

*This short biography of Bob Avakian is mainly drawn from his memoir, From Ike to Mao and Beyond: My Journey from Mainstream America to Revolutionary Communist.*

"...if you don't have a poetic spirit—or at least a poetic side—it is very dangerous for you to lead a Marxist movement or be the leader of a socialist state."  
—Bob Avakian

[This should be in a box to the left of the first paragraph starting with “This short biography”.]

TIMELINE—

Political Activism and  
Revolutionary Leadership  
of Bob Avakian (BA),  
During the 1960s-1970s,  
and Continuing to the  
Present Time

**[<http://revcom.us/avakian/ba-timeline.html>]**

## **The Early Years**

Bob Avakian’s personal and political development was strongly influenced by the experience of growing up in Berkeley in the 1960s. This was a place where radical intellectual, cultural and political currents were swirling, with major impact not only in that city but far beyond it as well. And it was a city with a significant population of Black people—which, in turn, had a significant impact on the character of the city as a whole.

In his memoir, *From Ike to Mao and Beyond: My Journey from Mainstream America to Revolutionary Communist*, Avakian describes the effect of developing close relationships with Black schoolmates through music and sports, and coming to see and hate the prevailing segregation and racism in society and the ways it affected his Black friends and Black people as a whole. In this memoir, he writes:

On the way back after the game I was sitting with some Black friends of mine on the football team, and we got into this whole deep conversation about why is there so much racism in this country, why is there so much prejudice and where does it come from, and can it ever change, and how could it change? This was mainly them talking and me listening. And I remember that very, very deeply – I learned a lot more in that one hour than I learned in hours of classroom time, even from some of the better teachers.

Avakian entered UC Berkeley in the fall of 1961, intending to pursue a wide range of academic interests, and trying out for the freshman football team, but that plan was cut short by life-threatening illness that required months of hospitalization, and years of intensive treatment.

As he resumed studies at UC Berkeley, even while his recovery from illness continued, the campus was being wracked with protest and intellectual challenges to the status

quo. Avakian became an active participant in the Free Speech Movement and the developing student protest movement. Over time, he became deeply involved in the anti-war movement, and in support of the Black liberation struggle, and the movement for women's liberation, and he was increasingly drawn toward revolution. In his memoir, Avakian describes the political relationships and friendships he developed during this period with leaders of the Black Panther Party, including Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, as well as Eldridge Cleaver, with whom Avakian worked for a period of time at Ramparts magazine.

Avakian was active with the Peace and Freedom Party in California, and took part in SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) on a national level. In this period, he began to move towards a developed revolutionary perspective and to wrestle with the big questions of what kind of revolution was needed, and what kind of leadership such a revolution would demand.

In 1967 Avakian moved to Richmond, California, a city with one of the highest rates of poverty in the San Francisco Bay Area. There he started a collective with the mission of integrating "with the proletariat and taking radical politics to the proletariat." He and others began to more systematically study some of the core works of Marxism, as well as the writings of Mao Tsetung, and to work on a theoretical framework for revolution in the U.S.

### **The Revolutionary Union...and Forming the Revolutionary Communist Party**

In 1968 Avakian played a central role in bringing together several revolutionary collectives to form the Bay Area Revolutionary Union. The conception was that this and other organizations (including the Black Panther Party) could forge ideological and political unity that would be the basis for a new revolutionary communist party.

That process proved complex, and involved great debates over questions like: What kind of revolution would be necessary and how could such a revolution be brought about? What would be the program of such a revolution? What forces in society would be the bedrock of such a revolution, and what other forces could take part in this revolution, and how would this all come together? And what kind of leadership would be needed, and how – on the basis of what principles and methods – would it be organized and function?

Avakian remained intractably opposed to, and determined to bring about an end to, all inequality and oppression, and – as such – was a strong supporter of every organization and force that opposed the oppression of Black people, Latinos, women and other oppressed sections of society. At the same time, he more deeply sought to understand the foundational elements in society that generated and enforced inequality and oppression. Through continuing study and social investigation, and often intense ideological debate, Avakian came to see Marxism, as it had been further developed by Lenin, and then had reached its highest point up to that time in the work of Mao Tsetung, as the theoretical framework that most scientifically synthesized an

understanding of the world and the means for radically transforming it in an emancipatory way.

In articles he wrote for the theoretical journal of the Revolutionary Union (Red Papers), Avakian began to develop a method and approach from which he explored a number of critical questions related to summing up the experience of the world communist movement, as well as speaking to the big and contended political and ideological issues of the day, in many different dimensions, including the fundamental question concerning the nature of the Soviet Union – whether it was still a socialist country, or (as Avakian argued) was Mao Tsetung’s analysis correct, that capitalism had been restored there? Avakian continued to focus attention on the theoretical and practical problems of uprooting the oppression of Black people in the U.S. and the crucial relation of this to the overall strategy for revolution. He has emphasized that, “There will never be a revolutionary movement in this country that doesn’t fully unleash and give expression to the sometimes openly expressed, sometimes expressed in partial ways, sometimes expressed in wrong ways, but deeply, deeply felt desire to be rid of these long centuries of oppression [of Black people]. There’s never gonna be a revolution in this country, and there never should be, that doesn’t make that one key foundation of what it’s all about.”

