

The ABC of national liberation movements

By Hal Draper

1. Anti-imperialism and revolution

As revolutionary socialists in the US our immediate enemy is American capitalism and its imperialism; and we wish to fight American capitalism at home and American imperialism abroad by every available means.

At bottom this is a single fight, since any weakening of American imperialism abroad or defeat suffered by it abroad also weakens the domestic capitalist power structure and facilitates opposition at home. The same is also true for other imperialist states, since a weakening or defeat of one or another power reverberates through the interconnected structure of world imperialism.

Therefore, objectively, anti-imperialist struggle by any people is an aid to the forces of revolutionary change at home.

But a warning is necessary: that word “objectively” represents a famous pitfall.

a. It is one thing to analyse and understand the objective effect of an event, and quite another thing to leap to the conclusion that we therefore advocate it or support it. We do not advocate depression, war or superexploitation on the ground that they stimulate revolution.

b. An event may have more than one objective effect; this is a risky way of arriving at a policy. In our present world, specific victories by American imperialism may have the objective effect of weakening Communist imperialism, and vice versa; but as an enemy of both, we do not find this an adequate basis for deciding policy. It is one consideration, to be taken in context. There is no substitute for concreteness.

Whenever anti-imperialist resistance breaks out into armed struggle, our attitude toward that war is based on the same fundamental consideration as our attitude on any other war, viz:

A war is politics continued by other, that is forcible, means. Our attitude toward a war must be congruent with our attitude toward the politics of which it is the continuation. This determines our principled position on the question of whether to support or oppose a given war — not primarily our opinion of the men, the government or the class leading the war, not our opinion of their past or present crimes. The latter considerations will be very relevant to how we support or oppose a war, but not to whether we do.

If an armed struggle is decisively a continuation of resistance to imperialist oppression, then it is decisively a war of national liberation that deserves the support of revolutionary socialists.

2. National elements and imperialist elements

IT is true that a particular national struggle can be swallowed up in, and overshadowed by, a more all-embracing conflict of an imperialist character, so that it is impossible to support any side of the national struggle without supporting

one or another side in the general war.

The case of Serbia. Such a case, in fact, was seen at the very beginning of World War One, which was triggered by the national struggle of the Serbs against the Hapsburg Empire.

If that conflict had remained on the ground of the antagonism between the Serbian people and its imperialist oppressor, revolutionary socialists would have been pro-war, i.e., pro the national war of the Serbs. But in fact the Serbian struggle was completely integrated into the Allied camp; and this national element in a predominantly imperialist war was therefore outweighed.

The case of Spain. A different case was exemplified by the Spanish Civil War. (We are not citing it as a war of national liberation; we wish to make a point common both to civil wars and wars of national liberation.)

In the case of Spain, Marxists supported the military defence of the loyalist regime, since in their view this civil war was decisively a continuation of the politics of the defense of the democratic republic against a fascist assault — that is, it was really a conflict between democracy and fascism, not demagogically so, like the previous war to “make the world safe for democracy”. While other aspects of policy will be considered later, we point out here that it was clear in Spain there was an international imperialist element in this conflict. German and Italian military units even fought on Franco’s side; foreign socialists and Communists organised to fight on the loyalist side; Russia intervened nonmilitarily on a large scale; a web of diplomatic imperialist manoeuvring went on around the tragic situation. In fact, the Spanish war was a localised hot war in the midst of an international imperialist Cold War. It was quite possible that World War Two could have been triggered off by it, and this eventuality would have completely overshadowed and changed the character of the local war, as in the case of Serbia. But it did not and this remained only a potentiality, not a fact; and therefore the Marxists’ attitude of military support did not have to change.

The conclusion is: the existence of an international context of imperialist antagonism (Cold War) is inevitably reflected in almost any conceivable local conflict, and may give rise to imperialist elements in any local situation, but it does not thereby necessarily determine the character of that local conflict.

3. Why socialists support national liberation

How does support to a war of national liberation relate to the basic politics of revolutionary socialism? In two ways:

1. The first restates the point we have just made about our basic approach: the politics of which war is a continuation. We support a struggle for a national liberation or independence because this national aim is a democratic demand.

