

Excerpts from *Révolution dans la Révolution?* by Régis Debray

WE ARE NEVER COMPLETELY contemporaneous with our present. History advances in disguise; it appears on stage wearing the mask of the preceding scene, and we tend to lose the meaning of the play. Each time the curtain rises, continuity has to be re-established. The blame, of course, is not history's, but lies in our vision, encumbered with memory and images learned in the past. We see the past superimposed on the present, even when the present is a revolution.

The impact of the Cuban Revolution has been experienced and pondered, principally in Latin America, by methods and schemas already catalogued, enthroned, and consecrated by history. This is why, in spite of all the commotion it has provoked, the shock has been softened. Today the tumult has died down; Cuba's real significance and the scope of its lessons, which had been overlooked before, are being discovered. A new conception of guerrilla warfare is coming to light.

Among other things, Cuba remembered from the beginning that the socialist revolution is the result of an armed struggle against the armed power of the bourgeois state. This old historic law, of a strategic nature if you like, was at first given a known tactical content. One began by identifying the guerrilla struggle with insurrection because the archetype—1917—had taken this form, and because Lenin and later Stalin had developed several theoretical formulas based on it—formulas which have nothing to do with the present situation and which are periodically debated in vain, such as those which refer to conditions for the outbreak of an insurrection, meaning an immediate assault on the central power. But this disparity soon became evident. American guerrilla warfare was next virtually identified with Asian guerrilla warfare, since both are “irregular” wars of encirclement of cities from the countryside. This confusion is even more dangerous than the first.

The armed revolutionary struggle encounters specific conditions on each continent, in each country, but these are neither “natural” nor obvious. So true is this that in each case years of sacrifice are necessary in order to discover and acquire an awareness of them. The Russian Social Democrats instinctively thought in terms of repeating the Paris Commune in Petrograd; the Chinese Communists in terms of repeating the

Russian October in the Canton of the '20s; and the Vietnamese comrades, a year after the foundation of their party, in terms of organizing insurrections of peasant soviets in the northern part of their country. It is now clear to us today that soviet-type insurrections could not triumph in prewar colonial Asia, but it was precisely here that the most genuine communist activists had to begin their apprenticeship for victory.

One may well consider it a stroke of good luck that Fidel had not read the military writings of Mao Tse-tung before disembarking on the coast of Oriente: he could thus invent, on the spot and out of his own experience, principles of a military doctrine in conformity with the terrain.... But once again in Latin America, militants are reading Fidel's speeches and Che Guevara's writings with eyes that have already read Mao on the anti-Japanese war, Giap, and certain texts of Lenin—and they think they recognize the latter in the former. Classical visual superimposition, but dangerous, since the Latin American revolutionary war possesses highly special and profoundly distinct conditions of development, which can only be discovered through a particular experience. In that sense, all the theoretical works on people's war do as much harm as good. They have been called the grammar books of the war. But a foreign language is learned faster in a country where it must be spoken than at home studying a language manual.

THE LATIN AMERICAN REVOLUTION and its vanguard, the Cuban revolution, have . . . made a decisive contribution to international revolutionary experience . . .

Under certain conditions, the political and the military are not separate, but form one organic whole, consisting of the people's army, whose nucleus is the guerrilla army. The vanguard party can exist in the form of the guerrilla foco itself. The guerrilla force is the party in embryo.

This is the staggering novelty introduced by the Cuban Revolution. . . .

Thus ends a divorce of several decades' duration between Marxist theory and revolutionary practice. As tentative and tenuous as the reconciliation may appear, it is the guerrilla movement—master of its own political leadership—that embodies it, this handful of men “with no other alternative but

death or victory, at moments when death was a concept a thousand times more real, and victory a myth that only a revolutionary can dream of" (Che). These men may die, but others will replace them. Risks must be taken. The union of theory and practice is not an inevitability but a battle, and no battle is won in advance. If this union is not achieved there, it will not be achieved anywhere.

The guerrilla force, if it genuinely seeks total political warfare, cannot in the long run tolerate any fundamental duality of functions or powers. Che Guevara carries the idea of unity so far that he proposes that the military and political leaders who lead insurrectional struggles in America be "united, if possible, in one person." But whether it is an individual, as with Fidel, or collective, the important thing is that the leadership be homogeneous, political and military simultaneously. Career soldiers can, in the process of the people's war, become political leaders (Luis Turcios, for example, had he lived); militant political leaders can become military leaders, learning the art of war by making it (Douglas Bravo, for example).

