

2 FROM REBELLION TO REVOLUTION

What inspires revolutionaries? By now it should be amply evident that there is no simple answer to this question. Revolutionaries may be inspired by the promises and charisma of their comrades or by their own self-generated belief that a better political future, one free of injustice, is both possible and worth striving for. Unlike spontaneous revolutions, in which largely unwitting participants steadily find themselves in revolutionary circumstances, in planned revolutions willful revolutionaries set out to create conditions in which a revolution is made possible. In doing so, they need certain tools, templates and blueprints, and tactics and strategies. These tools and ingredients are examined in the present chapter.

If spontaneous revolutions grow out of haphazard, largely unorganized eruptions of mass anger and frustration, planned revolutions emerge from deliberately organized and orchestrated rebellions. This particular category of revolutions, the chapter argues, contains several key, interrelated elements. First, regardless of their declared ideological beliefs, all self-declared revolutionaries are essentially nationalist. They are invariably motivated by a deep desire to better the conditions of their country and its citizens. Even when revolutionaries adhere to ideologies that are inherently antinationalist, as in communism, their underlying motivation for launching a revolution is to capture power not necessarily for the sake of power itself but in order to improve conditions around them, at the level of the neighborhood, the city, and the country.

Two other, related elements characteristic of planned revolutions are those of leadership and the party. Planned revolutions will not

appear unless several highly dedicated individuals commit themselves to planning, organizing, and leading a takeover of power. Out of necessity, this cabal is often initially organized into a secretive cell. Sooner or later, the cabal gives rise to a political party or a guerrilla organization whose chief, often only, mission is to lead a revolution. The party sees itself as the revolution's vanguard. Among the planners involved in this vanguard, usually an individual with greater ambitions, or better organizational skills and opportunities, or through sheer chance, emerges as its leader. While planned revolutions cannot succeed without the work of an organized revolutionary party, the party's leader becomes the face of the revolution, and, if the revolution succeeds, he then becomes the leader of the country.

Planned revolutions are initiated and carried forward by highly dedicated individuals who are often singularly driven by the goal of effecting wholesale and drastic changes to the body politic. Once they have decided on or embraced the cause of the revolution, they devote their lives to its victory, single-mindedly pursuing the objective of overthrowing the current order and ushering in a new one. In the meanwhile, many of the other facets of their lives suffer as they remain oblivious to most other endeavors not directly related to the revolutionary cause.

The revolution will not succeed unless the revolutionaries militarily defeat the forces of the government and bring the state to its knees. Doing so requires engagement in armed struggle, which is another key ingredient of planned revolutions. In their efforts to launch a revolution, much of the revolutionaries' attention is devoted to the ways and means of fighting and defeating the forces of the regime. If the strategic objective of the revolutionaries is to defeat the state and to capture political power, their tactics revolve around the employment of violence in general and armed struggle in particular.

Leaders need parties, and parties need strategies and tactics. But equally important are actual foot soldiers who would become members of the party or at least support its goals and ideals. Every vanguard party needs recruits who are sufficiently committed to the revolutionary cause to take up arms and to actively carry the revolution forward. Almost all revolutions are waged and fought in the name of the downtrodden and the destitute – the urban poor, the working class, the peasantry. But very few of the recruits are actually drawn from these classes, most being educated young idealists from wealthier urban areas.

Whatever classes they are drawn from, without such recruits, or at least a sufficiently robust number of them, the revolution is doomed to failure. This was a lesson, as we shall see soon, that Che Guevara learned the hard way.

In the following pages, I will examine each of the central elements of planned revolutions – nationalism, leadership, vanguard party, armed struggle, and foot soldiers – drawing on specific examples from the October 1917 Russian revolution as well as the Chinese, Vietnamese, and Cuban revolutions. For each of these elements, I will limit the examples to the revolutions or revolutionaries most representative of the phenomenon under discussion. When necessary or appropriate, I will highlight other pertinent examples as well.

Nationalism

Whatever ideological convictions revolutionary leaders may have, what animates them the most is the unshakable belief that their efforts and their cause will necessarily improve the lives of their compatriots and have overall benefit for the whole country. Someone with Lenin's ideological persuasion would likely object vehemently to being called a *nationalist*. But belief in the betterment of Russia, and a commitment to improving the lives of its citizenry and the country as a whole, is precisely what we find in Lenin in the lead-up to 1917. In the strictest sense of the word this may not be *nationalism*. But a commitment to improving Russian lives and Russia itself, it certainly is. Lenin's demagogic advocacy of *internationalism* did little to dampen his commitment to bettering Russian lives.

Perhaps in no other planned revolution is the compelling force of nationalism more evident than in the Vietnamese revolution. Throughout his life, in fact, Ho Chi Minh was dogged by questions about his nationalist versus communist leanings.¹ After the end of the First World War, French exploitation of Indochina kicked into high gear, and, commensurately, so did Ho's criticism of France on nationalist grounds. In fact, while he was still in France, in the 1920s Ho was becoming increasingly radicalized in his nationalist, anti-colonial sentiments. During this time, one of his central concerns was the seeming obliviousness of fellow French socialists to France's exploitative practices in its colonies. Somewhat reluctantly, he soon began realizing that European socialists cared little about the colonial question.² He also

often complained bitterly that the proletariat of the metropole were ignorant of, and frequently deliberately ignored, the proletariat of the colonies.³ In his speech to the Comintern meeting in Moscow in 1920, Ho could not hide his frustration with fellow socialists from the metropole:

You must excuse my frankness, but I cannot help but observe that the speeches by comrades from the mother countries give me the impression that they wish to kill a snake by stepping on its tail. You all know that today the poison and the life energy of the capitalist snake is concentrated more in the colonies than in the mother country.⁴

As early as 1921, Ho was calling on French colonial authorities to grant a wide array of liberties to the Vietnamese, believing that national liberation was a necessary precondition for social emancipation.⁵ His 1925 publication of the book *French Colonialism on Trial* (*Le Procès de la Colonisation Française*) was a searing indictment of France's colonial enterprise in general and in Indochina in particular.⁶

Ho soon adopted Lenin's two-stage formulation of revolutions – the February and October Revolutions – to advocate colonial liberation first and then a communist revolution.⁷ The fact that Ho was trying to mobilize his fellow countrymen against foreign occupation required him to pay more attention to nationalist sentiments. He did, of course, call for simultaneous struggles against both feudalists and colonialists, seeing the two groups as equally exploitative and plundering.⁸ Ho firmly believed that Vietnam's revolution would necessarily have to be communist and be carried forward by the proletariat.⁹ However, in calling on the Vietnamese to rally against French colonialism and to take part in the resistance war, there are few traces of communist doctrine in his many declarations. Instead, his rhetoric was often couched more in nationalist terms than in anything resembling Marxist-Leninism.¹⁰

As the liberation war against France was intensifying, in 1944 Ho directly addressed the question of his leanings toward nationalism and communism:

I am a communist but what is important to me now is the independence and the freedom of my country, not communism. I personally guarantee you that communism will not become a reality in Vietnam for another fifty years [if the French remain].¹¹

Around this time, Ho wrote a number of tracts in which he exalted Vietnam's history and its glorious past.¹² In reality, Ho saw little contradiction between nationalism and communism, as evident in the Vietnamese Declaration of Independence, which he drafted in September 1945. Modeled closely after the American Declaration of Independence and read aloud amid much public euphoria and celebration, there is actually little trace of communism in the document itself.¹³ Ho's resort to nationalist sentiments was for more than purely instrumentalist purposes. Even after Vietnam's independence, he repeatedly called for national unity and for greater attention to all elements of Vietnamese national identity, including, especially, respect for the country's ethnic and religious minorities.¹⁴

Similar nationalist tendencies can also be detected in many of the actions and maneuvers of Mao Zedong, and to a lesser extent in some of his writings. At the same time as ensuring that the ideological platform of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) remained highly doctrinaire, Mao held up Marxism-Leninism as a blueprint for action, much more pragmatic in its application to China and the conditions that prevailed in the country in the lead-up to 1949.¹⁵ For Mao, national unity and the defense of Chinese sovereignty, especially against Japanese occupation, was of paramount importance. The communist revolution, he argued, would only succeed once China was united and the Japanese had been ejected from the country.¹⁶ Despite the persecution by the nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) that had set in motion the Long March in 1934, by 1937 Mao's pragmatism prompted the CCP to enter into an alliance with the KMT in order to fight Japanese occupation.

