

On the International Situation

New Twist in the Imperialist Knot

By the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA

The dramatic and sudden collapse of long-existing state structures in Eastern Europe in late 1989 and early 1990 underlines the basic truth of the observation in the *Declaration of the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement*, adopted in 1984:

“The post World War 2 world is rapidly coming apart at the seams. The international economic and political relations, the ‘division of the world’ — established through and in the aftermath of World War 2 — no longer corresponds to the needs of various imperialist powers to ‘peacefully’ extend and expand their profit empires.... The very logic of the imperialist system and the revolutionaries is preparing a new situation. The contradiction between the rival bands of imperialists, between the imperialists and the oppressed nations, between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie in the imperialist countries, are all likely in the coming period to express themselves by the force of arms on an unprecedented scale.”

Many of the elements that appeared most permanent and unshakable in the post World War 2 world, including the boundaries of the different European countries themselves, stand revealed as merely provisional, temporary and (from a world historic point of view) transitory phenomena. Even the most unthinkable modification of frontiers, the reunification of an imperialist Germany hitherto divided into two antagonistic war blocs, is no longer simply a matter for conjecture, nor even the hidden agenda of West German revanchists or a battle-cry of die-hard reactionaries: it is a

question posed for resolution, a new factor with immense implications for world affairs.

If Marxism-Leninism-Maoism enabled the revolutionary communists, as expressed in the aforementioned *Declaration*, to see most clearly the impermanence of the existing world order and the underlying stresses and strains that were threatening to tear it asunder, it is also true that Marxism-Leninism-Maoism never claimed a capacity to foretell the future. The actual march of events will always prove richer, more complex, variegated and surprising than the predictions of any theory. Nevertheless, it is against the actual course of events that any theory which claims to be scientific must be tested, and the revolutionary communists do not shy away from such a critical evaluation.

At the turn of the decade of the 1980s, the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA (RCP,USA), as is well known, put forward its belief that world war would most likely break out in the course of the decade, unless prevented by revolution in large and/or strategic parts of the world. And, if not prevented, world war would, in turn, give rise to revolutionary struggle throughout the world. This analysis was made on the basis of our understanding of the dynamics of imperialism and our observations of the contemporary world situation: (1) that the network of international relations established through World War 2 (the “division of the world”) was no longer favourable to the continuing expanded reproduction of capital. This network had increasingly stood as a limit in the way of the different

imperialist powers’ inexorable compulsion to further expand, and all of these powers needed to break up the existing framework and establish a new one more favourable to them; (2) two imperialist blocs (one led by U.S. imperialism, the other by Soviet social-imperialism) were increasingly in conflict with each other — each one standing as the immediate and direct obstacle to the other’s expansion efforts. History had shown that such conflicts would ultimately be resolved by world war between rival blocs, unless revolution imposed its own resolution of these contradictions, and that each world war had also led to revolutionary advances. Mao Tsetung and the revolutionary comrades of the Chinese Communist Party had been clearly stressing this point with increasing urgency in the years immediately preceding the reactionary coup d’etat following Mao’s death in 1976; (3) finally, the actual course of events followed by the imperialist states through much of the 1980s and the period immediately preceding indicated that the two blocs were on such a collision course towards world war. This was reflected in the political, military, ideological and cultural realms as well — in particular with the rise of “Reaganism” in the United States and the aggressive pursuit of the Soviet imperialists’ project as well, most notably the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the subsequent war there. It was in this context that the RCP,USA analysed that the principal contradiction in the world was between the two imperialist blocs.

World war had ceased to be

“unthinkable” and became a practical plan of the imperialist ruling classes to which, to a large degree, other domestic and foreign policy goals were subordinated. Under these conditions, our Party sought to “sound the alarm” to the proletariat as to the danger of such a conflagration and to call on the proletariat and the peoples to strive to avert such a catastrophe through stepping up revolutionary struggle.

In retrospect, events have not worked out in the way we had foreseen. And like others throughout the world, we are overjoyed that such a war has not taken place. The break-neck drive to war of the mid-1980s (the implantation of the Euro-missiles in Germany, the shooting down of the jet airliner KAL 007 over Soviet airspace, the ever increasing decibel level of sabre-rattling) has given way to the situation today which in many ways appears as the mirror opposite: the climate of dangerous rivalry between the two superpowers has been replaced, on the surface at least, by a new era of “mutual understanding” between the U.S. and the USSR. The “cold war” has been officially declared over.

Certainly public perception reflects important elements of today’s reality. At the same time it is wrong and dangerous to mistake the appearance for the essence of things. The world most definitely has not entered into a new era of peace and tranquility. Instead we are seeing an overall intensification of the basic contradictions in the world and a deepening of the crisis of imperialism. In our opinion, the orientation of the *Declaration*, that these contradictions are moving to a point where they will be resolved by the force of arms, also remains true. *The most important factor to recognise and seize hold of in the new international framework is the more favourable conditions for revolution in the world as a whole.*

Bob Avakian, Chairman of the Central Committee of the RCP,USA, summed up the party’s past views this way:

“First of all, we were correct in stressing the real and heightening danger of world war. Second, it is true that things did not work out the way we had anticipated, and there have been shifts in world contradictions — and in particular the contra-

dition between the U.S. and the Soviet blocs — that have resulted in a temporary and partial mitigation of this contradiction and put off for a certain time a direct, all-out confrontation between these imperialist blocs. But we should not lower our guard and flip to the other side, ignoring or underestimating the very real, deep-going, and still intense contradictions between these imperialist blocs and the continuing danger of world war.”¹

The current situation is a result both of the overall intensification of contradictions and a shift, however temporary and partial it may prove, in the relative weight of the major contradictions in the world (the contradiction between the imperialist powers, the contradiction between the imperialists and the oppressed nations and the contradiction between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie in the imperialist and capitalist countries. The other major contradiction of the era of imperialism, between socialist states and imperialism, is currently inoperative as a result of the restoration of capitalism in the previously existing socialist states.)

