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Internationalism

The battles of Kobane, Aleppo and the relearning of solidarity

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For a long time now we have learned to be wary of “humanitarian” imperialist interventions. Denouncing the more or less hidden aims of our own imperialism (in this case French) remains a constant, paramount requirement. The seeds of the crisis in the Middle East today were sown during the Iraq war in 2003 and - going back further in time - at the time of signature of the Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916).

However, clearly, solidarity is not just about denouncing one’s own imperialism: it must also respond to the concrete needs (political, humanitarian and material) of the peoples and movements whose struggle we support. This often raises no particular problem, as with the defence of activists sentenced to iniquitous sentences by special courts - yet we still have to do it! But in many other cases, to be effective, we must learn from the conditions in which these struggles are waged, which has nothing obvious about it.

Internationalism has a history; its modalities are, in particular, deeply affected by capitalist globalisation, the character, now global, of the ecological crisis, the geopolitical upheavals underway, the crisis of the labour movement and the loss of legitimacy of socialist references. All areas of solidarity are affected by these radical changes; much has already been written on the subject and I will not return on this. I would like to focus here on specific questions raised by support for resistance and popular armed struggles.

This is, of course, not about posing as a military expert, but learning to acquire a minimum "political intelligence" in this field of struggle. In the 1960s-70s, we thus worked on the question of revolutionary war, prolonged people's war and urban guerrilla warfare, attempting to assimilate the lessons of the armed struggles of the time and the guidelines implemented by the leading organizations (to name some of the most well known authors expressing these experiences: Trotsky, Mao, Giap, Che, the Tupamaros and so on).

I am not trying to present here a balance sheet of these “years of fire”, but to compare the past to the present as to the role of solidarity, particularly taking into account the radical changes of geopolitical framework. Having been involved in the Vietnam mobilisations before 1968, and then in the foundation (1969) and leadership of the Indochina Solidarity Front, and then having been engaged in many organizations of solidarity with countries such as Thailand or the Philippines, I refer primarily to the Asian experiences.

Armed movements of the left and/or oppressed peoples have never disappeared from the Asian map (India, Philippines, Burma, Southern Thailand, Nepal, Sri Lanka and so on), even if in most cases the initial socio-political dynamism of “persistent” armed struggles is exhausted, and some of these movements have disarmed or have been placed in a specifically defensive position (self-defence) - and a few other have degenerated. Let us recall that the Nepalese revolution (the temporary conquest of government by a “classical” armed organization via mass action and the electoral process) is recent - it dates from 2006. But in most regions of the world, armed struggles have ended with a few exceptions (Colombia and so on) or have been replaced by the militarization and the ethnicization of conflicts (which I am not dealing here). In addition, the end of the “years of fire” has often been traumatic (including for us with, in particular, the military crushing of our small Argentine organization, and of the PRT).

Let us say that for a large part of the radical international left, reflection on the conditions of armed struggle or resistance has been interrupted. Thus, we have not studied under this angle the new experiences, particularly in the Arab world after 2011 - and the discussions on the tasks of solidarity.

The acquisition of arms: yesterday and today

The question of the disarmament of the bourgeoisie is obviously key to a revolutionary point of view. It has as a general rule the corollary of the arming of the people.

In some cases, the revolutionary forces had from the outset arms and a significant military know-how: in Russia (1917) with the decomposition of the Tsarist army defeated on the battlefields of the First World War; in China (1927) with the uprising of bodies of the national army who joined the popular insurrections and contributed to the foundation of the Red Army. In many other cases, it was different: weapons and experience were gained gradually, in the course of a general process of “accumulation of forces” (including social roots and a geographical extension).

Outside the rallying of existing armed forces to the revolution, there are roughly four ways to obtain weapons:

- Taking them from the enemy during military operations (or even buying them from soldiers or officers of the government army).
- Producing them in clandestine industrial workshops, if possible in areas protected from enemy intervention.

These first two points form the foundation of the process of arming of a “classic” popular armed struggle. They are independent sources of arms, of “self-arming”, in relation to the strengthening of the social implantation and geographical extension of the movement - all very important things, because the politico-military capacity of a revolutionary organization does not depend primarily on its fire-power, but its roots.