We are for all genuinely democratic demands — for the same reason we are for socialist demands and aims: because their fulfillment is necessary for a world in which human potentialities can best flower. National self-determination is a democratic demand even if it means self-determination under an undemocratic national government, as it often has. We should support this democratic demand even if it were unrelated to the further struggle for socialist democracy.

2. But, as a matter of fact, it is very difficult if not impossible for any genuinely democratic demand to be unrelated to the struggle for socialism, because of the nature of socialism itself. National liberation (independence) facilitates the struggle for socialist democracy, if not immediately then in a later stage.

The essential reason is this: domination or oppression from the outside by a foreign imperialist tends to overlay the social struggle class struggle of the indigenous society, and therefore to distort, dampen or moderate precisely those

social antagonisms which bear a social revolutionary potential. A people who do not enjoy national freedom will tend to give primary attention to that immediate source of pain; their capacity to struggle will tend to be dominated by it; their perception of who-is-the-enemy will tend to be dominated by it. Therefore imperialist oppression tends to set back or slow up a full crystallisation and clarification of class antagonisms; and a liberation from imperialist domination will have the long run effect of providing the conditions for the exacerbation of internal class strains (even if the immediate effect of a national liberation victory appears to be otherwise for an initial period). This is not gainsaid by the fact that, to be sure, revolutionary policy aims to introduce class struggle components even in the course of a national struggle.

Here, as in other sectors of politics, the fight for democracy includes specifically the democratic demand for national liberation.

4. Military support and political support

Besides the question of whether to support a given war, it is vital to be clear on how revolutionary socialists support a war. A distinctive feature of the Marxist approach is the distinction between military support of a given armed struggle and political support to a given political organisation (including a government) which may be officially “in charge” of that armed struggle.

This pregnant distinction goes far back in the Marxist movement, perhaps the first prominent example being Bebel and Liebknecht’s refusal to vote for war funds for the Franco-Prussian war. It has never been more important than today.

For most people, including liberals, social demorats and opportunists of every stripe, “support” means support, period. For Marxists, it never has. This is one reason why, not infrequently, political leaders of a national struggle have been almost as unhappy about being supported by revolutionists as by being opposed. Typically, the official leaders demand “civil peace” below in the ranks of their supporters, by which they mean unquestioning acceptance of their own dominance; they call for the end of “partisan politics,” by which they mean they want unquestioning support of their own partisan politics.

But Marxists see no more reason to give political support — to a government, to a party, or to any other political organisation — in wartime than in peacetime, and do not believe that basic differences in social policy become irrelevant just because policy is to be carried out by arms rather than by “normal” means.

On the contrary, it is precisely basic (especially, class) differences in social policy which may make the difference between victory or defeat in the armed struggle itself (as in the Spanish case), or may determine just what it is that is won and who does the winning, after victory is achieved.

5. Six cases

LET us take three pairs of cases to illustrate some problems of military and political support, especially in national wars.

(1:A) The Case of Chiang Kai-shek vs. Japan

This refers to the period before World War Two when Japanese imperialism was carrying on a blatantly aggressive policy, grabbing Manchuria and threatening to take over all China.

At the head of the Chinese resistance government was, officially, Chiang Kai-shek and his Guomindang — who, not long before, had distinguished themselves by their counter revolutionary fury in a bloodthirsty suppression of the working class in the cities. Internationally, socialists (and others) gave military support to

the Chiang regime as against the Japanese invaders — even Chinese revolutionaries who simultaneously had to defend themselves more against Chiang's butchers than against the Japanese. And this, for a regime (Chiang's) which could not be said to represent a bourgeois democratic social force, being not very bourgeois and even less democratic.

(1:B) The case of Ethiopia vs. Italy

Mussolini's openly imperialist attack on the realm of Haile Selassie was a similar case. The society ruled by the Negus was an incredibly reactionary one (not capitalist reaction but precapitalist reaction) — real slavery being by no means its most objectionable feature. In comparison, even Fascist Italy was a more progressive society, it goes without saying. Yet socialists gave unquestioned support to the defence of Ethiopia against this "more progressive society," and even the Communists were embarrassed by Russia's treacherous sale of badly needed oil to Mussolini's war machine.

