
GUEVARA, CHE (1928–1967)

Ernesto Guevara de la Serna was born on June 14, 1928, to a middle-class family in Rosario, Argentina. The Bolivian military executed him on October 9, 1967, at the small town of La Higuera after a failed guerrilla attempt to overthrow that country's government. Guevara was a socialist revolutionary and a strong internationalist who during the course of his short life traveled throughout much of the world. He is best known for being the number three commander in the Cuban Revolutionary Armed Forces that in 1959 overthrew the Fulgencio Batista dictatorship. From the Cuban guerrillas he gained the moniker "Che," a Guaraní expression commonly used in Argentina that can be roughly translated as "hey you," and he subsequently became best known by this name. Although his efforts to launch a continent-wide revolution to overthrow capitalism and to usher in a socialist utopia ultimately failed, Guevara became admired for his selfless dedication to a struggle against oppression and for social justice.

The eldest of five children, Guevara came from a liberal-left family that embraced anti-clerical ideas and supported the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War. His mother, Celia de la Serna, had a particularly important influence on the formation of his social conscience. Throughout his life, Guevara suffered from severe asthma attacks, but nevertheless he pushed himself hard and excelled as an athlete. In 1948, he entered the University of Buenos Aires to study medicine. Although Guevara finished medical school in 1953, he was never seriously committed to the profession.

In his early 20s, Guevara made three motorcycle trips that introduced him to the impoverished and oppressive conditions under which the majority of the Latin American people lived and worked. The first was a 4,000-mile moped trip in 1950 through northern Argentina. Alberto Granado, a friend and biochemist, joined Guevara on the second trip in 1951 and 1952 on a 500cc Norton motorcycle nicknamed "La Poderosa" (The Powerful One) that took them out of Argentina. The motorcycle did not make it further

than Chile, but the two vagabonds continued on foot, hitchhiking, and on boat to Peru, Colombia, and Venezuela. Guevara continued on alone to Miami where he spent a miserable month flat broke before returning to his native Argentina.

Guevara kept a diary during his second trip that was published posthumously as *The Motorcycle Diaries*. Walter Salles made the diary into an award-winning film in 2004 that subsequently revived Guevara as a media star. Although politically relatively insignificant in light of later events in Guevara's life, it was a consciousness-raising experience that ultimately changed the direction his life would take. The trip converted Guevara into a Pan-Latin-Americanist who, much like Simón Bolívar and José Martí, believed that the destiny of Latin America was unified and that national borders served to divide people in their struggles for a more just social order.

After finishing his medical studies in 1953, Guevara began a third trip through Latin America, which proved to be much more important in maturing his revolutionary political ideology. In Bolivia, he observed the mobilization of workers and the implementation of agrarian reform following a popular 1952 revolution. In Guatemala, he lived through a 1954 U.S.-backed military coup that overthrew Jacobo Arbenz's revolutionary government that had given land to peasants. Perhaps more than any other experience, this turned Guevara into a dedicated fighter against U.S. imperialism. It also convinced him that it was necessary to destroy completely the political and military forces of the old system, and to arm the masses to protect a revolution from counter-revolutionary forces. His recollections from this trip are recorded in his book, *Back on the Road*.

After the Guatemalan coup, Guevara hid in the Argentina embassy before escaping to Mexico where he began a serious study of Marxism. A Peruvian exile named Hilda Gadea, whom he had initially met in Guatemala, had a particularly strong influence on the development of his ideology. The two married in 1955 and had a daughter they named Hilda.

In Mexico, Guevara also met Fidel Castro, who was planning a revolution of his native Cuba. In 1956, Guevara joined Castro and 80 other guerrillas on the

yacht *Granma* to launch an armed struggle against the Fulgencio Batista dictatorship. