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The Strategy of Castroism

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IT IS DIFFICULT enough to define any "ism," even if the movement to which it gives rise is limited to the set of ideas propounded by the founding individual, such as Karl Marx or V. I. Lenin, during his lifetime. The difficulty becomes virtually insuperable in the case of "Castroism" because the ideas held by Fidel Castro, from the time he began his political career up to the present, have changed so much that a search for their unity would necessitate a psychological study.

Castroism did not emerge as an

ideology until after the victory of the revolution against Fulgencio Batista y Zaldivar. Its sources and documents are simply the speeches of Castro himself and those of his close associates, the Second Declaration of Havana, the writings of Ernesto (Che) Guevara, those of Regis Debray, and the resolutions of the Organization of Latin-American Solidarity Conference of 1967.

Generally speaking, it may be said that Castroism is a translation of Marxism-Leninism into Latin-American Spanish—a translation from

which the original emerged much changed. It has its roots in the Cuban experience as seen and interpreted by the victors of 1959. In contrast to other forms of the original doctrine—Trotskyism, Stalinism, Maoism, Titoism, and modern so-called Communist “revisionism”—Castroism did not grow out of the organic development of the Communist world movement as originally organized in the Comintern. It is an “outsider” ideology which is still in the process of change.

Strategic Implications

This is not an attempt to analyze the whole ideology, but to concentrate on its strategic implications—an effort to describe the peculiarities of Castroism as a strategy of revolution insofar as it is different from other Communist conceptions. The general concepts which are quite close to those of Mao Tse-tung will, therefore, be omitted: the primacy given to the third world, the importance attached to the peasantry, or the emphasis on the inevitability of violence.

Primarily, guerrilla warfare will be analyzed since it is the salient feature of Castroist strategy, and an effort will be made to define it as

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closely as possible, compare it with other related conceptions, investigate its roots, and, finally, give a sketch of the development and experiences of the Latin-American guerrilla movement.

Three Propositions

The fundamental characteristics of Castroist guerrilla warfare can be reduced to three propositions, the first two of which were formulated by Guevara in his first published work.¹ They are:

- It is not always necessary to wait for all the conditions for a revolution to exist; the insurrectional focus can create them.

- In underdeveloped America, the countryside must be fundamentally the locus of the armed struggle.

- The guerrilla focus is the nucleus of the revolutionary party, the real vanguard of the anti-imperialist and potentially Socialist revolution.

What do these propositions imply, and in which respects do they contradict the strategic concepts of orthodox Marxism-Leninism?

According to orthodox Marxism-Leninism, insurrectional armed struggle presupposes the existence of an objectively revolutionary situation out of which it grows as the last stage in the struggle for power. This is reversed in the case of Castroism, for which the armed struggle is the first stage of the revolution, which then creates the objective revolutionary situation.

For the orthodox Marxist-Leninist, armed struggle is fundamentally a mass struggle, but, for the Castroist, it is begun and implemented by a small band of guerrilla fighters which, in the course of time, may grow into

¹ Ernesto (Che) Guevara, *Guerra de guerrillas*, Havana, Cuba, 1960, p 11.

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a popular revolutionary army. Originally, Guevara declared that such a struggle could only be waged against an open dictatorship. He wrote in his first book:

Where a government has assumed power through some form of consulta-

same Guevara could write in 1963:

A dictatorial regime tries to maintain its rule under conditions in which it may not need to use violence on a large scale; one must force it to appear undisguised, that is to say, force it to show itself for what it is: a



From the book Che Guevara on Revolution by Jay Mallin

A captured guerrilla photo of Ernesto (Che) Guevara (right) and his double, "Tuma," in the countryside near La Paz, Bolivia

tion of the people, fraudulent or not, and maintains at least the appearance of constitutional legality, it is impossible to bring about a guerrilla uprising, inasmuch as the possibilities of peaceful political struggle have not been exhausted.²

This qualification was abandoned in about 1962 and a new concept adopted by the simple device of using the classical Marxist definition of any government in a class society as ultimately a dictatorship of the ruling class, even if this dictatorship is decked out in democratic trappings. Hence, the

violent dictatorship of the reactionary class.³

In this way, the guerrilla struggle, accompanied by terrorist acts, will not only create an objective revolutionary situation, but cause any democracy to change itself into an open dictatorship. This explains why "official" or "orthodox" Marxist-Leninists can, with some justification, label Castroism as a "subjectivist" or "voluntarist" deviation and accuse it of putschism and adventurism.