Why the support? Ethiopian society was so reactionary that not everything we have said about the reasons for supporting national wars can possibly apply. Most particularly, a victorious defence by Ethiopia could hardly be expected to be very relevant to "facilitating social revolution" in that country; in fact, a case could be made that Italian conquest would probably create revolutionary elements in Ethiopia more quickly.

The essential justification must be sought in two statements:

- a. The national freedom of Ethiopia was a democratic demand, as already explained; and
- b. a successful conquest of Ethiopia by Mussolini would have had a definitely retrogressive meaning for the social struggle in Italy, by helping to consolidate fascism internally, with a derivative similar effect elsewhere in Europe.

(2:A) The Spanish Civil War

We are here interested in the difference between military and political support in this situation.

Revolutionary socialists could not give political support to the bourgeois republican government which had been attacked by Franco.

This republican government had itself brutally shot down militant workers only the day before yesterday. Moreover, it was an imperialist government, so much so that not even the need to win over Franco's Moorish troops, in order to save its own neck, was enough to get it to declare for freeing Morocco. Revolutionary socialists could have no confidence in the conduct of the war by the section of the republican bourgeoisie which had not gone over to Franco, not even confidence in their will to fight Franco to the end, and certainly no confidence in their ability to fight Franco by the only means that could win, revolutionary means. When, in a later stage, due to Russian pressure exercised through material aid, Communist Party influence in the government became strong, to the point where the Spanish section of the GPU even had its own jails, the government apparatus was indeed used to silence and murder revolutionary opponents.

The military support to the struggle by the revolutionary left took the form of building independent fighting forces (the anarchist columns and POUM battalions), under their own command, while collaborating militarily with the forces of the government.

The existence of these independent armed forces of the left represented the possibility of an alternative leadership for the struggle as a whole; it reflected a basically different aim in the struggle itself (carrying over the struggle against Franco to social revolution, not a return to the discredited bourgeois status quo

ante). The counter revolutionary character of the Loyalist government and its Communist allies was acted out when they turned on the independent left forces in a bloody suppression. This was a prelude to the defeat of the Loyalist forces themselves by Franco, since only social revolution could have defeated fascism in Spain.

In Spain, therefore, we see that military support of one camp in the war did not exclude the formation of independent armed forces to carry on the military struggle without subordinating it to the political control of the “official” leadership of the Loyalist camp. Similarly, outside of Spain, revolutionary socialists who sympathised with the left sent their material aid not to agencies of the official government but rather attempted to channel it as much as possible to the independent detachments, without opposing other efforts which were organised to send material aid to the Loyalist government.

(2:B) The case of Algeria

There was no question but that revolutionary socialists supported the struggle of the Algerian people to free themselves from French imperialism. But for several years, the situation was characterised by the fact that there were two fighting movements of Algerian national liberation, neither of them “official”: the FLN and the MNA. Supporters of Algerian liberation then had to choose between supporting one or the other (or both). Here military support automatically posed a problem in political support.

Here too, as in Spain, there was an element of Communist influence in the picture, since the Communists backed the FLN and influenced its operations, though the leadership of the FLN was not derived from the Communist movement. Here too terrorism and assassination were used by one movement (the FLN) against the other. As we know, the FLN succeeded in eliminating its rival for hegemony in the national liberation movement, and, after victory, established the new Algerian government. We believe that Marxists would have to be a revolutionary democratic opposition to that government, not its political supporters. The new government’s politics were a continuation of its war (by other means). Political support to the FLN was by no means indicated merely by military support to the Algerian struggle for national liberation.

In this case, as in the case of Spain, there was a choice of political sides offered concretely, and therefore also a choice of how to give military support — through what political channels.

(3:A) Tito vs. Russia in 1948

We now come to two cases of a considerably different sort. In both cases the political power inviting support is a Communist government.

The first case of this new type was the situation created in 1948 when Tito’s Yugoslavia broke with Moscow and set out on an independent national-Communist course.