However, this type of process is necessarily relatively slow and rarely allows obtaining arms of high power in numbers. Hence the recourse:

- To smuggling, which is very expensive and is not without danger, because this puts the organization in contact with circles where the agents of multiple secret services operate;
- To more or less “friendly” governments, who often have their own objectives and who use the aid as a means of pressure. At the time, it was Russia, China, North Korea, Libya and Cuba.

To do this, the movements leading progressive armed struggles have rarely publicly called for international solidarity. The contacts established with governments were generally discreet. Material solidarity campaigns mainly concerned financial aid (that the movements could use as they wished) or medical aid (shipments of medical equipment, trips by doctors to guerrilla areas and so on). But we have intervened directly on the question of arms. Here are two examples:

- During the Algerian war of liberation, members of the Fourth International created a clandestine factory manufacturing weapons (mortars, grenades, rifles and so on) intended for the FLN. There were skilled workers selected for their know-how from several continents.
- Faced with the US military escalation in Indochina, we demanded that Moscow provide Hanoi with the missiles that would have allowed protection of the skies of North Vietnam - particularly from the devastating B52 bombers. These top of the range arms never arrived, but the Vietnamese Communist Party was able to organise air defences by adapting to this end the principles of people's war (Giap) and making the best use of weapons provided by the Soviet Union or China.

Let us note that we did not look to Moscow because we considered that this regime was in any way “revolutionary”. We characterised it as counter-revolutionary on the internal level (the bureaucratic counter-revolution) and, in large

part, in its international policy (at the time of “peaceful coexistence”). But, from a geopolitical point of view, two lines of confrontation cohabited: between revolution and counter-revolution, with Vietnam as nodal point; between “Eastern and Western blocs” (to which was added the Sino-Soviet inter-bureaucratic conflict).

Moscow and Beijing had dealt a very hard blow to the liberation struggle of the Vietnamese in 1954, when they forced the VCP to accept the Geneva agreements which carried the germ of a new war - the most deadly and the most total of wars - this time directly led by Washington.

However, we can say that Moscow and Beijing have both much helped and much betrayed the Vietnamese revolution - and we, with the solidarity movement, played as much as we were able to on this contradictory relationship.

The geopolitics of today are quite different. Russia and China are capitalist powers. Moscow supports militarily regimes like that of Assad and it would be absurd to ask it to supply arms to the Syrian popular rebellion (as it would have been absurd to ask for Paris or Washington to aid the Vietnamese revolutionaries!). Does this mean that peoples who resist and practice armed struggle (and therefore solidarity movements) can no longer play on any contradictions among the powers?

In addition, today, in the Iraq-Syria theatre of operations, multiple external actors have intervened, often heavily armed, with fundamentalist movements supported by Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and others in a regional geopolitics pushing towards the destructive confessionalisation of conflicts. It is a rather peculiar situation. What could the implications be on the question of arms?

To address these two questions, it seems to me necessary to return to the battles of Kobane and Aleppo – inasmuch as I understand a little about what is happening in a country where I do not have direct links.

Kobane

. Is the battle of Kobane decisive? In many cases, the loss of an urban centre can be costly, but without serious consequences in the course of a revolutionary war. A classic example: during the Sino-Japanese conflict, the counter-revolutionary forces of Chiang Kai-shek took Yan'an, the “red capital” of the Communist Party. The symbol was strong, but this only affected the local conditions of the struggle. The Red Army redeployed a significant portion of its units in the north-east of the country, behind the Japanese lines and immune to the White armies of Chiang - where the CCP created liberated areas of a scope and strategic importance far superior to that of their initial “base” in Yan'an.

The same is not true of Kobane. Beyond the symbol, itself very strong, the stakes in this battle are very large from the point of view of Syrian Kurdistan. On a small territory on the hostile Turkish border, Kurdish forces do not have the space to redeploy whereas in addition, Islamic State is massacring, and deporting people (including women intended for its combatants) leading to a mass exodus. In these conditions, the loss of Kobane endangers all of Syrian Kurdistan and the social transformations underway.

The battle of Kobane must then be won, while Islamic State has mobilized very significant resources to take it, because, from their point of view also, the issues at stake are very significant: the conquest of this city would allow control in a continuous manner of a long portion of the Turkish border.