Through actively reaching out to and carrying out investigation, discussion and struggle with collectives throughout the country, in which Avakian played a decisive part, the Bay Area Revolutionary Union developed as a national organization in 1970, and changed its name to the Revolutionary Union. During the first half of the 1970s, the process of theoretical debate and ideological struggle was carried out broadly among forces who had come forward through the upsurge of the 1960s and were grappling with the question of how to carry forward the revolutionary impulse of that time and give it an ongoing organized expression. Through a period of intense and complex theoretical debate and ideological struggle, Avakian played a key role in the development of a new communist party in the U.S. In 1975, the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA (RCP, USA) was formed. Bob Avakian was elected chairman of its leading body, the Party’s central committee.

### **Avakian's Role in the Wake of the Restoration of Capitalism in China**

Shortly after the founding of the RCP, Mao Tsetung died in 1976, and almost immediately his followers in the leadership of the Communist Party of China (the "Gang of Four") were arrested and denounced by those in the Chinese Communist Party, headed ultimately by Deng Xiaoping, who were determined to take China down a very different path. This posed a historic challenge to the revolutionaries around the world who had looked to Mao and socialist China as an inspiration—and among these forces there developed profoundly different understandings of what had happened in China. In the RCP, USA Avakian led a process of study and debate which resulted in the majority of the Party uniting around the understanding that what had happened after the death of Mao in China was a coup that overthrew socialism and was in the process of restoring capitalism. This led to a major split in the RCP: a significant minority of Party members supported the direction charted by the new leaders of

China and left the RCP, and before long gave up all pretense of being communists and working for revolution.

### **Government Attacks and Exile**

When Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping came to the U.S. in 1979 to meet with U.S. president Jimmy Carter, Avakian was part of a demonstration in Washington, DC, to expose and oppose what the RCP and Avakian understood to be Deng's reversal of the revolution in China. Police attacked the demonstration, injuring many and arresting scores of people. Avakian was among 17 protesters against whom the federal government brought serious, multiple felony charges for their role in the protest.

At the same time as he and others fought these charges, Avakian went on a national speaking tour in 1979. In the course of that tour, Avakian was interviewed by an L.A. Times reporter who wrote an article that included a serious distortion of Avakian's views. The Secret Service used that article as a pretext for an investigation into Avakian. After being threatened with a lawsuit, the L.A. Times printed a partial retraction, and the Secret Service investigation into Avakian was challenged in court. Avakian was never charged in connection with this investigation.

In this period, Damián García, who was closely associated with the RCP, raised a red flag on top of the Alamo. Shortly after that, while building for RCP-sponsored demonstrations on May Day 1980, Garcia was murdered in Los Angeles.

In his memoir, Avakian describes how this was also a period of growing death threats against him from various quarters. Under these circumstances, and in light of the history in the U.S. of political assassinations of revolutionaries like Malcolm X and Black Panther Party leader Fred Hampton, Avakian left the U.S. and went into exile in France in 1981. Criminal charges against Avakian were eventually dropped after an extensive political and legal battle. Over the course of the past several decades, while carrying out crucial theoretical work, Avakian has continued to provide overall leadership to the RCP and to the movement for revolution that it is actively working to build.

### **Bob Avakian's New Synthesis of Communism**

As a result of his extensive study of the history of the international communist movement and the socialist societies it has brought into being, first in the Soviet Union, and then in China – and digging deeply into the reasons for the reversals of those revolutions and the restoration of capitalism in those countries – while at the same time drawing from a wide range of experience in other fields, Avakian has developed a "new synthesis" – a recasting of the theoretical framework for carrying forward communist revolution, which upholds the very real and unprecedented achievements of the first wave of communism and the experience of socialism, while also pointing to and insisting on the importance of learning from the very real, and in some cases very serious, errors and shortcomings. As Avakian has put it, this new synthesis has revived the "viability and, yes, the desirability of a whole new and radically different

world, and [placed] this on an ever firmer foundation of materialism and dialectics ... a source of hope and of daring on a solid scientific foundation." Some of the main elements of this new synthesis address philosophy and method; proletarian internationalism; the character of the dictatorship of the proletariat and socialist society as a transition to communism, with an emphasis on the importance of giving greater scope and initiative to dissent and intellectual and cultural ferment, within an overall framework of carrying forward the transition toward communism with the political rule of the proletariat and the leadership of its vanguard party; and a strategic approach to revolution, including on the possibility and approach of actually making revolution in a developed imperialist country such as the U.S. As a concentration of the principles and methods that characterize this new synthesis, Avakian has stressed the pivotal importance of applying the approach of "solid core, with a lot of elasticity," to the process of making revolution and then in leading the new, socialist society that is brought into being through this revolution. (For a brief description of BA's new synthesis of communism, click [here](#).) [TBAI-Bob Avakian-NewSynthesisPiece.doc]

### **Communism as a Science, a Guide to Deeply Learning About and Radically Transforming the World**

A basic and distinguishing aspect of Avakian's body of work, and the new synthesis it has brought forward, is that communism is not only a revolutionary political movement, but also a scientific approach and method to understand and change the world. He has spoken of "the importance of the unity between grasping and applying Marxism as a way to engage all of reality, on the one hand, and its particular application to the problems of making revolution, on the other hand."

In connection with all this, Avakian has attached great importance to imagination, maintaining that "there is a unity between a systematic and comprehensive scientific method and outlook for comprehending and transforming reality, and giving flight to the imagination and giving expression to the 'need to be amazed.'"

To this day, through his talks and writings, and his overall political and ideological leadership, Bob Avakian has continued to guide the RCP, USA, in its fundamental orientation and strategic approach of working for revolution in the U.S. itself and contributing all it can to revolution and the ultimate goal of communism in the world as a whole.