A QUESTION SHARPLY POSED

by Bob Avakian, Chairman of the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA

NAT TURNER OR THOMAS JEFFERSON?

Slave rebellion or slavemaster?
Do you support the oppressed rising up against the oppressive system and seeking a radically different way, even with certain errors and excesses—or do you support the oppressors, and the leaders and guardians of an outmoded oppressive order, who may talk about “inalienable rights” but bring down wanton brutality and very real terror, on masses of people, to enforce and perpetuate their system of oppression?

This speaks to a basic question of stand and orientation, and represents a fundamental dividing line. And, along with “setting the record straight” on the actual experience and role of communist revolution, and refuting the factual and methodological distortions involved in the attacks on communism, this basic question—as represented by Nat Turner or Thomas Jefferson?—also needs to be sharply posed in relation to the history of communism and the present-day struggle for communist revolution, in opposition to the capitalist-imperialist system which still dominates the world, with such terrible consequences for humanity and for the environment. Do you stand with this oppressive system, or with the struggle to overthrow and uproot it, and bring into being a radically different, emancipating system and way of life?

Do we need to learn from not only the overwhelmingly positive experience of the communist movement so far, but also its shortcomings, including sometimes serious errors and even excesses? Yes, this is an important part of the new synthesis of communism, and it is crucial in order to be able to do even better in the new stage of communist revolution. But this can only be done, in the fullest way, by taking up and applying the scientific communist method and approach that leads, first of all, to standing firmly and consistently on the right side of this fundamental dividing line, between oppressors and oppressed—and, beyond that, makes it possible to correctly assess and learn from the rich experience of the struggle against oppression, throughout history and in all parts of the world, including the shortcomings involved in this experience, in order to carry forward the fight to the final goal of communist revolution and the emancipation of the oppressed, and ultimately humanity as a whole, from all forms and relations of oppression and exploitation, domination and degradation, everywhere in the world.

The Nat Turner Slave Rebellion
Nat Turner was the leader of a slave rebellion in Southampton County, Virginia, one of at least 250 slave revolts that took place in the U.S. before the Civil War. After careful preparation, Turner began the rebellion on August 21, 1831 with a trusted group of six other slaves. They were armed with just a few knives, hatchets and axes at the start. Their plan was to strike hard and quickly against the slaveowners and march toward the county seat, retaking other slaves to their cause along the way. At one point, Turner’s forces grew to as many as 60. The uprising deeply shook the slave system, and there was a huge, brutal response from those in power. The rebellion was defeated after 48 hours—Turner himself went into hiding for two months before surrendering. Turner and 50 others were executed by the state. As many as 200 other slaves were killed by the slaveowners’ militia and vigilantes, and many were tortured. During the rebellion, Turner’s forces killed all the slave owners they encountered—not only the adults but also their children. But the Nat Turner Rebellion—and other slave rebellions—must be firmly upheld because, in its principal character and in essence, it was a just struggle of the oppressed rising up against their oppression.

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