Given the relationship of military forces, the Kurds can only win the battle of Kobane under three conditions:

- A great capacity of resistance of the PYD forces in Kobane, without which nothing is possible.
- Supplies of arms to attack the armoured vehicles of Islamic State.
- The bombardment of IS military columns to prevent them reaching Kobane, operating freely in the city or bringing in reinforcements as needed.

I am not laying any “line” down here. It is a factual observation - right or wrong - but that in no way depends on a political “viewpoint”. An observation, however, that we must take into account in solidarity, if we are not to deny reality.

Second observation: the Kurdish resistance has succeeded to a significant degree in compelling Washington to change its policy in Syrian Kurdistan. The United States did not want to intervene in Kobane in the same way as they had done around the Mosul dam (in Iraqi Kurdistan): there was the Turkish veto, the marginal strategic importance (to their eyes) for the general theatre of operations, the priority given to Iraq, the refusal of recognition of Kurdish forces linked to the PKK (characterised as “terrorist”) and so on.

For these reasons, the US command did not target the columns of armoured vehicles and artillery of Islamic State before they reached Kobane (while the situation on the ground allowed very effective bombing) and arms supplies came late.

What forced the hand of Washington, in addition to the fierce resistance of the Kurds and the PYD, was the worldwide coverage: the assault led by IS, the Kurdish resistance, the inaction of the Coalition, the manoeuvres of Erdogan’s Turkey, everything was filmed from the very close border and broadcast on television. The abyss between the humanitarian claims of the imperialist intervention and the reality of its action (or inaction) became obvious, and unsustainable.

Imperialist wars

. It is all the more possible to weigh on the contradictions of the imperialist intervention in Iraq and Syria, inasmuch it has been decided urgently, without any strategic plan, to respond to a situation that had unexpectedly gone out of control. This was very different from the conditions of the wars in Afghanistan (2001) or Iraq (2003) - or the French intervention in Mali (January 2013).

In the latter case, Paris planned the intervention with the notable objective (initially concealed) of sending in ground troops with a view to the redeployment of its military apparatus in the region. If the French government was reacting to an actual crisis of the Malian regime, it also grossly exaggerated the strength of fundamentalist organizations to justify its decision: even with (temporary) Tuareg support, the Arab “jihadis” from the North or from abroad were not going to seize Bamako and take control of the south of Mali.

It cannot be argued today that the US presidency has exaggerated the rise of Islamic State (it has on the contrary long under-estimated it). It has taken action under the pressure of events, without clearly defined war objectives beyond a few obvious points (blocking the progress of IS, stabilizing a regime under control in Baghdad and so on). It wishes to avoid getting bogged down again in a deadly “swamp” by sending US troops on the ground (apart from military advisers).

It nevertheless needs troops on the ground, but which? The Iraqi army is impotent; the Kurdish forces of the PKK are effective, but not favoured politically; the Iranian forces in Iraq are not (yet) reliable allies; the non-fundamentalist components of the Syrian resistance have been long abandoned to their fate and have lost a lot of ground. The military advisers already number 3,000 and Washington may have to decide to move farther than it wishes.

As another source of contradictions, Washington has built a broad coalition of states, but with sometimes conflicting interests, from Turkey (the main NATO military power in the region) to Saudi Arabia with which it is very difficult to claim to be defending the status of women and democracy.

So we are not in 2003. The imperialist wars succeed each other, combine, but do not entirely resemble each other. Beyond constants that we must always denounce, we must also understand their specificities and their inherent contradictions; which is not always simple - but which allows a better evaluation of the conditions in which are continuing struggles and how solidarity can be effective.

Thus, one of the special features of the ongoing conflict is that on the same global theatre of Iraqi-Syrian operations, several separate wars mingle and intertwine. Strategically, the fate of all the peoples concerned is bound together - and the unity of progressive forces is needed. Specifically, the concrete details of the combat conditioning tactics can vary considerably, and even “diverge” at certain times. I am speaking here only of Kobane and Aleppo, but, more profoundly, conflicts also evolve according to very specific situations or global alignments and local alliances, which fluctuate and mingle [\[1\]](#).

Aleppo

. I would like to take three examples of the difference between the situation in Kobane and that of the popular resistance inside Syria, personified by the battle of Aleppo. Three examples that have implications for solidarity.