In any case, it is necessary that they be able to make it. *A guerrilla force cannot develop on the military level if it does not become a political vanguard.* As long as it does not work out its own line, as long as it remains a pressure group or a device for creating a political diversion, it is fruitlessly marking time, however successful its partial actions may be. How can it take the initiative? On what will it build its morale? Do we perhaps believe that it will go "too far" if it is allowed to become the catalyst for popular aspirations and energies, which will *ipso facto* transform it into a directive force? Precisely because it is a mass struggle—the most radical of all—the guerrilla movement, if it is to triumph *militarily*, must *politically* assemble around it the majority of the exploited classes. Victory is impossible without their active and organized participation, since it is the general strike or generalized urban insurrection that will give the *coup de grâce* to the regime and will defeat its final maneuvers—a last-minute *coup d'état*, a new junta, elections—by extending the struggle throughout the country. But in order to reach that point, must there not be a long and patient effort by the mountain forces to coordinate all forms of struggle, eventually to coordinate action by the militia with that of the regular forces, to coordinate rearguard sabotage by the suburban guerrillas with operations carried out by the principal guerrilla group? And, beyond the armed struggle, must there not be an effort to play an ever larger role in the country's civilian life? Whence the importance of a radio transmitter at the disposition of the guerrilla forces. The radio permits headquarters to establish daily contact with the population residing outside the zone of operations. Thus the latter can receive political instructions and orientation which, as military successes increase, find an ever-increasing echo. In Cuba *Radio Rebelde*, which began transmitting in 1958, was frequently utilized by Fidel, and confirmed the role of the Rebel Army's General Staff as the directive force of the revolutionary movement. Increasingly, everyone—from Catholics to communists—looked to the Sierra, tuned in to get reliable news, to know "what to do" and "where the action is." Clan-destinity became public. As revolutionary methods and goals became more radical, so did the people. After Batista's flight, Fidel broadcast his denunciation of the maneuvers for a *coup d'état* in the capital, thus depriving the ruling class in a matter

of minutes of its last card, and sealing the ultimate victory. Even before victory, the radio broke through government censorship on military operations, a censorship such as prevails today in all embattled countries. It is by means of radio that the guerrillas force the doors of truth and open them wide to the entire populace, especially if they follow the ethical precepts that guided *Radio Rebelde*—never broadcast inaccurate news, never conceal a defeat, never exaggerate a victory. In short, radio produces a qualitative change in the guerrilla movement. This explains the muffled or open resistance which certain party leaders offer today to the guerrilla movement's use of this propaganda medium.

Thus, in order for the small motor really to set the big motor of the masses into motion, without which its activity will remain limited, it must first be recognized by the masses as their only interpreter and guide, under penalty of dividing and weakening the people's strength. In order to bring about this recognition, the guerrillas must assume all the functions of political and military authority. Any guerrilla movement in Latin America that wishes to pursue the people's war to the end, transforming itself if necessary into a regular army and beginning a war of movement and positions, must become the unchallenged political vanguard, with the essential elements of its leadership being incorporated in the military command. . . .

WE HAVE ONLY TO OBSERVE the difficulties in which Algeria finds itself today, because of yesterday's division between the internal fighters and their government outside the country. There is no better example of the risks implicit in the separation of military and political functions when there is no Marxist vanguard party. Thus it is the revolutionary civil war that strengthens the historic agencies of the new society. Lenin, in his last notes, wrote that "the civil war has *welded* together the working class and the peasantry, and this is the *guarantee of an invincible strength*."*

In the mountains, then, workers, peasants, and intellectuals meet for the first time. Their integration is not so easy at the beginning. Just as there are divisions into classes elsewhere, groups can arise even in the midst of an encampment. The peasants, especially if they are of Indian origin, stay to themselves and speak their own language (Quechua or Cakchiquel), among themselves. The others, those who know how to write and speak well, spontaneously create their own circle. Mistrust, timidity, custom have to be gradually vanquished by means of untiring political work, in which the leaders set the example. These men all have something to learn from each other, beginning with their differences. Since they must all adapt themselves to the same conditions of life, and since they are all participating in the same undertaking, they adapt to each other. Slowly the shared existence, the combats, the hardships endured together, weld an alliance having the simple force of friendship. Furthermore the first law of guerrilla life is that no one survives it alone. The group's interest is the interest of each one, and vice versa. To live and conquer is to live and conquer all together. If a single combatant lags behind a marching column, it affects the speed and security of the entire column. In the rear is the enemy: impossible to leave the comrade behind or send him home. It is up to everyone, then,