In Eastern Europe it is easy to see the results of many different contradictions at work. First, while the cold war has been declared over and the U.S. and the USSR are indeed negotiating, collaborating and coniving over how to best exploit some of the countries of the region, it is also true that the previous rivalry that existed between these imperialist powers has not disappeared and is taking new forms. U.S. imperialism has been able to introduce powerful forces closely linked to it into the government structures of several of these states. The Western bloc, for the time being, has made use of the discontent of the masses with the old regimes, but it is also acutely aware of the need to prevent such turmoil from developing into a genuine revolutionary movement. This aspect bears resemblance to the role played by the revisionist parties in the West, who were used to bolster Soviet interests while striving to contain and suppress genuine revolutionary struggle.

Furthermore, the very fact that the contradiction between the U.S. and the Soviet Union has been partially mitigated opens the door to a coun-

tervailing phenomenon: the intensification of imperialist conflicts *within* each of these blocs. This is most clear — in the East and the West — in relation to the spectre of a reunited imperialist Germany.

The West German ruling class had never renounced, even formally, its claim to represent all of what was prewar Germany (which includes not only East Germany but large chunks of other countries as well, especially Poland). But until Gorbachev began to send out “feelers” about the possibility of German reunification as early as 1987, such a goal seemed impossible except as a direct result of victory in another world war.

For geographical and historical reasons, Germany’s natural “sphere of influence”, the region where it invariably seeks to establish its hegemony and shore up its base for broader world conquest, is in Eastern Europe. A reunified Germany means not only the merging of East Germany into the West German imperialist machine, it means providing much of the fuel for this machine (the most vital being the labour of the proletariat) from the more backward countries of Eastern Europe. This includes especially Poland and other areas in and outside the present borders of the USSR — countries that today form part of the Soviet imperialist empire. Ultimately, this reality hardly augers for peace between a voracious Germany and the Soviet Union. Quite the contrary, it was the desire for Germany to seek its natural “living space” in the East that was one of the decisive features pushing Hitler’s Germany toward war with the then socialist Soviet Union. But at present the Soviets seem to feel that their interests are best served by allowing the German jackals to feed on East European meat in the hopes that, in return, this German machine will be so mighty that it can pull even the Soviet economy out of its morass and, furthermore, that Germany’s eastward links will loosen it from the Western alliance.

For the moment, most of Germany’s Western allies have officially expressed support for the reunification of Germany, and it is true that the entire Western bloc benefits from the weakening of the Soviet bloc. But as reunification becomes

less of a propaganda ploy and more of a program for action, Germany's friends and allies in the West become more and more openly frightened. The essential condition Gorbachev has posed for the reunification of Germany is the elimination of Western troops from within its borders. Although it is unclear to what extent Gorbachev will be able to impose his conditions for reunification, a short-term compromise would not change his medium-range goal of a Germany decoupled militarily from the U.S. And a reunited Germany without U.S. or Soviet troops is a different Germany than that of today, and would be a major actor on a substantially different stage than that of today.

Can the World be Peacefully Redivided?

The prospect for a reunified Germany with all which that entails vis-a-vis the two existing imperialist blocs would represent a significant shift in imperialist power relations. The problem remains whether such a realignment would represent a peaceful redivision of the world, that is, a decisive redrawing of the spheres of influence of the different imperialist powers and of the network of links between them, without the violent conflict between rival imperialist blocs.

What we understand about the workings of imperialism and Lenin's basic teachings on the subject argues strongly against the possibility of peaceful division. While it is true that the objective *need* for a new redivision affects *all* the imperialist powers, this same need presents itself to each imperialist power in differing and often opposite ways. What is a favourable redivision for one power is generally a very unfavourable division for its rivals.

It is certainly true that the Soviet rulers have a number of short and even intermediate-range interests which, as pointed out earlier, overlap especially with those of West German imperialism. But fundamentally the opposite is the case: each of these powers needs *its own* hegemony over Central and Eastern Europe. Furthermore, both West Germany and the USSR have their own already existing relationships with other states (blocs) which constitute

real barriers to their capacity to dramatically depart from the existing order without calling these vital relationships into question as well. For example, West Germany's growth has come on the basis of its partnership within the *Western* imperialist empire. Thus it is difficult to see how any durable and viable redivision of the world could take place without the violent recasting of *all* imperialist relationships and a new order being brought about on the only basis possible for imperialists, that of the relative strength of the different powers.

