

GUERRILLA WARFARE

CHE GUEVARA

Introduction to the Bison Books Edition
by Marc Becker

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INTRODUCTION

Marc Becker

Thirty years after his death, university students throughout Latin America still wear T-shirts emblazoned with Che Guevara's image. Workers carry placards and banners featuring him as they march through the streets demanding higher wages and better working conditions. Zapatista guerrillas in southern Mexico paint murals depicting Che together with Emiliano Zapata and Indian heroes. In Cuba, vendors sell Che watches to tourists. Not only has he captured the popular imagination, but recently several authors have written lengthy biographies detailing the revolutionary's life.¹ In the face of a political milieu that considers socialism to be a discredited ideology, what explains this continued international fascination with a guerrilla leader and romantic revolutionary who died in a failed attempt to spark a hemispheric Marxist insurrection?

Che's life represents a selfless dedication to the concerns of the underclass, a struggle to encourage people to place the needs of the broader society above their own narrow personal wishes and desires, and a willingness to make extensive personal sacrifices to achieve a more just and equitable social order. Che made the ultimate sacrifice for his beliefs. With his death in October of 1967 at the hands of the military in Bolivia he became a martyr and a prophet for leftist causes and beliefs.

Che, however, is more a symbolic representation of these struggles than an intellectual or philosophical leader.² In fact, since the 1960s specific aspects of his thought (particularly his *foco* theory of guerrilla warfare) have become discredited. Over the last ten or fifteen years, new issues that Che never seriously considered, such as ethnic consciousness, have become critically important to popular movements for social justice. In the aftermath of seemingly endless and deadly guerrilla battles in the 1980s in Central America, Peru, and Colombia, many leftist political activists are now content to limit their struggles for social justice to the political arena rather than resorting to armed uprisings. In fact, many militants would now consider guerrilla

warfare to be a failure that represents the breakdown of civil society. They strive to keep these fundamentally political issues in the arena in which they properly belong.

Che's *Guerrilla Warfare*, thus, is now seen in a different light than when it was originally written in 1960. It has become a historical document rather than a manual or blueprint for the overthrow of imperialism and capitalism. Nevertheless, it represents a significant stage in the development of leftist revolutionary thought in Latin America. In order to understand more accurately the revolutionary fervor of the 1960s, insurrectionary movements during the 1980s, and the current situation in Latin America, it is important to read, understand, and analyze this key historic document. This includes considering the life and personal history of its author and examining key points, contributions, and shortcomings of the document in light of intellectual trends within current popular movements in Latin America.

CHE GUEVARA: HIS LIFE AND TIMES

Che Guevara was born Ernesto Guevara de la Serna on June 14, 1928, to an aristocratic family in Rosario, Argentina. Years later, Cuban revolutionaries in Mexico gave him the nickname "Che," a word from the Guaraní Indians that is commonly used in Argentina and can be roughly translated as "hey you." In 1959, after the triumph of the Cuban Revolution, he became a Cuban citizen and legally adopted Che as part of his name. Che's family held leftist ideas, including opposition to the institutional power of the church and support for the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War. Che's mother, Celia de la Serna, had a particularly important influence on the formation of his social conscience. In 1948 he entered the University of Buenos Aires to study medicine. Although Che eventually finished medical school, he was never seriously committed to the profession. Almost a decade later, after landing in Cuba with Fidel Castro to launch an insurrectionary war against the Fulgencio Batista dictatorship, when forced to choose he decided to carry bullets rather than a first-aid kit.

In his early twenties, Che made two motorcycle trips during

which he directly observed the lives of workers and peasants for the first time. In 1950 he took a four-thousand-mile moped trip alone through northern Argentina. During 1951 and 1952 Che journeyed through South America on a 500cc Norton motorcycle nicknamed "La Poderosa" (The Powerful One) with Alberto Granado, a radical doctor and leprologist.³ These trips introduced him to the political and economic realities of Latin America and the poverty and exploitation under which the majority of the Latin American people lived. It was a consciousness-raising experience that ultimately changed the direction his life would take.