The bald statement that the coun-

² *Ibid.*

³ Ernesto (Che) Guevara, "Guerra de guerrillas: Un metodo," in *Cuba socialista*, Havana, Cuba, September 1963.

tryside is the main locus of armed struggle in Latin America would, at first sight, appear to be entirely acceptable to orthodox Marxist-Leninists. In most Latin-American countries, the peasantry forms the bulk of the population and its poorest element. Also, it is easier to take up arms in the mountains and remote areas of the countryside than in the cities where the repressive forces are concentrated, especially if the peasants in such areas are rebellious.

"Self-Defense" Areas

The Communist Party of Colombia has, for many years, been in favor of the formation of armed "self-defense" areas in which rebel peasants could find a refuge against attacks from bandits and the army, and which led to the establishment of quasi-autonomous regions called, in popular parlance, "independent republics." Such self-defense organizations did not always need to remain defensive: if attacked and forced to evacuate their territory, they could transform themselves into guerrillas—as was the case in Colombia in 1964 when the army began its Operation *Marquetalia*.

Similar to these Colombian Communist ideas were those of the Trotskyite Hugo Blanco who set up armed "peasant syndicates" in a valley of Peru. These were to be the nuclei of the coming revolutionary forces and "the basis of the future government of the Peruvian people, of the revolutionary government."⁴

Blanco maintained that, by organizing themselves into syndicates which offered protection from the big landowners and were designed eventually to take over the lands of the *latifundistas*, the peasants would simultane-

ously begin to satisfy their other needs by building and running schools, hospitals, and making roads. They would form the nucleus of a dual power, opposed to that of the ruling classes, and possess their own armed militias.

The syndicates would turn from local defensive organizations into offensive, revolutionary, and supraregional organizations; they would then carry out the agrarian reform and revolutionize the country as a whole. The armed struggle would, however, be on a mass scale, not that of a small moving band. Therefore, Blanco came out in favor of militias and not of guerrillas.

Spontaneous Ideas

Castroism is sharply opposed to such ideas which to it smack of "spontaneity." Guerrilla warfare is not the struggle by the peasant masses, launched by them and waged because they want to protect themselves or further their interests. The guerrilla band does not emerge from the peasantry, but comes "from the outside" in the same way as Lenin's Bolshevik Party did not grow out of the workers, but was considered a vanguard which should arouse the political awareness of the masses, overcome the "economist" and "trade unionist" ideas of the workers, propagate revolutionary ideas in their midst, and, finally, lead them into the revolution.

The opposition to any notion of the guerrilla struggle as a peasant movement, to any "spontaneity," to any idea that the object of this struggle is to satisfy the demands of the peasants is a fundamental difference between the Castroist and the official Communist or Trotskyite approach to the struggle in the countryside. The Castroist guerrilla band is an elite,

⁴ Hugo Blanco, *El camino de nuestra revolucion*, Ediciones Revolucion Peruana, Lima, Peru, 1964, p. 36.

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The French author, Regis Debray, now in prison in Bolivia, has been a major factor in articulating and propagating the Castro ideology through his writings

not a mass, organization of peasants. It is fundamentally offensive, not defensive; it is a mobile band fighting for the anti-imperialist and Socialist revolution.

If Castroism proclaims the countryside as the main locus of armed struggle, it is so only secondarily because of the geographical conditions and not because the poverty-stricken peasantry is considered potentially revolutionary. It is easier to start armed struggle in the mountains and jungles far away from the centers of government power and repression.

The other main reason for the Castroist emphasis on the countryside is that the hard living conditions in the mountains, far away from any urban comforts, are particularly conducive to the emergence of a revolutionary personality as required by a true revolutionary vanguard.

Orthodox Communists have never idealized the peasantry, and have never considered them as the leading force of the revolution, only as the most important allies of the proletariat. To the "official" Communist, it is the proletariat—in particular, the ur-

ban proletariat—which has to lead the revolution. "Middle-class" intellectuals are only its allies.

For the Castroist, the intellectuals are the true leaders of the anti-imperialist (and Socialist) revolution, whereas the workers, especially the urban workers, are considered with deep, albeit never clearly formulated, suspicion. Castroism doubts if the workers are, or can ever become, as genuinely revolutionary as the "classless" elite which is formed in the guerrilla war from people of middle-class intellectual background.

Party Role

The third proposition, which places Castroism in a class apart from Marxism-Leninism, is the so-called "role of the party." For Leninism, the party is the prime mover, preparer, and leader of the revolution which brings true Marxist ideas to the masses from the outside. The party is versed in Marxism, fundamentally urban, and constructed according to the principles of "democratic centralism." It considers itself the vanguard of the proletariat, directing, educating, and organizing the working class in the revolutionary struggle.

Castroism accepts the "elitist" concept of Leninism, but substitutes for the urban party the guerrilla band in the mountains. It also dissolves the bond between this vanguard and the proletariat, as well as the connection between it and theoretical Marxism. The guerrilla band is a political and a military organization which cannot be led from the city nor subordinated to any urban-based party. It does not consist of "Marxists," but of people whose revolutionary legitimacy is proved not by any ideology, but by participation in the guerrilla war, and whose social background is irrelevant.

Debray writes in his famous booklet: "The mountains transform bourgeois and peasants into proletarians, whereas the city may make bourgeois even out of proletarians."⁵ This is hardly compatible with Marxism since "class" becomes a moral, instead of a sociological, category. To quote Debray again:

*The revolutionary guerrilla war is clandestine. It is born and develops in secret. . . . In the beginning it maintains its invisibility and it appears only at the moment and the place chosen by its leader. In its action and with respect to its organization, the guerrilla is independent of the civilian population and has therefore not to assume the direct defense of the peasant population.*⁶

Here, it seems to be no pure chance that the "leader" is mentioned. The guerrilla band is, indeed, closely bound up with the *caudillo* principle which, at least theoretically, is quite distinct from any "democratic centralism."

Analyze Revolution

These ideas on strategy characteristic of Castroism grew first out of the Cuban, and second out of later Latin-American, experience. The development of the Cuban revolution should be analyzed first.

Castro did not consider guerrilla struggle as a fundamental method until late 1958. He landed in Cuba in December 1956, hoping that his arrival would coincide with an urban rising in eastern Cuba which, however, was crushed before it could develop into a genuine insurrection. Even then, Castro, who had made no preparation for a prolonged struggle in the mountains of the Sierra Maes-

tra, continued to hope that Batista would be defeated by some kind of mass movement and a general strike. But the people—especially the lower classes—remained passive, and the effort to organize a general strike on 9 April 1958 ended in total failure.

Batista's Army Fails

This apathy on the part of the masses was one of the factors which contributed to the birth of Castroism as a strategy, the other being the failure of the large Batista army to eradicate the guerrillas. So, the small band of fighters around Castro (which scarcely numbered 800 four weeks before Batista's flight) apparently defeated a well-equipped regular army of some 38,000 men. Although there was no genuine military victory, it was on the strength of this experience that Guevara could claim that a regular army was no match for the guerrillas.

In point of fact, Batista's army was inefficient, corrupt, unwilling to fight, and particularly ill-prepared to wage a battle against the revolutionaries. It was not beaten; it disintegrated under the inner pressure of corruption and demoralization, and under the weight of growing popular antipathy. This hostility toward Batista and his whole apparatus—or, conversely, the growing sympathy of the people, especially the upper and middle classes, for Castro and his men—was the essential element.

This sympathy, however, never grew into active support. Neither the victory by Castro in 1959 nor the rapid transformation of the "democratic" revolution into a "Socialist" revolution were the result of mass action; the masses were never more than approving onlookers. The democratic and Socialist revolutions were

⁵ Regis Debray, *¿Revolucion en la revolucion?*, Havana, Cuba, 1967, p. 63.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

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A review of elite troops at the Colombian ranger school where special training is conducted in counterguerrilla operations

carried out solely by a small band of revolutionaries, mostly of middle-class background, grouped around a charismatic leader, and it was this fact which contributed a decisive element to the whole ideology and strategy of Castroism.

It is true that, before his victory of 1959, Castro obtained some help, especially from the upper and middle classes, and that some peasants of the Sierra Maestra fought with him. It is also true that his victory aroused general enthusiasm. But there was no mass action, no large-scale and spreading strikes or demonstrations, or any widespread uprising. The workers remained particularly passive throughout.

The simple reason for this was that the workers were not dissatisfied with their economic position. They proved to be permeated with the

spirit of "economism" and "trade unionism," and it was this which reinforced Castroist doubts about the revolutionary potentialities of the proletariat. These doubts were to grow after Castro had established himself as ruler of Cuba because of the opposition from the workers which he experienced in his struggle for Socialist transformation of the country.

In 1959, Castro was victorious as champion of representative democracy under the banner of the 1940 Constitution which he promised to put into effect. It was for this reason that he was able to count on almost universal sympathy and was backed by 90 percent or more of the population, scarcely any of whom wanted a radical social transformation of the Cuban economy or society. Communists formed a small proportion of the

population and were not popular either among the Castroites (who had been accused of petty bourgeois putschism and had not been actively helped by the Communists until the end of 1958) or among the majority of the lower classes.

Cuba was a comparatively rich country, with a population which was, on the average, better off than that of the majority of other Latin-American countries. This was so even though a large proportion—most of the rural population—lived under considerably worse conditions than the urban citizenry, unemployment was rife, and differences in wealth quite pronounced.

Agrarian Reform

Although the bulk of the rural population consisted not of peasants but, rather, of agricultural laborers, there was a general wish for dissolution of the *latifundia* and some kind of agrarian reform. Anti-imperialist feeling was quite weak even among the middle class, much less pronounced than it had been in the 1930's, and less in evidence than in most other Latin-American countries. And few wanted any form of "socialism," although socialism did come subsequently and with great rapidity, not because the masses pressed for it, but because Castro and his closest associates imposed it on society from above while whipping up nationalist and anti-imperialist sentiment.

Much quicker than the Communists had anticipated or even wished, by October 1960, Cuba was transformed into a Socialist country, with almost all the key means of production in the hands of the revolutionary state. This transformation required no violence; it might be said that the Cuban revolution was violent as long as it was

not Socialist, but democratic (during the fight against Batista) and peaceful when it turned Socialist. The former ruling classes protested and muttered, and some emigrated, but they did not offer any active resistance. Neither did the United States intervene until the transformation was complete.

The majority of the population applauded the transformation—in part, because, during the first years of his rule, Castro was able to offer them quite exceptional material and moral benefits, sacrificing the immediate economic future of Cuba by distributing its existing wealth. They also applauded because they thought that the standard of living would go on rising and, in part, also because they did not realize what was happening.

Semantic Method

Castro, indeed, manipulated public opinion by a strange semantic method—calling changes by names which bore no relation to the content and aims of the changes introduced. A particularly glaring example of this method was the way in which the agrarian reform of 1959 was presented and the interpretation given to the concept of the "cooperative." The peasants and agricultural workers were thinking of cooperatives which would collectively own their land and sell their products, whereas Castro aimed at collectivization which was something scarcely anyone wanted.

When the members of the cooperatives realized what had happened and opposition manifested itself among the rural population, it was too late, and the cooperatives were officially transformed into state farms.

The workers, happy about the halving of rent for housing, wage rises, and the fact that they had rid them-

selves of the former corrupt trade union bureaucracy, were at first no less enthusiastic than the rural population. But it was not long before they began to display opposition. In November 1959, a new, pro-Communist leadership was imposed on the trade unions through the personal intervention of Castro and against the manifest will of the freely elected delegates to the Trade Union Congress. As a result, the urban workers lost almost all the rights and privileges they had enjoyed, had to work harder and longer than before for lower wages, and were deprived of the right to strike.

Triple Disillusion

The Castroites also grasped something else which inevitably deepened their distrust of the masses and of their "spontaneity." The masses wanted to live better, they wanted material comforts, and they were filled with a spirit of hedonism, not heroism. But the revolution needed sacrifices, hard work, and destruction of all privileges, even those of the urban workers. This had to be imposed from above, together with an additional aim advocated by the leading group of intellectuals. Capitalist man had to be reeducated, to be transformed into Socialist man for whom heroism and work for others would be more important than individual well-being. Humanism acquired a new tinge, highly characteristic of an elite composed of intellectuals.

The elitist consequences of the Cuban experience were reinforced by what happened in Latin America after 1959. According to Castro and Guevara, the whole continent was ripe for revolution. But it did not occur. Hence, there arose a triple disillusion:

with the social classes and strata, supposed to be the moving forces of this revolution; with the Soviet Union, supposed to favor and promote the revolution; and with the "revolutionary organizations"—in particular, the official Communist Parties—supposed to lead it.

