

Guevara, Debray, and Armed Revisionism

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“This revisionist deviation has taken on in the past both a ‘left’ and an openly right-wing form. The modern revisionists preached, especially in the past, the ‘peaceful transition to socialism’ and promoted the leadership of the bourgeoisie in the national liberation struggle. However this openly capitulationist, right-wing revisionism always corresponded with, and has become increasingly intermingled with, a kind of ‘left’ armed revisionism, promoted at times by the Cuban leadership and others, which separated the armed struggle from the masses and preached a line of combining revolutionary stages into one single ‘socialist’ revolution, which in fact meant appealing to the workers on the narrowest of bases and negating the necessity of the working class to lead the peasantry and others in thoroughly eliminating imperialism and the backward and distorted economic and social relations that foreign capital thrives on and reinforces. Today this form of revisionism is one of the major planks of the social-imperialist attempt to penetrate and control national liberation struggles.” (Revolutionary Internationalist Movement [RIM] 1984, 33)

Over 15 years after his murder by CIA-trained soldiers, the image of Che Guevara retains a certain power among the revolutionary-minded. To many he still seems the man of action who cut through the endless excuses and equivocations of the old-line revisionist parties in Latin America. More than a few profess to see important differences between Guevara and Fidel Castro, who, in the period after Guevara’s death, steered Cuba ever more firmly into an open and passionate embrace of the Soviet Union. Others even liken Guevara to Mao Tsetung.* And with Guevara’s influence so too goes the influence of *focoism*, the military and political doctrine which he developed and attempted to implement, and which was systematized into the book *Revolution in the Revolution?* by Guevara’s erstwhile acolyte Régis Debray.

Yet appearance and essence stand at odds in Che Guevara. Ever ready to criticize and denounce revisionism in public forums, he predicated his entire project on the support of the revisionist parties and the Soviet Union; constantly calling attention to the vulnerability of the U.S. to revolutionary initiatives, he resisted rallying forth the most massive and potentially powerful revolutionary forces on the Latin American continent. Indeed, in the end, Guevara set himself in opposition to revolution internationally.

* E.g., the almost routine characterization by bourgeois scholars of the 1966-70 period in Cuba as the “Mao-Guevara period,” or the revolutionary writings of George Jackson which point to “men who read Mao, Che and Fanon” as the revolutionary element among prisoners.

Because Guevara is associated with the revolutionary upsurge of the 1960s, and because he fell from the bullets of agents of U.S. imperialism, such an assertion is bound to evoke emotion. Yet emotion and sentiment must be put aside. Guevarism retains influence as a political line, and while the Soviets (and Cubans) internationally often tend to rely more on elements *within* the armed forces to carry out their strategy of armed revisionism, they pay no small attention to the directions and activities of the neo-Guevarist groups. Particularly in situations of acute political crisis, efforts are made to both foster these neo-Guevarist forces and bring them more firmly on board the overall revisionist project. Because of all this, Guevarism (and Guevara himself) must be scientifically evaluated in terms of its objective social role. This article will examine the military and political line of Guevarism, its conception of revolution, and its social and material roots. Central to it will be unraveling the paradox of Che Guevara - the foe of revisionism who maligns it the better to rely on it.

I

In early 1966 Castro and Guevara brought Régis Debray* to Cuba for discussions on guerrilla war. The Cubans had asked Debray to prepare a polemic which would synthesize the experiences of the Cuban Revolution into a military doctrine and political line distinctively suited to Latin American conditions. The end product of these discussions – Debray’s book, *Revolution in the Revolution?* - is the single most concentrated exposition of Guevarism. The central theses of Guevarism run something like this: (1) The revolution in Latin America has been delayed because the revolutionaries have remained in thrall to one or another wrong line, or "imported misconception"; (2) The Maoist model of a people’s war - which in vast areas of the Third World includes as a crucial element relying on the masses of peasantry and utilizing base areas from which to wage the military struggle - simply does not apply in Latin America due to different objective conditions, principally the more developed state of the countryside and the sparser and allegedly more passive character of the peasantry; (3) At the same time, the views of the Moscow-influenced CPs (which only used armed struggle as an adjunct to their legalistic/parliamentary maneuvers) and the Trotskyites (who tailed an anarcho-syndicalist line of workers’ self-defense) are no better, since after decades of their implementation they have not led to revolution; (4) The real key to revolution on the Latin American continent lay in studying the Cuban example, where a small band of men built an armed unit in the countryside independent of the peasantry and grew through engaging the regime’s army in battle. These military *focos* could and had to be reproduced throughout Latin America. In the words of Debray, this line gave a "concrete answer to the question: How to overthrow the power of the capitalist state? ... The Cuban Revolution offers an answer to fraternal Latin American countries which has still to be studied in its historical details: by means of the more or less slow building up, through guerrilla warfare carried out in suitably chosen rural zones, a *mobile strategic force*, a nucleus of a people’s army and of a “future socialist state” (Debray 1967, 24).

* Debray, of course, no longer holds to the positions he set forth in his book. Nevertheless, since it is the most concentrated and influential exposition of Guevarism, much of this polemic will necessarily take up the arguments in his book, *Revolution in the Revolution?*, in particular. We note in passing that Mr. Debray currently serves as an important figure in the Mitterrand regime - having recently traveled to Nicaragua to "express concern at violations of the democratic process by the Sandinista government" on behalf of Mr. Mitterrand. Debray's latest book is a celebration of the progressive role of French nationalism in today's world.

Revolution in the Revolution? focused its main attack on military line against Mao Tsetung's conception of people's war, particularly Mao's stress on mobilizing the peasantry and building up base areas from which to wage the war. (At bottom lay a more fundamental difference concerning the role of the masses in revolutionary war altogether.) Let us begin by examining the main arguments made on this point.

Role of the Peasantry

As noted, the foco line entailed a basic rejection of any orientation toward the peasantry as a crucial revolutionary force. Debray insisted on this. Rejected as well was the revolutionary experience in China and Vietnam. There, Debray wrote, "the high density of the peasant population, the over-population of the villages and towns, and the marked predominance of the peasantry over the urban population permit revolutionary propagandists to mingle easily with the people, 'like fish in the water.'"

In Latin America, on the other hand,

The guerrilla focus, when they first begin their activity, are located in regions of highly dispersed and relatively sparse population. Nobody, no new arrival, goes unnoticed in an Andean village, for example. Above all else, a stranger inspires distrust. The Quechua or Cakchiquel (Mayan) peasants have good reason to distrust the "outsider," "the white man." They know very well that fine words cannot be eaten and will not protect them from bombardment. The poor peasant believes, first of all, in anyone who has a certain power, beginning with the power to do what he says. The system of oppression is subtle: it has existed from time immemorial, fixed, entrenched, and solid. The army, the *guardia rural*, the *latifundista's* private police, or nowadays the "Green Berets" and Rangers, enjoy a prestige all the greater for being subconscious. This prestige constitutes the principal form of oppression: it immobilizes the discontented, silences them, leads them to swallow affronts at the mere sight of a uniform. (Debray 1967, 50-51)

The contempt that drips from this passage is little short of incredible - contempt both for the peasantry and for history. From reading it you'd never know that there was a rich tradition of peasant rebellions in Latin America. Castro's own native province, the Oriente (which was also the stronghold of the rebel army) had seen over 20 peasant rebellions between 1900 and 1959. In Bolivia (where Guevara was directing his thoughts), the peasant revolt had constituted the main fighting force of the 1952-53 Revolution. Going back slightly further, of course, there had been the insurgency led by Sandino in Nicaragua in the '30s, the peasant rebellions in El Salvador in the same period (in which 30,000 peasants were murdered in the repression that followed), the series of revolutions in Mexico in the early part of the century predominantly fought by the peasantry, etc.*

* Elsewhere Debray notes in passing the military mobilization of the Colombian peasantry during 'La Violencia,' the bloody quasi-civil war of the late '40s and early '50s, and refers at another point to the original Indian uprising against the Spaniards in Peru, led by Tapac Amaru II. But even these lonely examples are one-sidedly dismissed as showing the inappropriateness of the peasant war to liberation in Latin America, since they did not, obviously, in themselves lead to emancipation.

For Guevarism the peasantry's ill-fittedness for revolutionary struggle is no minor matter. It lays at the heart of its political line, and Debray returned to it repeatedly. Debray cites Guevara's "three golden rules" as "constant vigilance, constant mistrust, constant mobility" and goes on to say that

Various considerations of common sense necessitate wariness toward the civilian population and the maintenance of a certain aloofness. By their very situation civilians are exposed to repression and the constant presence and pressure of the enemy, who will attempt to buy them, corrupt them, or to extort from them by violence what cannot be bought. Not having undergone a process of selection or technical training, as have the guerrilla fighters, the civilians of a given zone of operations are more vulnerable to infiltration or moral corruption by the enemy. (Debray 1967, 43)

Did Debray and Guevara, then, merely construct a slander of the peasantry with absolutely no basis in fact? Hardly. The pervasiveness of backward ideas, the terror unleashed against those who resist, the legacy and continued power of feudal relations, are all too real. But whether through tendentiousness or due to problems with mechanical and undialectical thinking, Guevara and Debray seized on one aspect of the truth only to erase what lies at the essence of the question - the revolutionary potential of the peasantry - the revolutionary potential of the peasantry (recognition of which, incidentally, has historically been a point demarcating Leninism from social-democracy, Trotskyism and revisionism). Mao in particular utilized dialectics to distinguish between different strata in the countryside and to grasp their contradictory motion and potential. He developed the approach of relying on the poor peasants while fighting to win over the more middle elements and to neutralize (or in different settings to win over) the rich peasants. (And anyone who thinks Mao was a starry-eyed idealist with no understanding of the difficulties of arousing the peasantry and raising its political consciousness need only read his essays on the subject.)

The question was, and is, so crucial because of the persistence of feudal and semifeudal relations and survivals in Latin America, and the consequent importance of agrarian revolution to the revolution as a whole in the countries of that region. This is true despite the significant transformation of feudal agriculture that has gone on there since World War 2.*

The crucial point to grasp here is that the societies in question are oppressed nations, integrated into a subordinate relation to the imperialist countries. Agriculture, in both its feudal/semifeudal and "capitalist" forms in the oppressed nations, is integrated (along with industry) into the matrix of international accumulation which is fundamentally controlled by finance capital rooted in the imperialist nations. From this results the grotesque distortion and disarticulation of the agricultural sectors of these countries, in which certain areas are developed by finance capital (either through direct investment, or more often

* These transformations have led some - including some of today's neo-Guevarists - to claim that agriculture is now almost entirely capitalist in Latin America, and to adduce this as yet another argument against revolutionary war based in the peasantry. Neither Debray nor Guevara raised this particular argument, though traces of it can be seen in Debray's book. The rightist character of this line comes out in linking a denial of feudal and/or semifeudal relations to outright opposition to revolutionary war of the masses in the countryside when they do wage it; see for instance "Capitalist Democracy in Peru," by Petras, Morely and Havens in *New Left Review* No. 142, in which the authors attack the armed struggle led by the Communist Party of Peru for "curtailing the opportunities of the Left and [perhaps leading] to a military takeover regardless of popular disdain for the armed forces."

through loans, state aid, etc., funneled through the local bureaucrat-capitalists in the state sector and/or the big feudal landowners), while others are left to stagnate and rot. And even in those areas which *are* integrated into finance capital's circuit of accumulation it is often the case that feudal holdings are maintained and propped up, while the exploitation of the peasantry is intensified to satisfy the demands of the world market.

Thus the countrysides of Latin America often appear to be patchworks of different kinds of production relations: there are plantations depending on *minifundia*, old-style *latifundia*, kulak-type freeholders, corporate farms and farms producing for the international market but still held by old feudal lords. The peasantry is often subjugated in a manner little different from before. The feudal landholding classes typically retain their despotic hold over much of the countryside, terrorizing the peasantry with the rural *guardias* and local police; even where relations have been partially transformed toward capitalist ones this feudal tradition has been retained and often intensified so as to contain social unrest arising from the transformation that *has* occurred. The continued severe oppression of women in the countryside and the barbaric oppression visited against the Indian peoples sharply express the persistence of these feudal and sernifeudal relations, in both base and superstructure (as does the continued power of the feudal classes in the key institutions of the state and political life, including the army).

