

Imperialism and Revolution / Episode #33



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Revolutionary practice unifies

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During the Cuban revolutionary war of 1957 and 1958, there were organizational, tactical and ideological divisions. These divisions were resolved in revolutionary practice.

There was, on the one hand, the armed struggle in the Sierra Maestra, directed by Fidel, which as it evolved increasingly had peasant participation. On the other hand, there was a clandestine struggle in the cities, characterized by sabotage and the formation of secret cells among workers and the radicalized sector the petit bourgeoisie. Many of the urban leaders saw the guerrilla struggle in the mountains as of secondary importance. Using the Revolution of 1933 as their guide, they believed that a combination of mass action and sabotage in the cities would bring down Batista. But the leaders and soldiers of the rebel army believed that they would acquire the military capacity to defeat Batista's army and to force the surrender or flight of the dictator.

The July 26 Movement enjoyed enormous popular support, because of the July 26, 1953 attack on the Moncada Barracks and the clandestine distribution of Fidel's platform and manifesto known as History Will Absolve Me. The national direction of the July 26 Movement, located in Havana, was responsible for organizing all its activities of guerrilla war and sabotage throughout the country. The second most important organization was the Communist Party, which had changed its name to the Popular Socialist Party (PSP) in 1944, in consideration of the global united front against capitalism. The PSP possessed a significant capacity to organize urban workers. In general, the PSP membership had far more experience and political consciousness than the members of the July 26 Movement. Many of the PSP had a distrustful attitude toward the July 26 Movement, due to the latter's diversity of ideological viewpoints, including an element of anti-communism, and its relative political immaturity. Another important revolutionary organization was the March 13 Revolutionary Directory, a student organization led by José Antonio Echeverría. The Revolutionary Directory experienced the same tactical and ideological divisions that were found in the July 26 Movement.

Events during 1958 would demonstrate the greater viability of the guerrilla struggle as against the urban front. The leaders of the urban front of the July 26 Movement called for a general strike and actions of sabotage for April 9, with the intention of provoking the fall of Batista. But as a result of the lack of cooperation between the PSP and the urban July 26 Movement, the general strike failed to generate mass participation. The PSP, with its network among urban workers, had the capacity to mobilize workers, but the PSP was not participating in the mass action. Although the July 26 Movement had enormous prestige among the people, it lacked organizational structures to mobilize the people. The leaders of the urban July 26 Movement mistakenly had believed that a general call would bring the people to strike and acts of sabotage, in spite of its lack of organizational strength, because of its high prestige.

The failure of the general strike had the consequence that the July 26 Movement gave priority to the guerrilla struggle. At a meeting of the national leadership of the July 26 Movement on May 3-4, it was decided to transfer headquarters to the Sierra Maestra and to place the organization under the direct control of Fidel. Henceforth, all resources and arms were to be sent to the guerrilla forces.

In addition, Batista was emboldened as a result of the failure of the general strike. On May 24, he launched an offensive against the rebel army, seeking to totally annihilate it. Ten thousand soldiers were sent against the guerrilla forces, which at the time consisted of no more than 300. There were 30 battles in 76 days during the offensive, and the rebels were forced to retreat to an area of twenty kilometers from the highest point of the Sierra Maestra.

But the rebel retreat to some extent was strategic. As the Batista army advanced, it was more vulnerable to guerrilla attacks and more isolated from its bases of support. By the end of the offensive, the Army had suffered one thousand casualties, and the guerrillas had taken 400 prisoners, turning them over to the Red Cross with great publicity. They captured arms from Batista's forces, and they increased their numbers threefold; while Batista's army was exhausted and demoralized.

On August 18, Fidel announced on Radio Rebelde that the offensive had failed and that the guerrillas would soon begin a counteroffensive. The rebel army expanded from its base, and battles began to acquire characteristics of conventional war. Che Guevara and Camilio Cienfuegos commanded columns that marched to the West, supplementing the front to the east that Raúl Castro had established prior to the army offensive. Fidel moved the July 26 Movement headquarters from the mountains to the plains. The tide had turned; the guerrillas, expanding in numbers and arms, were occupying towns at a dizzying pace, and Batista's army was in disarray. Batista fled Cuba just past midnight on January 1, 1959, and the revolutionary army occupied Santiago de Cuba and Havana, with an enthusiastic and celebratory popular reception.

There is a lesson here for popular revolutions. Ideological differences within the movement often are resolved in practice as the revolution evolves. The revolution itself, as it unfolds, will teach us which

theory, idea, or strategy is correct. We should be patient, and let the Revolution show us the necessary road, thereby avoiding political divisions that would damage the revolutionary process. If the Revolutionary experience does not teach us the correct way, and the revolutionary process has arrived to the point where one must decide, this would be the moment for political struggle within the movement.

Following the triumph of the revolution, all could now see that the guerrilla strategy was the necessary road. Fidel in that moment taught that the clandestine struggle in the cities also contributed to the triumph, and that all should be included in the revolutionary process, without any prejudice against or exclusion of those who opted for urban sabotage.

As noted, the PSP (the Communist Party) believed in neither guerrilla war nor urban sabotage, but the patient education and organization of the people, not yet discerning Fidel's long range strategy of educating the people in stages, first tapping into to their revolutionary spontaneity to carry out guerrilla struggle, supplemented by urban actions, and then educating the people toward greater political maturity following the taking of political power.

Because of the PSP's disagreement with the prevailing strategies of the revolutionary movement, it remained marginal from the revolutionary process in the decisive moments of 1958, which was a historic error, damaging the revolution during the struggle, and harming the prestige of the Party after the triumph. Fidel, however, appreciating the importance of the Communist Party and its many experienced cadres, reached out to the Party and included them in the revolutionary process and the new vanguard political party that it would form. This politically intelligent and necessary strategy by Fidel prevented the triumphant revolution from falling into fateful division.

Fidel correctly discerned the correct strategy of guerrilla war in the context of the particular conditions of Cuba. Fidel attacked the dictatorship at its weakest point, in the remote areas where the hatred of the dictatorship was especially strong because of the brutality of the soldiers toward the peasants, yet where there were only a few soldiers isolated in small outposts. In contrast, the PSP was operating primarily in cities, where the regime was able to arrest and coopt leaders.

The conditions of Cuba in the late 1950s do not apply to our world today. The weakest point of the neocolonial world-system today is its ideology, so absurdly inconsistent with fundamental historical and social facts, while the peoples have the possibility of reaching a mature understanding, as a result of the significant gains in theory and practice of the Third World socialist revolutions. Today, as Fidel has taught us, the terrain of struggle is what he called "the battle of ideas."

This is Charles McKelvey, speaking from Cuba, the heart and soul of a global socialist revolution that struggles for a more just, democratic, and sustainable world.

Sources

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