, now using the English name, and adopted Maoism and its strategy of armed revolution. A few months later, the fledgling party joined with a remnant of the old guerrilla movement, which formed its armed wing, the New People’s Army (NPA).

For many participants in the protests of 1970, the Maoist guerrillas were a distant phantasm, an inspiring myth, but part of a reality many of the urban, middle-class students had difficulty relating to. *Subversive Lives* relates how at one of the protests, a speaker rouses the crowd with made-up stories of communist guerrillas shooting down army helicopters. In the following years, however, many would find their way to the CPP and the NPA.

When Marcos declared martial law and the government cracked down on all opposition, young activists, many of them barely out of their teens, were decisive in reorganizing the suddenly illegal movement. They eventually built the CPP and its allies, the “National-Democratic” movement, into a formidable opposition force.

An Extraordinary Family

The oldest Quimpo sons were the first to be attracted to the radical movement, inspiring several of their siblings to follow. It was a commitment that often came at a high cost. One son, Ronald Jan F. Quimpo, was “disappeared” by the army, and another, Ishmael “Jun” Quimpo, joined the guerrilla forces but was killed by a comrade. Several of the siblings were arrested and relate experiences of beatings, electric shocks, sexual assault, and other forms of torture. Susan Quimpo, the youngest of the siblings and the other main author, writes, “For most, myself included, it seemed like there was no tomorrow. When my brother Jun died at the age of 24, I caught myself thinking, ‘That is a good ripe age to die for one’s principles.’ I knew Jun was ready to die for the revolution, and it seemed most of the *kasama* [comrades] felt the same way. An early death was a risk that just came with the territory.”

The format of *Subversive Lives*, with separate chapters written by different authors, provides a kaleidoscopic view of the movement as it developed. Susan and Nathan Quimpo have different but complementary styles of writing. After breaking with the party, Nathan Quimpo began a scholarly career, writing *Contested Democracy and the Left in the Philippines After Marcos* and becoming an associate professor in Japan. His writing is analytical and constrained. Susan Quimpo, who felt unable to make the sort of commitment she saw in Jun, always refused to join the party. As a

member of a leftist cultural performance group and as a reporter, she witnessed brutal police violence. Her writing is more evocative, and her account of a police assault on striking workers is especially moving.

The book gives the reader an idea of what life was like in the Philippines for a family like the Quimpos. Their family was unusual in that so many of the siblings joined the movement, but in other aspects, the experiences of the Quimpo household must have been similar to those of many others whose children joined the revolution. Like many in the Philippines, the Quimpos grew up as practicing Catholics. The father, Ishmael de los Reyes Quimpo, was the breadwinner and disciplinarian, while the mother, Esperanza Ferrer Quimpo, stayed at home and looked after the children. The father had a middle-class, white-collar job, but with ten children, the family struggled to make ends meet. Not only the gender division of labor, but also the emotional dynamics in the family were traditional. Her daughter Susan relates how Esperanza sacrificed her own happiness and her life's wishes for the family. The sons and the father were unable to express their love for each other. When the sons joined the movement, they were not only rebelling against the government, but also against the authority of their father. Ishmael de los Reyes Quimpo died while one of his sons was in custody and others in hiding. The impact of martial law and political struggle reached far beyond the ranks of activists.

For the Country and the People

A driving force behind the publication of *Subversive Lives* was historian Vicente L. Rafael. Rafael, a scholar of colonialism and nationalism, also offers a foreword in which he describes Philippine communism as "nationalism's uncanny other":

Communism has been part of Philippine modernity for over a century. It has supplied nationalism with its anti-imperialist outlook, mass movements with much of their organizational structure, and even civil society with the ideological ballast of "national-democracy." But unable to seize state power, communism has also been relegated to the margins of Filipino historical consciousness.

The term "communism" is used here, and throughout the book, to refer to the Philippine inflection of Maoism, a movement that still dogmatically continues to insist on its supposed monopoly on being "left-wing."

Subversive Lives shows how this movement was able to become an integral part of Philippine society by connecting with two existing, strong traditions: nationalism and religion, especially Roman Catholicism. After being granted independence by the United States, the country remained under the influence of its former colonial master. For many in the Philippines, the United States is simultaneously admired, envied, and resented. In the revolutionary mythology of the CPP, their struggle is first of all one of national liberation from U.S. imperialism. With this, it is the heir of previous anti-colonial movements. The social force that would realize this liberation is "the Philippine people" in the classic Maoist conception of a multi-class bloc of the national bourgeoisie, petty bourgeois, peasants, and workers.

This worldview sees the essence of the Philippine people in the last two classes, that is, in the poor. The poor are more than a social layer that has the potential to break the power of imperialism; in a fusion of Maoist populism and Christian reverence for suffering, "the poor" become the incarnation of the good. The CPP's links with a movement that was developing a Philippine version of Liberation Theology, Christians for National Liberation (CNL), provided them with important local roots. Many in the CPP would agree with words of liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez: "We find the Lord in our encounters with men, in particular with the poorest, marginalized and exploited by other men. A

gesture of love toward them is a gesture toward God.” A CNL slogan summed up the Philippine encounter of Maoism and Catholicism: “Love thy neighbor; serve the people.”

References to communism as a “gospel” and party cadres as “missionaries” show the influence of this sensibility, even among activists who were not explicitly religious. Undoubtedly, this sensibility was an important source of inner strength for many activists faced with hardship and danger—but as the poor became an ideal, they also became less real as human beings, as individuals, capable of fighting for their own emancipation.

A Continuing Past

The period covered by the book ends soon after the fall of Marcos in the 1986 “People Power” rebellion. After years of building the resistance against the dictatorship and increasingly feeling the struggle was a direct confrontation between the CPP on the one hand, and the U.S.-backed Marcos regime on the other, the Communists were outmaneuvered by the bourgeois opposition. The dictator fell as a result of an unexpected popular urban insurrection, and Cory Aquino, the widow of the murdered liberal opposition leader Benigno Aquino, was brought to power. The party was at its peak but unable to steer developments or even to decisively influence events. An intense debate on strategy, inner-party democracy, and alliance-building erupted in the party but was shut down in the early nineties by founding chair Jose María Sison and his circle. He imposed a return to Maoist orthodoxy and expelled dissidents, leading to a series of severe splits. Several former members who had broken with the party and criticized its orientation were killed by their former comrades. The party eventually stabilized, much more homogeneous than before but severely contracted in size and influence.

Almost half a century after the beginning of its armed struggle, the NPA today is smaller than it was in the mid-eighties. Suggesting he would be able to play an “anti-imperialist” role, the CPP recently made a disastrous attempt at building an alliance with the current far-right Philippine president, Rodrigo Duterte.

By that time however, the Quimpos had already long left the movement, breaking with the party in the post-dictatorship period. That their past is not just past was made clear after the publication of the U.S. edition of *Subversive Lives*; outreach for talks by Susan Quimpo had to be limited and one talk canceled after U.S.-based CPP supporters spread the claim she was misrepresenting the history of the movement. But the history of Jun and Jan Quimpo, and of so many other Filipinos who sacrificed in the struggle against oppression, does not belong to the CPP’s leaders and their apologists.

Subversive Lives shares an essential piece of history and deserves to be read by anyone with an interest in the Philippine and international struggle for liberation.

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P.S.

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