Nationalist sentiments were equally pervasive among Cuban revolutionaries in general and in the person of Fidel Castro in particular. In the lead up to the success of his movement, in fact, Castro was far less of a Marxist-Leninist and more of a "radical nationalist with strong beliefs about social justice."¹⁷ In many ways, the genesis of Cuba's revolutionary movement was far more nationalist than anything else, and the revolution's ideology was essentially anti-imperialist and, at least initially, only vaguely Marxist. This nationalism was formulated largely in reaction to US presence and machinations in the Americas, especially in Cuba, and therefore had an anti-American tone and flavor from the beginning. The writings and poetry of José Martí (1853–1895), an icon of Cuban independence, were a source of

inspiration for the country's young revolutionaries. For Castro, as with Ho Chi Minh and Mao Zedong, Cuban nationalism meant first and foremost improving the lives of his compatriots and the conditions of the country in general. And, as with his fellow revolutionaries, Castro saw the prevailing political system as the most fundamental obstacle to achieving Cuba's national aspirations. As one of his biographers has observed, similar to Martí, Castro "possessed an organicist, almost ahistorical picture of true Cuba, free from the aberration of dictatorship, whose essence was waiting to be discovered."¹⁸ With his revolution, he assumed, historic wrongs would be righted and a road to a better future opened.

The Leader

In addition to nationalist aspirations, all planned revolutions have the common element of a highly committed leader whose life is devoted, often single-mindedly, to the pursuit of the revolution's cause. As discussed shortly, all revolutions, especially planned revolutions, require direction by a group dedicated to ensuring the state's collapse. Another equally pervasive common denominator that all planned revolutions have is a leader for whom the revolutionary movement is an all-consuming cause. Not surprisingly, planned revolutions invariably give rise to a larger-than-life figure whose name and life become synonymous with the revolution itself. Revolutionaries are romantics with the courage to act on their convictions, and *leaders* of planned revolutions are a special breed of romantics for whom life other than in the revolution has little meaning and value. What sets revolutionary leaders apart from others is their single-minded focus on and their near complete devotion to the revolutionary cause. Nelson Mandela's words – "the struggle is my life"¹⁹ – capture what others like him must have felt. Reflecting on his distance and separation from his wife Winnie, Mandela recorded the following thought in his diary:

It seems to be the destiny of freedom fighters to have unstable personal lives. When your life is struggle, as mine was, there is little room left for family. That has always been my greatest regret, and the most painful aspect of the choice I made.²⁰

This single-mindedness was especially characteristic of Lenin and his pursuit of communist revolution in Russia. At times ruthlessly, Lenin

was relentless in seeking the overthrow of the Romanovs and ensuring the success of Bolshevism. In his grand pursuit he literally ran himself aground, seldom resting, and often suffering from ill health as a result. In trying to ensure the ideological purity of the movement, he was often pedantic and unyielding, writing endless tracts to ensure that his interpretation of the party's correct path won the day.²¹ As one of his biographers wrote, "In the small world of organized Russian Marxism, he became the figure whom everyone either loved or detested. He left hardly anyone neutral toward him."²² Lenin often decried the elitism of intellectuals among fellow Bolsheviks, labeling it as "intellectualism," and dismissed it as opportunism.²³ At the same time, he combined doctrinal purity with a sense of pragmatism, as shown by his embrace of the soviets, which had developed independent of the Bolshevik party.²⁴ As fate would have it, it was the Bolshevik nexus with and utilization of the soviets that proved critical in the fateful months of February to October, 1917.

None of this, of course, is meant to reduce the depth and weight of the revolution to the efforts of just one person, no matter how deeply committed to the cause he or she may be. But there is an undeniable pattern in all planned revolutions of the emergence of at least one individual, prior and in the lead-up to the capture of power, as the key leader of the revolutionary effort. Perhaps nowhere was this more apparent than in China, where "Mao Zedong Thought" had already become the Chinese Communist Party's new orthodoxy as early as 1938.²⁵ At the Seventh Congress of the CCP in 1945, his peers certified Mao as the charismatic Supreme Leader, and from that point on he was known as Chairman Mao.²⁶

Very few individuals, revolutionary or otherwise, have achieved the near complete deification that Mao Zedong commanded before and especially after the success of the Chinese revolution. In some ways, nevertheless, Castro, who inspired his band of *Fidelista* guerrillas into the jungles of Sierra Maestra, comes in at a distant second. At his trial following the disastrous attacks on the Moncada Barracks on July 26, 1953, Castro defiantly declared: "Condemn me, it does not matter, history will absolve me."²⁷ In many ways, from the very start Castro's whole revolutionary enterprise appeared reckless. Many Cubans at the time actually dismissed him as yet another rabble-rouser among a whole cast of political malcontents. But somehow he managed to succeed. Imprisoned following his trial, Castro appears to have only strengthened his resolve to launch a revolution.

For rebels and revolutionaries, prison is often said to be the best school. Perhaps for no one was this more the case than for Fidel Castro, who actually went so far as to say that “this prison is the best classroom.”²⁸ Castro later talked of his fondness for French literature while in prison and how he enjoyed the works of Victor Hugo, Romain Rolland, Maxim Gorky, H. G. Wells, Cervantes, Dostoevsky, and Karl Marx.²⁹ Once he was released, however, he cast aside books and once again set out to lead a revolution in earnest. In a letter dated July 7, 1955, he wrote:

All roads to a peaceful political struggle have been closed to me. [It is time to] seize our rights instead of asking for them, to grab instead of beg for them. Cuban patience has its limits.³⁰

Declaring himself to be “a Cuban who has given and will go on giving everything to his country,” Castro left Cuba, this time for Mexico. There he regrouped, formed the July 26 Movement, and devised a plan for the downfall of the Batista regime.

It was in Mexico where a young Argentine physician named Ernesto “Che” Guevara first met Fidel Castro, and he was immediately drawn in by Castro’s personality, charisma, and revolutionary spirit.³¹ Those who knew him as Che did credited Castro for his dogged persistence in the face of intolerable odds, and also for his courage, integrity, intuition, and his political flexibility in pursuit of strategic goals. Also, while Castro was not necessarily an original thinker, he could be an effective facilitator of ideas.³² It was, in fact, Che who was more ideological and a more serious thinker, while Fidel reveled in being a man of action.

The Vanguard Party

Revolutions, of course, go beyond the activism and the commitments of individuals, no matter how deeply dedicated to the cause they may be. Planned revolutions are pushed forward by a group of conspirators who perceive themselves as its vanguard. In planned revolutions, the activities and operations of a vanguard party – whether highly regimented and discipline-oriented, such as the Russian Bolsheviks, or loosely sewn together like Fidel Castro’s July 26 Movement – are essential to planning, organizing, and advancing the revolutionary movement.