By "durable" or "viable" redivision of the world, we mean one which could allow a whole new spiral of imperialist growth and development, such as that which has marked most of the post-World War 2 period. And it is nothing less than a protracted and sustained period of capitalist development which could accomplish the miracles that are being called for: modernisation of the backward economies of Central and Eastern Europe, the development of vast new markets for consumer goods in these countries (which would imply a radical raising of living standards for at least a major section of the people), and a corresponding intensification of imperialist exploitation in the Third World. All this is supposed to take place without disturbing the powers already seated at the imperialist banquet table — France, Britain, Japan, etc.

It is clear that at least some of the governmental and ruling class spokesmen are drunk with this delusion. In particular this is true of the German imperialist ruling class who believe they may have at last found their way out of their long-standing dilemma — how to pursue their strategy of German reunification and obtain "living space" in the East while saving their homeland from the virtual destruction that a full-scale war between the two rival blocs, fought to no small degree on German territory, would entail. According to press accounts, even the dour Chancellor Kohl is full of vigour and optimism these days...

But whatever different rulers East and West may believe, their soul, to paraphrase Marx, is the "soul of capital". That is to say, their policies and strategy must ultimately con-

form to the needs of the different national capital formations they preside over. These strategic needs and interests will continue to assert themselves and play the role of the "invisible hand" pushing governments and statesmen first in one direction and then in another.

However much individual ruling class figures might prefer to march forward on the road of peaceful redivision and joint exploitation, the underlying conflicts between different imperialist states is bound to reemerge all the more sharply. So while the possibility of further significant, even dramatic, realignments in the current world balance cannot be ruled out, it is necessary to see such shifts and realignments *not* as the beginning of a new spiral which holds within it the possibility of a new round of dynamic development but as part of the conclusion of the existing spiral, as a reflection of the fact that the current division of the world is no longer adequate for the expanded reproduction of capital, East or West. The RIM *Declaration* makes reference to Stalin's famous quote of World War 1 about "tying all of the contradictions in the world into a single knot and throwing them onto the scales for resolution". Today's situation is not the resolution or "denouement" of the imperialist knot, but rather its tightening and the further intertwining of the opposing trends of the drives toward imperialist war and proletarian revolution. Recent events do not argue for a protracted, "peaceful" expansion of the imperialist system but rather for a period of intense turmoil and conflict out of which a new alignment of world relations will be born.

More Favourable Grounds for Revolution

The fact that the collision course between the two rival imperialist blocs has been temporarily mitigated creates new conditions governing the revolutionary process in different countries and the world as a whole. There are certainly some unfavourable elements to the new situation, for example, that certain imperialist powers now feel less restricted in their aggression against the oppressed nations and countries (the Panama invasion is a recent case in

point). However, the main implication for revolutionary struggle is the opposite: the conditions are more favourable for the proletariat and the oppressed peoples.

One of the two main pillars of the imperialist system in the past period, the USSR, is undergoing tremendous internal upheaval. The only ones who can be disheartened by the difficulties of this great enemy are those who continued to believe against all evidence that the revisionist USSR has been a friend of the oppressed peoples, or at least a "lesser evil" than the U.S. whose conflict with this latter power is supposedly in the interests of the oppressed. The capacity of the USSR to intervene against revolution is, at least temporarily, dramatically reduced, and this becomes a favourable factor for challenging the existing order in all of the Soviet empire and beyond.

Furthermore, the political influence of the USSR and its ability to mislead the masses has also undergone dramatic changes. While Gorbachev is quite popular with bourgeois public opinion in the imperialist West, the political authority of the USSR has been greatly undermined elsewhere as the nature of the USSR as a capitalist power standing opposed to the interests of the oppressed peoples is all the more evident. Forces like George Habash of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) who have long served as apologists of the Soviet social-imperialists are very quiet these days, and all the more so as the USSR steps up its collaboration with Israel itself. Today, it is very difficult to justify one's own capitulation through reference to a supposedly larger interest represented by the USSR; still less is it possible to hold out the hope of Soviet "aid" as the key to advancing the liberation struggles.

Nor should we underestimate the potential for upheaval in the Soviet Union itself taking on a more revolutionary character. It is true that the ideological and political weight of Khrushchev and Brezhnev-style revisionism is heavy indeed, and this makes it very difficult for the emergence of a genuine Marxist-Leninist-Maoist line. But it is also true that the calling into question of the form of rule by the rulers them-

selves, the dramatic heightening of the contradiction between the non-Russian peoples and the central authorities, the inevitable sacrifices that are being demanded of the proletariat in the "restructuring" drive — all of these factors have awakened sleeping peoples to political life and created the circumstances in which the programs and political platforms of different classes and tendencies can be examined by the masses and tested in practice. If even the most rudimentary steps can be taken now toward the establishment of a genuine proletarian revolutionary vanguard, then the possibility for a real revolutionary opening cannot be dismissed.

In Eastern Europe, many of the same factors exist as in the USSR, but there are also many differences that stem from the existence of different states and nations as well as from the historical circumstances in which the East bloc was created (i.e., East Europe became part of the socialist camp not as a result of revolution in these countries but basically due to the victory of the Soviet Red Army against the Nazis). As the *RIM Declaration* points out, little socialist transformation was actually carried out in these countries. The collapse of these exploiting regimes offers the best opening for revolutionary advance in this region since revisionism consolidated its hold in the mid-1950s.