Meanwhile a landless peasantry and rural proletariat arise side by side with the remaining tenant farmers and semi-independent subsistence farmers. Politically combustible material accumulates in the countryside, and the demand for land - even among the expropriated peasantry early in the process of proletarianization - can be explosive, as evidenced by the important squatters' movement in the relatively highly capitalist sugar districts of Cuba's Oriente province during the 1950s.

All this points to the continued importance of the agrarian revolution in almost all Latin American countries, and to the objective basis to rely on and unleash the rural masses as the main strategic ally (and in many cases the main fighting force) of the revolution. And it points as well to the inextricable link between the revolutionary struggle against the feudal and semifeudal relations and survivals, and the struggle for national liberation: the two are inseparable.

As to Debray's point on the low population density in many Latin American rural areas and on the high percentage - in some cases - of population located in the cities: while very important, with few exceptions this does not obviate the need for mobilizing the masses of peasantry and carrying forward the agrarian revolution. The *Declaration of the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement* notes in reference to this that

The relative weight of the cities in relation to the countryside, both politically and militarily, is an extremely important question that is posed by the increased capitalist development of some oppressed countries. In some of these countries it is correct to begin the armed struggle by launching insurrections in the city and not to follow the model of surrounding the cities by the countryside. Moreover, even in countries where the path of revolution is that of surrounding the city by the countryside, situations in which a mass upheaval leads to uprisings and insurrections in the cities can occur and the party should be prepared to utilize such situations within its overall strategy. However in both these situations, the party's ability to mobilize the peasants to take part in the revolution under proletarian leadership is critical to its success. (RIM 1984, 36-37)

But this central truth on the importance of the peasantry was ignored and/or opposed by Guevara and Debray. Just how off-base and antirevolutionary their stand toward the peasantry really was comes out in their line on the Indian national question within Latin American society. Debray treats this more or less in passing but (as can be seen from his previously cited passage on the peasantry's backwardness) it is plain that he sees the presence of large and viciously suppressed Indian populations in the countryside of (especially) Guatemala and the Andean nations as *obstacles* to revolution. (Guevara's practice in Bolivia, to be addressed later, reflected this same view.) This seems a reflection of, or at least an adaptation to, the outlook of the suppressed bourgeois forces in Latin America who at times resist the national oppression they suffer at the hands of the U.S. (and other imperialists), but attempt simultaneously to prevent the really oppressed masses from getting "out of control" and to maintain their own national privileges vis-à-vis these masses. (Indeed, they will utilize such national oppression if they succeed in replacing the compradors whom they fight.) Without portraying the Indians as some sort of ideal revolutionary force, it should be noted that in the majority of countries in Latin America which witnessed significant guerrilla uprisings during the 1960s - including Peru, Guatemala, and Colombia - the Indian question was extremely important and Indians often made up an important social base for and a big percentage of the fighting force. No genuine revolution against the prevailing social relations could negate this important question or afford to stand aloof from this important section of the masses and its struggles. Debray's view toward the Indians is a product and reflection of the whole Guevarist line, insofar as that line resists mobilizing the peasantry and opposes targeting the backward semifeudal relations (including national oppression within Latin American society).

To sum this up: the domination of imperialism is bound up with the disarticulated character of agriculture in the oppressed nations, including the persistence of various forms of feudal relations and survivals. By the same token, continued disarticulation, feudal survivals, etc., serve to reproduce and reinforce those relations of domination. On the other hand, this severe oppression inevitably generates resistance among the peasantry and the agricultural proletariat and semiproletariat - resistance which must be channeled and led towards revolution by the proletariat. To attempt to skip over arousing and leading the peasant masses to carry through an agrarian revolution means to leave that domination intact. Even if a new regime should come to power, the form may change - state bureaucrats and ex-guerrillas may replace those who formerly managed the more profitable farms - but imperialism will continue to dominate. The less profitable sectors of agriculture will continue to stagnate, the masses will be squeezed and the patterns and structure of production, trade, etc., will remain the same. This is, with some variation, exactly what happened in Cuba, and later, Ethiopia, and Angola (more on this later). When those who want to shortcut mobilizing the masses, especially the peasantry, for people's war speak of revolution, in truth they can only mean their own ascent to power, and that alone; and this is so even if done in the name of more quickly carrying the insurgency through, as Debray and Guevara attempted to do it. The real transformation of the social relations, the "springing of society into the air," in Marx's phrase, is evidently irrelevant to their calculations.

There is a further implication to this entire line on the peasantry. If one posits an armed force in the countryside existing without the active support of the peasantry - indeed, if one is strenuously arguing against even daring to politically mobilize these masses - *who*, then, *is* to be relied upon? While Debray and Guevara never got around to explicitly spelling out their plans on this point, we shall argue later that they envisioned their focus marching at the head of a coalition of the revisionist parties and the radical bourgeois (and petty-bourgeois) democrats. These forces, Guevara reckoned, could be hammered together

to defeat the old regimes, seize power, grant reforms in the name of the masses, and then proceed with political consolidation.

Base Areas

Debray devotes a significant section of his book to a polemic against the strategic goal of constructing base areas for the revolutionary forces in the countryside, at least until the rebel forces are on the very verge of seizing nationwide political power. He attributed the failure of a number of attempts at rural guerrilla war in the early '60s in Latin America to premature building of base areas.

To begin with, while the forces evidently referred to by Debray may have attempted to actually mobilize the masses and may, perhaps, have been influenced by Mao, it is hardly correct to act as if they were Maoist forces trying to put Mao's concepts into practice. (Even if they had been, that alone would not necessarily prove the incorrectness of the line; as Mao himself wrote, "In social struggle, the forces representing the advanced class sometimes suffer defeat not because their ideas are incorrect but because, in the balance of forces engaged in struggle, they are not as powerful for the time being as the forces of reaction; they are therefore temporarily defeated, but they are bound to triumph sooner or later" [Mao 1971, 503]).

Base areas, as conceived and put into practice by the Chinese Communist Party under Mao's leadership, are intended to serve as "great military, political, economic and cultural bastions of the revolution from which to fight [the] vicious enemies who are using the cities for attacks on the rural districts. . ." (Mao 1967, 2: 316-317). While the conditions and characteristics of such base areas have historically varied widely (even within the Chinese Revolution itself), their ear-mark is the establishment of the political power of the masses through armed struggle. On this political foundation the revolutionary forces then utilize these base areas as spring-boards for further annihilation of enemy troops, expansion of the liberated zones, and preparation for nationwide seizure of power. The establishment of the masses' political power (and the concomitant commencement of the agrarian revolution in both the economic sphere and the superstructure) distinguishes base areas as a strategic concept from the looser forms of support (and even land division, etc.) among the rural masses seen, for example, in the Mexican Revolution, Sandino's struggle in the '20s and '30s, and indeed in the Cuban Revolution itself. It marks the transformation of spontaneity into consciousness.

There is no doubt that this important concept of Mao's has to be fitted to the particular conditions and tasks of Latin America; as noted, even within China itself the kaleidoscopically shifting conditions of the revolution during its twenty-two years gave rise to a variety of expressions, and Mao himself urged Latin American revolutionaries during the 1960s to steer clear of attempts to mechanically transpose or copy what seemed to "work" elsewhere onto their own conditions. How to deal with the generally more developed infrastructure found in many Latin American countries, what is the character of the organs of power appropriate to liberated zones, how to handle the closer relationship to the urban struggle necessitated (and afforded) by the greater urbanization, how in today's conditions to take into account and deal with the looming threat of interimperialist war: all pose (and posed then) urgent challenges for both theory and practice on the continent.

And to be clear, the establishment of base areas should *not* be viewed as the absolute first step in people's war; still less should the ability to sustain one from the very start be seen as a prerequisite whose absence would preclude the launching of such a war. In many, perhaps most, cases it may be necessary for revolutionary forces to engage in a period of guerrilla warfare with enemy troops prior to establishing a base area; indeed, Mao paid great attention to "contested guerrilla zones," areas in which the rebel forces could not yet establish political power but in which there was enough support among the masses to enable them to operate against the enemy in guerrilla fashion. But Mao also thought it necessary to work to transform these zones into base areas as soon as conditions allowed. And such base areas are an important strategic goal of the armed struggle.

In fact, there would seem to be an important difference as to what exactly is *meant* by base areas. Some confusion seems evident in Debray when, for example, he concedes the value of base areas after the rebel forces have reached a certain point. He draws a cautionary lesson from the Cuban experience, describing Che's attempt in late 1957 to set up a base in the Sierra Maestra. "He set up a permanent encampment, constructed a bread oven, a shoe repair shop, and a hospital. He had a mimeograph machine sent in, with which he published the first numbers of *El Cubano Libre*; and, according to his own words, he began making plans for a small electric plant on the river of the valley." But Guevara's plans were smashed when government forces attacked. Only later, writes Debray, could the guerrillas set up a base able to be secured, and did so in April 1958: "The small basic territory then cleared was the terrain on which were to be found the field hospital, small handicraft industries, military repair shops, a radio station, a training center for recruits, and the command post. This small base enabled the rebels to resist the 1958 general summer offensive from entrenched positions" (Debray 1967, 63-64).

What is stunning in Debray's discussion here is his fixation on the purely military functions of base areas (and even in this sphere his conception is narrow!). Where is the mobilization of the masses here? Where are the organs of political power? What *political* experience was accumulated in this regard? Leaving aside Debray's explanation for *why* the base area could be set up when it was - to which we will return - there is really nothing here connecting the conception of base areas to red political power that must be developed by the revolutionary forces, the revolution which must be unleashed in the countryside, etc. *He seems in fact to have confounded the concept of base areas with the notion of a permanent base camp!*

In sum, Debray's aim in taking up the question of base areas at all was hardly to explore the real problems and challenges, but instead to deduce their supposed impossibility from a few scattered instances in Latin America, and to marshal this "impossibility" as one more argument against a war of the masses.

In light of Debray's arguments on the utter inapplicability of Mao's theory to Latin America, the practice today by the Communist Party of Peru is of more than passing interest. Its initial successes in applying the Maoist line and orientation are highly significant; as of this writing they have waged guerrilla war against the government for four years with increasing intensity, and bourgeois observers now are forced to concede both that the revolutionaries have significant support among the masses and that the crisis for the Peruvian regime is deepening.

The objective and subjective basis for this struggle should be noted. To begin with, the Peruvian party firmly consolidated around a correct political line, thus establishing the force capable of *leading* the

revolutionary army. They then conducted intensive investigation and political work in and analysis of the areas in which they initiated the armed struggle. In addition, there are important divisions in the Peruvian ruling class today, particularly between pro-U.S. elements among the traditional ruling classes and pro-Soviet forces in parts of the military. This fissure, at the same time, has been greatly aggravated by the insurgency itself. Finally, Peru is in deep economic crisis, including bearing a crushing burden of debt to the imperialist countries, resulting in severe hardship for the masses and ongoing political instability. This kind of situation is hardly atypical or anomalous in Latin America, nor is it a mere temporary rough spot likely to soon be passed through by the rulers of Peru. It is, rather, symptomatic of the sort of opportunities offered in the present period.

Unlike Guevara, the Communist Party of Peru bases itself on mobilizing the masses for people's war. And in further sharp contrast to Guevara's orientation - as we shall see - the Peruvian revolution is not attempting to link with and/or draw in the support of the Soviets or their local parties. Instead, while utilizing the interimperialist contradictions, they are advancing the independent struggle of the proletariat in leadership of the peasantry.

II

It is not as if at least some of the previous points, in one form or another, were never raised against the Guevara/Debray line. But Debray felt that he could trump any objections with what he clearly believed to be the best argument of all for focoism: "it worked in Cuba." He begins the whole book by arguing against the phrase that "the Cuban Revolution can no longer be repeated in Latin America," and at key points buttresses his case with illustrations from the Cuban Revolution. It is certainly not wrong to examine new revolutionary practice and to draw new theory from it, and it's also true (and quite fine!) that the process usually leads to a reexamination of - indeed, often a break with - some of what may have become "conventional wisdom" in the Marxist movement. The question here is just *what* the practice of the Cuban Revolution really proves, and whether Debray and Guevara drew their conclusions correctly.