In 1953 Che began a third trip through Latin America. In Bolivia he observed the mobilization of workers and the implementation of agrarian reform following the popular 1952 revolution. He then continued on to Guatemala, where he lived until a United States-backed coup overthrew the revolutionary government of Jacobo Arbenz in 1954. He gleaned important lessons from this experience, which would strongly influence his later ideology. He believed that it was necessary to destroy completely the political and military forces of the old system, something Arbenz had not done. Under Che's leadership, the Cuban revolutionaries eradicated all vestiges of Batistas's government and successfully maintained their hold on power. In contrast, the Sandinista guerrillas who triumphed in Nicaragua in 1979 did not do this and subsequently faced a drawn-out war against counterrevolutionary forces that eventually contributed to their fall from power. If Arbenz had had more faith in the Indians, peasants, and workers, Che contended, and had been willing to organize them into armed militias, the revolutionary government would have maintained power. The role of the United States in the coup in 1954 also turned Che into a dedicated fighter against United States imperialism in Latin America.

After the overthrow of Arbenz's revolutionary government in Guatemala, Che escaped to Mexico, where he met Fidel Castro, who was planning an invasion of his native Cuba. In Mexico Che began to study Marxism and became an ideological communist. Hilda Gadea, a political exile from Peru whom Che married, had a particularly strong influence on the development of his ideology. She introduced Che to many new political and intellectual ideas, including those of José Carlos Mariátegui,

the founder of Latin American Marxist thought. These ideological influences had a dramatic impact on his later development as a Marxist thinker.⁴

Che joined Fidel and his small guerrilla army in 1956 when they traveled to Cuba's eastern region to begin a guerrilla war against the Batista regime. Che, chosen because of his medical skills, was the only non-Cuban included in this group. For two years Che fought alongside Fidel in the Sierra Maestra mountains of Cuba, eventually rising to the rank of Rebel Army commander. During this time he solidified the revolutionary ideologies and military strategies that would later form the basis for *Guerrilla Warfare*.

After the triumph of the Cuban Revolution on January 1, 1959, Che assumed a series of positions in the new government. He was first named to head the national bank, a job for which he had no training or expertise. In 1961 he assumed the post of minister of industry. He led a Cuban delegation to the Inter-American Economic and Social Council sponsored by the Organization of American States in Uruguay, where he strongly denounced the motives of John F. Kennedy's Alliance for Progress program.⁵ The Alliance for Progress was a ten-year development program that sought, through mild social and economic reforms, to prevent in other Latin American countries radical social revolutions such as that in Cuba. In fact, Che's *Guerrilla Warfare* probably led Kennedy to his conclusion that those who make peaceful change impossible make violent revolution inevitable.

Increasingly, Che traveled internationally as an ambassador for Cuba. He left Cuba in 1965 to spread the revolutionary struggle. He first surfaced in Africa fighting in the Congo and then returned to Latin America with the intent of sparking a hemisphere-wide guerrilla uprising. Che became increasingly vocal in denouncing United States imperialism. He believed that people throughout Latin America were ready for a revolutionary uprising. In his last public statement, a message to the Organization of Solidarity with the Peoples of Asia, Africa, and Latin America (OSPAAAL, also known as the Tricontinental), he spoke of creating "two, three, or many Vietnams," which would strike a deadly blow against imperialism. Much like Simón Bolívar and José Martí before him, Che was a true internation-

alist who believed that the destiny of Latin America was singular and unified. National borders simply served to divide people in their struggle to achieve a more just social order.