Gorbachev Steps Back from the Brink

The current turn in world affairs is essentially due to the policies adopted by Mikhail Gorbachev within the Soviet Union and internationally. Upon coming to power, Gorbachev inherited a Soviet imperialist system marked by a colossal military machine. Estimates are that war preparations consumed 20% of the Soviet gross national product, which represents much more (in relative terms) than the resources consumed by the Western imperialist war machine. This massive military buildup is an essential reason for what Gorbachev called the economic "stagnation" in the USSR during the Brezhnev period (that is, the period following the fall of Khrushchev up to Gorbachev's ascension to power). The short inter-

vening reigns of Andropov and Chernenko did not break in any decisive way with "Brezhnevism".

The Brezhnev period of "stagnation" was, of course, not only an economic phenomenon. It was also marked by important advances on the part of the Soviet imperialists in their conflict with the U.S. And it had repercussions in all other spheres as well. The notorious lack of political and intellectual liberties under the Brezhnev form of bourgeois dictatorship, the trampling on the national rights of the non-Russian nations making up the USSR, even the Russo-centric political and ideological atmosphere engendered by Brezhnev & Co, were all part of a package whose core was preparations for an all-out military confrontation with the West bloc.

When Khrushchev came to power through a reactionary coup d'état in 1956 he declared his intention to "peacefully compete" with the West and made many grandiose boasts of how he would "bury" the West through victory in this peaceful competition. The building of the Berlin Wall was perhaps the most dramatic illustration of this view. The East bloc would be "walled off" economically and politically from the West even though it would continue to interpenetrate in a single world economy, in the Third World for example. The "socialist" system would triumph not by destroying the West but by beating the West at "its own game" — the construction of modern imperialist states with a standard of living for broad sections of the masses that only the privileges of imperialism could guarantee.

But such a competition was bound to fail. The division of the world that existed in the post-war world was highly unfavourable to the new rulers of the Soviet Union, despite their hegemony over a number of not-insignificant countries of Eastern Europe, especially East Germany. More importantly, the Soviet bloc did not have the same kind of neocolonial empire that the U.S. had established in the wake of World War 2. Even in countries where it was able to gain a foothold, for example, in the state sector in India, the weaknesses in its own capital formation prevented the social-

imperialists from being able to invest on the scale necessary to profit fully from these opportunities and, in turn, use the superprofits that could be garnered in a place like India to fuel new dynamism in the home market. In other words, piecemeal advances by the Soviet imperialists were not enough to enable it to compete on a world scale with its rivals.

Indeed, the "peaceful competition" became more and more one-sided throughout the decades of the 1970s and 1980s, especially in economic terms. Even so, Brezhnev's challenges to the West bloc made considerable headway, for example, in Angola, Ethiopia, etc. And U.S. imperialism had been significantly shaken by its humiliating and costly defeat in Vietnam.

The whole imperialist system, East and West, was increasingly confronted with the built-in limits to its profit-engendering capacities; both blocs continued to lurch ahead, but at rates and from a starting point determined by what had gone before (especially the division of the world they had inherited). Furthermore, the massive war build-up carried out by the U.S. and the USSR in particular would have very different (and temporarily, at least, opposite) effects on the home economies. The U.S. "perverse recovery" of the Reagan era was fueled in large part by a massive military buildup while the Soviet economy was already burdened down by military expenditures even before the decibel level jumped at the beginning of the decade (taking the Afghanistan invasion as a starting point).

The problem for the Soviet leaders was never one of "guns or butter". Then, as now, the Soviet ruling class could only make their political, economic and military decisions within parameters determined by the workings of the imperialist system itself. Once the decisive step of transforming the formerly socialist state into a capitalist one had been taken, the leaders of such a system were not and could not be free to choose whatever path of development and whatever form of competition with the West they might desire. In other words, their imperialist nature itself pushed them into a course of challenging the hegemony of the U.S. imperialist bloc.

Soviet expansionary pressures would inevitably meet with resistance from other powers. Similarly, the Western powers themselves could not be permanently bound by the existing division of the world. First, the "cards" had been dealt out unevenly to the Western players. Although some, like West Germany, have done well acting within a new set of connections and linkages within the U.S. empire, ultimately these powers, too, must seek to increase and consolidate their own spheres of influence. These pressures, however, took place and acted through a bipolar framework which pitted the whole Western imperialist bloc against the Soviet Union and its allies. In other words, France and W. Germany, while ultimately competitors of U.S. imperialism, sought to advance their own independent imperialist interests *through alliance* with the U.S. (just as the U.S. had carried out its takeover of the British Empire not by going to war against Britain but in great measure while it was Britain's ally in World War 2). Furthermore, in the very important case of West Germany, the "natural" sphere of influence (including a large part of the historic "home base" itself, East Germany) was solidly (or so it seemed!) anchored in the Soviet orbit.

Qualitative Nature of the Division of the World

Furthermore, it is not correct to see the division of the world only as a quantitative parcelling out of different spheres of influence. It also has a *qualitative* element as well, in that only a redivision of the world provides the necessary impetus to a whole new round (or spiral) of imperialist development through the further centralisation of capital and the destruction of inefficient capitals and their reintegration into others. This need, also, would make itself felt in the West as well as the East. War, and the process of going into and coming out of it, plays a decisive role in all of this. This is not only because large amounts of productive capacity are destroyed but also because war enables the imperialist state, to a large degree, to directly organise production along the most rational lines. Also, very importantly, the political and ideo-

logical mobilisation of the masses that accompanies war may (if things go well for them) enable the imperialists to intensify exploitation and clamp down on the proletariat. All this is part of the wrenching process of reorganisation of capital.