In spite of their poverty, the peasants did not become revolutionary



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A former army lieutenant, Marco Antonio Yon Sosa, headed a guerrilla group in Guatemala which never conformed to Castroist strategy

nor, in spite of all the revolutionary exhortations used, did the urban workers overcome the limits of reformism, economism, and trade unionism. The so-called "national bourgeoisie" proved even more unreliable as both the downfall of Joao Belchior Marques Goulart in Brazil and the victory of Eduardo Frei Montalva in Chile seemed to show. The only social stratum which openly and almost everywhere manifested revolutionary attitudes were the intellectuals who were strongly influenced by Castro and his revolution.

The policy adopted by the Soviet Union during the Cuban crisis of 1962 provoked much resentment among the Castroites, and its policy in the fol-

lowing years seemed even worse. It appeared—at least in the eyes of the Cubans—that the Soviet Union had renounced any attempt to foster revolution in Latin America, and not only because of its policy of “peaceful coexistence” with the United States.

Economic Aid

To the Cubans, it seemed that the Soviet leaders had concluded that the objective situation in most Latin-American countries was not revolutionary and that the best strategy to undermine the United States would consist in having closer diplomatic and economic relations with the existing Latin-American Governments which Castro regarded as counterrevolutionary lackeys of imperialism. Not only did the Soviet Union wish to come to terms with these regimes, it even declared its preparedness to extend credits and economic and technological aid to them which provoked extreme anger in Cuba.

It is quite possible that still another consideration determined Soviet policy: Cuba costs them a lot of money, and they are reluctant to spend still more in order to sustain any new “Socialist” country appearing in the hemisphere.

The Castroites had always been suspicious with regard to the official Communist Parties, and especially of the Cuban Party. The attempt to reach a compromise, made at the Conference of the Latin-American Communist Parties which met in November or December 1964 in Havana, misfired, and the divergences between Castro and the official Communist Parties grew. In July 1966, Castro not only accused them of being “pseudorevolutionaries,” but even went so far as to declare that these “pseudorevolu-

tionaries” were the main support of imperialism.

Nowhere did the official Communist Parties score any notable successes, and, in some countries, such as Brazil, they suffered tremendous defeats. The “peaceful” way, the way of “mobilizing the masses,” of forming broad anti-imperialist fronts with the national *bourgeoisie*, did not apparently work. The Chinese splinter parties, formed at first in Brazil (1962), then in Peru and Colombia, appeared neither more revolutionary nor more efficient than those oriented toward Moscow.

Guerrilla Detachments

Finally, the struggle based on the ideas of “self-defense” or on the arming of peasant syndicates had not led the countries nearer to revolution or brought the organizations responsible for them nearer to conquest of power. In Colombia, the “self-defense” groups, after being attacked by the army, had, indeed, been transformed into moving guerrilla detachments, but failed to score any spectacular successes. The Communist Party directing them still considered the situation in the country as not revolutionary.

Little remained of Hugo Blanco's syndicates, and this remnant was sometimes not exactly “revolutionary,” but, rather, “reformist” and potentially counterrevolutionary because the partial reforms attained by the syndicates apparently satisfied the peasants. In addition, Juliao's “peasant leagues” in northeastern Brazil had disintegrated. So, no other way seemed to exist as a revolutionary means apart from that of Castroist guerrilla warfare.

If some rather small and early attempts to take up armed struggle in

Latin America are left aside, there were fairly serious guerrilla movements in five Latin-American countries: Colombia, Guatemala, Venezuela, Peru, and Bolivia. In none of these countries did guerrilla struggle have the expected results although the failure may be considered as due to "deviations" from the Castroist concepts or to mistakes which could have been avoided. Therefore, no Castroist need admit that Castroism has proved unworkable—it may prove effective in the long run.

Guerrilla Organizations

In Colombia, there are two guerrilla movements. One, not Castroist, but directed by the Communist Party, and which has grown out of "self-defense," is the *FRAC* (Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia) and is led officially by Manuel Marulanda Velez ("Tiro Fijo"). The other is the "Castroite" *ELN* (National Liberation Army), led by Fabio Vasquez Castano, which became active in January 1965 in the Santander region bordering on Venezuela.

Fighting groups formed by an earlier organization which was very close to Castroism—the *MOEC* (Student Peasant Worker Movement)—seem either to be inactive or to have merged with the *ELN*. Other guerrilla organizations, such as the so-called Movement of Vichada, led by Dr. Tulio Bayer, have disappeared.