Che chose Bolivia as the place to launch this pan-American war, more because of its strategic geographic location than out of concern for local conditions. Despite the presence of a radical Marxist urban labor movement possibly sympathetic to his political ideologies, he chose to position his guerrilla army in Bolivia's isolated eastern jungle, which was more appropriate to his military strategy. Emphasizing geography over subjective political ideologies turned out to be a costly mistake. Che alienated the Bolivian Communist Party based in La Paz, depriving him of a critically important base of support for his efforts. Moreover, the Guaraní Indians living in the sparsely populated eastern jungle had received land in a government-sponsored agrarian reform program and felt little animosity toward the Bolivian army (members of which were often recruited from their own ranks). The local population had few reasons to defend a foreign guerrilla army that was culturally different, did not speak their language, and did not reflect local concerns. Ironically, in a short essay from 1963 entitled "Guerrilla Warfare: A Method," Che emphasized the importance of popular support to a guerrilla struggle. Without this backing, a disaster was inevitable.

For several months, Che engaged in skirmishes with the Bolivian military but was always on the defensive. On October 8, 1967, the army captured Che and his few remaining guerrilla fighters near the small village of La Higuera. The next day they executed him and publicly displayed his body. In death he looked like a sacrificed Christ, which helped create an image of Che as a martyr and prophet. A popular cult grew around "Saint Ernesto of La Higuera," and locals placed his portrait in their houses alongside Catholic images. The army buried his body in a mass grave, where it remained until it was repatriated to Cuba in 1997 with a hero's welcome. Since his death, Che's supporters have celebrated October 8 as the Day of the Heroic Guerrilla.⁶ Like Eva Perón, Che became a more potent symbol in death than he had ever been in life.

Che's death ushered in a year of violent repression of political opposition movements around the world. In April and June of 1968 assassins killed civil rights leader Martin Luther King

Jr. and presidential candidate Robert Kennedy in the United States. During May student and worker protests paralyzed Paris, France. In August Chicago police attacked Vietnam War protestors at the Democratic National Convention. The Mexican army shot an estimated three hundred protestors in October at the Plaza of Three Cultures in Mexico City. Che's death did not mean the end of revolutionary actions, and it only helped to polarize further an already tense global political situation.

GUERRILLA WARFARE

Guerrilla Warfare is an extended essay that runs well over one hundred pages. Che published it in May of 1960, about a year after the triumph of the Cuban Revolution. It is divided into three chapters that outline the general principles of guerrilla warfare, describe the nature of a guerrilla group, and explain the strategies of a guerrilla army. A manual setting forth his ideas on conducting a guerrilla war to overthrow a dictatorship and implement a new and more just social order, it is part theory, part practical information (though over time much of this information has become outdated), and part a political tract designed to press the Left into action. He speaks directly from his experience helping Fidel and Raul Castro organize their guerrilla army in Cuba. At times he considers this history to be normative, yet at other points he indicates that Cuba's experience is only an outline; other guerrilla forces would have to discover paths suitable to their own situations. Generally, though, Che analyzed the Cuban Revolution in order to extract general laws and develop a theory of guerrilla warfare.

Many historians see the Cuban Revolution as a watershed event in twentieth-century Latin American history, and Che lays out what he believes is the historical significance of their guerrilla victory. First, it demonstrated that people can organize themselves into a small guerrilla army and overthrow a large, powerful, established regime. Second, popular movements do not have to wait for the proper economic conditions before organizing a revolutionary war; the insurrectionary guerrilla force can create them. Third, Latin American revolutionary struggles should, according to Che, be based in a rural, peasant popula-

tion. These three concepts underlie this entire work, and it is worth examining them in more detail.

In order to understand the theoretical and political implications of Che's major points, it is important to understand the international context of the Cuban Revolution. Although the United States consistently blamed leftist uprisings in Latin America on the Soviet Union's penetration of "its" hemisphere, the Cuban Revolution did not begin as a communist movement. In fact, the Cuban Communist Party denounced the guerrillas as "adventuresome." Since the 1930s, communist parties in Latin America generally had pursued a gradualist "Popular Front" strategy in which they sought slowly to build a base of support within established political structures. They fostered peaceful relations with existing moderate governments, even to the point of accepting positions in those governments. Che, on the other hand, believed that a vanguardist group with strong leadership could grab power. He became highly critical of bureaucratic Soviet communism, which had lost its revolutionary fervor. Che believed in a revolutionary movement that responded to local conditions, not the geopolitical concerns of a distant empire.