This vanguard invariably takes the form of a political party whose primary task it is to plan for and strategize the revolutionary capture of power. Vanguard parties often pursue three interrelated objectives. First, they outline the broader ideological and theoretical framework through which they intend to capture power and, frequently, what they hope to do with that power once they have attained it. As we have seen so far, this ideological blueprint for action is frequently a composite of nationalist sentiments and ideals on the one hand and various interpretations of Marxism on the other. Second, vanguard parties devise specific tactics. They create plans of action, identify targets, coordinate attacks, allocate personnel and resources, and, as much as possible, try to direct the revolution on the ground. Third and finally, parties serve as important tools for attracting new recruits and broadening their pool of sympathizers. Together, these functions of theorizing the revolution, devising its strategies and tactics, and enhancing its recruitment efforts and its broader support base make some form of a vanguard organization indispensable to planned revolutions.

The critical necessity of a vanguard party was one of the main innovations that Lenin introduced to Marxist ideology. For Lenin, the party needs to have several essential characteristics:

- a program based on Marxism and its application to reality in a way that advances the struggle for socialism;
- professional activists who agree on its core programs and their application;
- open and democratic principles at all levels of organization; and,
- a disciplined and detailed internal hierarchy for organizational and decision-making processes.³³

Lenin defined “democratic centralism” within the party as “freedom of discussion, unity in action.”³⁴ And discussion the Bolsheviks, especially their leadership, often had plenty of, at times very bitterly. As far back as the 1880s and the 1890s in Munich, where many had ended up in voluntary exile, Russian revolutionary émigrés constantly quarreled over revolutionary tactics and strategy. Despite a strong streak of pragmatism, Lenin could be highly dogmatic at times and was fully committed to what he perceived to be Marxist orthodoxy. One of the central points of contention between Lenin and other Marxists was how to adapt and apply Marxism to a Russian society that in the late 1800s

was comprised of some 90 percent peasants and only 7 percent wage-workers. Among the Russian revolutionaries, many of whom had gathered within the Social-Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP), two main groups soon emerged. The Bolsheviks (Majority), led by Lenin, advocated a more disciplined party, a worker–peasant alliance, and the subsequent establishment of a “dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry.” The Mensheviks (Minority) favored a coalition between workers and industrialists, seeing such an alliance as the most effective means of overthrowing Tsarism.³⁵

In 1912, Lenin and a few like-minded comrades made a clear break from the Mensheviks and established the splinter Bolshevik RSDLP. Soon, the Bolsheviks articulated a clear strategy of how they conceived of the revolution and devised a clear program of action, including calling for an eight-hour workday for workers, land reform for peasants, and democratic elections for a new parliament. Not surprisingly, their popularity soon soared. This popularity was to reemerge once the initial shock of Russia’s devastating losses in the Great War wore off. As 1917 approached, workers councils – soviets – which had originally appeared in the aftermath of the 1905 Russo-Japanese War, began reappearing in Russian factories and towns, this time under socialist leadership. In April 1917, Lenin articulated what came to be known as the April Thesis: “All power to the soviets,” and “peace, bread, and land.”³⁶ As the summer months wore on and as the Provisional Government found itself more and more out of step with the radicalizing mood of the country, Lenin’s stridency and his revolutionary message became increasingly resonant.

By September, Lenin was relentless in calling on fellow Bolsheviks to keep up the pressure on the Provisional Government and to push the revolution forward. If they failed to act, he decried, “the Bolsheviks will cover themselves in eternal shame” and “we shall ruin the revolution.”³⁷ Lenin’s moment was not long in coming. The insurrection began on October 24 in Petrograd, where by the next day, the Winter Palace, the new residence of Prime Minister Kerensky, was, in a rather calm and eerily quiet manner, stormed and captured.³⁸ The Bolsheviks then marched on to and captured other government buildings, declaring the end of Tsarism and the establishment of a new, soviet-run political system. Soon thereafter, the Bolsheviks renamed themselves as the Communist Party. To dampen expectations of communist revolutions elsewhere, at least in the near future, Lenin soon

declared that the October Revolution was not the blaze that would set the rest of Europe on fire.³⁹ Russia, as it turned out, had its own civil war to contend with.

The Chinese Communist Party played a similarly critical role in bringing about and directing the Chinese revolution. Mao had discovered the importance of organization relatively early on, when in 1917 he started a student discussion group called the New People's Study Society. By the early 1920s, he was already organizing peasant associations. Throughout his career, Mao remained keenly aware of both the scale of his country's geographic and population size and the scope and historic significance of his movement. Both before and after the communist victory, therefore, organization and discipline remained among his central preoccupations. From the earliest days of joining the Communist Party, he paid close attention to the means and mechanisms through which revolutionary mobilization was achieved, discipline was instilled among the rank and file, and goals and objectives were articulated, understood, and accomplished. As early as 1938, Mao called on his comrades to be mindful of the importance of the theory and practice of revolution:

No political party can lead a great revolutionary movement to victory unless it possesses revolutionary theory and a knowledge of history and a profound grasp of the practical movement.⁴⁰

If Lenin saw the party as an indispensable component of the revolution, Mao saw it as inseparable from the revolutionary army. Mao's innovation to Marxism-Leninism, in fact, lies in the introduction of the notion of the party-army. In fact, Mao and other Chinese revolutionary leaders used the CCP far more for purposes of peasant mobilization and armed action, against both the Japanese and the Koumintang, than for ideological deliberations concerning the proper direction of the revolutionary struggle. Much more so than the strict application of Marxist doctrine, what the Chinese communists really advocated was more "rural egalitarianism," a proposition that found much appeal throughout the countryside and among the peasantry.⁴¹ Throughout, Mao remained concerned with the pragmatic aspects of the revolution instead of abstract theorizing, so much so that his advocacy of pragmatism extending even into the arts.⁴²

In broad terms, the Chinese communists believed that the successful fulfillment of Sun Yat Sen's "bourgeois-democratic" revolution

was a necessary first step to the establishment of a socialist society.⁴³ Of course, Mao declared in 1945, “We Communists never conceal our political views. Definitely and beyond all doubt, our future or maximum programme is to carry China forward to socialism and communism.”⁴⁴ But he also reminded fellow party members that “policy and tactics are the life of the Party; leading comrades at all levels must give full attention and must never on any account be negligent.”⁴⁵

Both during the peasant revolution, when the CCP acted as a party-army, and after the revolution’s success, when the CCP turned into the state party, Mao used the institution in order to solidify his personal hold over the revolutionary movement and the Chinese body politic. In 1941 he launched the Rectification Movement, lasting until 1944, during which all CCP members were meant to engage in intensive study, reflection, criticism, and self-criticism. The Rectification Movement, ruthless iterations of which occurred with great frequency after the revolution’s success, enabled Mao to strengthen his hold over the party. By the mid-1940s, Mao’s cult of personality was already well established.