The struggle did not turn into a general rising; the cities remained untouched by the guerrilla campaign, and the Communist Party itself declared that armed struggle was not the predominant form of struggle in Colombia. Today, the *FRAC* seems to have lost its importance, but the *ELN* is still active.

In spite of some reports glorifying

the Colombian guerrilla campaign published by the Cuban press, there seems hardly any doubt that its importance is declining. The reasons for this failure were given in an interview with Tulio Bayer, himself formerly active with Colombian guerrillas.⁷

Bayer stated: "The guerrilla movement is not what it should be—namely, a popular affair." He went on to give various reasons for this, explaining the fundamental difference between Castro's struggle against Batista and the situation in Colombia where the guerrillas lacked any sympathy from the middle class and where the army was superior to that of Batista. The reason for the lack of popular and middle-class support was stated succinctly: "We need a Batista—but we have a Lleras, who is at present more popular than he was when he acceded to power."

Military Rising Fails

The case of Guatemala is different from that of Colombia, except that here, too, the guerrillas achieved meager results. On 13 November 1960, a military rising took place, led by two junior officers trained by the United States in antiguerrilla warfare—Lieutenants Marco Antonio Yon Sosa and Luis Augusto Turcios Lima. The uprising failed, and they formed a secret organization called the Movement of 13 November. However, armed struggle was not launched until early 1962 after a rebellion by middle-class elements, mainly students, in the months of March and April of that year which, in turn, gave birth to a militant student organization called the Movement of 12 April.

To add to the confusion, the illegal

⁷ *Le Figaro*, 1 February 1968.



Manual de Informaciones, Argentina

Douglas Bravo, a guerrilla leader in Venezuela, was expelled from the Soviet-supported Communist Party because of his Castroist strategy

official Communist Party, the Guatemalan Workers' Party (*PGT*), itself formed an organization for guerrilla warfare in collaboration with the 13 November and the 12 April Movements, called *FAR* (Rebel Armed Forces). But this organization broke apart because Yon Sosa's movement fell under the influence of Trotskyites who proclaimed openly the need for a Socialist revolution and denounced the *PGT*. Then, Turcios Lima broke with Yon Sosa, established an inde-

pendent organism called the Edgar Ibarra Revolutionary Front, and came once more into close contact with the *PGT* which saw no possibilities for legal struggle of any kind under the regime of Colonel Peralta Azurdia.

A new *FAR* was established in 1965, without the 13 November Movement, and entered a crisis in 1966 at the time of the presidential elections. Under the influence of the *PGT*, the *FAR* came to a tacit understanding with the candidate of the Revolutionary Party, Julio Cesar Mendez Montenegro, and suspended its armed activities after he was elected.

Present Situation

It is extremely difficult to ascertain the real situation of the guerrillas at the present time. The 13 November Movement seems to be almost extinguished, and the *FAR* has been badly hit by army attacks—in particular, by the terrorism of extreme right-wing organizations which appear to be closely linked to the Guatemalan Army and upper classes.

The Yon Sosa Movement never conformed to Castroist strategy. It corresponded much more closely to the ideas of Hugo Blanco than of Guevara or Debray. Practically the whole movement was limited to a single region in which it tried to establish something akin to the "independent republics" of Colombia although the mobile guerrilla band proper played an important part.

According to Cesar Montes, who became the head of the *FAR* after the death of Turcios Lima, the guerrilla band should be a mobile organization, not a sedentary organization reduced to one or two areas, and it should consider itself as the nucleus of a future popular army fighting for an anti-imperialist revolution.

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But at the same time, Montes emphasizes that conditions in Guatemala are different from those in Batista's Cuba, and he also declares that some areas of his country are unfit for guerrilla struggle. He criticizes Debray who, according to him, has insufficient knowledge of conditions in Guatemala and seems to attach much more importance to the struggle by the peasants themselves. According to Montes, the Indian peasants participate actively in the *FAR* and will participate in ever-growing numbers. Many of them realize that armed struggle is the only way for them, even though it will take a long time.

The 'MIR'

In Venezuela, armed struggle centered at first in the cities in the form of acts of terrorism, and began in 1961 after the leftwing of the ruling Democratic Action Party had formed itself into the more or less Castroite Movement of the Revolutionary Left (*MIR*).

