

AAQ 51

Régis Debray

A Critique of Arms

Volume 1

translated by Rosemary Sheed

Penguin Books

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AAQ 51

Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth,
Middlesex, England
Penguin Books, 625 Madison Avenue, New York,
New York 10022, U.S.A.
Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood,
Victoria, Australia
Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 2801 John Street,
Markham, Ontario, Canada L3R 1B4
Penguin Books (N.Z.) Ltd, 182-190 Wairau Road,
Auckland 10, New Zealand

La Critique des armes I first published by Éditions du Seuil 1974
This translation first published by Penguin Books 1977
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Richard Clay (The Chaucer Press) Ltd
Bungay, Suffolk
Set in Monotype Times

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To Monika Hertl, 'la Grínga', a German and a Latin American,
murdered by the enemy in La Paz
13 May 1973

I offer these over-rational words –
and she may have been right not to want to
listen to them.

international levels, which would increasingly further the grandiose plans of the Tricontinental Conference. More immediately, they also knew of the reorganization taking place within the existing guerrilla movements, the advances being made in their leadership and strategy, and the working out of prospective plans. Not merely did Régis Debray have all this information, but he was actually in touch with the Bolivian Liberation Army, the ELN.

That sums up the difference between those whose prognosis was based only on a knowledge of the existing situation – plus, of course, an estimate of its potential for development and the possibility of further rebellions coming to the fore in the future – and those who knew both the existing situation, and what was actually planned for the future. And because underlying all this were things that could not be revealed, the public at large gained a somewhat vague image of just what it was that we were all doing. The widespread optimism of that period instilled in many of our sympathizers a conviction that international revolutionary conferences were the *result* of a highly developed guerrilla war in Latin America, and not, as they in fact were, a *forecast of and preparation for* such a war. This mistake, and a certain understandable enthusiasm on the part of the delegates to these meetings, led them to suppose that, at least in Guatemala and Venezuela (and Bolivia, for those in the know), *power would very shortly be in the hands of the revolutionaries*. Consequently, the disillusionment caused by the failures and withdrawals of the armed movements had a profound impact; it produced a backlash which enabled reformism to extend its counterattack on both a regional and a worldwide scale.

But none of that is sufficient. What was the basic error of *Revolution in the Revolution*? The argument put forward passed quickly over the (politico-economic) premises to get straight to the conclusions; it presented the result (a guerrilla force in action, linked closely with the people and becoming the nation's political vanguard) without any cause, a specific military product without the (economic, social and political) conditions that produced it. I passed over the necessary prerequisites for guerrilla war and went straight to the methods needed to ensure military success *once the guerrilla war had begun*. In other words, the book gave some useful, abstract indications about *how* to resolve the problem of power, without bothering to consider whether, here and now, the necessary conditions existed in which it could *be* resolved. The subjective was

totally disconnected from the objective; the guidelines for aware and organized revolutionary action were isolated from the laws of the class struggle and its development; military *art* from political *science*.

Nor did the preconditions for a successful war exist any more in political fact than in the ideological theorizing that reflected it. And that for the very good reason that the balance of forces in Latin America at that time was objectively anything but favourable to a revolutionary offensive.

This hiatus between the objective conditions for a large-scale popular war and the actual launching of such a war was something that characterized not just that moment, but the kind of political plan to which that moment gave rise. That hiatus, the failure to combine the operation being undertaken with the conditions that would make it effective, was at the very core of Che's enterprise. It was not a restriction or limitation imposed from outside; it was in a sense its mainspring and cause.

Let me explain what I mean.

Time and contradiction: Che in history

The impact of the Cuban revolution, combined with the decline of the economic expansion of the fifties as a result of the cold war and what was called the 'substitute industrialization' of imports, was the starting signal for an upsurge of the popular movement all over the continent. In that upsurge insurrectional and legal forms merged together in a great wave. The first caesura came in 1964: it was after that that the last legal (or tolerated) mass movements, and the more or less democratic régimes which they supported and which supported them, drew back, leaving the vanguards isolated, far ahead of the popular movement. In other words, that was the point at which a split occurred between the *armed struggle* and the *mass struggle*, which had hitherto been combined into a single movement – a composite and unsteady movement, but firmly united. The year 1964 witnessed simultaneously the political failure of the Venezuelan guerrillas, the *coup d'état* in Brazil, the *coup d'état* in Bolivia, the encirclement and attack by the army on the self-

Collection Number: AK2117

DELMAS TREASON TRIAL 1985 - 1989

PUBLISHER:

Publisher: **Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand**

Location: **Johannesburg**

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