In January 1949, Mao’s forces marched into Beijing, and, defying the wishes of Stalin, who had given the Chinese communists logistical support and advice, they pushed on until the Koumintang fled to Taiwan. Access to Mao, already remote shortly after the end of the Long March in 1935, became even rarer after victory, and his personality cult grew exponentially.⁴⁶ Once in power, Mao repeatedly used the party apparatus to launch massive political and economic campaigns – such as the 1958–1962 Great Leap Forward and the 1966–1976 Cultural Revolution – through which he sought also to eliminate rivals and to ensure the consolidation of his hold on power.⁴⁷

The communist party was equally integral to the journey of the Vietnamese revolution as it evolved from clandestine meetings by loosely organized discussion groups into a full-fledged guerrilla uprising. Having spent time in Canton in the 1920s, Ho’s first-hand observations of and experiences with the communist revolutionary movement in China led him to several key conclusions: Indochina needed its own communist party; the “national question” and the “social question” – independence and agrarian reform, respectively – would necessarily have to be linked; and the principles of Lenin and San Yat Sen could be fruitfully blended.⁴⁸ Upon settling in northern Vietnam in the early 1930s, Ho began holding regular discussion

groups and meetings, while at the same time living extremely modestly and engaging in regular and often hard labor. In the process, he emerged as a role model to which many local peasants looked up. In the meanwhile, in order to foster grassroots mobilization, he set up a number of friendship associations. As one of his biographers recounts, “Like a good ethnologist, he always practiced ‘participant observation,’ as well as ‘observant participation,’ and never forgot that a good example is better than a hundred lectures.”⁴⁹

In February 1930, Ho established the Indochinese Communist Party. The party’s platform called for the overthrow of French imperialism and an end to feudalism and to the reactionary bourgeoisie; the complete independence of Indochina from French rule; the establishment of a worker–peasant–soldier government; access to education for the masses; the implementation of an eight-hour workday; and democratic freedoms for the masses.⁵⁰ According to Ho, the Party “must assume a tactful, flexible attitude towards the national bourgeoisie . . . urge them into action if possible, isolate them politically if necessary.”⁵¹ The Party, he argued, needs broad appeal among all different groups and social strata in order to achieve its most urgent priority, namely national liberation.⁵²

In his 1927 book *The Revolutionary Path*, Ho had distinguished between three forms of revolution – bourgeois, national, and social – and outlined the essential ethical qualities of a revolutionary. He also blended Asian ethics with European ideals, and Confucianism with socialism.⁵³ For Ho, it was important for party cadres to have a “revolutionary morality,” which he saw as having three characteristics: absolute loyalty and devotion to the party in preference over personal and individual commitments; an in-depth understanding of the theory and practice of Marxism-Leninism; and “constantly [using] self-criticism and criticism to heighten one’s ideological standard, improve one’s work, and progress together with one’s comrades.”⁵⁴ At the same time, Ho believed that the party must necessarily be led by the working class, because workers constitute “the most advanced, conscious, resolute, disciplined and best-organized class.”⁵⁵

By the early 1940s, Ho had resolved to drive the French and Japanese colonizers out of Vietnam and to establish a “people’s democracy” there.⁵⁶ In pursuing his objectives, the Communist Party played a key role in recruiting, indoctrinating, and directing the guerrillas fighting the French.⁵⁷ This centrality of the party carried over into the

post-independence era, when Ho relied on the party apparatus, much like Mao was doing in China at about the same time, to create and operationalize the institutions of a new state. From the moment Ho announced Vietnam's independence in September 1945 until the end of 1946, he sought to establish a functioning state through issuing 181 decrees on everything from education to justice, the army, the police, taxes, agriculture, business and industry, and even forestry.⁵⁸ Unlike Mao, Ho did not see himself as larger than life and as the embodiment of the Vietnamese revolution. Like Mao, however, he was not above concentrating power in his own hands, at times ruthlessly. By the 1950s, some Vietnamese were likening Ho's centralization of power to the Jacobin's reign of terror in France.⁵⁹

Similar to the roles that the Bolsheviks, the CCP, and the Indochinese Communist Party played in the Russian, Chinese, and Vietnamese revolutions, respectively, the July 26 Movement was decisive in guiding and directing the Cuban revolution. In the 1940s, Castro came to the growing realization that party politics in Cuba was futile and that armed struggle was the only viable option for changing the political system.⁶⁰ These feelings were confirmed when former President Fulgencio Batista (1940–1944) forcibly took over power in 1952. Castro's thoughts, recorded soon thereafter, are revealing:

The present moment is revolutionary, not political. Politics is the consecration of the opportunism of those who have means and resources. The revolution opens the way for true merit, for those who bare their chest and take up the standard. A Revolutionary Party needs to be young and needs a revolutionary leadership drawn from the people in whose hands Cuba can be saved.⁶¹

Named after the ill-fated attack on the Moncada barracks in 1953, Castro's July 26 Movement (also known as the M26–7) was comprised of a broad cross section of aggrieved and anti-Batista groups that included fisherman, agricultural laborers, peasants, industrial workers, and students.⁶² In many ways, the July 26 Movement was non-ideological, or at least its goals were formulated not around what should exist but rather what should not. Carlos Franqui, the movement's chief propagandist, later recounted the obstacles to the country that the revolutionaries had identified: "the army, caudillism, oligarchism, monoculture, and dependency of foreign nations."⁶³ According

to Franqui, the group agreed that “propaganda, or public information, was the decisive weapon in our struggle,” and that the revolutionaries would aim for “a minimum of physical destruction and a maximum of psychological penetration.”⁶⁴

The July 26 Movement was not the only group fighting for the overthrow of the Batista regime. It was, however, the most determined one.⁶⁵ In November 1956, eighty-two revolutionaries, including Che Guevara, set sail for Cuba from Mexico onboard the yacht *Granma*. On landing, most of the would-be attackers lost their way in the unfamiliar terrain and a number of them were captured. The surviving party, numbering twelve and including the brothers Fidel and Raul Castro and Che Guevara, sought shelter in the jungles of the Sierra Maestra region and decided to wage their peasant revolution from there. For the rebels, the region offered the right mixture of demographic and geographic features from where they could launch their revolution.⁶⁶ Atypical of most Cuban peasantry across the island, the peasants of the Sierra Maestra region were among Cuba’s poorest, were often squatters, and led highly precarious lives. In reality, Castro initially did not intend to launch a peasant-based revolution. But once his small band started operating in the Sierras, a mythology of peasant revolution gradually took hold.⁶⁷ The Cuban revolution was thus born.

What followed in the Sierras was a test of resolve reminiscent of what the Chinese communists had experienced in the lead-up to and during the Long March. After the disastrous *Granma* landing, Che recorded the group’s difficult journey: “We were an army of shadows, ghosts, walking as if to the beat of some dark, psychic mechanism.”⁶⁸ The Cuban rebels faced a chronic cash crunch, and many of the weapons they bought or acquired through clandestine means were defective and did not operate properly. Food and other basic necessities, especially medicine and arms, were not always easy to come by, especially as new recruits joined and as the needs of the group grew.⁶⁹ It would be inaccurate, and wholly unfair, to call the July 26 Movement the gang that couldn’t shoot straight. Nevertheless, the self-declared revolutionaries repeatedly suffered setbacks, often miscalculated their own strength and the enemy’s vulnerability, and learned by trial and error, an example of which was the ill-fated attack on the presidential palace on March 1957.⁷⁰ By their own admission, the “climate of illusion” and especially the “illusion of victory” often resulted in rebels overestimating their strength and committing “tactical errors.”⁷¹

Within the anti-Batista revolutionary movement, two broad tendencies developed – the Sierra and the Llano – with the former believing in peasant mobilization first and the latter advocating all-out strike in the cities and urban-based insurrection.⁷² It is through sheer resolve and determination that the Sierra, to which the Castro brothers and Che belonged, emerged on top. “The myth of the Sierra,” a valorized struggle in a region with significant symbolic meaning from the days of Cuba’s independence wars, should not overshadow important contributions made to the revolution by various urban-based groups.⁷³ Ultimately, nevertheless, it was the Sierras who were victorious, and it was they who wrote the revolution’s official history and shaped its myths.