Related to this strategic difference with the communists are two important ideological distinctions. Karl Marx believed that history moved through a series of stages, from a feudalistic stage through capitalism to the final perfect stage of communism. Although in the 1917 Russian Revolution Vladimir Lenin had demonstrated that feudalistic societies could move immediately to the communist stage, orthodox Marxists in Latin America still believed that an industrialized capitalist economy was essential before workers would gain the necessary class consciousness to break loose from their chains and overthrow an oppressive system. Che, however, following in the footsteps of earlier Latin American Marxist thinkers such as José Carlos Mariátegui, believed that subjective conditions, including the role of human consciousness, were more important for creating a revolutionary situation than the objective economic situation.⁷ To spur the revolution a dedicated cadre must engage in the political education of the masses rather than wait for a highly developed capitalist economy to collapse due to its internal contradictions. "The duty of every revolutionary is to make the revolution," Fidel Castro later stated. "It is known that the revolution will triumph

in America and throughout the world, but it is not for revolutionaries to sit in the doorways of their houses waiting for the corpse of imperialism to pass by."⁸

Mariátegui, Che, and other Latin American Marxists also broke with orthodox thought over the role of the peasantry in a revolutionary movement. In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx wrote that the peasantry was "not revolutionary, but conservative." He proceeded to note that "nay more, they are reactionary, for they try to roll back the wheel of history."⁹ Latin America, however, largely lacked an urban, industrialized working class, which orthodox Marxists believed would lead a socialist revolution. Instead, in the 1950s landless agricultural workers comprised much of Latin America's population. Although Marx thought that peasants were inactive, passive like a "sack of potatoes," Che believed they could head a revolutionary movement.¹⁰ Che believed that the experience of the Cuban Revolution demonstrated that peasants understood the nature of their exploitation and were able to achieve the class consciousness necessary to engage in revolutionary action. As Eric Wolf demonstrated in *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century*, successful revolutionary movements in Mexico, Russia, China, Vietnam, and Algeria as well as in Cuba have been rural based.¹¹

The most controversial aspect of Che's thought, the one that many people believe led to his eventual defeat and execution in Bolivia, was his belief that a guerrilla force could create the objective conditions necessary for a guerrilla war. Previous revolutionary theorists had argued that certain political and economic conditions were necessary for a successful struggle. In what became known as his *foco* theory of guerrilla warfare, Che argued that a small guerrilla army operating in the countryside could spark a revolution that would then spread to the cities. Only a handful of guerrillas in each country was necessary to begin a process that would transform Latin America. This led him in *Guerrilla Warfare* to emphasize the importance of a proper geographic setting for an armed struggle. A jungle environment that provided good cover for the guerrillas was more important than the ideological preparation of a large civilian base of support.

Che's *foco* theory subsequently was discredited in Latin America; those who attempted to implement it failed miserably.

In Peru in 1965, Héctor Béjar's insurrectionary *foco* met defeat, and two years later Che himself was killed while attempting to follow this strategy in Bolivia.¹² Many people have criticized Che for overemphasizing the role of armed struggle in a revolutionary movement and have pointed out that, although a relatively small guerrilla force overthrew Batista in Cuba, this came only after years of leftist political agitations and rising worker expectations.¹³ Because of his role in guerrilla battles in the mountains, he either was not aware of or discounted a coalition of urban student and worker movements that served to undermine the Batista regime. A lengthy debate has also ensued suggesting that Che misidentified the rural masses of Cuba as a peasant population. They worked primarily as wage laborers on large plantations and therefore comprised a rural proletariat that had developed a class consciousness unlike that which a more traditional peasantry could be expected to develop.¹⁴

Many of the ideas in *Guerrilla Warfare* were not new; what Che did contribute to revolutionary theory was a creative adaptation of existing notions to the Latin American context. He did not realize, however, how unique the Cuban situation was and his defeat in Bolivia was a result of a failure to reinterpret what he had learned for a new and different situation. Subsequent guerrilla armies learned from the fiasco in Bolivia to reinterpret Che's theories for their own local reality and never to apply mechanically what had worked in one situation to another.