Debray and Guevara believed that the revolutionary army need not - indeed, should not - undertake political work among the masses. In polemicizing, for instance, against "armed propaganda" (the tactic of dividing armed forces into small units to temporarily seize villages, execute local tyrants, and hold brief political rallies), he first notes the greater political effect of decisive military engagements with the enemy armed forces: "The destruction of a troop transport truck or the public execution of a police torturer is more effective propaganda for the local population than a hundred speeches." He then delivers what he considers his clincher: "A significant detail: During two years of warfare, Fidel did not hold a single political rally in his zone of operations" (Debray 1967, 53-54).

The first thing you wonder on reading this is why Debray set up this dichotomy between military and political in such a loaded way. Those who've followed the Maoist line have carried out military action and political mobilization in close conjunction. It's true, of course, that when the revolutionary forces reach a point at which they can actually contest for power or even inflict some military defeats on the bourgeois army, many masses who had hitherto wavered or even refused to entertain the possibility of revolution will politically awaken. But it seems clear from the context that Debray had in mind something

in the nature of spectacular stunts, rather than the protracted process of annihilating enemy troops and building up areas of political power. Further, if any military success isn't put in the service of and led by a genuine revolutionary line and program, and if there is no party to raise the sights of the masses when they do flood into motion, then the Debrayist orientation will degenerate into a rationale for developing shock troops for one or another bourgeois faction or imperialist (including social-imperialist) patron - and this in fact has repeatedly happened.

As to the military point involved in dividing one's forces, it's true that the people's army should principally concentrate its forces for battles of annihilation against the enemy. However, Mao also points to the role (secondary, but important) of dividing forces at times to arouse the masses. This whole question is not an either/or proposition as Debray tries to make it, but one of dialectically grasping the relationship between principal and secondary aspects of contradictory relationships (between military and political work, concentrating forces and dividing them, etc.).

Debray, however, goes on to try to analyze the roots "of this concept which reduces the *guerrillero* to a mere armed agitator." What accounts for it?

A misreading of the Cuban Revolution - a revolution well known in its external detail but whose inner content has not yet been sufficiently studied - may also have played its part.... A hundred men incite the mountain population with speeches; the regime, terrified, collapses to the accompaniment of jeers; and the *barbudos* are acclaimed by the people. In this way one confuses a military *foco* - a motor force of a total war - with a *foco* of political agitation. It appears to have been simply forgotten that the "26th of July" Cubans first made a war without a single unilateral truce; that during only a few months of 1958, the Rebel Army engaged in more battles than have other American fronts during a year or two; that in two months the rebels broke Batista's last offensive; and that 300 *guerrilleros* repulsed and routed 10,000 men. A general counteroffensive followed. (Debray 1967, 57)

But Debray himself is here guilty of a "misreading," of a self-serving oversimplification. It's true, of course, that Castro's columns were the decisive military force in overthrowing Batista; but the crisis facing the Batista regime ran deeper than the challenge posed by the Castroist *foco* and its military activities. Batista had seized power in 1952 through a coup d'état and neither of Cuba's main political parties - the Orthodox or the Authentics - mounted any real resistance. After the coup, investment opportunities for the Cuban bourgeoisie drastically slowed while new U.S. investment on the island leaped ahead at a rapid clip. Sections of the aspiring Cuban bourgeoisie were crowded out, and the problem was even more exacerbated for the relatively large Cuban petty bourgeoisie. The pamphlet *Cuba: The Evaporation of a Myth*, outlines both their dilemma and their political stance:

By the 1950s the petty bourgeoisie had become the most volatile class in Cuba. The political groups that arose from it were the best organized to fight for their interests. Castro's 26th of July Movement came from the urban petty bourgeoisie, 25% of Cuba's population - the tens of thousands of businessmen with no business, salesmen with no sales, teachers with no one to teach, lawyers and doctors with few patients and clients, architects and engineers for whom there was little work, and so on. In its 1956 "Program Manifesto," it defined itself as "guided by the

ideals of democracy, nationalism and social justice ... [of] Jeffersonian democracy,” and declared, “democracy cannot be the government of a race, class or religion, it must be a government of all the people.”

... Its practical program aimed at restricting the U.S. and the landlords by ending the quota system under which the U.S. controlled Cuban sugar cane production, restricting the domination of the biggest landlords over the medium-sized growers, distributing unused and stolen farmland to the small peasants, and a profit-sharing scheme for urban workers to expand the market for domestic manufactures and new investment. Revolutionary Communist Party 1983, 9)

The Batista coup had closed off any chance for these forces to move politically to gain concessions. Pressure mounted.

Castro first acted against Batista with his assault on the Moncada army barracks in July 1953, and he took the occasion of his trial to make his well-known “History Will Absolve Me” speech. In fact, the speech reads almost like a Christian-Democratic document, with little mention of the U.S. role in the Cuban situation and a heavy focus on Batista’s corruption, the regime’s illegitimacy, violations of legality and the Constitution, etc. But the Moncada incident, along with his speech, turned Castro into a national figure, and some months later he was released from prison and sent into exile in Mexico.

Similarly, his openly declared intention from Mexico to launch the revolution in 1956, while leading to a military disaster, made Castro even more of a political pole of attraction for the growing anti-Batista opposition that was beginning to develop. But this opposition, independent of Castro, was growing in any case: widespread student struggles raged in Havana in 1955 and 1956; an organization known as the Revolutionary Directorate militarily attacked the presidential palace in March 1957; other fronts were opened by different groups in the Escambray Mountains and Pinar del Rio; and an unsuccessful general strike was even attempted by a coalition of forces (including Castro’s movement, although not the CP of Cuba). It was not, in other words, *just* 300 guerrilleros versus 10,000 of Batista’s troops.

This is also important in understanding why Castro could set up a base area – or rather, to be accurate about it, a permanent campsite – a few months after Guevara had failed, a point of Debray’s referred to earlier. While Debray never explains this, he implies that the sheer weight of accumulated fighting was principally responsible. He leaves out the all-around crisis which by then had enveloped Cuban society and which increasingly denied Batista the freedom to concentrate his troops in the countryside (lest Havana erupt), or to even rely on them to engage the rebel forces at all.

Then too there’s the character of the Oriente itself, where the main force of Castro’s troops were located. Later in the book, when Debray wants to convince the reader that once the military struggle turns favorable the masses will more or less fall into the revolution’s lap, he cites a 1956 letter in which Castro wrote:

Now I know who the people are: I see them in that invincible force that surrounds us everywhere, I see them in the bands of 30 or 40 men, lighting their way with lanterns, who descend the muddy slopes at two or three in the morning, with 30 kilos on their backs, in order to supply us with

food. Who had organized them so wonderfully? Where did they acquire so much ability, astuteness, courage, self-sacrifice? No one knows. It is almost a mystery. (Debray 1967, 113)

In fact, it wasn't really as mysterious as all that. The peasants of the Oriente were some of the most politically experienced in the world. They had fought for and defended rural soviets in the '30s. By the late '50s, when Castro and his men made their way there, they were embroiled in a volatile squatters' struggle.

It's valuable to ponder for a moment the picture presented by the Oriente. The site of the bulk of the fighting and of the revolution's greatest support, it contained Cuba's largest sugar-cane farms, cultivated by a rural proletariat and semiproletariat, as well as half of Cuba's small peasant holdings. But the peasants were insecure and often driven off their land, and there had been no less than twenty significant peasant uprisings between 1902 and 1958. One historian notes that

The Sierra Maestre squatters had for some time been organized in bands to protect themselves against landlords who tried to evict them. The social bandit, a mixture of outlaw and protester, was the form that peasant social and political organization had taken. When Castro's band appeared in the area, it was almost immediately joined by these peasant bands, who no doubt recognized the guerrillas as allies. (Dominguez 1978, 436-437)

Two other observers, writing in criticism of Debray in 1967 in Cuba, note that when Castro reached the Oriente there was already "direct peasant-army confrontation, in which the army upheld the big landowners (rule by machete, evictions, violence against the peasant masses)... The political confrontations had already taken the form of direct clashes between the army and the peasantry" (Huberman and Sweezy 1967, 56). It would seem perhaps that one lesson of the Cuban Revolution lies in the potential political and military explosiveness of the peasantry of the oppressed nations, even in 1959 Cuba where large-scale capitalization of agriculture and urbanization of half the population had taken place - Debray and today's neo-Guevarists to the contrary.

Insofar as the Cuban Revolution proves anything, it is certainly not Debray's model of a *foco*, divorced from the peasantry, causing on its own a deep crisis and more or less single-handedly defeating the government. More what it seems to point to is the powerful role a revolutionary armed force can play in the presence of a political crisis and a peasantry (along with an agricultural proletariat and semiproletariat) eager to take up arms against their oppressors; or better yet, it indicates the dialectical interplay between what is subjective (the military force, in this case) and what is objective (the crisis of the regime and the sentiments and struggle of the masses). This is not to say that the revolutionary armed force has no role to play in sparking up-surge and deepening a political crisis; nor is it the case that one can or should only launch the armed struggle in the oppressed nations when such conditions are already fully present (although they generally must be for a victorious conclusion to be carried through). But Guevarism attempts to totally deny the importance of the objective situation to all phases of the armed struggle, and prefers instead to act as if the objective situation is "set" and all that is lacking is the courage and sound tactics of the revolutionaries.

The Declaration of the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement treats this question in the following way:

In the oppressed countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America a continuous revolutionary situation generally exists. But it is important to understand this correctly: the revolutionary situation does not follow a straight line; it has its ebbs and flows. The communist parties should keep this dynamic in mind. They should not fall into one-sidedness in the form of asserting that the commencement and the final victory of people's war depends totally on the subjective factor (the communists), a view often associated with "Lin Piaoism". Although at all times some form of armed struggle is generally both desirable and necessary to carry out the tasks of class struggle in these countries, during certain periods armed struggle may be the principal form of struggle and at other times it may not be. (RIM 1984, 34)

What helps to make this particular problem so tricky - and what adds to the appeal of Che Guevara to those who really do burn to make a revolution - is that many a revolutionary sentiment and initiative has been smothered by conventional revisionism under the rubric of "objective conditions." It won't cut it, however, to oppose this by way of denying the crucial importance of the objective situation and essentially throwing materialism out the window. Instead, revolutionaries must oppose the mechanical-materialist method utilized by revisionism with materialist *dialectics*. Lenin, in an essay on Karl Marx, made the distinction well:

Only an objective consideration of the sum-total of reciprocal relations of all the classes of a given society without exception, and, consequently, a consideration of the objective stage of development of that society and of the reciprocal relations between it and other societies, can serve as a basis for correct tactics of the advanced class. At the same time, all classes and all countries are regarded not statically, but dynamically, i.e., not in a state of immobility, but in motion (the laws of which are determined by the economic conditions of existence of each class). Motion, in its turn, is regarded not only from the standpoint of the past, but also from the standpoint of the future, and, at the same time, not in accordance with the vulgar conception of the "evolutionists," who see only slow changes, but dialectically: "in developments of such magnitude twenty years are no more than a day," Marx wrote to Engels, "although later there may come days in which twenty years are concentrated". (Lenin 1970, 40-41)

And based on just such an understanding Bob Avakian has, over the last several years, stressed the necessity for a vanguard party to ascertain, base itself on, and develop the "revolutionary elements" within any given situation. The dialectic involved is one of doing the utmost to prepare for revolutionary insurrection (or in the case of oppressed nations, where the armed struggle may already have been launched, for a full and decisive strategic offensive) while - as Mao put it - "hastening or awaiting changes in the international situation and the internal collapse of the enemy" (Mao 1967, 2:126).