* Draft of a speech (not delivered) for the Tenth Congress of Russian Soviets, December 1922. Lenin's emphasis.

to share the burden, lighten his knapsack or cartridge-case, and help him all the way. Under these conditions class egoism does not long endure. Petty bourgeois psychology melts like snow under the summer sun, undermining the ideology of the same stratum. Where else could such an encounter, such an alliance, take place? By the same token, the only conceivable line for a guerrilla group to adopt is the "mass line"; it can live only with their support, in daily contact with them. Bureaucratic faintheartedness becomes irrelevant. Is this not the best education for a future socialist leader . . . ? Revolutionaries make revolutionary civil wars; but to an even greater extent it is revolutionary civil war that makes revolutionaries.

Lenin wrote: "The civil war has educated and tempered (Denikin and the others are good *teachers*; they have taught well; *all our best militants have been in the army*)."*

The best teacher of Marxism-Leninism is the enemy, in face-to-face confrontation during the people's war. Study and apprenticeship are necessary but not decisive. There are no academy-trained cadres. One cannot claim to train revolutionary cadres in theoretical schools detached from instructional work and common combat experiences. To think otherwise would be justifiable naiveté in Western Europe; elsewhere it is unpardonable nonsense.

The guerrilla group's exercise of, or commitment to establish, a political leadership is even more clearly revealed when it organizes its first liberated zone. It then tries out and tests tomorrow's revolutionary measures (as on the Second Front in Oriente): agrarian reform, peasant congresses, levying of taxes, revolutionary tribunals, the discipline of collective life. The liberated zone becomes the prototype and the model for the future state, its administrators the models for future leaders of state. Who but a popular armed force can carry through such socialist "rehearsals"? . . .

Here the political word is abruptly made flesh. The revolutionary ideal emerges from the gray shadow of formula and acquires substance in the full light of day. This transubstantiation comes as a surprise, and when those who have experienced it want to describe it—in China, in Vietnam, in Cuba, in many places—they resort not to words but to exclamations:

"The renovating spirit, the longing for collective excellence, the awareness of a higher destiny are in full flower and can develop considerably further. We had heard of these things, which had a flavor of verbal abstraction, and we accepted their beautiful meaning, but now we are living it, we are experiencing it in every sense, and it is truly unique. We have seen its incredible development in this Sierra, which is our small universe. Here the word "people," which is so often utilized in a vague and confused sense, becomes a living, wonderful and dazzling reality. 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 has organized them so wonderfully? Where did they acquire so much ability, astuteness, courage, self-sacrifice? No one knows! It is almost a mystery! They organize themselves all alone, spontaneously! When weary animals drop to the ground, unable to go further, men appear from all directions and carry the goods. Force cannot defeat them. It would be necessary

to kill them all, to the last peasant, and that is impossible; this, the dictatorship cannot do; the people are aware of it and are daily more aware of their own growing strength."†

All these factors, operating together, gave shape to a strange band which was made to appear picturesque by certain photographs and which, because of our stupidity, impressed us only through the attire and long beards of its members. These are the militants of our time, not martyrs, not functionaries, but fighters. Neither creatures of an apparatus nor potentates: at this stage, they themselves are the apparatus. Aggressive men, especially in retreat. Resolute and responsible, each of them knowing the meaning and goal of this armed class struggle through its leaders, fighters like themselves whom they see daily carrying the same packs on their backs, suffering the same blistered feet and the same thirst during a march. The blase will smile at this vision *à la Rousseau*. We need not point out here that it is not love of nature nor the pursuit of happiness which brought them to the mountain, but the awareness of a historic necessity. Power is seized and held in the capital, but the road that leads the exploited to it must pass through the countryside. Need we recall that war and military discipline are characterized by rigors unknown to the *Social Contract*? This is even truer for guerrilla armies than for regular armies. Today some of these groups have disappeared before assuming a vanguard role, having retreated or suffered liquidation. In a struggle of this kind, which involves such grave risks and is still only in the process of taking its first faltering steps, such defeats are normal. Other groups, the most important ones operating in countries whose history proves their importance for all Latin America—Venezuela, Guatemala, Colombia—have established themselves and are moving ahead. It is there, in such countries as these, that history is on the march today. Tomorrow other countries will join and supersede them in the vanguard role.