Visibility. The popular resistance in Aleppo has not benefited from the same media coverage as that of Kobane, be it only for topographical reasons: it cannot be filmed from the Turkish “balcony”. In addition, it does not benefit from a network of associations and movements in Europe and elsewhere of the same magnitude as the Kurdish left (and singularly the PKK).

In the case of Kobane, we can say that public opinion spontaneously influenced Washington as in the same way that a campaign of solidarity could have. We cannot as things stand replace a “strong” media coverage, but that implies that we must do everything that we can to ensure visibility to the Syrian popular resistance: as much as we devote ourselves to the situation in the Syrian Kurdistan, as we must ensure that the struggle in the rest of the country is not “forgotten”, while it continues in extremely precarious conditions and the violence of IS obscures that of the Assad regime.

Exemplarity. The battle of Kobane is exemplary - but is the resistance in Aleppo less so? The fighting capacity of the forces of the PYD is notably based on its popular roots and the social dynamics initiated by revolutionary measures taken in the “three cantons” which make up Rojava (Syrian Kurdistan) - but have we not also had numerous examples of “people’s power” in the Syrian uprising against the Assad dictatorship? The role of women in Rojava and the resistance of Kobane are rightly hailed, but they have not been inactive in the rest of the Syria!

There are in various calls for international solidarity with Kobane certain formulas or “oversights” which seem to me quite unfortunate. Let us take for example the global call for the day of solidarity with Kobane on November 1, 2014.

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The title could have mentioned Aleppo and not only Kobane, this was not the case. The terrorist violence of Islamic State was denounced, but not that of the Assad regime. And then, there is this sentence: "The democratic model of the autonomous administration of Rojava is an example for all the populations of Syria" .Which would be greeted with bitterness by the forces and peoples involved elsewhere in Syria in democratic experiments.

The popular uprising against the Assad regime has experienced its own social experiences; if they are etiolated, it is because they have not benefited from the same "window" of peace as the PYD in Syrian Kurdistan. They were immediately the object of a repressive military escalation on the part of the government, and then were attacked from behind by counter-revolutionary fundamentalist forces supported by regimes which wanted to put an end to the "Arab revolution".

During this time, the popular movements in Syrian Kurdistan benefited from a situation of "non-war" with the Assad regime (which had withdrawn its armed forces from the bulk of Rojava); they were only lately attacked frontally by the fundamentalist movements, first, in May 2013, by the al-Nusra Front, then, in September 2014, by IS. The attack was fierce and the resistance remarkable, the stakes were high, but international solidarity should not forget the importance of the popular movement in the Syrian uprising and the tragic circumstances in which it finds itself: with a lot of mortal enemies and no international support at the level needed.

Bombing. On the border of Iraqi Kurdistan and Kobane, there has been effective US bombing without "collateral damage" which the Kurdish forces have been able to benefit from. This is not the case in Aleppo, in the Palestinian camp of Yarmuk, in the suburbs of Damascus and so on. In a general way, in Syria, the Coalition's air intervention does not play in favour of the popular resistance. It enables the regime to ensure that it is done with its agreement and to claim a new international recognition; its forces benefit from it to concentrate their fire against the popular uprising. The fundamentalist movements make much of denouncing the imperialist intervention. Assad, like IS, draws on a new legitimacy. Militarily, the bombing does not loosen the vice on the progressive forces, politically, it detracts from them.

One could say that in the case of Iraqi or Syrian Kurdistan, some US bombing was tactically valuable; but the general situation on the theatre of operations shows that it remains nevertheless strategically disastrous. Solidarity must therefore absolutely not align with the imperialist intervention, including in this area - but it must not deny the reality of individual theatres of operations. It must also take account of the different positions of the movements it supports, in Syrian Kurdistan and in the rest of the country. The latter have frontally denounced the air intervention of the Coalition, the former have roundly criticized the non-intervention of US aviation in Kobane, then actively collaborated in its effectiveness when it began.

Solidarity does not have to align itself with the viewpoint of Kobane to the exclusion of Aleppo (or vice-versa), but take account of the two.