The voluntarism undergirding Guevara and Debray's method, because it tries to refute mechanical materialism with subjective idealism,* ends up eventually falling into some of the same errors of passivity typically associated with mechanical materialism. This comes out, for example, in Debray's examination of the ways in which Cuba's revolution was exceptional, or "never to be repeated." He notes, for example, that U.S. uncertainty and laxness regarding the intentions of the revolutionaries was highly unlikely to be repeated elsewhere in Latin America. But while the Cuban Revolution certainly made the U.S. much more wary, it is not the case that the U.S. could or can always do whatever it wishes to crush revolutions, even where the intentions of the revolutionaries are unmistakably clear - as they were in China and Vietnam! Even in Central America, the U.S.'s self-styled "backyard," constraints beyond even the strength of the masses operate; for example, Alexander Haig claims in his recent memoirs that Weinberger and others in the Reagan administration rebuffed his 1981 proposal to *decisively* intervene in El Salvador and Nicaragua, for fear that it would conflict with what they saw as the overriding priority: preparing the U.S. armed forces (and U.S. public opinion) for a global war with the Soviets. But Debray's voluntarism leads him not only to denial of the importance of objective conditions to revolutionaries, but to blindness to the real constraints they also put on the imperialists. This method will lead to losing sight of or ignoring important potential weaknesses in the enemy camp.

On the other hand, Debray does not take sufficient note of other factors. Batista, for instance, was forced by dint of the potential explosiveness of Havana as well as divisions among the Cuban bourgeoisie into an "enclave strategy," meaning that he concentrated his troops in a few secure locations rather than sending them on search-and-destroy missions. This allowed the rebel troops time to rest and train. But it would be very unwise for revolutionary forces to rely on such a situation developing in every case. It may happen, but it is far from automatic and one must prepare for intense and protracted fighting as a rule. Further, because the U.S. was, after all, unclear on the revolution's goals and because the leading group was *not* in fact committed to a thoroughgoing revolution (or even at that point to a break of any sorts with the U.S.), there was remarkably little destruction and no real civil war in the Cuban Revolution. This marks a sharp contrast with what occurred in Russia, China, and Vietnam and must be considered highly atypical (at least of revolutions which really do aim at rupturing with imperialism and transforming the social relations). Thus even the important lessons from the Cuban Revolution (e.g., the role of the peasantry and the agricultural proletariat, the political volatility of the urban petty bourgeoisie, etc.) must be carefully drawn regarding their possible universal significance.

Debray draws only those lessons which fit into the *foco* model he was pushing at the time, and then absolutizes their relevance. And again, what was that model? A small band relies on astute military tactics to defeat an imperialist-backed army, with the political mobilization of the masses presumed to follow in the wake of dramatic military success. The measures associated with people's war - including the mobilization and reliance upon the peasantry, the establishment of base areas as an important objective of the military struggle, the commencement of the agrarian revolution - are denied, even bitterly opposed, as

* Subjective idealism holds that the ideas or beliefs of the individual give rise to material reality, or in general more determine the character of that reality than vice versa. While ideas play a powerful role and can become transmuted into a powerful material force, this is based on the extent to which they reflect objective reality and elucidate the underlying laws determining its motion and development.

inapplicable to Latin America. The peasantry is viewed not as a reservoir of forces for the revolution, but as a mass of potential informers. Base areas are seen as little more than permanent military campsites and then in effect dismissed as a dangerous diversion. The agrarian revolution, is quite simply, ignored and thus negated.

But let us, even for the sake of debate, grant Guevarism its central argument here: that a band of guerrillas, keeping aloof from the peasantry to the very end, can catalyze a revolutionary overthrow of the old regime. Even allowing for the exaggeration found in *Revolution in the Revolution?*, is there not in fact some truth to this? Did not Castro essentially lead his initial handful of men to make a revolution in Cuba? Did not Guevarism work in Cuba?

That depends in the final analysis on what you mean by “working.” It’s true that Castro effected a seizure of power, that the Batista regime was overthrown, that major changes ensued in Cuban society. But as to the basic and underlying problems of Cuban society – and by this we mean its status in world relations as an oppressed, dependent nation with all the consequent ramifications – the change has been one of form rather than content. Specifically focusing on the land question, the Castro regime can be said to have basically finished the process begun by Batista: they transformed Cuban agriculture into a massive, proletarianized operation devoted to the production of sugar. The old farms, directly owned either by U.S. corporations or Cuban compradors, were put into the hands of the state, yes. But the role of the masses in agriculture as proletarians with no control over their labor, the monocultural structure of Cuban agricultural production (the bulk of production given over to the single export crop of sugar), and most of all (and setting the terms for the other conditions), the integration of Cuban sugar production into the exigencies and rhythms of imperialist (even if Soviet imperialist) capital - all these essentially remain the same. The difference lies in the beards and fatigues (initially) worn by the new crop of administrators and the language in which the new set of imperialist overlords give their orders.

The experience of Cuba (and here again we urge the reader to turn to *The Evaporation of a Myth* for a deeper analysis and further documentation) points again to the fact that in most oppressed nations imperialism cannot finally be ousted without mobilizing the peasantry (along with the rural proletarians and semiproletarians) to tear up the roots of the oppressive legacy in the countryside and to step-by-step restructure agriculture from bottom to top so as to break the chains of dependency and serve the world revolution. The land question in these countries is just too essential and too integrated into the whole structure of imperialist domination to be somehow finessed, or dealt with mainly through nationalizing the big farms.

Thus even if one concedes to all of Guevarism’s (dubious) arguments, even if one ignores the potentially explosive role of the peasantry (in favor of allying with their would-be new bosses), even if important facets of what did happen in Cuba during 1953-59 are left out - the fact is that this road cannot lead to genuine emancipation.

There is a shortcut offered here. You need only screw up your courage, review military tactics and engage the enemy. This shortcut mentality extends as well to the other crucial component of Guevarism: its view of the role of the party in revolutionary war, of the relationship between party and army.

Something else as well begins to emerge in studying that area: the real plan guiding Guevara, Castro, and Debray, their hidden answer to the question of: if not the peasantry led by the proletariat, then who?

III

In examining the Guevarist line on the relationship of the party to the army, more questions arise while the basis for answering other ones begins to appear. Guevara and Debray held that the guerrilla *foco* must be entirely autonomous of party control. They argued that since the armed struggle takes place in the countryside, the leadership must also be based in the countryside, both to better guide that struggle and to elude capture by the police. They further insisted that ideological and political struggle and training within the ranks of the rebel army was at best an irrelevant distraction, at worst a fatal diversion. According to Debray, the necessary political unity will be forged in the furnace of battle, and the strategy and tactics necessary for victory drawn from the lessons afforded by each military engagement with the enemy.

Is Guevarism just arguing a variation on the classical spontaneist line here - downplaying the key and leading role of the party? While that is the form, and while some common elements exist, something a bit different is actually at work: a proposed *modus vivendi* with the established revisionist parties. To grasp this, however, it's first necessary to address Debray's main points on the party/army relationship in their own right.

Debray purports to sum up the experience of the failed guerrilla risings of the early '60s, and he traces many of the problems to the failure to allow the *foco* autonomy. For example, one sharp problem in these insurgencies was the capture and/or murder of the leaders. Debray points to the perilous journeys undertaken by these leaders to the cities for political instructions and aid. By contrast, according to Debray, so long as the guerrillas stay in the mountains, capture "is virtually impossible.... All that the police and their North American advisers can do is to wait on their home ground until the guerrilla leaders come to the city" (Debray 1967, 69).

Further, he argues that "the lack of political power [referring in this context to the power of the *foco* to determine its own political and military line] leads to logistical and military dependence of the mountain forces on the city. This dependence often leads to abandonment of the guerrilla force by the city leadership" (Debray, 69). Debray recounts the experience of one unnamed movement in Latin America which was given only \$200 a year by their urban-based leadership with which to purchase arms, supplies, etc. An oblique criticism of the Venezuelan CP, which in 1965 abandoned and renounced a guerrilla movement that they had been part of, may have been intended here. And Debray also criticized those parties which utilized their armed wings only in subordination to various parliamentary maneuvers. Again, one understands an implied criticism of the Latin American CPs which at that point were still involved in some sort of armed struggle.

In much of this argument Debray articulates the disgust of many honest revolutionary forces with the stultified revisionist parties, participating in the armed struggle (if at all), it often seemed, only to hold it back. This disgust for revisionism - at least in its classical, suit-and-tie parliamentary incarnation - soon

slides over, however, into an opposition to *any* political training whatsoever. Debray sharply opposes the presence of political commissars in military units and training schools for military cadre. He cites Castro: “To those who show military ability, also give political responsibility” (Debray 1967, 90).

A number of different contradictions have been mushed together here, including the contradiction between city and countryside during the period of war, the contradiction between the party and the army, and the contradiction between parliamentary and armed forms of struggle. Let’s briefly try to untangle this mess.

First, where *should* the party be based during the period of guerrilla war? If it is based in the countryside, as it should be and as indeed it was during China’s revolutionary war, then don’t the Guevarist objections as to the drawbacks of the military arm being subordinate to the political - at least those concerning the safety of the military commanders, the inability of the city cadre to grasp “the importance of a pound of gun grease or square yard of nylon,” etc. - begin to melt away? Debray basically argues that the party (assumed to be urban based) and the *foco* should each be allowed to do its own thing. Why is he so resistant to waging an ideological and political struggle as to what the real focus of the party’s work should be - that is, waging, or preparing to wage, revolutionary war?

As to the contradiction between the party and army: Debray notes that he is arguing against “an entire international range of experience,” including the Russian Revolution and the protracted people’s wars of China and Vietnam, with his opposition to party leadership over the military. But he refuses to address the reasons why international Marxism reached that conclusion.

This has everything to do with how one conceives of the role of the party and the tasks of the proletariat in the revolution. The party must act as the revolutionary vanguard of the proletariat in every sphere. This includes carrying through a basic analysis of the international situation and of the classes within the country in question, developing a program and strategy for revolution on that basis, educating the masses on the goal of the struggle and the path to victory, and *developing a correct military line and forging the military apparatus to actually lead the armed struggle*. But the latter task, crucial as it is in its own right, cannot really be done on a correct basis without doing that basic analysis of classes and the international situation, without developing a strategy and program. And unless the masses are mobilized through the course of the war, and unless, moreover, their consciousness is raised, then what will the war be fought over anyway? How will the masses have been prepared to wield political power? *The Declaration of the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement* sharply sums up the historical experience on these points, as it applies to oppressed nations:

The key to carrying out a new democratic revolution is the independent role of the proletariat and its ability, through its Marxist-Leninist party, to establish its hegemony in the revolutionary struggle. Experience has shown again and again that even when a section of the national bourgeoisie joins the revolutionary movement, it will not and cannot lead a new democratic revolution, to say nothing of carrying this revolution through to completion. Similarly, history demonstrates the bankruptcy of an “anti-imperialist front” (or similar “revolutionary front”) which is not led by a Marxist-Leninist party, even when such a front or forces within it adopt a “Marxist” (actually pseudo-Marxist) colouration. While such revolutionary formations have led

heroic struggles and even delivered powerful blows to the imperialists they have been proven to be ideologically and organisationally incapable of resisting imperialist and bourgeois influences. Even where such forces have seized power they have been incapable of carrying through a thoroughgoing revolutionary transformation of society and end up, sooner or later, being overthrown by the imperialists or themselves becoming a new reactionary ruling power in league with imperialists....

The Marxist-Leninist party must arm the proletariat and the revolutionary masses not only with an understanding of the immediate task of carrying through the new democratic revolution and the role and conflicting interests of different class forces, friend and foe alike, but also of the need to prepare the transition to the socialist revolution and of the ultimate goal of worldwide communism. (RIM 1984, 32)

None of this at all implies downplaying the necessity for the party to stress military matters. One need only note the extensive military writings of Mao (who in fact developed the first really integral, really comprehensive Marxist military doctrine). Indeed the struggle over military line, finally won by Mao at the Tsunyi conference in 1935, concentrated the overall line struggles in the Chinese Communist Party at that point, and that was no accident: the gun was the principal weapon of struggle and in that situation military line becomes the concentrated expression of political line.