There was widespread expectation that Russia would invade the country militarily to force it into line (as it did later in Hungary); there is every reason to believe that this was a real possibility, even though it never actually happened. It was necessary for socialists to be clear in their own midst what their attitude would be in the event of such a war — which would clearly be a continuation of Yugoslavia’s move for national independence from Russia.

Independent socialists stated promptly, at the time, that they would be for the military defence of Yugoslavia against such a Russian invasion. It goes without saying that there could be no question of political support to the Tito regime.

Nor, for that matter, could the Tito regime be expected to tolerate any independent forces within its borders even in support of its struggle; in time of war

crisis, an independent force would be even more dangerous to its totalitarian control than before. If such a war had actually broken out, it is possible that its control would have loosened perforce and in spite of its aims, but this is speculative. In any case, military support of the Yugoslavian fight for national independence would not be conditional on such development.

Why was military support to the Tito regime mandatory in this case? For all the reasons given above, but one of them must now be restated. This is the motivation which said: "National liberation facilitates the struggle for socialist democracy, if not immediately then in a later stage." In what sense would victory for the Tito regime in such a war have facilitated the necessary "second revolution" in Yugoslavia? Not necessarily in the sense that the national war would itself merge into a social war, or immediately open the door to it. But certainly in this sense: that the other outcome, conquest by Russia, would mean the overlaying of the internal social antagonisms by the national question, and tend to blanket the former by the latter, thus delaying the reckoning.

What this means concretely was seen eight years later in Poland (1956) when an incipient national and social revolution combined was short-circuited by Gomulka, essentially through the strategy of counterposing the national question to the social. A nationally independent Poland at that point would have lain open to social revolution.

History cannot guarantee when the "later stage" will arrive, but we know from all experience that the weight of national oppression is a weight that militates against the resolving of the social struggle by revolutionary means; and that this is fully as true of the bureaucratic collectivist regimes as of the capitalist.

In addition, we must insist that national independence is a democratic demand for countries under Communist rule, not less than for countries under the rule of feudal emperors and Guomintang butchers.

(3:B) The case of the Cuban invasion

Whereas the danger in 1948 was the invasion of one Communist state by another Communist state, in 1961 we saw a Communist dominated state, Castro's, under the gun of an invasion sponsored by, and effectively organised under the aegis of, American imperialism. In point of fact the struggle was a brief one, since the US pulled back after initial defeat, but it would be useful to consider this case as it would have been if the fighting had gone on for a period of time, in order to underline the problems of policy.

American revolutionary socialists were dutybound to condemn, and wish for the defeat of, the US invasion of Cuba. Any vacillation or uncertainty on this point can only be regarded as a fundamental concession to the ideology of social patriotism.

We must especially reject the reasoning which makes the pervasive US-Russian cold war the political determinant of the character of this 1961 conflict, that is, which makes it only a subordinate incident in the US-Russian confrontation. This line of reasoning would wipe out almost any case of self-determination in the modern world — for example, the CIA-sponsored invasion of Guatemala in 1954 no less than the 1961 Cuban invasion. It has far less of a leg to stand on than the similar sectarian view which refused to support the Loyalist camp in Spain on the ground that the civil war was only the first battle of World War Two; for there actually were substantial foreign troops in Spain, whereas there was no Russian military force in Cuba whatsoever. The decisive political criterion must still be: concretely, what politics was this war the continuation of?

The right of Cuba (or any other country) to self-determination has absolutely nothing to do with whether we or anyone else approve of its government. This is, as we said, a democratic demand even under an undemocratic government.

We would like to see the Castro regime overthrown by the Cuban people in favour of a regime of socialist democracy, but this task cannot be contracted out to American imperialism, which is interested only in installing a regime subservient to world capitalism.

The conquest of Cuba by the US would only have served to confirm American imperialism in its conviction that it not only has the right to police the world in favor of capitalism, but that it can do so successfully and with impunity; and this conviction could only lead to more and more extensive “police actions” of the Vietnam type. The consequence of this development could only be increased reaction at home — that is, if the US succeeded in getting away with it.