ETHNICITY AND NEW GUERRILLA STRUGGLES IN LATIN AMERICA

Che grew up in an urban milieu in Argentina in which he was not constantly and directly exposed to the daily battles that Latin America's large rural Indigenous and peasant population faced. He encountered this rural reality as an adult traveling through Latin America and in the Sierra Maestra of Cuba. He interpreted it through an outsider's *indigenista* perspective that betrayed sympathy for Indian and peasant causes, but he was not able to internalize their struggles or analyze the world from an Indigenous person's point of view. On his motorcycle trip through South America, Che visited the Inca ruins at Machu Picchu in

the Peruvian highlands. He was impressed with the ruins and Inca history, he read literature critical of the social and economic marginalization that Indians faced, and he observed the misery and exploitation to which the Inca descendants were subjected. Still, he never seriously considered that their ethnic identity could lead to a type of consciousness that would result in a movement with revolutionary implications.

Particularly in countries with large rural Indigenous populations such as Bolivia and Ecuador, ethnic-based movements have gained a great deal of strength over the last ten to twenty years.¹⁵ Although not organized as guerrilla armies, Indians have been increasingly successful at gaining political space in civil society while still being fundamentally concerned with the same issues of economic inequality and injustice that motivated Che's campaigns. Che maintained in *Guerrilla Warfare* that insurgent groups should not turn to armed struggle until all peaceful means for political change had been exhausted, a point in time that is open to interpretation. Che defined this process primarily in electoral terms. These new ethnic movements, however, have largely eschewed electoral politics in favor of using strikes, marches, and other tools of direct action that the urban Marxist Left had perfected some fifty years earlier. As James Petras has observed, it is within these rural-based movements that the largest potential for revolutionary action currently exists in Latin America.¹⁶

A primary example of this trend is in Chiapas, Mexico, where the Zapatista guerrillas' dramatic armed uprising on New Year's Day 1994 grabbed international attention.¹⁷ In a sense, this insurrection synthesized many of the issues related to guerrilla warfare as they have developed since the triumph of the Cuban Revolution. Except for the symbolic representation of their media-savvy, urban-raised international spokesperson Subcomandante Marcos (himself almost a legendary Che-type figure), this was undisputably a locally grown revolt. It met all of the primary conditions that Che laid out for a successful guerrilla war. Chiapas's mountainous terrain created a type of ground cover that Che would have found ideal for waging a guerrilla war. After centuries of exploitation, the local Maya Indians had attained a high degree of consciousness as to the nature of their political situation and the necessity for change. As a result, most

of the guerrillas were from that area and thus had extensive and immediate knowledge of the local human and physical geography. They enjoyed deep support from the local civilian population. Che could not have asked for more ideal conditions.

Although the Zapatista struggle began as a guerrilla battle, they fought for only eleven days before engaging in peace negotiations with the Mexican government. Like other ethnic struggles, their concerns were fundamentally political rather than military and the Zapatistas and their supporters more often engaged in peaceful direct actions, such as marches, than armed engagements. The Zapatista uprising in Mexico adds ethnic dimensions to the guerrilla struggle that are largely missing in Che's ideological constructions. This extends beyond the obvious ethnic Maya dress and language of the majority of the Zapatista combatants. More significant are the conceptual underpinnings of the movement. Specifically, the Zapatistas have championed the demand for land, not only as an economic commodity but as a territorial component of their culture. They seek to gain political space in Mexican society that they can enter with their complete ethnic identities and concerns intact. Their struggle reflects Mexican Revolutionary war hero Emiliano Zapata's slogan *tierra y libertad*, "land and liberty." Through their grounding in a long history of land and ethnic struggles, they stand poised to carry Che's theories of guerrilla warfare into the twenty-first century.