Debray, however, portrays the struggle over political line as a distraction, nothing more than an excuse to avoid the business at hand: launching an insurgency. No doubt more than a few revisionists provided the basis for that caricature. But Debray tries to cover over what Mao continually emphasized: if one line does not lead, then another surely will. And the proletarian line never leads without acute struggle. This was also stressed by Lenin, and lies at the very foundation of *What Is To Be Done?*, his work laying out the relationship of the party to the revolutionary movement and preparation for armed insurrection. There he wrote:

Since there can be no talk of an independent ideology being developed by the masses of the workers themselves in the process of their movement the only choice is: either the bourgeois or the socialist ideology. There is no middle course (for humanity has not created a “third” ideology, and, moreover, in a society torn by class antagonisms there can never be a non-class or above-class ideology). Hence, to belittle the socialist ideology *in any way*, to *turn away from it in the slightest degree* means to strengthen bourgeois ideology....

But why, the reader will ask, does the spontaneous movement, the movement along the line of the least resistance, lead to the domination of the bourgeois ideology? For the simple reason that the bourgeois ideology is far older in origin than the socialist ideology; because it is more fully developed and because it possesses *immeasurably* more opportunities for being spread. (Lenin 1975, 48-51).

In passing, we must speak to Debray’s dismissal of political training of soldiers. Is this not really a plan to use the masses as cannon fodder? The flip notion that the “masses will know what they are fighting for” ignores a bitter history of new bourgeois forces taking advantage for their own narrow interests of the eagerness of the masses to take up arms against oppression. Even Debray, at the time he was writing, would have argued this to be true of Algeria, for example, and history provides other

examples as well - with Iran and Nicaragua being only the most recent. To intentionally keep vague the goals and stance of the revolution, to deny the masses the *theoretical* tools necessary for their emancipation, can only curtail their initiative and enhance that of those who aspire to be their saviors – and new (if “enlightened”) rulers.

How does the emphasis given by Lenin and Mao to a centralized party relate to the need for local commanders to have a measure of autonomy? Guevara and Debray are not wrong to stress that aspect of autonomy, but it is not necessarily antagonistic to a strong party; Mao himself attached great importance to it. The initiative is key in war, and local commanders will hardly be able to seize it if they must check and recheck every plan. The question however is what the basis is for that autonomy. If such autonomy is to feed the overall military struggle, the commanders must be firmly united around the basic military line of the party, the principles of operation forged for the party, specific strategic concepts in various areas, etc. And all of this must ultimately be based on the political line and objectives of the party. Otherwise guerrilla actions become pointless, rivulets that lead to no stream and eventually dry up.

But Guevara and Debray addressed the de-emphasis on military struggle by demanding autonomy for the army, and in the process negated the importance of political leadership and consciousness altogether. Why did they not instead speak to the question of what kind of party had to be built to really lead the armed struggle?

Finally, there is the political question of the relation between parliamentary and military struggle. The revisionist CPs of Latin America, even when waging military struggle, usually saw it – at that point in history – as an adjunct to various parliamentary maneuvers.* To this Debray and Guevara objected. Their solution (autonomy of the *foco*) is again wrong, however, and again we ask: why not a struggle within the revolutionary ranks on the correct road forward? Why just a “you do your thing and we’ll do ours” type of orientation?

After all, if the parties of Latin America were seriously flawed - and the revisionist CPs by that point were not so much flawed as they were hopelessly corroded and counter-revolutionary - then why not carry out a thorough struggle and rupture in the spheres of ideology, politics, organization, and the military and *on that basis forge a new vanguard party*? As a matter of fact just such a struggle was being waged, internationally and within the Latin American continent, by the Marxist-Leninist forces who supported Mao. But Guevara and Debray bitterly opposed it. Why?

For one, as pointed to earlier, they simply did not have in mind the sort of thoroughgoing revolution that necessitates a genuine Leninist vanguard. They were aiming to “get something going” - to be the “small motor that starts the large motor,” Debray says at one point - and then to take it from there. The orientation is to cause a crisis within the ruling regime, attempt to strike a deal with other bourgeois forces, set loose - to a degree - mass upheaval and ride that either into power or to a role in a coalition government. This was the real “Cuban model” these forces had in mind. If you are not attempting to

* Today, in Latin America, it is also seen by these revisionists as prelude to or positioning for negotiations over power-sharing with various neocolonial governments tied to the U.S.

arouse the masses to really uproot the old social relations and consciously transform society, if you are not expecting the protracted war that almost surely will accompany such an orientation, then, really, what need have you for a Leninist party?

Second, and obviously related to that, the specific program and strategy they were pushing for, the way in which they saw the forces lining up in Latin America (and internationally), ruled out any attempt to forge a new party in opposition to the revisionist CPs. Yes, they would fight for autonomy, and even raise the question of hegemony at times, but they would have to be very careful not to risk upsetting the revisionist applecart altogether. And this becomes clearer in considering the international situation at the time and how Guevara and Debray (and of course Castro above all) viewed their options within it.

IV

Guevarism arose in a specific international situation, and its content is conditioned by the dynamics of that situation. Throughout the 1960s the drive of imperialism (headed by the U.S.) to more thoroughly exploit the oppressed nations of the Third World ran right up against the resistance of the masses of those countries, and this constituted the principal contradiction in the world at that time. It set the political terms of a decade. Exemplified by the indomitable resistance of the Vietnamese against U.S. aggression, this contradiction reached a breadth and intensity during that period that was quite literally unprecedented.

This was, however, not the only contradiction shaping world events. There was a particular character to U.S./Soviet rivalry during that period: the Soviets pursued their imperialist interests through a policy of (in the main) collusion with U.S. imperialism. Necessity imposed upon them the tactic of attempting to secure significant pockets of influence - even domination - in specific Third World governments, while avoiding a decisive confrontation with a U.S. whose military superiority was then unquestionable. All this was by way of preparation to more aggressively push out to confront the U.S. later on, when changing conditions would afford new opportunities (and a still greater necessity). But in the situation of the '60s this meant that oppositional and revolutionary forces of different classes were not so drawn in as today to Soviet revisionism, and tended to look either to socialist China or to their own devices (or both) to find the wherewithal to rise in arms against U.S. imperialism.

That in turn points to the important contradiction between then socialist China and each of the two imperialist blocs. The U.S. had continued its aggressively hostile stance toward China all through the '50s and early '60s, and China's refusal to buckle at all had inspired countless millions around the world. The Soviets had, throughout the late '50s and early '60s, also attempted to dominate China: this took the form of economic sabotage, sponsoring anti-Maoist forces within the Chinese leadership, and attempting to isolate China by claiming that its firm stance against the U.S. increased the dangers of world war. (In the late '60s the Soviets would actually launch military attacks against China's borders and float plans for a preemptive nuclear strike on its cities.) All this led to a situation in which China "competed" with the Soviets to aid the liberation struggles against (mainly U.S.) imperialism and tried to influence them in a genuinely Marxist-Leninist direction. These intertwining international contradictions - in which, again, the contradiction between the oppressed nations and imperialism, finding expression in the powerful

wave of national liberation struggles, formed the principal factor - constituted the ground upon which Guevarism arose, as a specific political (and ideological) response of a particular class.

Analyzing Latin America in particular, where Guevarism both arose and enjoyed its greatest influence, one must understand the politically galvanic effect of the Cuban Revolution, both on the masses generally and in particular on the national bourgeoisies and petty bourgeoisies on the continent. The U.S. had responded to the Cuban Revolution with invasion, espionage, and attempts to diplomatically isolate the Castro regime, preparatory to military action. Pressure was brought to bear on all the Latin American governments to break ties; the expulsion of Cuba from the Organization of American States was only the most dramatic (and politically explosive) case in point. But all this tended to generate widespread sympathy for Cuba among the masses and among a significant layer of the revolutionary bourgeois democrats on the continent. The groveling of the comprador regimes of Latin America to the U.S. demands to punish the one country that was standing up to the beast – which indeed had defeated it militarily – disgusted many of what could be considered revolutionary and/or radical bourgeois-democratic forces.*

As things polarized, these forces launched revolutionary wars in a number of Latin American countries. Venezuela, for example, saw the birth in 1962 of a guerrilla movement led by the Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (MIR), which had split off in disgust from the ruling party in 1960. Their ranks were further swollen by military men who rebelled in February 1963. Guatemala was also the site of a guerrilla movement, beginning in 1962, and this one had even more significant roots in the bourgeois military: two of its leading members, Yon Sosa and Luis Turcios, had taken part in the November 1960 revolt in the army against the presence of a CIA training base preparing Cuban exiles for the Bay of Pigs invasion. In Peru, guerrillas appeared a few years later, and the leaders mostly came from another organization called MIR, this one a breakaway from the ruling APRA party; in Colombia, the Ejército de Liberación Nacional drew its main strength from the dissident members of the bourgeois Liberal Party.

Simultaneously the revisionist parties of Latin America were undergoing great turmoil. On the one hand a number of these parties had been outlawed, or otherwise subjected to unusual repression, in the wake of the Cuban Revolution, including the parties of Venezuela and Colombia. On the other, the success of the Cuban Revolution against a backdrop of 40 years of CP impotence and reformism raised big questions among the masses and put tremendous pressure on the revisionists. The youth in particular demanded action. Finally, significant sections of these parties were influenced by the Chinese polemics against the Soviet stress on the “three peaceful” (peaceful coexistence, peaceful transition to socialism in the capitalist countries, and the peaceful competitive victory of socialism over capitalism on a world scale). This severe internal stress occurred in a context where for a few years in the early to mid-1960s, especially during the initial phases of the uprisings in Venezuela and Guatemala, at least sections of the Soviet leadership felt that Cuban-type revolutions might happen in other Latin American countries. This line became more pronounced for a brief period after the fall of Khrushchev. So there were powerful pulls on these parties to get in on the armed struggles that were burgeoning in Latin America.

* These forces were roughly parallel in position and outlook to the 26th of July Movement in Cuba, characterized earlier.

But by 1965 things took yet another turn on the continent. The U.S. launched a major and all-sided initiative, including not only the Alliance for Progress but also the large-scale training of military officers, the tremendous expansion of CIA activity, and the virtual direction of the Christian-Democratic movement. The 1964 coup in Brazil against Goulart (rather openly coordinated by the CIA) and the U.S. invasion of the Dominican Republic a year later made it brutally clear that the U.S. was ready to use its might against any even mildly nationalist initiative (let alone a full-blown revolutionary challenge).

Meanwhile, and linked to this, the guerrilla movements had begun to run into trouble. The insurgencies in Guatemala and Colombia stagnated; the Peruvian revolutionaries were brutally crushed; in Venezuela the movement made little headway. Fabricio Ojeda and Camilio Torres were assassinated, Luis de la Puente was caught and sentenced to 20 years in prison, other revolutionary-democratic leaders (e.g., Domingo Rangel, the most important leader of MIR in Venezuela) capitulated and abandoned the armed struggle.

The Soviets judged the times to be not so promising any more, and effected a shift in policy. They decided to pursue diplomatic and economic ties with the regimes on the continent, deeming it a form of penetration more promising than supporting revolutions which no longer seemed very likely to win and which, even if they did win, might have been prohibitively difficult (from the standpoint of Soviet *realpolitik*) to defend and support against a U.S. imperialism operating with renewed rabidity. It's also true that by this time the Soviet/Chinese split had become irrevocable, and many of the Latin American parties had also split; it may no longer have seemed so necessary to the Soviets to at least partially support some revolutionary struggles in hopes of holding together these parties, since the splits had already occurred.

All these factors - along, no doubt, with the new offers of amnesty for the revisionist CPs - led almost all those parties to renounce the armed struggle by 1965. This was most concentrated in Venezuela, where the struggle had been the most advanced and the role of the CP the largest. There the move by the leadership in April 1965 to withdraw from the guerrilla front and abandon the armed struggle led to a serious split, with CP leader Douglas Bravo leaving the party.

Throughout this period of 1961-65 Cuba played relatively little role in attempting to lead these struggles. Support and refuge were provided, advice was offered, some training even went on - but Cuba made no real attempt to form up a center for revolution on the continent. Guevara, who left Cuba in 1964, did not at first journey to another Latin American country but went instead to the Congo, where he attempted to link up with the guerrilla movement then going on.