Fidel was a man of action, and whereas those affiliated with the Llano spent much time debating the proper methods of the revolution, Castro busied himself with peasant recruitment, revolutionary mobilization, and armed action. What “manifesto” he did issue, on February 20, 1957, was essentially designed to dispel regime-sponsored rumors that he had been killed in action. His expositions often took the form of “guidelines to the country” on how to more effectively resist and undermine the economic livelihood and the political machinery of the state.⁷⁴ In March 1958, the July 26 Movement did issue a more robust manifesto, this time calling for “total war against tyranny” and declaring that “the struggle against Batista has entered its final stage.”⁷⁵ The end of the Batista regime was indeed near. On January 1, 1959, Batista fled the country.

Throughout the two-year journey from the time the Cuban revolutionaries gathered in Mexico and planned their takeover of power in 1956 until Batista’s flight in 1958, Fidel Castro played a critical role in planning and carrying out the revolution. Exactly how central this role was from the very start, and how Castro was viewed within the movement, is not fully clear. According to the researcher Julia Sweig, up until the last six to eight months before the success of the revolutionary movement, most of the decisions affecting the revolution were made by lesser-known individuals instead of by Fidel, his brother Raul, or Che.⁷⁶ Carlos Franqui, however, one of the July 26 Movement rebels who later had a falling out with Castro, accused him of ignoring procedures and instead making rash and arbitrary decisions, accepting no criticism, and treating “the Sierras as if it were his personal property.”⁷⁷ Whatever the truth, by the time 1958 was drawing to a close, Castro’s leadership of

the July 26 Movement was unrivaled and complete. Soon he set up an office of Revolutionary Plans and Coordination, which amounted to a situation of dual power similar to what had developed in the heady days of Lenin's and Mao's revolutions. By the time Batista fled, no one else could command the level of respect, popularity, and revolutionary legitimacy that Castro enjoyed.

Armed Struggle

As important as vanguard parties are, they would be vacuous without actual revolutionary foot soldiers, who most often take the form of guerrilla fighters. The primary objective of the self-declared revolutionaries is to bring about the collapse of the state. To achieve this goal, insurgents and guerrillas resort to a variety of violent actions, ranging from acts of sabotage against regime-affiliated targets to all-out attacks against political personalities and institutions. Invariably, violence in general and armed struggle in particular become integral to planned revolutions. This resort to violence is part of an ethos of struggle that emerges in the process of contestation for power: Political power is held on to through resort to violence and repression, and therefore the only way it can be captured is also through violence.⁷⁸ Mao famously justified armed struggle in the following terms:

A revolution is not a dinner party, or writing an essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery; it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained, and magnanimous. A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows the power of another.⁷⁹

For Mao, violence was an inescapable facet of the revolutionary struggle. "War," he wrote in 1936, "is the highest form of resolving contradictions, when they have developed to a certain stage, between classes, nations, states, or political groups, and it has existed ever since the existence of private property and of classes."⁸⁰ His call to arms was blunt and direct: "Every Communist must grasp the truth, 'Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.'"⁸¹

Other revolutionary leaders have been equally adamant in their defense of the need for violence in general and armed struggle in particular. In his 1964 trial, for example, Nelson Mandela defended

his leadership of the armed wing of the African National Congress, uMkhonto we Sizwe or MK, and its resort to armed struggle:

Firstly, we believe that as a result of Government policy, violence by the African people had become inevitable, and that unless responsible leadership was given to canalize and control the feelings of our people, there would be outbreaks of terrorism and hostility between the various races of this country which is not produced even by war. Secondly, we felt that without violence there would be no way open to the African people to succeed in their struggle against the principle of white supremacy. All lawful means of expressing opposition to this principle had been closed by legislation, and we were placed in a position in which we had either to accept a permanent state of inferiority, or to defy the Government.⁸²

Lenin, Che Guevara, and Mandela saw violence as the quickest means to attain power, a necessary evil needed for the overthrow of the pre-revolutionary state. Out of necessity, Ho Chi Minh saw the struggle for power, what he called a “protracted war of resistance,” as a much longer process. “We use the strategy of a protracted war of resistance,” he wrote, “in order to develop our forces and gather more experience. We use guerilla tactics to wear down the enemy forces until a general offensive wipes them out.”⁸³ This guerilla war needs a vanguard party with a guiding military strategy, which must “cling to the people because they are the source of strength of the army.”⁸⁴ According to Ho, “*military activity* is the keystone in the war of resistance.”⁸⁵

As subsequent history was to bear witness, Ho saw this war of resistance as a protracted one: “We must understand that protracted resistance is closely connected with preparations for a general counter-offensive. As the war of resistance is a long one, long preparations are also needed for a general counteroffensive.”⁸⁶ For Ho, resistance at the local level was key to weakening and eventually defeating the colonizers. He exhorted his comrades to “effectively organize and train militiamen and guerrillas in *each village*” and to “*take the village militiamen and guerrillas as basis.*” The party must give combatants “a clear grasp of guerrilla tactics,” while at the same time “realize self-supply and self-sufficiency by effectively increasing production.”⁸⁷

Mao, of course, agreed with such instrumentalist use of violence. But for him the value of armed struggle went beyond the mere

capture of power. Mao, and to a lesser extent Che Guevara later on, saw an additional benefit to armed struggle, not simply as a means but as an integral part of the revolutionary process. The masses, they both believed, needed to be awakened, both to the need for a revolution and to their own potential to push a revolution forward. Mao believed that “all genuine knowledge originates in experience,” reminding his comrades that one must “discover truth through practice and through practice again verify the truth.”⁸⁸ As Mao was to himself admit in 1948, just a year before finally capturing the state,

If we tried to go on the offensive when the masses are not yet awakened, that would be adventurism. If we insisted on leading the masses to do anything against their will, we would certainly fail. If we did not advance when the masses demand advance, that would be Right opportunism.⁸⁹

More specifically, Mao utilized the concept of “people’s war” not only as a means of organizing and mobilizing the peasantry, but also as a tool for ideological and practical indoctrination and education at the grassroots level. After the 1911 Republican Revolution, China had descended into civil war, foreign occupation, and warlordism, and chaos, war, and displacement were regular facts of life. This had inured the Chinese revolutionaries to violence. Even after the revolution’s success and reaching the pinnacle of power, violence was never far from Mao’s *modus operandi*. As state leader, resolving what he saw as “contradictions” among his peers and the people at large became the central means through which Mao sought to continually eradicate real or perceived enemies and to maintain his unchallenged consolidation of power.

For Mao and his comrades, the revolution essentially had to be fought simultaneously on three fronts, the first and the second involving battle against the Koumintang and the Japanese occupation, while the third revolved around the continued mobilization of the peasant army. The PCC was compelled to look for support in the countryside not so much because of ideological belief in the revolutionary potential of the peasantry but out of necessity. Comparatively, the peasantry was the less difficult of the social forces to mobilize. But once the CCP was pushed into the countryside, it discovered the potential of the peasantry as a powerful army of recruits capable of affecting meaningful, and often immediate, change on ground. Facing persecution by the

Kuomintang government, in 1927 Mao and a peasant army of 1,000 fellow communists moved to the mountainous Jinggangshan region in the Jiangxi province and established the Red Army.⁹⁰ By 1930, the Red Army had a force of no fewer than 60,000 to 70,000 troops.⁹¹ To capitalize on its presence in the countryside and to channel the mobilizational potentials of the peasantry, in the early 1930s the CCP organized peasant soviets in most places where its members found themselves.⁹²