What has not changed in Mexico nor throughout Latin America since Che wrote *Guerrilla Warfare* in 1960 is the political, social, and economic inequalities that gave rise to revolutionary movements for social justice. In fact, many people throughout the hemisphere were worse off in the 1990s than in the 1960s. As long as these fundamental structural inequalities persist, Ernesto "Che" Guevara will continue to live in the hearts and minds of those who pursue a more fair and just social order.

NOTES

1. See Jon Lee Anderson, *Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life* (New York: Grove, 1997); Jorge G. Castañeda, *Compañero: The Life and Death of Che Guevara* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997); and Paco

Ignacio Taibo, *Guevara, Also Known As Che* (New York: St. Martin's, 1997).

2. In analyzing publications on Che, Robert J. Scauzillo concluded that Che's martyrdom "has been given more importance than what he accomplished during his lifetime." Scauzillo, "Ernesto 'Che' Guevara: A Research Bibliography," *Latin American Research Review* 5:2 (Summer 1970): 55.

3. Che recounts this trip in his *The Motorcycle Diaries: A Journey around South America* (London: Fourth Estate, 1996).

4. On Gadea's influence, see Hilda Gadea, *Ernesto: A Memoir of Che Guevara* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1972). For a broader analysis of these types of ideological influences, see Marc Becker, *Mariátegui and Latin American Marxist Theory*, Monographs in International Studies (Athens: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1993), 74–80.

5. "The Alliance for Progress," in *Che: Selected Works of Ernesto Guevara*, ed. Rolando E. Bonachea and Nelson P. Valdes (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1969), 265–96.

6. Che's Bolivian campaign is described in Ernesto Guevara and Mary-Alice Waters, *The Bolivian Diary of Ernesto Che Guevara* (New York: Pathfinder, 1994). Gary Prado Salmón details his role as a Bolivian army captain in the capture of Che in *The Defeat of Che Guevara: Military Response to Guerrilla Challenge in Bolivia* (New York: Praeger, 1990).

7. Harry E. Vanden, *Marxism in National Latin America: José Carlos Mariátegui's Thought and Politics* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1986).

8. Fidel Castro, "The Duty of a Revolutionary Is to Make the Revolution," *Fidel Castro Speaks* (New York: Grove, 1969), 115.

9. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The Communist Manifesto," in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 229.

10. Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in *Karl Marx*, 317.

11. Eric R. Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969).

12. Héctor Béjar, *Peru 1965: Notes on a Guerrilla Experience* (New York: Monthly Review, 1970).

13. For a good summary of these criticisms, see Matt D. Childs, "An Historical Critique of the Emergence and Evolution of Ernesto Che Guevara's *Foco* Theory," *Journal of Latin American studies* 27, 3 (October 1995): 593–624.

14. Sidney W. Mintz, "The Rural Proletariat and the Problem of Rural Proletarian Consciousness," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 1, 3

(April 1974): 291–325. Che briefly addresses this issue in "Cuba: Exceptional Case or Vanguard," in *Che: Selected Works*, 60.

15. For a summary of this history see Xavier Albó, "El retorno del Indio," *Revista Andina* 9, 2 (December 1991): 299–345.

16. James Petras, "Latin America: The Resurgence of the Left," *New Left Review* 223 (May/June 1997): 17–47.

17. On the Zapatistas, see George Allen Collier and Elizabeth Lowery Quaratiello, *Basta! Land and the Zapatista Rebellion in Chiapas* (Oakland CA: Food First Book, Institute for Food and Development Policy, 1994); Elaine Katzenberger, ed., *First World, Ha Ha Ha! The Zapatista Challenge* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1995); and John Ross, *Rebellion from the Roots: Indian Uprising in Chiapas* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage, 1995).