But this too changed in 1965-66. When Guevara was called back to Havana, the object was to re-ignite the revolutionary brushfires in Latin America. In early 1966 Cuba held the first conference of the Organization of Latin American Solidarity (OLAS). While revisionist parties of Latin America were invited, the Cubans more conceived of it as a center for the radical-democratic non-CP forces interested in launching armed struggle. (Almost all pro-Maoist parties and forces were screened out of the conference by Cuba - an exclusion that will become more comprehensible later.) At the same time, Debray was brought to Havana to write his book, and Guevara undertook preparations for the Bolivian mission of 1966-67.

Why this shift? Castro also attached great importance to the events of 1965, from his own particular interests and angle. In particular, Cuba not only feared the heightened American aggression around the world (and especially in Latin America), but was also dismayed by the Soviet reluctance to confront the U.S. When the U.S. began bombing North Vietnam (in February 1965), Castro took a long hard look at the Soviet promises to treat Cuba as an “inviolable part of the socialist camp” should the U.S. land in Havana. After all, not only was North Vietnam just as inviolable, it was more than a little bit closer to the Soviet sphere of influence! Juan Bosch, himself a political casualty of the U.S. invasion of the Dominican Republic, commented in his review of Debray’s book that one must first understand the fact that

Fidel Castro is waiting for an attack by the United States. He waits for it day after day and fears that when it occurs Russia will not fight for Cuba. Fidel Castro does not hope to make fervent Cuban nationalists of world Communists, and perhaps does not entirely trust the nationalism of Cuban Communists. Fidel Castro, according to what can be deduced from what he says and does, seems to depend more on the nationalist youth of Latin America than on the Communist parties of the region. He sees that the Communist parties are withholding support from the guerrillas organizing all over the continent, and no doubt fears that these parties, formed during the Stalinist days of loyalty to Russia, may follow the Russian line of coexistence with the United States. If the North American attack occurs, they will make no serious effort to prevent a Cuban defeat. (Huberman and Sweezy 1967, 104)

This strategic view finds expression in Guevara’s assessment of the international situation, ironically enough in his message containing the famous call for “two, three, many Vietnams.” While Guevara correctly identified the principal contradiction as that between imperialism headed by the U.S. and the oppressed nations, and focused on the war in Vietnam within that, he did so in a peculiar way:

This is the sad reality: Vietnam - a nation representing the aspirations, the hopes of a whole world of forgotten peoples - is tragically alone. This nation must endure the furious attacks of U.S. technology with practically no possibility of reprisals in the South and only some of defense in the North - but always alone. The solidarity of all progressive forces of the world with the people of Vietnam is today similar to the bitter agony of the plebians urging on the gladiators in the Roman arena. It is not a matter of wishing success to the victim of aggression, but of sharing his fate; one must accompany him to his death or to victory.

When we analyze the lonely situation of the Vietnamese people, we are overcome by anguish at this illogical fix in which humanity finds itself. (Bonachea and Valdés 1969, 172)

While the struggle of the Vietnamese was certainly complicated and made more difficult, to wildly understate the case, by the reversal of socialism in the Soviet Union and its consequent policy of selling out the national liberation struggles, it was nevertheless wrong, and profoundly so, for Guevara to have seen Vietnam as “tragically isolated.” For one thing, it was directly backed by China, which had pledged itself as a rear area; for another, there were perhaps a score of other liberation struggles raging in the world at that time (as well as a revolutionary reawakening beginning in the imperialist citadels, most notably in the rebellions of the Black people in the U.S.). If none of these struggles had yet reached (or

ever did, in that spiral) the height of Vietnam, that certainly cannot negate the real blows that were struck against imperialism, and the real potential for even more serious blows had the revolutionary movement been in a stronger position - a shortcoming for which Guevara and Castro themselves bear no small measure of responsibility. Even when Guevara does take note of other struggles, he uses these in the service of his “tragically isolated” line of thinking: the “liberation struggle against the Portuguese should end victoriously,” he writes, only to immediately dismiss its significance by adding, “but Portugal means nothing in the imperialist field” (Bonachea and Valdés 1969, 176).

Guevara’s statement castigates both the Soviet Union and China for dereliction in their internationalist duties: the Soviets for not daring to confront the U.S. over the bombing of North Vietnam, and the Chinese for continuing their polemics against the Soviets (and hence supposedly dividing the “socialist camp”). In regard to the criticism of the Soviets, more than anything it reflected Cuban concern over the reliability of Soviet guarantees of Cuban sovereignty which the Soviets claimed to have extracted from Kennedy in exchange for their capitulation in the 1962 missile crisis. It is above all a plea for the Soviets to act more aggressively in pursuit of their imperialist interests (which is one reason why Castro welcomed the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia). We will deal with the motivation for the attacks on China shortly.

For the Cuban leadership, the question was urgent - in their view their survival might depend on the revival of the guerrilla movements. It’s important to grasp that it was primarily this narrow nationalist framework which led them to foster the Guevara initiative.* Were one of the movements to take power, then Cuba would have an ally on the continent, and even were it not to win immediately, if at least a credible threat could be mounted, the U.S. could be tied down, maybe in several places at once - thus taking some of the pressure off of Cuba. And then, too, the possibility existed of bargaining off these movements in return for U.S. security concessions to Cuba. (If this last possibility seems to ascribe too much cynicism to a movement which has constantly advertised its own idealism, we only note Castro’s profound silence during the Mexican government’s murder of several hundred students during the 1968 rebellions; Mexico was the only Latin American government with ties to Cuba at that time.)

Guevara envisioned building these movements out of the radical bourgeois-democratic forces and the supporters of the revisionist parties. These were the only forces which could possibly be mobilized in short order to take up this new continentally conceived and directed project. And short order was key from the Cuban perspective, for they felt the U.S. threat to them to be an immediate one.

* To be clear - we do not agree with the criticism of Guevara that the very fact that he was not Bolivian doomed and invalidated his attempt to launch an insurgency there. This criticism was unofficially voiced by some (rightist) elements in China who went so far as to accuse him of “exporting revolution”! The proletarian revolution is a world revolution. Revolutionaries must proceed in all cases from that perspective, and make their contribution wherever it will have the greatest impact and value internationally; there is surely nothing wrong with 'exporting revolution' (as long, as Bob Avakian has pointed out, as there is someone there to “import it”). The problem with Guevara’s brand of ersatz internationalism (and what made it ultimately phony) lay in the underlying perspective which guided it: the national interest of the Cuban state.

How was this coalition to be hammered together? To appeal to the radical bourgeois democrats, a few things were necessary. First, some summation of the earlier period of guerrilla struggles had to be assayed. This was part of the task intended for Debray's book.* Second, the radicals were well acquainted with CP treachery, and some sort of assurance that the revisionist parties would be kept on a tight rein was necessary. This did not mean a total break; indeed, these forces generally saw Soviet aid as ultimately necessary to any attempt to break from the U.S. (or to any attempt to gain a better bargaining position vis-à-vis the U.S.) and felt that if the revisionist CPs of Latin America could be drawn into an alliance such aid would be more likely. One must figure as well that the assurance that the experienced Cubans were now going to directly lead the military battle (including the personal command of Guevara) also had an affect on these forces.

As for the CPs, the Cubans hoped to generate enough pressure to at least neutralize them, and hopefully force them to provide logistical support on the guerrillas' terms. Thus Castro's vitriolic public attacks on the Venezuelan CP, the statements at the various OLAS conferences excoriating the old-line revisionist parties, and the fanfare afforded Debray's book itself were all designed to create a certain amount of havoc within the social base and the ranks of these parties. On the other hand, Castro hoped that offers of aid (\$25,000 was provided up front to the head of the Bolivian CP, for example) coupled with visions of quick victory might also, from the other side, help knock together this alliance.

All this makes it easier to understand why Guevara and Debray were not pushing for ideological struggle against the old parties, but instead preferred what amounted to the struggling out of a *quid pro quo* with them. Ideological struggle could mean definitive ruptures; yet that would make impossible what the Guevarists needed so badly from the old-line revisionists. Their hope, again, was not to shatter these parties, nor was it to make them change their orientation; what Guevara wanted from them was basically an urban net-work that could be relied upon by the guerrillas, and some ability to draw sections of their youth groups into the guerrilla troops (under his hegemony). (Guevara may also have hoped that the CP connections into the bourgeois governments could be useful in promoting a coup favorable to Cuban interests - in Bolivia, for example, one high-ranking CP leader had a brother high up in the air force and was routinely utilized by the government as something of a pivot man in a Washington-Moscow-La Paz connection. In any event, this particular aspect has gained more prominence in the years since, especially following the 1969 Peruvian coup which afforded greatly increased influence for the Soviets land Cuba].)

* Debray also attacks the notion, promoted by, among others, anarchists and Trotskyites, that the revolution can be made relying on the armed self-defense actions of the masses as the point of departure for the revolution. An example of these actions was the seizure of mines by Bolivian tin miners at the outset of the 1952 Bolivian Revolution (and periodically following the revolution and its betrayal). Debray correctly noted that this tailing of spontaneity could only lead to defeat, that an actual army had to be formed to make the revolution, and that what amounted to sending the workers up alone against the guns of the state generally resulted in profound demoralization. What Debray did not do, however, was to discuss how such upsurges might be utilized by a genuinely revolutionary movement. In any case this forms a secondary element in Debray's book and is not germane to the main points under discussion here.

There was an even more overriding reason, however, and that concerned the intricate relations between Cuba and the USSR. Castro's verbal denunciations of the Soviet Union during the 1965-67 period reflected some real underlying contradictions. Cuba, as noted, worried about the depth of the Soviet commitment to defending them in case of attack, and were willing to publicly embarrass the Soviets as a way to force them into affirming and carrying out such a commitment; Castro, for instance, refused to sign a joint communiqué with Kosygin when the latter stopped in Cuba after his visit with U.S. President Johnson in Glassboro, N.Y. in 1967. Nor did they like Moscow's turn toward seeking diplomatic, economic, and military ties with the established (and anti-Cuban) Latin regimes, and its concomitant "counsel" to its parties to withdraw from the armed struggle and carry out their parliamentary cretinist traditions and inclinations even more wholeheartedly than before. But with all these initiatives (centered in 1965-67) Cuba was *not* pursuing a basic break with the dependency on the Soviets engendered by their earlier policies, but only *better terms of the deal*.

The Soviets, for their part, would tolerate much from the Castro regime, and for several reasons. First, there was not all that much that they *could* do about it - at that point. Open Soviet replies to Cuban attacks and quasi-heresies would go against the Soviet efforts to patch up what remained of *their* international movement in the wake of the split with China, and would likely have the effect of driving Cuba further away from the Soviet position and endangering their ties in unpredictable ways. Economic pressure, which would in fact later be brought to bear,^{*} was also seen as premature - better to wait until Cuba began to taste the results of Castro's harebrained schemes and the wild promises had turned to dust. In a word, the Soviets wanted and needed more leverage.

Second, as long as it was kept within limits, the highly publicized "revolutionary renaissance" in Havana benefited the Soviet Union more than it hurt it. For the Soviets, the principal question in regard to the international movement still focused on China and how to isolate it. Larger strategic concerns at that point dictated that the Soviets not challenge the U.S. through support of revolutionary movements in places of U.S. influence - but this then provided an opening for substantial Chinese influence in key arenas like Palestine, the Persian Gulf, parts of Africa, and almost all of Asia. Cuba's setting itself up as yet another revolutionary center, even posturing to the left of and rabidly attacking China, not only undercut the influence of Maoism but also provided the Soviets with an important conduit to these movements (and these strata) around the world. Part of the bargain - and as we shall see, the Cubans certainly more than upheld their end of it - whether arrived at tacitly or more explicitly, was that the Cubans direct their main fire against the Maoists and that the Guevarist project should attempt to isolate them totally. Thus Castro's exclusion of Maoist parties, though not pro-Soviet ones, from the OLAS and other similar conferences; the pledge made by Guevara not to work with Maoists in Bolivia; and Che's attack on the polemics in his statement to the Tricontinental. This carries into Debray's book, where the Maoist trend in Latin America is slandered as being made up of "scatterbrains and even

^{*} The Soviets did begin such pressure in 1968, when they lowered promised shipments of oil to Cuba at the same time as they raised shipments to Brazil and Chile. This period witnessed Castro beginning to be more fully brought to heel, a process essentially completed with the Soviet custodianship of the Cuban economy in the wake of the Ten Million Tons debacle and the transformation of Castro from self-styled heretic to established ecclesiarch of Soviet revisionism.

renegades” - the point is clearly made that the revisionists have their problems, but *these* revolutionaries are beyond the pale.