Compromise

. The problem posed by the above point is not who is the more to the left (the PKK-PYD or the FSA?), but the relationship between strategy, tactics and compromise. Of course, the analysis of a tactic or a compromise depends in part on the perception one has of the movement(s) involved. That of the PKK-PYD is not self evident. These parties have certainly changed, but to what point? In many articles, they are today are presented as a libertarian current, committed to political pluralism, as armed anarcho-communists; for others, they retain an authoritarian Mao-Stalinist matrix which prohibits them from recognizing in practice pluralism on the left: an iron fist in a discourse of velvet. The war situation and the urgency of solidarity do not help clarify a reality which is probably complex. But in

any case, in the region, the PKK-PYD current is one of the most radical components (in its social project and its roots in the far left); probably the most powerful of them.

We should not therefore see in any compromise the announcement of betrayal. Very symptomatically, the PYD wants to keep control of forces on the ground, while using to its advantage the US bombing of IS armoured vehicles: the Kurdish organizations who are close to it reject in advance any intervention on the ground by the Coalition.

Similarly, in the rest of Syria, there have been many tactical and momentary agreements between various armed components combining for a time against a common enemy. But this situation has never led the Syrian left forces to change their judgment on the counter-revolutionary nature of the fundamentalist groups.

Any compromise involves dangers; but the rejection of any compromise also does! It is better to follow the situation over time, rather than rush to judge each political decision of the movements whose struggles we support.

In this area, the role of solidarity is to contribute to creating the best possible conditions for peace talks which allow the victory of the liberation struggle, of the revolutionary struggle; we are not at the bargaining table and we do not have as a general rule to intervene on the terms of the discussions between belligerents; but sometimes it is demanded of us. This was the case in 1973. The Paris negotiations had led to the drafting of an agreement that Washington refused to conclude. The Vietnamese launched an appeal to public opinion and to the movement of international solidarity to force the United States to sign what became the Paris Agreements. We responded actively to this appeal, breaking the rules of secret diplomatic negotiations.

The Paris Agreements were a compromise that could seem risky; but two years later, the US forces were to literally flee the catastrophe of Saigon. The crisis which later shook the “socialist camp” has made us forget the importance of the event. The largest imperialist power in the world had conducted in Indo-china a total counter-revolutionary war, on all fronts - a war at the time without precedent; and still without equivalent today by the magnitude of the effort, by the means implemented, by its multifaceted character - and it lost.

Peace process

. If the Vietnamese have thus been able to impose “winning agreements” in 1973, it was thanks to the struggle on the ground, to the development of international solidarity and to the major crisis opened by this war in the United States, but also because they had learned the lessons of 1954 and kept Moscow and Beijing well away from the negotiating table.

The study of the peace process is an important facet of reflection on armed struggle. We can draw on a wealth of experience in this area, historic, but also contemporary. The questions asked are often very difficult. How can one disarm when surrounded by enemy weapons (that is the dilemma facing our comrades of the RPM-M in Mindanao)? How, in the name of the rights of a “majority minority” on a portion of territory, not to sacrifice the rights of “minority communities” present on this same territory: for example, in Mindanao again, recognize the rights of Muslim populations without denying the rights of mountain dwelling “indigenous peoples”?

Can we negotiate with the Taliban in Afghanistan or IS in the Middle East without sacrificing in advance the rights of women in the name of “peace”? What social, environmental and democratic rights must be guaranteed to end a military conflict when revolution is not on the agenda?

All these matters must be taken into account by solidarity, otherwise “anti-war movements” or “peace movements”

can contribute to the denial of the rights of entire sectors of the population (women, indigenous peoples, workers and so on) so as not to further complicate an already difficult peace process.

One of the ways to avoid the overlooking of the oppressed or exploited in the course of a peace negotiation is to involve them directly in the process by having them judge at each step the measures and agreements proposed: the negotiation then ceases to be a head-to-head at the summit between armed forces (governmental and dissenting) and itself becomes a democratic process. That is the experience of our comrades in Mindanao (although the peace talks are currently suspended). Solidarity can support this direct integration of populations in negotiations on which their future depends.