At the same time, the altered capital base of the imperialist countries interacts with new modes of control over and penetration of the colonies and neocolonies. The integration of colonies into a new global framework enables imperialist capital to both more profitably expand and restructure internationally and to further transform production relations in the oppressed countries to meet its requirements.²

The Brezhnev program was not based on the hypothesis of long-term peaceful competition with the West. His massive military expenditures were a reflection of the fact that the defence of Soviet "real socialism" (ie, social-imperialism) would rely on force and ultimately offered the only real prospect for their triumph over the West. These expenditures were a type of "investment" which mortgaged the present against hopes for the future.

But such investments could not endure indefinitely. By putting ever increasing tension on the contradictions of Soviet society the Brezhnev policies threatened to blow up in the face of the ruling class. The explosion of contradictions seen in the *perestroika* years of Gorbachev did not come out of the blue; the pressure had long been building. When Gorbachev came to power he was confronted with the choice between continuing Brezhnev's policies — with the very real likelihood of the outbreak of war in the immediate period ahead — or making a radical departure from the basic course the country had been on for some time.

It is also necessary to recall the international situation when Gorbachev came to power in 1985. By all accounts, relations between the USSR and the U.S. were, as Shevardnadze put it at the time, at their worst point since World War 2 — quite a statement considering all the extreme moments of conflict between the two powers in that period (the Berlin airlift, Korean War, Cuban missile crisis, etc.). The U.S. ruling class, through the adoption of "Reaganism", had made it clear that

it intended to pursue its own program of militarisation and confrontation with the Soviets at whatever cost.

In fact, Reagan presided over the biggest military buildup in world history. And it was not a question of the production of war materiel alone — the U.S. had been pursuing the Soviets across the board: its efforts to destabilise Nicaragua's Sandinist regime, the introduction of a new generation of nuclear-tipped missiles in Europe in 1983, the invasion of Grenada to depose a pro-Soviet regime, and so on.

It is never completely clear to what extent various representatives of the ruling class are conscious of the direction in which their policies are heading. Some historians, for example, claim that Hitler was surprised at the British declaration of war following his invasion of Poland. Did Brezhnev and Reagan both believe nuclear war was inevitable? Late in his term, when "Reaganism" had taken a severe beating by the Iran/Contra scandal, Reagan himself professed his supposed concern (without naming names) that some of his inner circle believed in the "inevitability of nuclear war". Yet several years before his "conversion" Reagan had declared before a group of Christian fundamentalists that he expected to see "Armageddon" (the biblical prediction of massive fire and the destruction of the Earth) "in his lifetime" — at age 70! Certainly, Reagan had made his "firmness", his ability "to push the button" if necessary, one of the main images he presented to the public. Both Reagan and his inner circle were clear that their policies brought with them a real risk of the outbreak of war, and they accepted such a risk.

In the final analysis, however, the subjective understanding of state leaders is of far less importance than the momentum their policies give rise to. The point is that both the U.S. and the USSR were clearly anchored on a war course in the period from 1979 to 1986. Indeed, the fact that a war did not take place in that period is, to some degree, a matter of chance, for any one of a number of "incidents" could well have started the chain of actions and reactions leading to all-out conflict. Chance *does* play an important role

in history, but chance itself is not "blind": underlying laws of motion are expressed *through* chance events. While any one "incident" need not have started a third world war, these two collision paths would inevitably give rise to one such "incident" after another until a war did break out. This is one reason why it is not correct to treat the whole post World War 2 period as an indistinguishable block in which a more or less constant and unchanging danger of war exists simply because of the general tendencies of imperialism.

While the *possibility* of the outbreak of world war cannot be ruled out at any time, this possibility can become either relatively remote or acutely imminent at a given time. To deny this, to act as though there is no particularity to the development of contradictions or that they can only all intensify in a one-dimensional way, is bound to lead to errors in assessing the situation and in developing a policy in relation to it. This can take the form of the error mentioned earlier of denigrating the very real danger of war that *did* exist in the period in question by reducing it to the permanent, if residual, danger of conflict that exists under imperialism. Or such an argument can take an opposite form — considering the danger of the outbreak of war always imminent, always occupying the same relative importance compared to the other contradictions in any given period. Such a view would turn the danger of the outbreak of world war into a "holy ghost", always present but never tangible. In reality, the two views are not as different from each other as it appears.

But if it is true that it is ultimately underlying laws, and not the decisions of statesmen, that determine questions of war and peace, it is true too that history is made by human beings, even if they do not make it according to their will alone. And it is clear that at a number of key junctures the state leaders *did* make decisions which backed away from the precipice of world war. Our Party has already raised some points of self-criticism in relation to this point. Specifically, we underestimated the degree to which the massive destruction caused by nuclear weapons would influence the actions

of the ruling classes when they were confronted with the questions of initiating a war they could win. Furthermore, the imperialists had more freedom of action, more manoeuvring room, than we had previously believed.