We are not arguing that this antagonism toward the Maoists was something forced on the Cubans by the Soviets. Two opposed conceptions of revolution were at odds and struggling for hegemony. For Guevara to carry out *his* concept, struggle against the proletarian revolutionary line upheld by Maoism internationally would be necessary. At the same time, one cannot separate Guevara’s notion of revolution from the role he envisioned for the Soviet Union, the actions he demanded of it, and the trade-offs he was willing to make with it.

The Soviets, then, bided their time. Rather than openly attack Guevara or reply to the insults of Castro, they opened their journals to the more orthodox revisionist parties in Latin America, which were more than willing to reply to Castro’s attacks on them and to give back as good as they got in the vitriol department.

For Guevara to have pumped for an open break with these parties along ideological lines was inconceivable for a number of reasons. In the first place, at bottom the *ideology* of Castro and the Soviets was not all that opposed: in the version of revolution and socialism they each propounded, there resided a common view of the masses as the objects to be manipulated by either a skilled elite or demagogues, depending on the case. This finds an echo in the Debray/Guevara strategy of revolution, in which all turns on the daring and skill of a small band of heroes. In addition to that fundamental reason, there was also the fact that such a break would have totally gone against Guevara’s plan for revolution (in which the revisionists still had a large role to play) as well as the danger that that sort of initiative ran the risk of being the last straw that would have forced the Soviet Union to finally put its foot down, and hard. For the Soviets to allow the Cuban leadership, which they had so fully committed themselves to, to attempt to wreck the parties which had so faithfully served them - and for a “revolution” the Soviets deemed to be chimerical - would have hurt the Soviets with the forces they relied on in the international movement and in a whole host of tasks in pursuing strategic and tactical political maneuvers in various countries.

Finally, such a call for ideological combat could have eventually fed into the Maoist trend; once such combats are begun, it’s not predetermined how they will end. Some of the forces at that point drawn to the Guevarist pole could, in the course of free-swinging ideological struggle, have been pulled towards genuine Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tsetung Thought.

At the same time, to have called for the formation of a new party on the basis of ideological unity would have made it impossible to unite with the radical democrats in the ways that Guevara had desired. These forces did not want CP domination of the liberation movements, but in most cases they were not even professedly Marxist and hence had no interest in a conflict with the CPs over the content of genuine Marxism. Many who could perhaps be united in the short term around picking up the gun may have been driven out by such a struggle. Indeed, part of the selling pitch to these forces was the possibility of a successful balancing act - of being able to utilize the CPs without getting swallowed up by them, thanks to the presumed hegemony of the Guevarists. Debray’s attacks on the revisionist parties in frankly traditionally anticommunist terms - “imported conceptions,” “not knowing the conditions of Latin America,” etc. - was perhaps designed at least in part to further prove Guevara & Co.’s nationalist bona

fides, and to win the trust of the radical democrats for what seemed a possibly dangerous and dubious alliance.

(It's important here to note that had, against all odds, the Guevarist insurgency caught fire, the Soviets would not necessarily have been unable to find a use for such a movement. What the ultimate fate of the Guevarists may have been even in this case, however, is open to question. A few years after the death of Guevara, Cayetano Carpio left the CP of El Salvador to launch an insurgency in the hills. After some years of fighting and some important changes in the international situation and in Central America, a juncture emerged at which a similar alliance - between, in this case, the revisionists, reformists under a social-democratic banner, nationalists, and the neo-Guevarist Carpio forces - became real, and in which Carpio initially had the upper hand. However, Carpio's resistance to negotiations in the service of the Soviet historic-compromise strategy in El Salvador led to a concerted effort to undermine his leadership and, according to the official story coming out of Nicaragua, to Carpio's assassination of a leading pro-Soviet cadre in his organization and his own alleged subsequent suicide. If your hopes rest on getting something going so as to attract a powerful patron, don't be surprised when your patron decides that your enterprise will be best served by your absence.)

Debray's antitheoretical approach was a key link in uniting both elements of this hoped-for coalition - the revisionist CPs with the more traditionally nationalist bourgeois democrats. His refusal to polemicize for the leadership of *genuine* Marxist-Leninist parties served this alliance. But was it wrong to seek to unite with those bourgeois democrats? To answer this, one must first draw a distinction between *uniting with* and *relying on*. Such class forces do in fact have a serious contradiction with imperialism, and depending on the situation can often be united with in the effort to drive out imperialism. But if they are utterly relied on, as Guevara aimed to do, then the revolution will undoubtedly reflect *their* class interests, which are essentially the dreams of an oppressed and aspiring bourgeoisie to take over the national market, etc., and develop the country as an autonomous and integral capitalist country. Even when the party is able to rally the proletariat and forge the worker-peasant alliance as the backbone and basis for the revolutionary movement, the problems presented by the revolutionary sections of the national bourgeoisie - how to unite to the degree possible without sacrificing in any way the integrity of the communist party program, how to lay the basis for the future advance to socialism within the stage of a new-democratic revolution, how to garner the requisite independent strength (political and military) to more or less "force" these sections to "let" the proletariat lead - have been more than a little complex. Indeed, more often than not, this has been dealt with by tailing the national bourgeoisie. (With Debray and Guevara, despite the "left" phrase-mongering, that tailing went on, as we shall discuss shortly.) This, as noted earlier, all the more emphasizes the need for an ideologically sound party.

Guevara attempted to get around this with a two-into-one mashing together of the new-democratic and socialist stages of the revolution, and with a seemingly left attack on the national bourgeoisies. The revolution would have to be for socialism right from the start, Debray declared in his book, and would have to break with the notion that the national bourgeoisie had any role to play against imperialism.

But what view of socialism was being put forward here? Essentially the goulash socialism popularized by Khrushchev, the appeal to the workers to support a regime that would provide them with - or at least promise to - provide them with certain economic benefits and social reforms in exchange for

political passivity. The model was Cuba, where even in the heyday of “moral incentives” Guevara himself was promising a standard of living comparable to Sweden’s by the late ’60s - if only the masses would put in voluntary work now.

More principally, however, this view of socialism was designed to appeal to a section of the national and petty bourgeoisies, in which they were to become the controllers of a huge state sector. Again, such had happened in Cuba (especially during the period when the 26th of July veterans shared power with the CP apparatus; after the Ten Million Tons disaster the CP became fully dominant, and many of the so-called experiments of Cuba, in which the petty bourgeoisie was “given its head,” were ended). (Debray, for his part, tried to redefine these forces out of the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie, at several points claiming that participation in the guerrilla war in and of itself dissolved class differences, etc.)

The rightism of this formula also comes out in the attempt to bypass the new-democratic stage of revolution, with its strong antifeudal component. In Cuba, the state sector took over and directly administered the great majority of big farms shortly after the revolution, and moved on to take over the majority of medium-sized ones shortly following that. This was proclaimed by admirers of Debray and Guevara as the most radical land program in history; in fact, the change in the content of Cuban agriculture was little more than formal: the farmworkers had a different boss telling them when and how they’d harvest the sugar, and the bulk of the harvest would henceforth be sent to the Soviet Union rather than the U.S. But the pattern of monoculture dependency, the chains of sugar, stayed the same. The rural proletariat and peasantry were not unleashed to step-by-step uproot, overcome, and transform the relations and legacy of imperialism, clearing the ground and fully restructuring agriculture; they were told, and later forced, only to work harder.

As touched on earlier, the legacy of imperialism in the oppressed nations cannot be reduced to something as simple (and as rooted in distribution) as unequal exchange. It extends to the very structure of agriculture, including what is produced, to the ways in which feudalism *has* been transformed (in the service of finance capital), and to the far from insignificant elements of feudalism which have been retained (again in the service of finance capital). In these situations it may well be necessary to take a step backward to really go forward, to go from big state or corporate farms to some (at first) smaller-scale holdings in the hands of the peasants and recently proletarianized farmworkers as part of an overall plan to rupture agriculture from the patterns and structure of imperialist domination and to lead the peasantry through the stages of cooperation, collectivization, and finally state ownership, on a qualitatively different basis. This can only be done, however, by a politically aroused peasantry led by a strong and conscious proletariat with a strong vanguard. And this - the full restructuring of agriculture away from imperialist domination, the political awakening of the peasantry and, even more, the strengthening of the leadership of the proletariat and its party - this is anathema to the Guevarists.

So as to the question of uniting with the national bourgeoisie, the answer must be that while the basis exists due to the antagonism between sections of it and imperialism, this can only be really successfully done when the proletariat is clear that such unity carries with it struggle over many fundamental questions of the goals, direction, and strategy of the revolution, at *every* stage of the revolution.

In regard to the revisionists and the attempt to unite with them: this is a complex matter but there are clear revolutionary principles which Guevarism tramples in the interest of its unity with revisionism. The revisionist parties directly represent the interests of the imperialists (specifically social-imperialism) within the ranks of the revolutionary movement. This makes them (unlike the national bourgeoisie) not potentially part of the popular forces of the new-democratic stage of the revolution led by the proletariat, but rather part of the enemy of that stage. Thus they can in no way be regarded as strategic allies, and certainly the melding together envisioned by Debray is wrong in any case. Because, however, it is most often true that in the colonial and dependent countries the revolutionary struggle must be directed, in an immediate sense, against one imperialist power or bloc and its agents, a certain form of alliance may at times be necessary. This is spoken to in *Basic Principles For the Unity of Marxist-Leninists and For the Line of the International Communist Movement*:

In certain specific conditions, particularly for example where one imperialist power (or bloc) actually carries out an invasion and attempts to occupy a particular colonial or dependent country, it may be necessary and correct not only to direct the spearhead of the struggle against that particular power (or bloc) but even to ally with or at least seek to neutralize – “put to the side” - certain domestic reactionary forces who are dependent on and serve other imperialists (in particular the rival imperialist bloc).

But *Basic Principles* goes on immediately to stress that

... in such cases it is all the more important to expose the class nature and interests and imperialist connections of such forces; to resolutely combat and defeat their treachery in the struggle and particularly their attempts to suppress the masses; to insist on and establish through struggle the leading role of the proletariat and the independence and initiative of its party; to continue the policy of refusing to join with or support any imperialist power or bloc; and to keep clearly in mind and lead the proletariat and popular masses toward the goal of victory not only in the immediate stage (or sub-stage) but in the anti-imperialist democratic revolution as a whole, and through that to the socialist revolution, in unity with the international proletariat and the worldwide struggle. (RCP of Chile and RCP,USA 1981, 43)

But these are the very questions - the character of the international situation, the class character of the Soviet Union, the tasks of the revolution in relation to imperialism, the class analysis of the nation, a roughing out of the relationship between the two stages of the revolution - that one must have a communist party with a clear and sound ideological foundation in order to deal with. The Guevarist line on the party, and in particular the stubborn opposition to struggle over basic principles - principles pitting revolutionary Marxism against revisionism - represented an attempt to abort the necessary process of hammering out answers to these questions. They had, of course, their own answers - specifically, their alliance of revisionist CPs and sections of the national bourgeoisie to shift the country, via armed struggle, into the Soviet camp - but they were not about to even put these out clearly, lest they spark the very ideological struggle they wished to avoid and drive some of the more naive and/or honest radical-democratic forces out of their camp.

Guevarism, in sum, was not and is not a different way of fighting people's war: it's a strategy opposed to people's war, and, moreover, opposed to the kind of revolution necessary in the oppressed nations.

