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Who are the real communist dupes?

By BRIAN MARTIN*

WHAT FORCES promote militarism in communist countries? In a world in which our lives are threatened by Soviet nuclear weapons, this is an important question.

The Soviet military establishment is one of the two most powerful in the world, along with that of the United States. As well there are other large communist military forces. The Chinese army is the largest in the world, and Vietnam has a huge army for its population. Then there are the other militaries in the Warsaw Pact.

The easiest answer to the question is that communist governments promote their own military strength. But who in the West helps them out?

Consider the Soviet arsenal of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). In 1960 one of the contentious issues in the United States presidential election campaign was the alleged "missile gap" by which the United States lagged behind the Soviet Union in ICBMs.

John Kennedy narrowly won the election. After he became President he found out that actually the United States was far ahead in ICBMs, with perhaps 10 times as many deliverable nuclear warheads.

The Soviet Government mounted a massive catch-up effort throughout the latter part of the 1960s and 1970s. Today the Soviet arsenal is roughly comparable to the United States arsenal. The authoritative account of the politics of Soviet military power is David Holloway's book The Soviet Union and the Arms Race.

What stimulated the Soviets in their massive ICBM program? Certainly not the peace movement in the West. Though strong in the late 1950s, its attention to nuclear weapons faded to nothing by the mid-1960s, not to return until the 1980s.

One stimulus to the Soviet rulers was their humiliating backdown in the October, 1962, Cuban missile crisis. At the time, the Soviet Union was surrounded by intermediate-range ballistic missiles based in places such as Turkey, South Korea and West Germany. To try to redress the balance, Soviet missiles were installed in Cuba. Kennedy risked global nuclear war by confronting the Soviet Government and forcing the removal of the missiles.

Soviet political leaders realised it was they who were far behind in deliverable nuclear weapons. They vowed never to be put in such a position again, and so began a massive military build-up.

This example suggests that vocal Western proponents of military strength and confrontation actually do more than anyone else in the West to promote communist militarism.

Military races are based on mutual threats and perceptions of danger. Each side uses the "enemy" as the excuse for building up their own military strength.

It is common practice to exaggerate the enemy threat in order to justify military expansion, as in the case of the "missile gap". In the United States the excuse for militarisation in the 1980s has been the so-called "window of vulnerability" to Soviet nuclear attack. This window is more like a mirror, reflecting the massive expansion in US military expenditure.

Western military strength is at least partly to blame for political repression within the communist sphere. After World War II, the Soviet Government, greatly fearing another invasion from the West, established puppet states in Eastern Europe. The loyalty of these governments to the Soviet Union was seen as crucial to its defence.

When movements for liberalisation occurred, these were smashed by Soviet troops in Hungary in 1956 and in Czechoslovakia in 1968, while the 1981 military coup in Poland had the blessing of the Soviet Government. In none of these cases did Western military forces provide any support for the resisters. Instead, the alleged Western military threat provided a potent justification for the repression.

The evidence also shows that when relations between the governments of the Soviet Union and the United States are good, the Soviet Government allows a much greater Jewish emigration. Under detente in the later 1970s and with the signing of SALT II, Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union increased to over 50,000 a year.

When relations soured after 1979, emigration was drastically cut back. Those who argue for a confrontationist approach to the Soviet Union thereby contribute to a reduction in Jewish emigration.

Ironically, then, the best allies that Soviet militarists have in the West are those who beat the communist drum, arguing for "peace through strength" and opposing initiatives towards disarmament. Communist hardliners see all their warnings confirmed when the US Government provides support for contras attacking Nicaragua or puts massive funding into "Star Wars".

Likewise, the best allies of Western militarists are their counterparts in communist countries. Nothing helped the Western advocates of military strength more than the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

So it is reasonable to argue that those in the West who advocate Western military strength to confront and threaten communist governments are actually effective supporters of communist militarism. No doubt most of them are unwitting in this. But who is to say that some prominent anti-communists may not be "agents of influence" of communist governments? This would be similar to police agents who try to discredit social movements by entering them and encouraging them to use violence.

An alternative to the way in which militaries mutually reinforce each other is given by various initiatives which go person-to-person rather than through governments. One of the efforts of the European nuclear-disarmament movement has been to make personal contact with members of independent peace groups in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. This has allowed the sharing of ideas and the providing of mutual support as well as constructive criticism.

Out of such contacts have come initiatives such as a joint petition by figures in East and West Germany arguing for a resolution to outstanding issues.

The International Peace Brigades train people in active nonviolent intervention. Peace Brigade teams have entered, for example, the border area between Nicaragua and Honduras. Their very presence has inhibited fighting.

These and similar efforts to overcome the polarisation between enemies are significant. They do not receive much publicity, but then they do not have the massive financial and organisational support which all governments devote to their military establishments.

Militarists on all sides say that we must fight fire with fire. Other people advocate nonviolent approaches. Instead of using fire against fire, they think it is better to use water.

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