Guerrilla struggle in the mountains only developed in 1962 after the failure of two military risings in Carupano and Puerto Cabello. A minority of revolutionary military men in the *MIR* and the Communist Party (*PCV*), which was forced into complete illegality, participated in it. Precisely because the government of Romulo Betancourt reacted to terrorism with great energy, the radical left could claim it to be a dictatorship which was obedient to reaction and to US imperialism and would never achieve any serious agrarian reform.

The insurrectionists, however, got into difficulties as their terroristic acts antagonized a large part of the population while the peasants remained, on the whole, unresponsive. After the failure of the attempt to

disrupt the presidential elections of December 1963, doubts appeared among the radical left. They were uncertain whether to continue with the armed struggle or to regard it as the main form of struggle against the government and the establishment.

These doubts were reinforced by a creeping crisis in the Venezuelan so-



Marine Corps Gazette

Arms seized from extremist groups in Peru were linked to Castro's Cuba

cial and political system, the rising cost of living, increasing corruption, and the growth of discontent which, in part, led to the formation of new radical left parties. Splits occurred in the *MIR*, as well as in the *PCV*, with factions of both organizations slowly turning against guerrilla warfare and terrorism while repression by the government forces imposed heavy sacrifices on the fighters.

The Castroist leaders of the guerrillas accused the leadership of the *PCV* of wanting to put an end to the armed struggle or to use it merely for political ends. In 1966, Castroites such as Douglas Bravo and Luben Petkoff were expelled from the ranks

of the *PCV*, and it was this fact, above all, which caused Fidel Castro to accuse the Latin-American Communists of being pseudorevolutionaries. But it was not until 13 March 1967 that he openly attacked the *PCV*, accusing it of treason. He also leveled three main criticisms at the armed struggle as it had been waged in Venezuela:

- Too much importance had been given to the cities and too little to the mountains and other rural areas.

- Too much hope was concentrated on eventual risings by revolutionary-minded military men, and too little attention had been paid to the systematic buildup of rural guerrilla forces.

- The movement had been led by the cities, whereas, from the start, it should have been directed from the mountains by a single political-military command.

Not until 1966, with the creation of this command in the form of the unified *FLN-FALN* (National Liberation Front-Armed Forces of the National Liberation) under Douglas Bravo, Fabricio Ojeda, and Luben Petkoff, had these mistakes been corrected. Now, the struggle would take place on a higher level.

Castro's optimism appears to have been more contradicted than confirmed by subsequent events. Although at the beginning of 1968 the guerrillas became more active in some regions, their over-all importance seems to have diminished and their number to have decreased. This makes the view that they may be able to assume power look rather farfetched.

An anonymous and secret document written in June 1966 by the "12th district of the *MIR*," indicated that to

believe in the possibility of guerrilla struggle in the mountains and countryside was to ignore reality in Venezuela, a country where the peasantry does not represent more than about 26 percent of the population, mostly concentrated in suburban areas. The majority of the peasants are not revolutionary, and they are controlled by organizations closely bound up with the governing Democratic Action Party.⁸

Guerrilla Movement Weaker

It seems clear that the guerrilla movement in Venezuela is weaker than it was a few years ago and further from taking power than it was in 1963 when this was believed possible in some quarters.

While in Colombia, Guatemala, and Venezuela the guerrilla is still active, this is no longer the case in Peru and Bolivia. The guerrilla groups which took up arms in Peru in 1965, and were completely defeated within the same year, belonged to two groups, both influenced by Castroism: the *MIR* led by De la Puente Uceda and Guillermo Lobaton, and the National Liberation Army, which was led by Hector Bejar.

A post mortem on the Peruvian guerrilla movement written by Francisco Moncloa declares that the *MIR* had been defeated because it had completely misjudged the national situation. It believed that Peru was in the midst of a revolutionary situation, and that the peasants, driven by misery and despair, would sympathize with the guerrilla whose struggle would provoke urban uprisings.

These assumptions proved wrong because the guerrillas had underestimated the popularity of President

⁸ *Confidencial*, Caracas, Venezuela, Number 33, August 1966.