By 1934, the KMT's military campaign against the Communists had become so effective that Mao and his comrades decided to evacuate the Jiangxi province. In what came to be known as the Long March, from 1934 to 1936 some 100,000 individuals left for the Communist base areas in the northern Shaangxi region, of whom approximately 85,000 were soldiers. "In concrete terms," Mao declared in 1936, "and especially with regard to military operations, when we talk of the people in the base area as a factor, we mean that we have an armed people."⁹³ But the Long March was a decidedly unhappy endeavor. Many of the marchers dropped out or died of exhaustion over the course of the perilous journey, with only one in ten reaching the north after a year on the march.⁹⁴ Nevertheless, despite the ordeal the group suffered, due to his bravery and leadership, Mao's political standing rose during the march. By the time the Long March came to an end in the northern city of Yan'an, Mao was seen as the undisputed political and military leader of the Chinese Communist Party.⁹⁵

Mao's resolve to wage war on the KMT and the Japanese and to also bring about a communist revolution only hardened after the Long March ended. In 1937, for example, he made the following statement:

Revolutions and revolutionary wars are inevitable in class society, and without them it is impossible to accomplish any leap in social development and to overthrow the reactionary ruling classes and therefore impossible for the people to win political power.⁹⁶

A year later the theme of his speeches had changed little:

The seizure of power by armed force, the settlement of the issue by war, is the central task and the highest form of revolution . . . We are advocates of the abolition of war, we do not want war; but war can only be abolished through war, and in order to get rid of the gun it is necessary to take up the gun.⁹⁷

The Foot Soldiers

Revolutionary leaders inspire and lead. Revolutionary parties recruit and mobilize. And armed struggle fosters and hastens the collapse of the regime and the revolution's victory. But there is no revolution if it has no foot soldiers, those rank and file fighters who are willing to take up arms, face off against government soldiers, and risk the consequences. In the planned revolutions under study here – the Russian, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Cuban revolutions – the revolution's rank and file was invariably made up of the peasantry, or at least it sought to portray itself as having come from the peasantry. Often times, the leaders are urbanites and frequently from the comfortable if not affluent classes. Historically, in fact, some of the most prominent roles in guerrilla movements, both successful and unsuccessful ones, have been played by university students and professors.⁹⁸ But they lead the revolution in the name of the downtrodden and the dispossessed, and it is to this strata of society that they direct their message and whom they seek to mobilize. In each of the societies where revolutions occurred, there are vast armies of urban poor and marginalized. But the paucity of regime control over and reach into the countryside pushed the revolutionaries into rural areas, where the fighters available to them were peasants. Not surprisingly, the revolution's ideology is bent and contorted in order to address “the peasant question.” The peasantry is valorized and romanticized in the process, its “heroic sacrifices” quickly added to the revolution's mythology.

The efforts of revolutionary leaders in mobilizing and directing peasant activism require, more than anything else, a solid and viable organizational apparatus. In addition to an agitated and mobilizable peasantry, guerrilla revolutions require a disciplined army and a party organization, one that can provide the coordination and tactical vision necessary for peasant unity and ultimately for capture of state power.⁹⁹ Peasant-based revolutions depend directly upon the mobilization of the peasantry by revolutionary organizations, making the sheer availability and effectiveness of such groups a necessary precondition of revolutionary situations.¹⁰⁰ Often times, spontaneous political acts by peasants have forced a scramble for the mobilization and formation of their would-be leadership.¹⁰¹ The degree of interaction between peasants and the leadership, and the extent to which leaders can absorb the peasantry into their organization and to expand their power base,

determine the viability and success of the revolutionary movement. Adversely, an absence of solid bonds between revolutionary leaders and followers, especially in guerrilla revolutions where planned revolutionary initiatives play an extremely important role, can substantially reduce a movement's chances of success.¹⁰² Moreover, for guerrilla organizations to succeed in achieving their revolutionary goals, they need to have a sustained ability to recruit new members, structurally and organizationally evolve and develop, and to endure the adverse consequences of military confrontation with the regime.

The social composition of the leadership of peasant-based revolutionary movements is often decidedly non-rural. It is, in fact, frequently the disaffected members of the middle classes, most notably urban-educated students and intellectuals, who occupy most of the leadership positions of guerrilla organizations. Disjointed processes of social, political, and economic development turn the middle classes into potential revolutionary groups, groups whose oppositional inclinations are likely to rise along with their levels of education and social awareness. Given their greater sensitivity to their surrounding environment, the most revolutionary of groups are often middle-class intellectuals, and the most revolutionary of intellectuals are students.¹⁰³ Historically, there have been many dissatisfied literati elites who have turned into professional revolutionaries. They have entrusted themselves with the task of establishing solid revolutionary coalitions and alliances that can overcome social, ethnic, and economic divides and are also capable of eventually replacing the current regime.¹⁰⁴ In search of an audience willing to follow and to obey them, they most frequently find the peasantry.

The preponderant role of the peasantry in guerrilla organizations arises out of a combination of rural conditions that are conducive to oppositional mobilization, as well as the political and ideological inclinations of revolutionary leaders themselves. To begin with, urban-based political activists are drawn to the peasantry because of a number of practical political considerations. Frequently, a lack of political penetration by the government machinery into distant towns and villages results in the alienation of the countryside from the state. Despite detailed and large-scale control over various aspects of urban life, most praetorian states pay at best scant attention to the countryside. Most, in fact, neglect the economic development of rural areas and their political mobilization or at least pacification also. Even in instances where

concerted efforts aimed at the political mobilization of rural inhabitants have been launched, large numbers of peasants continue to remain outside the influence of what often times turn out to be only halfhearted campaigns. The political vacuum thus created offers potential guerrilla leaders ample opportunity for recruitment and mobilization. In an environment of little or no official political presence of any kind, guerrilla leaders can recruit followers with relative ease. They can also conduct revolutionary acts, which, even if only symbolically important, may have a magnified effect. For guerrilla organizations, mere survival can be politically as important as it is to win battles. In the eminently political types of wars they wage, survival for the guerrillas is a victory in itself.¹⁰⁵

Another reason for the attraction of revolutionary leaders to the peasantry is the supposed “ideological purity” of peasants because of their geographic and political distance from centers of power. Alienation from the state also entails estrangement from its ideology and values. Mao, who was perhaps the most astute observer of the peasantry’s revolutionary potential, went so far as to label peasants – not the Communist Party – as “the vanguards of revolution,” “blank masses” uncorrupted by the bourgeois ideologies of the city.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, not only is the peasantry ideologically unassimilated into the political establishment, its predicaments and objective conditions often closely match those of the revolutionaries. Most revolutionaries declare their aims to be the alleviation of misery and injustice, poverty, and exploitation, the very conditions that in one way or another are dominant in most rural areas. Coupled with greater possibilities for recruitment and mobilization, ideological compatibility with objective conditions draws most leaders of planned revolutions to remote rural regions and areas. There is thus a strong connection between the revolutionaries’ ideology and dogma on the one hand and circumstances prevailing in the countryside on the other.