Solidarity yesterday and today

Solidarity must therefore respond to the needs of the peoples and movements whose struggles we support, but that does not mean opposing “effectiveness” to “principles”. A large part of the French “left of the left” refuses to characterize our state as imperialist, or draws no inference from this (Melenchon and the PG, the PCF and so on). Others were easily fooled by the “humanitarian imperialist” discourse of the Hollande presidency when preparing for the intervention in Mali, or confined themselves to press release protests without any consequence. Political currents (like the NPA) or associative groups (like Survie) who are trying to oppose Françafrique in a consistent manner found themselves very much in the minority. Accordingly, there has been no (re)construction of a permanent antiwar or anti-imperialist movement, whilst our imperialism intervenes on a permanent basis in Africa including - and more than any other power - militarily.

A political compass is all the more necessary for the (re)construction of durable solidarity movements inasmuch as we are generally faced with complex situations that we must decrypt, requiring a theoretical approach but also a serious effort to assimilate the realities on the ground. Better then not to take refuge in the comfort of “principled” postures which are likely to screen – behind a simplification of the realities - or lead to positions which are sometimes absurd. It happened to us in the 1960s. An appeal had been launched by personalities had been launched to collect money for the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) in South Vietnam. A simple requirement, without any ambiguity, politically correct. However, we realized late in the day that (one!) left Gaullist had signed this appeal: horrors, he embodied the “shadow” of this bourgeoisie with which there can be no compromise! We went from poster to poster scratching out with a black felt tip pen two of our signatures (Alain Krivine and Henri Weber, the “youth” of the time) while leaving that of Pierre Frank (our “old man”, more reasonable).

Fortunately the ridiculous does not kill, or we would have died very young. If we are still alive, despite a few outbreaks of “infantile leftism”, it is also because we were fully engaged in all the concrete activities of internationalist solidarity. We devoted much more time to action than to posturing.

Nor should we wildly over-state the internationalist commitment of the 1960s in France. In fact, May 1968 dealt a harsh blow to solidarity, the far left concentrating their efforts on the class struggles in France. The Comité Vietnam national (CVN, unitary) and the Comités Vietnam de Base (CVB, Maoist) ceased to exist! It was necessary to rebuild in a voluntarist manner the Front solidarité Indochine (FSI). But for some years, there was nonetheless a deployment of energy and very diverse activities, on a mass or sometimes clandestine basis [2].

The movement for global justice at the beginning of this century temporarily gave new life to internationalism, after a period during which this aspiration was often decried. Continuity was ensured by the movements of occupation which succeeded each other from Egypt to Hong Kong. However, we must recognize that the sustainable capacity for international solidarity remains very far short of what would be the essential minimum. This obviously reflects the

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current weakness of radical progressive currents in the imperialist countries, but also the loss of traditions and a difficulty in thinking about the implications in this field of successive geopolitical upheavals.

Since Bush, many of us have realized that we were entering into a world of “permanent war”, but without making a conclusion which is nonetheless obvious enough: we were going to “permanently” support armies of popular resistance. The credibility crisis of the socialist alternative is certainly so deep that in various conflicts, we cannot give our support to any of the movements involved in the fighting (Afghanistan, Pakistan, Libya and so on, where support should also be given to unarmed movements); but there are cases where we can (Syria, Kurdistan and so on).

More generally, in the face of the abuses by armed bands of all types, the issue of self defence of organizations or communities whose existence is threatened arises (Mindanao and so on), even if the answer to these threats must be above all political and when the “armed struggle” itself is not on the agenda.

In some cases (probably rare), we have to respond to urgent appeals to demand that our governments supply weapons. The example of Kobane shows that said governments can actually be obliged to do so. The example of Aleppo confirmed that they do not want to. In the Syrian context, this is certainly an anti-imperialist demand.

This article is centred on solidarity with armed resistance. However, the “updating” of tasks of solidarity arises in all areas. This is true for example of the response to humanitarian disasters, including climatic - or of the capacity of the trade union movement to better coordinate support for labour struggles in a time of globalized production chains.

We cannot assume our internationalist responsibilities without a broader and more systematic involvement of progressive political and social organizations progressive - and without a more consistent financial support to resistance. Will without means and politics without logistics are impotent.

[1] Thus, in the tribal areas of Pakistan there is a combination of international developments – “jihad”, the US intervention and so on - with national ones – factional rivalries inside the army - and local ones – changing alliances between the heads of tribes and clans

[2] in relation to Algeria, the Basque country under Franco, or US military deserters from the Vietnam War