Has it been noted that nearly all of these guerrilla movements neither have nor want political commissars? The majority of the fighters come from communist ranks. These are the first socialist guerrilla forces that have not adopted the system of political commissars, a system which does not appear to correspond to the Latin American reality.

If what we have said makes any sense at all, this absence of specialists in political affairs has the effect of sanctioning the absence of specialists in military affairs. The people's army is its own political authority. The *guerrilleros* play both roles, indivisibly. Its commanders are political instructors for the fighters, its political instructors are its commanders.

† From Fidel Castro's last letter to Frank País, written in the Sierra Maestra, July 21, 1957. The same wonderment is expressed today in the letters of Turcios, Douglas Bravo, Camilo Torres, and others. Of course this does not mean that it is easy to obtain peasant support immediately; but when it is obtained, it performs wonders. Fidel wrote the letter after eight months in the Sierra and after having escaped betrayal by several peasants.

Régis Debray's Révolution dans la Révolution? was first published early this year in Havana and Paris. The selections here are from the American edition, published by the Monthly Review Press. The entire text also appears in the July-August issue of the Monthly Review magazine. It is translated from the author's French and Spanish by Bobbye Ortis. Copyright ©1967 by Monthly Review Press; reprinted by permission.

* *Ibid.* Lenin's emphasis.

With the Guerrillas in Guatemala



Photograph
of
Guatemalan
guerrillas
by the
author

CÉSAR MONTES, THE LEADER of one of the two principal guerrilla groups operating in the Guatemalan countryside, unfolded an Esso map of his country. He was standing in a jungle clearing. "See here?" he said. "This is where the guerrillas started, in the Sierra de las Minas. Later they spread to the north—to the Vera Paces, the Indian regions, and then into the low lands—Rio Hondo, La Palma, San Cristóbal, Rosario, Gualán, San Agustín, and Teculután. For some time now we have also been operating in the western region, the most densely populated Indian areas. Half the people in Guatemala are Indians, and you can be sure they will play a decisive role in our revolution. But it is a slow and difficult job. We are faced with four centuries of distrust which the Indians have had for the whites and the mestizos." Montes proudly pointed out several Indian guerrillas in his encampment, and added that they were devoted Catholics.

It seemed fitting that Montes was using an Esso road map to explain the whereabouts of the Guatemalan guerrillas. Although he had personally learned the art of warfare by actual fighting, a number of other guerrilla leaders had been taught by U.S. Army officers. Luis Augusto Turcios, a former commander of Montes' FAR (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias*) who was recently killed in an automobile accident at the age of 24, had been trained at the Army Ranger school at Fort Benning, Georgia. Yon Sosa, the commander of the other guerrilla group, MR-13, which controls part of Izabal in northeastern Guatemala, learned guerrilla warfare from U.S. instructors at Fort Gulick in the Panama Canal Zone.

But, of course, what the American military is trying to do is not to train the guerrillas themselves, but the people trying to suppress them. Even more so than with other Latin American countries, the U.S. is quietly pouring arms, money and

"advisors" into the anti-guerrilla effort in Guatemala. It is an involvement beginning to look ominously like the U.S. presence in South Vietnam in the years before American combat troops arrived there. The war is no longer just Guatemala's.

Just what the extent of American military involvement is, no one knows for sure. Many Guatemalan officers have been trained by the U.S. Army at bases in the Canal Zone and in the U.S. itself. But U.S. involvement is greater than this. The guerrillas themselves claimed at one time that 1000 members of the U.S. Special Forces were aiding the Guatemalan Army. This figure seems high, but the U.S. government has officially admitted the participation of men from the U.S. Eighth Special Forces group in the military training of Guatemalans.

A former Guatemalan Army sergeant told me about the courses in anti-guerrilla warfare he took from Special Forces instructors: "The classes were held at the 'La Cajeta' farm in Zacapa. We were there from May to October of last year. They told us that Cubans were heading the Guatemalan guerrillas. They taught us camouflage techniques, how to survive in the mountains, how to undo booby traps. As for prisoners, we were advised to do away with them whenever we were not able to take them with us."

General Robert W. Porter Jr., commander of the U.S. Southern Army Command in Panama, told the House Committee on Foreign Affairs in April 1966 that the U.S. Army engineers and rangers were working on "civic action" programs in the border zone where troops from Guatemala and Honduras have been fighting guerrillas. The "civic action" consists mostly of distributing powdered milk, medicines and promises to villagers under guerrilla influence. "The guerrillas must first be close by before we even get water," a peasant from the Izabal region said to me. But from reports both by Guate-

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