The development of the actual links that bind revolutionary leaders and guerrilla organizations to masses of peasants is important in determining the extent and effectiveness of revolutionary mobilization. The establishment of such links and the resulting mobilization are dependent upon several variables, some indigenous to local conditions and others dependent on the characteristics of the guerrilla leaders themselves. Chief among these determining factors are the extent to which local ruling classes dominate power sources, the nature and

extent of rural coalitions and alliances, and the ability of guerrilla leaders to deliver the goods and services that others cannot. In most rural regions, pre-capitalist peasant small-holders, sharecroppers, and tenants are likely to enjoy cultural and social (as well as organizational) autonomy from ruling elites, despite their tendency toward localism and traditionalism.¹⁰⁷ This relative, built-in resistance to elite hegemony, and comparative receptivity to ideological and organizational alternatives, arises out of a sense of economic security and independence *vis-à-vis* the more dominant rural classes such as big landlords and estate owners. The spread of capitalism and the subsequent commercialization of agrarian society is also important in bringing about peasant rebelliousness.¹⁰⁸

This increasing propensity toward revolutionary activity is not necessarily because of the increased exploitation of peasants due to the spread of capitalist relations. Instead, it is derived from a general breakdown of “prior social commitments” to kin and neighbors and, therefore, greater flexibility and independence to act as desired.¹⁰⁹ Even more important is the extent of direct government control over a region, or indirectly through landed proprietors acting as government proxies. Favorable political circumstances, the most important of which are the existence of weak states, are crucial in determining the feasibility of revolutionary activism and possibilities for peasant mobilization.

Another significant factor that determines the success of guerrilla leaders in mobilizing peasants is the guerrillas’ ability to deliver goods and services, both actual and perceived. People will join or abstain from opposition groups based on the rewards they receive, both individually or as a collective whole. These rewards may be emotional – i.e., a sense of empowerment – or material.¹¹⁰ In specific relation to rural areas, revolutionary movements have won broad support when they have been willing and able to provide state-like goods and services to their targeted constituents. The establishment of “liberated areas” that are secure from government attacks; the provision of services such as public education, health care, and law and order; and the initiation of economic reforms in the form of land redistribution or tax reductions are all particularly effective measures in drawing peasants closer to guerrilla movements. Revolutionary groups are especially successful in attracting peasant support when they provide local goods and services with immediate payoffs *before* attempting to mobilize the population for the more difficult task of overthrowing the government.¹¹¹

The provision of goods and services may not necessarily be material. For most peasants and rural inhabitants, participation in an army-like guerrilla organization offers a way of escaping from disillusioning surroundings and finding purpose and meaning in a greater cause. Membership in an organization becomes an end in itself, a means to overcome powerlessness and to strive for higher goals and principles. To command and in turn to be commanded, to hold a gun, and to aspire for dreams and ideals are often mechanisms through which peasant revolutionaries, especially younger ones, try to shatter their socially-prescribed, second-class image and, within their own world, try to “become somebody.”

Given his reluctance to veer too far off course from Marxist orthodoxy, of all revolutionary leaders Lenin had perhaps the hardest time justifying his attention to the peasantry. He therefore often couched his appeal to peasants with references to the proletariat. As one of his biographers has observed, Lenin “was an improviser; he worked by instinct as well as by doctrine. His agrarian project was unconvincing in its own terms, but his intuitive searching was understandable. He wanted the party, when finally it came into existence, to take account of the fact that 85 percent of the subjects of the Russian empire were peasants.”¹¹² Lenin was keenly aware of the power of the peasantry as a potent revolutionary force, as evident from one of his writings in 1905:

Today the question of the peasant movement has become vital not only in the theoretical but also in the most direct practical sense. We now have to transform our general slogans into direct appeals by the revolutionary proletariat to the revolutionary peasantry. The time has now come when the peasantry is coming forward as a conscious maker of a new way of life in Russia. And the course and outcome of the great Russian revolution depend in tremendous measure on the growth of the peasants’ political consciousness.¹¹³

This political consciousness could only be harnessed and channeled for revolutionary purposes by peasant alliance with the working class. “Trust the workers, comrade peasants,” Lenin wrote in 1905, “and break with the capitalists! Only in close alliance with the workers *can* you begin to carry out the programme set out in the [socialist] mandates.”¹¹⁴ Lenin believed that “the small peasantry can free itself from

the yoke of capital only by associating itself with the working-class movement, by helping the workers in their struggle for the socialist system, for transforming the land, as well as the other means of production (factories, works, machines, etc.), into social property.”

Trying to save the peasantry by protecting small-scale farming and small holdings from the onslaught of capitalism would be a useless retarding of social development; it would mean deceiving the peasantry with illusions of the possibility of prosperity even under capitalism, it would mean disuniting the labouring classes and creating a privileged position for the minority at the expense of the majority.¹¹⁵

For Lenin, the coalition between the peasantry and the working class was a necessity for the revolution's success. On its own, the working class was too small in size and resources to win the revolutionary struggle. But it could not trust the bourgeoisie. As he wrote in a letter to *Pravda* in December 1917, an alliance between the workers and the bourgeoisie was inadvisable “because of the radical divergence of interests between these classes.” However, an alliance between the proletariat and peasants was “an ‘honest coalition,’ an honest alliance, for there is *no* radical divergence of interests between the wage-workers and the working and exploited peasants. Socialism is *fully* able to meet the interests of both. *Only* socialism can meet their interests.”¹¹⁶

Whereas Lenin saw the peasantry as a useful appendage to what should be fundamentally a workers' revolution, Mao, and also Ho Chi Minh, believed that real revolutionary potential actually lay with none other than the peasantry.¹¹⁷ Both men saw the peasantry as a truly revolutionary force, especially prior to the capture of power, when the force of circumstances had left them with few options but to establish their base of operations in overwhelmingly peasant-dominated areas. For Ho, given the composition of Vietnamese society at the time, with some 90 percent being peasants, it was incumbent upon the party “to carry out *political agitation*” among the peasantry and to “stir them up.” This meant awakening the peasants' political consciousness, tightly organizing and uniting them, and “leading them to struggle vigorously for their own interest and that of the fatherland.”¹¹⁸ Similarly, from the very beginning of his revolutionary career, Mao was also preoccupied with the mobilization of the “masses,” which for him at the time meant the peasantry. “The revolutionary war is a war of the

masses,” he wrote in 1934, and “it can be waged only by mobilizing the masses and relying on them.”¹¹⁹ Mao considered “the masses” to be “the true bastion of iron,” the real force on whose shoulder the revolution rests. True revolutionary potential, he argued, resides with “the masses, millions upon millions of people who genuinely and sincerely support the revolution.”¹²⁰

Chinese revolutionaries, Mao included, were aware that the peasantry in China was economically stratified and could broadly be distinguished into the categories of landless, poor, middle, and rich. As a result, in the early days of their movement most of Mao’s contemporaries thought he overestimated the revolutionary potential of the peasantry. Mao, however, was unwavering in his belief in the peasantry’s mobilizational and revolutionary capacities:

In a very short time in China’s central, southern and northern provinces, several hundred million peasants will rise like a mighty storm, a mighty hurricane, a force so swift and violent that no power, however great, will hold it back. . . . All revolutionary parties and all revolutionary comrades will stand before [the peasants] to be tested, to be accepted or rejected by them.¹²¹

There was, by all accounts, more to Mao’s statements than mere slogans meant to arouse passions and attract recruits. The journalist Edgar Snow, who spent time with Mao’s army and followed it around for a number of years, had a similar assessment. “The Chinese peasant was not passive,” Snow later wrote. “He was not a coward. He would fight when given a method, and organization, a leadership, a workable program, hope – *and arms*. The development of ‘communism’ in China had proven that.”¹²² Not surprisingly, Snow witnessed widespread support for the Communists among the peasantry. Communist initiatives such as land distribution, the introduction of more effective farming techniques, organizational skills, and the integration of women into the workforce were all highly popular among the Chinese peasantry.¹²³

Perhaps no other revolutionary leaders romanticized guerrilla warfare as much as Fidel Castro and Che Guevara did. Both men, of course, were keenly aware of the critical role that peasants played in the guerrilla army, and agrarian land reform was one of the central goals of the Cuban revolution. Che Guevara went so far as to maintain that “important individual exceptions notwithstanding” – including, most notably, himself, Castro, and most other members of the July 26

Movement – “the combat nucleus of the guerrilla army should be composed of peasants.”¹²⁴ And, to attract as many peasants to the revolutionary cause as possible, Castro constantly emphasized the humility of his movement: “The 26th of July movement is the revolutionary organization of the humble, by the humble, and for the humble.”¹²⁵ Guerrillas found guilty of crimes and infractions were severely punished by the rebel army. On some occasions, the rebels even executed some of their own who had committed serious offenses such as treason or rape. By Castro’s own account, over the course of two years some ten offenders faced the rebel group’s firing squad.¹²⁶ But Castro’s war in the Sierras was not a peasant war *per se*. In fact, a majority of the combatants were from the cities.