History has proven that imperialists will shrink before no crime if they feel that the existence of their class and its "vital interests" are at stake. At the same time, they are also acutely aware of the Pyrrhic nature of any victory that would come at the expense of the complete or virtual destruction of their home base. Indeed, one of the most alarming features of the 1980s was the imperialists' continual efforts to solve this dilemma, to find a way of surviving, winning and reconstructing on the basis of nuclear holocaust. (Militarily this took different forms, such as the U.S.' stepped-up search for the miracle weapon, "star wars", that would free it to obliterate its enemy without suffering the consequences, or the "miniaturisation" of nuclear weapons, developing smaller, more accurate missiles and warheads that could be more sharply focused on military targets in the hopes of making such weapons more "usable". Of course, no one could be sure how "survivable" such a nuclear war could be, but even the most optimistic commentators wrote of hundreds of millions of deaths.)

The rulers of the USSR and the U.S. were confronted with the stark reality of where their path was heading. And, indeed, this sober reckoning played a major role in influencing the choices to proceed along a different path. This was particularly the case when Gorbachev came to power, but once he showed a desire to slow down the immediate drive towards war, the U.S. imperialists also were quick to take up his offer, for the U.S. too confronted the problem of the difficulties of surviving and winning a nuclear war.

Reserves

As already pointed out, the fact that the imperialists were *able* to choose a different path is also a question for analysis. In other words, both blocs of imperialists seemed to have more capacity to adapt, more "reserves", than we had previously thought. An analysis of

the "reserves" of the U.S. and Soviet blocs is outside the scope of this article and must be the subject of further study. Still, a few points can be noted. First, it is important to stress that "reserves" is a relative question. For an imperialist ruling class, "reserves" are those economic, political, diplomatic and military factors which they can mobilise to enable them to meet exceptional requirements and weather extraordinary difficulties. It is most definitely not like a "reserve tank" of gasoline that can be turned on when the other fuel is used up and, in turn, will continue to function for a clearly predictable period of time. For example, the lack of revolutionary struggle of the proletariat and oppressed peoples or their errors can also become a "reserve" for the ruling class in times of crisis, and a most important one at that!

There is *no time* when the imperialists are completely "without reserves". This is another way of saying that imperialism, however shaken and battered, will not fall of its own weight; nor will the outbreak of war ever be "automatic" — it would come about as a result of underlying tendencies and compulsions expressing themselves in connection with and through international events and concrete actions taken by the principal states involved.

The corollary point must also be made: there is no specific level of "reserves" which will guarantee that the imperialists will survive any particular period of crisis or *not* go to war. Our Party has analysed that an important factor enabling the U.S. ruling class to weather the storm provoked by the Vietnam war and the rise of a powerful revolutionary movement within the borders of the U.S., most especially the Black liberation movement, was its remaining economic, political and military reserves, connected with its position at the head of a global empire. This is certainly the major factor, for example, in the U.S. imperialists' ability, for a time, to pursue the Vietnam war while enabling the living standards of broad strata in the U.S. to rise. But it would be a serious mistake to conclude from this that a full-scale revolutionary situation could not have emerged in that period or that it is inconceivable that

U.S. imperialism could have been overthrown.

One can anticipate the objection that with such qualifications the very concept of "reserves" has become so nebulous as to lose all value. No, this is not the case. It is possible to understand the basic laws governing the functioning of imperialism, and it is possible on the basis of this understanding to concretely analyse the motion and development of the imperialist states, the underlying weaknesses they face, as well as "the reserves" they are able to draw upon, and on this basis to develop revolutionary strategy and policies aimed at hastening the overthrow of these beasts. That such analysis can never be made with the same precision as a mathematical axiom does not make it any less scientific — like all science it can only reflect reality partially and like all science it must continue to advance through practice and the struggle between the correct and the incorrect so as to reflect reality more fully and completely. Furthermore, while all of nature and society are in a constant state of change, human society (and thus the world situation) are more dynamic, changing and complex; thus perception and analysis of people cannot help but lag behind, to a greater or lesser degree, the actual transformations taking place.

Collusion and Contention

Collusion and contention are opposites in the dialectical sense; that is, like all opposites, they interpenetrate with each other and can, under certain circumstances, transform themselves into their opposites.

Collusion and contention always exist between imperialist powers; this contradiction is itself an expression of the inherent tendency in capitalism of competing capitals to both attract and repel each other, and whose very conditions of existence demand the existence of other capitals even though these capitals are inevitably locked in a battle to destroy each other. Capital stands as one pole of a contradiction opposite labour (the proletariat), but it also has contradiction *within* it. Marx captured this dual nature well when he referred to the capitalist class as "an operating fraternity of thieves".

At no time can only contention or

only collusion exist. For example, even in the midst of war itself both tendencies can be clearly seen. In World War 2 the U.S. and Britain were allied against the German bloc, but it is clear that this alliance was full of contention, as these two rivals each pursued different and highly conflicting goals *through the course* of their collaboration (or collusion) against the other bloc. Similarly, even while the Allied and the Axis bloc were in a life and death battle for world supremacy, the two sides colluded at important junctures against the interests of proletarian revolution and the Soviet Union. Britain and Germany worked jointly against the interests of the revolution in Greece. Similarly, the policies of the U.S. and Britain toward a "second front" were also governed, to no small degree, by their desire both to see the then socialist Soviet Union bled and weakened by Germany (in the early years of the war) and (especially after the Red Army had dealt Hitler a decisive blow) to minimise revolutionary advances sure to accompany Hitler's defeat by rushing the Allied imperialist armies to Berlin.