Finally, in the case of Cuba as in the case of Tito, national independence “facilitates the struggle for socialist democracy, if not immediately then in a later stage.” Conquest by the US would not have convinced the Cuban people that Castro was a totalitarian dictator, but rather would have made him their national revolutionary hero defending Cuban integrity against the American colossus. This is exactly the pattern of how Ho Chi Minh captured the status of national hero of the Vietnamese people in the struggle against the French.

The struggle in Cuba for revolutionary democracy under socialism must take place under conditions of independence if it is to develop in a “later stage”; it can only be set back by US domination. Even after the failure of the US invasion and still today, the Castro regime uses the danger and fear of the US intervention to promote support from the people on patriotic grounds.

We were and are therefore in favor of military support of the Castro regime against US invasion, but, as before, this provides no reason whatsoever to convince us to give Castro political support, any more than we do now. We remain political opponents of the Castro dictatorship.

6. A summary of policy

Political support to an organisation or movement or government (which means, its leadership) into political power. It is the equivalent of voting for this leadership if an election were to take place.

Political support to an organisation or government heading a national struggle is essentially determined by the same considerations as if there were an unarmed political struggle going on (as there may have been before the armed phase of the struggle broke out). We cannot take an attitude of political opposition in the earlier phase and then switch to political support simply because the political war has been continued by other means.

We do not give political support simply because an organisation or government demonstrates it has mass support. We do not give political support simply because an organization or government is an enemy of our enemy. We certainly do not give political support to a government simply because it is in power or gets into power. We do not give political support to a movement or government simply because it adopts a formal political programme that is superficially unobjectionable. We do not give political support to a movement simply because it succeeds in inveigling the support of better political elements than its leadership. We can give political support only on the basis of what we analyse as the real political character and real political programme of this formation, as in any other case.

7. Military support

Military support means that we prefer the military victory of one side in an armed struggle and the military defeat of the opposing side. This is as much a

political position as is an attitude of political support, that is, it is determined by political considerations, not military ones. We have already summarised what those political causes are, and have applied them to various cases, where we prefer the military victory of a camp which we do not support politically.

Since the question of military support is a question of a political position, it raises the issue of how to give military support and to whom — that is, the implementing question of the forms of material support. It goes without saying that not every political position we take can be implemented at the time. Even though we frequently cannot implement political positions we take (as when we say we are for a labour party), the point of taking them is propagandistic, rather than a matter of agitation or action.

With respect to the implementation of military support, a major role is obviously played not simply by our attitude but by theirs, that is, the leadership of the national struggle in question. Is that national struggle led by a national democratic movement of some sort, or by nationalist authoritarian or totalitarian leaders?

A simple example: Are the leaders of that nationalist struggle as anxious to kill you as they are to kill the imperialist enemy? In most of the six cases we considered, it was in fact impossible for revolutionary forces to establish a relationship of peaceful coexistence and collaboration with the official leaders of the national struggle, and in some cases the latter would give higher priority to the task of physical extermination of a revolutionary alternative to their own leadership than to fighting the common foe.

This means it is impossible for the revolutionary to openly establish an independent fighting force to carry on military struggle, or that this can be done only in areas not controlled by the official leadership. Depending on the politics of the situation, "military support" may remain mainly a matter of a political position if there is no way to implement it without handing the revolutionary left over to the hangmen.

8. Three situations

The concretisation of military support is conditioned by which of the three types of situation exists with relation to the scene of the actual struggle:

- A. A movement in the oppressed country.
- B. A movement in the oppressor country, or in an ally of the oppressor.
- C. A movement in an uninvolved country.

It is only in situation A that revolutionary socialists concretely face the tactical problem of whether or not, and in what form, it is feasible to organise military support through independent forces, legal or illegal.

In situation B — a typical one for American revolutionists — we primarily have the task of politically implementing the position of defeatism which is the other side of the coin of military support of the national liberation struggle.

In both B and C, revolutionary socialists will try to determine whether it is possible or desirable to give material aid to any particular fighting force in the situation, and how to do so. But the primary import of military support is likely to be the way it conditions the movement's political propaganda.

1969 (abridged)