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Fernando Belaunde Terry whose promises of agrarian reform had raised hopes among the peasantry. They also underestimated the strength and the morale of the Peruvian armed forces and the difficulty of fighting a war in the inhospitable Andes which are so different from the Cuban Sierra Maestra. Writing for those Latin-American enthusiasts who still did not believe that the guerrillas in Peru had been defeated, Moncloa states:

Even if it pains me, I still have to emphatically state the truth. It is absolutely essential to combat the illusion of victory where no more has occurred than a generous, beautiful, and premature adventure, born of schematism and passion, ignorance of national reality and wishful thinking.⁹

Further Criticism

A further, similar criticism of the Peruvian experience may be found in a letter written by Hector Bejar. After criticizing the lack of coordination between the different guerrilla groups and their establishment in well-defined zones, making it possible for the army to guard the outlets of each zone, Bejar writes:

The peasants only rarely had the opportunity to offer organized and active support to the guerrillas. . . . The reason is clear: secrecy is not a characteristic of work among peasants, and the incompetence of the insurrectional organizations, together with their excessive desire for publicity, left their collaborators at the mercy of the repressive forces. . . . The guerrillas were liquidated less through combat . . . than through information given by ex-collaborators of low po-

litical level and poor fighting spirit, or by deserters.¹⁰

In Bolivia, the sole guerrilla rising was prepared and led in accordance with Castroist theories by Guevara himself. It was also the one which failed most completely after a short time. It was obviously not intended to be confined to Bolivia. The object was to infect all South America—especially Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina—and thus create a “second Vietnam.”

Favorable Factors

At first sight, Bolivia seemed an appropriate place for such an attempt: thinly populated with an inefficient, unpopular administration remote from the original zone of combat, with a huge part of the population disaffected, especially since the overthrow of the government in November 1964 and subsequent events; a country whose peasants were wretchedly poor, and whose army contained several thousand revolutionary-minded miners. Yet despite all these apparently favorable factors, the guerrilla band led by Guevara and composed to a great extent of foreigners (including Cubans, Peruvians, and Argentinians) suffered a crushing defeat which cannot be explained by the fact that it was discovered prematurely—although this alone is a serious reflection on its leadership.

The Bolivian Government was able to seal off the mining regions and to win the sympathy of the local peasants, among whom President Rene Barrientos Ortuno was much more popular than Guevara and his friends had thought. The peasants of the region in which the guerrillas moved, who, as Guevara complained, were

⁹ Francisco Moncloa, *Marcha*, Montevideo, Uruguay, 21 January 1966.

¹⁰ Hector Bejar, *World Outlook*, N. Y., Volume VI, Number 4, 2 February 1968.

"impenetrable as stones," were fairly prosperous and expecting public works such as the construction of a highway. This was interrupted by the appearance of the guerrillas.

Those among the peasants who seemingly collaborated with the guerrillas by selling them food and serving as guides went to the authorities to denounce the foreign intruders. Answering the call for volunteers, they joined the army to fight the guerrillas. Some of them were killed during the fighting, and their deaths increased the antipathy felt by their local compatriots for the Castroites.

A rather strange, well-nigh absurd, post mortem on the Bolivian adventure can be found in the utterances of two Cuban survivors during a press conference in Santiago, Chile.¹¹ The Cubans admitted that the Bolivian Army was bad, the worst in Latin America, and that their failure was due to the lack of peasant support. Extraordinary, however, was their generalization regarding the relationship of the peasantry and the guerrillas in which they distinguished three stages. In the first stage, the guerrilla is nomadic, and:

... the peasant is rather an enemy of the guerrillero and a friend of the army, because he lives in doubt. In the second state a sort of equilibrium is reached and the campesino turns neutral. The third stage is attained when

the guerrilla becomes the dominant force in a peasant region. Then the campesinos turn into revolutionaries and become the propelling force of the guerrilla. They provide him with what he needs, serve as messengers, and so on. We never reached this stage.

Apart from the strange interpretation of people who provide food and serve as messengers as being the "propelling force" of guerrilla warfare, there remains the enigma as to how a guerrilla can ever reach the third stage at all because apparently he had to be winning before he could hope to mobilize peasant support. It may be true that nothing succeeds like success, but this does not diminish the naivete of such statements.

It is said that Guevara exclaimed after his defeat that five years of work had been wasted. Hector Bejar wrote in his above-quoted letter from prison:

*The recent events in Bolivia . . . oblige us to reflect. For the ELN, some of whose members died at Che's side, a second critical reckoning is inevitable. The question is basically whether Che's death was also the death of a concept, of a tactic.*¹²

It seems, indeed, that Castroism did not fail due to any one particular mistake, but, rather, because Latin-American realities are humiliatingly different from what many leftwing intellectuals think.

¹¹ *El Siglo*, Santiago, Chile, 24 February 1968.

¹² Hector Bejar, *op. cit.*