Ultimately, the relationship between imperialist powers, and all the more so between imperialist blocs, is determined principally by contention and only secondarily by collusion. This, too, is rooted in the fact that capital can only exist as many, conflicting capitals. But what is principal in a general sense does not determine which aspect of the relationship between imperialist states is dominant, or principal, at any moment in international affairs. Opposites can and are transformed into each other and this can take place more rapidly, violently and repeatedly as the contradiction itself is heightened. The principal aspect determines the nature of a contradiction at any given time and in this sense it can be said that the current international situation is marked more by collusion between the U.S. and the USSR than by their contention. But it is also true that *both* contention *and* collusion can increase, even if the relationship between these two opposites undergoes change.

In today's situation collusion has become a more important factor in world affairs, and even the con-

tion between the imperialist powers is taking place to no small extent through and as part of their collusion. Even so, today's East-West "honeymoon" could just as quickly be transformed into a bitter and violent divorce.

The relationship between collusion and contention is, of course, no stranger to the question of the principal contradiction on a world scale. Contention and collusion are a unity of opposites; they are two opposite expressions, or forms of motion, of the interimperialist contradiction. Contention, and not collusion, is what, in an overall and long-term sense, characterises the contradiction between imperialist powers, and it is the force that propels the imperialist states to war with one another. The situation today where East-West relations are more marked by collusion is both a *reflection* of the fact that the principal contradiction has been temporarily and partially mitigated and it *contributes* to this temporary and partial mitigation. The fact that the principal contradiction has been partially and temporarily mitigated — even if a new principal contradiction were to clearly emerge and govern the unfolding of world events — does not and would not mean the elimination of the contradictions between the imperialist powers. Furthermore, these changes are taking place in a world in which the options, manoeuvring room and "reserves" of the imperialist powers are shrinking, and this is a further argument against any tendencies toward complacency. The overall intensification of the basic contradictions means that the interrelationship between these different contradictions is all the more tightly drawn and subject to rapid and dramatic reconfigurations.

The collapse of the Eastern European regimes is an illustration of the above point. While long-term rivalry between the two imperialist blocs helped set the stage for this collapse (including through the West's direct efforts to foment trouble in the opposing camp), the upheaval was made possible in a more immediate sense by the mitigation of the rivalry between the two blocs and the temporarily predominant role of collusion in the superpower relationship, for it was the sharpness of the conflict between the

two blocs which held in check, if only temporarily, the centrifugal forces within the blocs themselves. (The mutual attraction of the two Germanys toward each other existed before as well, but the marriage could not be consummated due to the sharpness of the rivalry of their respective clans.)

But it is important to note that here, too, counterbalancing tendencies exist. As East and West Germany grow closer to each other and in so doing upset many of the premises on which both of the two blocs are organised, there is also a tendency to resolidify some previously strained alliances — Poland with the USSR, France with Britain, and so forth.

It can be said that today's world situation is marked by two opposite factors. The straining of the post World War 2 structures has reached the point of, as Mao put it in referring to the law of contradiction, conspicuous change. That the previous framework is no longer viable is evident to all. But at the same time the different actors on the world arena are as yet unable to *carry through* the necessary realignment. *The redivision of the world has already begun*, but this redivision cannot be completed, it cannot be brought to fruition, by the methods that are being currently employed. The *previous* division of the world cannot help but assert itself and constantly stand in the way of the best-laid plans of the imperialists precisely because it has not been shattered. The *test of strength* of different imperialist powers, the imposing of will by one grouping over another and the sorting out of relative strength within the different groupings has yet to take place.

This is what explains the seeming paradox of the current world situation. The very real cooperation between the U.S. and the USSR is allowing a number of previously "frozen" situations — Afghanistan, Nicaragua and, of course, Germany — to witness important movement. On one level, the danger of world war no longer fills the air. Yet the rapid unravelling of yesterday's seemingly immutable features is a most *destabilising* factor in world affairs. The increase in turmoil among the ruling circles and the real possibility of revolutionary upheavals among the masses in many

countries will most definitely interpenetrate with and greatly influence the development of the contradiction between the two blocs.

Gorbachev's Ace?

One thing is crystal clear: all of the previously established strategies of the imperialists, East and West, are being restudied and revised. The *status quo* is coming unravelled and any attempt by one or another power (or group of powers) to rest their strategic interests on an effort to maintain this status quo will surely end in failure. Gorbachev, pushed by the acuteness of the crisis in the USSR, recognised this more rapidly than his American counterparts and played the more dynamic role in triggering today's situation.

By playing the "German card", that is, opening the door to German reunification, Gorbachev has taken a great gamble, but he has also thrown what might turn out to be a giant wrench into the Western alliance. The question can be posed: are Gorbachev's policies (especially regarding Germany but even more broadly) to be considered the white flag of surrender by the "loser" of the Cold War or rather a Machiavellian manoeuvre aimed at disrupting the West while Gorbachev actually proceeds with a hidden agenda?

Neither of these two views is correct, even though both contain elements of truth. As we have seen, Gorbachev *did* (or so it appears) come to the double conclusion that the status quo was no longer viable and that, at the critical moment when vital decisions had to be taken, it was not possible to reshape the world through war in a way favourable to Soviet social-imperialism at that time. In this sense, Gorbachev did "back down". But such a decision did not, of course, change the imperialist character of the Soviet Union nor did it mean that Gorbachev had simply surrendered to his enemies. It did mean that he strove to consciously adopt and apply new policies which most favoured social-imperialism *within the framework* of his decision to back away from the onward rush toward war of the mid-1980s.