In his treatise on guerrilla warfare, Che outlined “three fundamental lessons to the revolutionary movements in the Americas”: (1) popular forces can win a war against a regular army; (2) “the insurrectional *foco* [a small nucleus of revolutionaries] can develop subjective conditions based on existing objective conditions”; and (3) the underdeveloped countryside is “the fundamental arena for armed struggle.”¹²⁷ Moreover, in the same tradition as Mao Zedong and Ho Chi Minh, Che Guevara saw guerrillas as more than mere armed combatants:

As social reformers, guerrilla fighters should not only provide an example in their own lives, but should also constantly give an orientation on ideological issues, explaining what they know and what they wish to do at the right time. They should also make use of what they learn as the months and years of the war strengthen their revolutionary convictions, making them more radical as the potency of arms is demonstrated, as the outlook of the local people becomes a part of their spirit and of their own life, and as they understand the justice and the vital necessity of many changes, the theoretical importance of which they understood before, but perhaps not the practical urgency.¹²⁸

While offering the ideal environment in which guerrillas can operate, fighters do have a responsibility to the local peasants. They must educate the peasantry ideologically and help radicalize them by demonstrating the efficiency of armed action:

The guerrilla fighter is above all an agrarian revolutionary, who interprets the desires of the great peasant mass to be owners of

land, owners of their means of production, of their animals, of everything they live for, which will also constitute their cemetery.¹²⁹

He continues:

Intensive work must be undertaken among the local people to explain the motives of the revolution, its goals, and to spread the incontrovertible truth that the enemy's victory over the people is ultimately impossible. *Whoever does not feel this indisputable truth cannot be a guerrilla fighter.*¹³⁰

As it turned out, Che Guevara romanticized the fighting spirit of the peasantry and the life of the guerrilla fighter to a fault. Guevara believed that since there are certain fundamental laws to guerrilla warfare, both the conditions and the successful rebellion in Cuba could be replicated elsewhere in the Americas.¹³¹ Following a series of high-level positions in the post-revolutionary government in Havana, including as minister of the economy (1960) and industry (1961), Che traveled first to Belgian Congo and eventually, in November 1966, to Bolivia, where he hoped to instigate the same kind of revolution that he had fought in Cuba. Less than a year later, he was dead.

Che's Bolivian venture was exceptionally difficult. He and his small band of Cuban revolutionaries had little success attracting local recruits and then integrating them into their cabal. The recruits initially numbered only four, soon to grow to six.¹³² "Of everything that was envisioned," he lamented, "the slowest has been the incorporation of Bolivian combatants."¹³³ In fact, there continued to be divisions and tensions between the rebels from Cuba, to whom Che referred to as the Vanguard, and the local Bolivian recruits.¹³⁴ In April 1967, only a month after arriving in Bolivia and approximately six months before his capture and death, Che could hardly hide his despair:

We are totally cut off; illness has undermined the health of some compañeros, obliging us to divide our forces, which has greatly reduced our effectiveness . . . the peasant support base has yet to develop, although, it appears that the systemic terror they suffer will ensure the neutrality of most – support will come later. There has not been a single new recruit, and apart from the deaths, we have lost [fellow fighter] Toro, who disappeared after the action at Taperillas.¹³⁵

The fact that the Bolivian army actively recruited peasant informants and brutally attacked those areas suspected of sympathy for the rebels greatly helped keep the number of local recruits down. By the following month, the rebels' predicament had grown even more dire:

The only food we have left is lard; I felt faint and had to sleep two hours to be able to continue at even this slow and halting pace; in general the march has been that way. We ate soup made from the lard at the first water hole. The troops are sick and now many have edema.¹³⁶

By the end of July 1967, Che admitted that "the gradual loss of men" was "a serious defeat" and that the band of rebels numbered no more than twenty-two.¹³⁷ A month later he made one last-ditch effort to rally his troops:

I am beginning to lose control; this will be corrected, but we are all in this together and anyone who does not feel up to it should say so. This is one of those moments when great decisions have to be made; this type of struggle gives us the opportunity to become revolutionaries, the highest form of human species, and it allows us to emerge fully as men; those who are unable to achieve either of these two states should say so now and abandon the struggle.¹³⁸

Betrayed by the very peasantry he thought he was saving, Che Guevara was captured by the Bolivian army and killed on October 9, 1967.¹³⁹

Conclusion

Revolutions, radical and accelerated social transformations, are made in specific circumstances. They rarely, if ever, emerge fully ripe, and not all their details can be scientifically foreseen. They are made from passion, from the improvisation of human beings in their struggle for social change, and they are never perfect. Our revolution was no exception. It committed errors, and some of these cost us dearly.¹⁴⁰

Che Guevara perhaps could not have imagined how prescient his words would be. No matter how *planned* a revolution may be, it is still a messy, unpredictable affair. It takes tremendous commitment, herculean courage, and all too often enormous and sustained use of violence for a

planned revolution to succeed. That success, of course, hinges on the military defeat and collapse of the state, often dramatically culminated in the flight or even death of a fallen strongman. Planned revolutions set out to weaken pre-revolutionary states either by chipping away at their power and their base, as in China and Vietnam, or by overwhelming them with brute force, as in Cuba. Most often, the revolution succeeds when both the support base of the state is too narrow and tenuous and its institutions are rotten and corrupt. If the rebel army can sustain itself and over time achieve military superiority over the forces of the government, then the revolution succeeds.

The rebel army, meanwhile, is made up primarily of the peasantry, at least in theory if not in reality. Revolutions are actually often waged and fought by the middle classes, who do so in the name of the peasants and workers and the downtrodden. Orthodox Marxism had no room for any revolutionary force other than the working class. No less a luminary than Karl Marx himself had referred to peasants as a “sack of potatoes” and mused about “the idiocy of rural life” due to the peasants’ lack of political organization.¹⁴¹ But his heirs came to discover that the master theorist had been wrong. Lenin only reluctantly, but Mao, Ho Chi Minh, and Che Guevara all embraced the peasantry wholeheartedly, aware of, or perhaps even resigned to, the fact that the industrial working class on its own was hardly numerous or foolhardy enough to take up arms against the establishment. It was among the peasants, who had the least to lose and the most to gain, the later revolutionaries reasoned, where real revolutionary potential laid.

There is, as the next chapter will show, a certain amount of contagion that a spontaneous revolution can emit, the mass exuberance of one population inspiring and spilling over to populations across the border or even further afield. But planned revolutions, which are essentially military and power contests between state elites and their opponents, do not necessarily have the same contagion affect. Instead, those who plan revolutions often build on the received wisdom of their predecessors from whom they learn ideological blueprints, tactics and strategies, popular mobilization techniques, and broader revolutionary objectives. Not all planned revolutions have the same cross-fertilization that existed between the Chinese and the Vietnamese people’s wars. But there is accumulated knowledge – of how to affect a revolutionary capture of power – that is often passed on from one generation of revolutionaries to the next.