The *Declaration of the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement* summarizes both the essence of this revolution and its relation to the strategy of people's war:

The target of the revolution in countries of this kind is foreign imperialism and the comprador-bureaucrat bourgeoisie and feudals, which are classes closely linked to and dependent on imperialism. In these countries the revolution will pass through two stages: a first, new democratic revolution which leads directly to the second, socialist revolution. The character, target and tasks of the first stage of the revolution enables and requires the proletariat to form a broad united front of all classes and strata that can be won to support the new democratic programme. It must do so, however, on the basis of developing and strengthening the independent forces of the proletariat, including in the appropriate conditions its own armed forces and establishing the hegemony of the proletariat among the other sections of the revolutionary masses, especially the poor peasants. The cornerstone of this alliance is the worker-peasant alliance and the carrying out of the agrarian revolution (i.e. the struggle against semi-feudal exploitation in the countryside and/or the fulfillment of the slogan "land to the tiller") occupies a central part of the new democratic programme.

In these countries the exploitation of the proletariat and the masses is severe, the outrages of imperialist domination constant, and the ruling classes usually exercise their dictatorship nakedly and brutally and even when they utilise the bourgeois-democratic or parliamentary form their dictatorship is only very thinly veiled. This situation leads to frequent revolutionary struggles on the part of the proletariat, the peasants and other sections of the masses which often take the form of armed struggle. For all these reasons, including the lopsided and distorted development in these countries which often makes it difficult for the reactionary classes to maintain stable rule and to consolidate their power throughout the state, it is often the case that the revolution takes the form of protracted revolutionary warfare in which the revolutionary forces are able to establish base areas of one type or another in the countryside and carry out the basic strategy of surrounding the city by the countryside (RIM 1984, 31)

Guevarism, however, makes a principle of turning away from mobilizing the peasantry, and looks with scorn on the fighting capacity of the proletariat. The class alliance that it seeks to knock together and rely on consists of those mobilized under the banner of the revisionists and the radical bourgeois democrats. The Guevarists neither carry through the agrarian revolution in the countryside nor do they draw the proletariat into the struggle over the cardinal questions of the day so as to develop them into the leading class; instead there is only the scheming to quickly climb to power and seize the reins of a rapidly expanded state (capitalist) sector, in the name of the people.

Its internationalism, when all is said and done, consists of appealing to the revolutionary aspirations of the masses only to utilize them as cannon fodder for the Soviet side in the interimperialist conflict between the two blocs. (In the case of Che himself, it was a matter of seeking to mold the revolutionary movement from the standpoint of narrow Cuban national interests.) The revolution it promises is not

revolution at all - not, at least, in the sense of a fundamental change in the social relations - but is at most the institution of some reforms under Soviet aegis. And in line with all that, the tasks of the vanguard itself in leading the masses to consciously remake all of society, to not only overthrow the capitalists but move forward to the continued revolution under proletarian dictatorship and the transition to communism, are negated. In their place is put the will of a small handful, backed up by the sponsorship of a big imperialist power.

Bolivian Epilogue

The theory of Debray, Guevara, and Castro found expression in Bolivia, shortly after publication of *Revolution Within the Revolution?*. A core of Bolivians, sympathetic to the Guevarist line, began in 1966 to set up a guerrilla base in the mountain region of the country, and in the fall of that year Guevara, along with a number of Central Committee members from the Cuban Communist Party, arrived in Bolivia. The plan was to both recruit Bolivians into the force and to train Argentines and Peruvians through the practice of the battle to form the cores of *focos* in their countries. The hope was to develop an insurgency in Bolivia and in more or less short order to move from there into the surrounding countries.

As is known the project was almost a total debacle. The guerrilla *foco* was defeated after six months in the field, pursued and hunted down by the CIA-trained and directed Bolivian Rangers, with hardly a single engagement. The *foco* was preoccupied with the sheer struggle for food and shelter, and by February Guevara was ruefully noting in his diary the fights over food in camp and the moral collapse of some of the prominent Cuban CP men. Meanwhile, Guevara's diary records almost no political discussion or education among the *foco* and nary a political thought of his own throughout the campaign.

In April Debray, who had been with the *foco*, judged it the better part of valor to leave the troops to go organize support in Europe. Captured almost immediately, he, who so blithely labelled revolutionaries as "renegades," revealed apparently useful information to the authorities about the nature of the *foco* ("the Frenchman talks more than he needs to" Guevara noted in his diary).

In June Bolivia was wracked by a political crisis. The tin miners struck, and on June 24 the army came in to occupy the mines. The resulting clash left an estimated 100 miners dead, and threw Bolivia into an uproar, especially in the cities and campuses. In a statement to the miners, Guevara called the army's action a "complete victory" and called on the miners to come to the *foco*. While it may not have been wrong to issue such a call (assuming, for a moment, that the guerrilla army was guided by a basically correct orientation and line in its struggle), what was missing was a grasp of how to utilize the political crisis gripping the Bolivian government, how to push forward and divert into the revolutionary movement *what had erupted among the masses*. In any event, despite widespread sympathy for the *foco*, the upsurge and the *foco* itself remained on two different tracks. No Bolivian came forward to join.

Throughout the summer the *foco* was riddled with disease, desertion, and death by both accident and enemy fire. In October Guevara was captured and then murdered in custody, with the apparent supervision of a CIA man.

This defeat cannot and does not, in and of itself, prove Guevara's line to have been fundamentally incorrect. No political theory can be made to rise or fall on the basis of a single practical experience, and besides it can plausibly be argued that Bolivia does not represent the best case of Guevarism, that one must look to Cuba instead.

While that may be true, the Bolivian experience does, however, contain a few important lessons. First, it does show that Guevara's view of insurrectionary war did hinge on the tricky relationship he was trying to effect with the revisionist CP (and ultimately with the Soviet Union). The Cubans never informed the Bolivian CP that Guevara himself would be landing in Bolivia to command a national liberation movement. Instead, in early 1966 Castro met with its leader, Mario Monje, to sound him out on prospects for a national liberation struggle and gave him \$25,000 for the rather vague promise to begin preparations. Evidently the hope was to buy Monje's agreement to provide something of an urban support network and allow cadre to join with the guerrillas. When Monje was finally officially informed of Guevara's presence, at a New Year's meeting at the guerrilla camp in 1967, he refused to cooperate unless Guevara surrendered command to him, Monje. When such support was not forthcoming, Guevara literally had nowhere else to turn.*

The second, and related, point concerns the Guevarist view toward the masses. Guevara slipped into Bolivia in November 1966 to begin direct preparations for the guerrilla war. But he conceived of this preparation solely in terms of learning the physical terrain, digging caves and preparing caches, going on long training marches, etc. No real study of Bolivia was carried on, nor was even the most rudimentary class analysis made. The masses were so utterly absent from his calculations that even the cursory course given the guerrillas in the Quechuan language was useless, since an entirely distinct non-Quechuan language was spoken by the Indians of the area! And while terrain is not without importance, the principal thing (as Mao often noted, and as the Cuban experience, in fact, bore witness to) is the political character of an area - the level of the masses' understanding and experience in struggle, the political stability of the local rulers, and other similar factors. As it turned out, even the physical terrain was ultimately militarily unfavorable to the guerrillas, itself a bitter testimony to the problems of a purely military approach to revolution - even in military affairs.

In this light, those analysts who trace the almost palpable air of depression in Guevara's diaries to his failure to rally the masses are probably reading their own assumptions into things. In the diaries themselves the preoccupation is much more with the demoralization of the troops; the masses hardly

* The practice of the Bolivian CP during this affair is something of an exposure of the more orthodox-style revisionism. Monje himself is said to have intercepted some members of his youth group headed for the guerrilla troop at a bus station, and threatened to report them to the police should they board the bus. They stayed. Richard Harris, an author overall sympathetic to Guevara, alleged in his book *Death of a Revolutionary* that several middle-level CP members attempted to sell information about Guevara's presence to the CIA, and in fact provided valuable information about the guerrilla operation, including its true size, composition, strategy, and sources of support. Harris also gave some credence to reports that Jorge Kalle, a high-ranking CPer whose brother headed up the Bolivian Air Force at the time, served as the connecting link between the Bolivian regime and Washington on the one hand, and the orthodox Communists and Moscow on the other (Harris 1970, 162). The CP did not openly oppose the Guevarists, however, preferring to silently withhold support.

figure into it. And, in my opinion, it is as Monje's success in withholding support becomes clear that the almost total lack of direction and élan begin to assert themselves in Guevara's writings.

Those points indicate a fundamental difference between the defeat of Guevara in Bolivia and the genuine attempts to launch people's war during that period, many of which also met with defeat. Unlike Guevara, these other forces were going straight up against revisionism - ideologically, politically, organizationally, and (often) militarily - and attempting to lead the masses to make a revolution which would oppose both imperialist blocs. Guevara, as noted earlier, attached importance to using the revolutionary movements to move the Soviets into a more "revolutionary" (read: more aggressively imperialist) stance; his differences with the Soviets were tactical, at most. The genuinely Marxist-Leninist forces who followed Mao, by contrast, took up arms to rid the world of all imperialism, no matter what its political wrappings.

Further - and again in marked contrast to Guevara - these other attempts genuinely mobilized the masses, raising their political consciousness and leading them to begin to root out the backward relations propped up and engendered by imperialist domination. The masses themselves, in other words, were rallied and marshaled to consciously take the political stage, guns in hand. For all these reasons, whatever their shortcomings, the Maoist attempts to wage people's war in that period fall into a qualitatively different camp than the Guevarist adventure in Bolivia. The *Declaration* notes that:

In a number of countries the Marxist-Leninist forces were able to rally considerable sections of the population to the revolutionary banner and maintain the Marxist-Leninist party and armed forces of the masses despite the savage counter-revolutionary repression. It was inevitable that these early attempts at building new, Marxist-Leninist parties and the launching of armed struggle would be marked by primitiveness and that ideological and political weaknesses would manifest themselves, and it is, of course, not surprising that the imperialists and revisionists would seize upon these errors and weaknesses to condemn the revolutionaries as "ultra-leftists" or worse. Nevertheless these experiences must, in general, be upheld as an important part of the legacy of the Marxist-Leninist movement which helped lay the basis for further advances. (RIM 1984, 34)

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The Soviets marked Guevara's defeat without comment, while unleashing the parties tightly under their domination to crow (the Hungarians, for instance, called the whole affair "pathetic"). For them, Guevara's death held a number of benefits. It strengthened the hand of the old-line revisionist parties, for one thing; in the wake of Bolivia, it should be noted, the Soviet strategy of "historic compromise" - briefly, the attempt to win a foothold in states in the U.S. sphere of influence through penetrating the ruling coalitions of the government as subordinate partners - came to the forefront in Latin America. The Peruvian coup of 1969, in which the Soviets gained influence through important ties in the military, and the election in Chile of Salvador Allende in 1970, marked as it was by the maneuverings of the Chilean CP within the new government, were promoted as new exemplars for Latin America, and by none other than Castro himself.

As for Castro, his real view toward Guevara's mission is open to question. Some maintain that he set Guevara up, and cite his failure to announce Guevara's presence in Bolivia despite what Guevara seemed to think (in his diaries) were prearranged plans to do so. It's also possible that Castro saw early on that Guevara's scheme was heading for failure and saw no point in opening Cuba to what he feared could be an OAS-backed U.S. military reprisal against Cuba. In any event, the defeat in Bolivia marked the beginning of the end of Castro's brief and phony mutiny against the Soviets. By 1968 he was welcoming the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, by 1969 Cuba was attending important Soviet anti-China conferences, and by 1971 - following the Ten Million Tons fiasco - the Soviets had put the Cuban economy and political apparatus into virtual receivership.

For the revolutionary masses, however, there can be but one ultimate conclusion: not the rejection of armed struggle (for the opportunities for such struggle are further opening up today and will do so on a truly unprecedented scale in the years to come), but the rupture with illusory shortcuts in league with revisionism. Such shortcuts - and this is the sharpest lesson of Guevarism - are shortcuts only to a renewed and recast, but essentially similar, imperialist domination.

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