There is no evidence that the policies of Gorbachev will succeed, even temporarily, in pulling the

USSR out of the crisis in which it has been mired. It is, certainly, an attempt at radical restructuring of the Soviet economic system, and it is clearly seen by the Soviets as integrally connected with their efforts to "restructure" (or redivide!) international relations as a whole. But even while playing the key role in *undoing* the old order the Soviets have not been able to fundamentally recast international relations in a way favourable to them. To take one example, the German locomotive has yet to be hitched to the Soviet train. And even as Germany and the USSR each strive to bring about such a coupling, the fundamental dispute over who will be the conductor and which direction the train will roll cannot help but sharpen.

The underlying compulsion for a new, more favourable division of the world continues to exist for the Soviet Union and it will continue to assert itself in the different policies that the Soviet rulers debate and adopt. Even in the most recent period, when Soviet strategic choices were not being made mainly from the point of view of how to prepare and prosecute a successful world war, the Soviet ruling class continued to pursue its interests through various diplomatic, political, economic and most definitely military steps as well. When making such calculations, all imperialist ruling classes consider not only today but tomorrow, not only what policy they might prefer but also what policy might be forced on them by the unfolding of events — this is one meaning of "preparedness". Attempts will always be made to turn a retreat in one sphere into an advance in another — a concession on armaments, for example, into an international public opinion windfall. The possibility that Gorbachev's current strategic plan will fail and will be abandoned either by Gorbachev himself or by his successors has always been taken into account by Soviet civilian and military authorities, and by the West as well. What is a strategic retreat from confrontation today could become a strategic preparation for conflict tomorrow. This is not mainly a question of Machiavellian manoeuvring; it is, again, the underlying drives of imperialism expressing themselves through the choice of policies by

people who are but partially aware of the very forces they are responding to.

The West has certainly won some important victories over its Soviet counterparts in the recent period. But the very real difficulties being faced by the USSR also represent a source of worry in the Western ruling circles, for they realise that the crisis and turmoil in the Soviet Union becomes a major factor for instability and uncertainty in world affairs. This is one reason that the Western powers have been careful not to push Gorbachev too hard in a number of circumstances, such as in relation to the crisis provoked by Lithuania's "declaration of independence".

Furthermore, as far as the relations between the two imperialist blocs are concerned, the possibility cannot be ruled out that it will be the U.S. or further fissures within the U.S. bloc that will call an abrupt halt to the current turn in international events.

Conclusion

We have already pointed out that the most important factor to grasp is the more favourable grounds for revolution. There is no telling how long this more favourable convergence of contradictions and circumstances might last. The increasing rapidity of the unfolding of world events, which is itself a reflection of the underlying intensification of contradictions, is a strong incentive to seize the hour.

No truly revolutionary strategy can ever be built upon the assumption of a long and protracted period of peace. Even though the post-war period has been marked by the absence of world war, it has been a violent and turbulent epoch full of wars and revolutions of different types. For most countries in the world, "peace" is very relative indeed and the violent nature of reactionary rule is constantly reasserting itself. Even if, in the imperialist countries, "peace" — that is, the absence of a direct military confrontation with other major powers or some other major war — appears to be the "normal" state of affairs, this is only the *appearance* of things, it is only looking at things from their quantitative aspect (what dominates for the longest period of time) and not from their qualitative

aspect (what actually reflects the *essence* of imperialism and what plays the key role in its development). And, of course, such "peace" involves the carrying out of violent suppression and wars against oppressed nations and peoples. In the imperialist powers where long periods of "peace" can exist — and this only relatively, as noted above — still revolutionary strategy must be based upon precisely those moments of severe crisis, disorder and/or war, when the actual class relations and nature of the man-eating imperialist system are evident and the dictatorial nature of the reactionary political power revealed, and the possibility of an assault on state power becomes viable.

Waging or preparing to launch the revolutionary war of the proletariat, People's War, remains the pressing task of communist revolutionaries in all countries, even if the particular nature of this war will vary according to the conditions in different countries and especially between the two great streams of the world proletarian revolution: the new democratic revolution of the oppressed countries and the socialist revolution of the capitalist and imperialist states.

The recent turn in world events has caused some turmoil in the ranks of revolutionaries — but it has caused much greater turmoil in the ranks of the imperialists and reactionaries. Difficulties exist, but they can and must be overcome. An already favourable situation can become all the more favourable through the conscious and energetic intervention of the revolutionary communists. □

Footnotes

1. *Revolutionary Worker* No. 540 (January 22, 1990).

2. See Raymond Lotta, *America in Decline* (Banner Press, Chicago, USA, 1984) for a more complete discussion of this point regarding the redivision of the world. It is interesting to note here the difference between the reorganisation brought about by world war and the current situation in which East and West Germany are seeking to reunify. The West German imperialists, especially, are promising the benefits of citizenship in a powerful imperialist homeland to the masses East and West without suffering or hardship. In fact, they have been very careful to promise, completely unrealistically, that the whole "buy out" can take place without the tranquility of the German burgher being disturbed in the least.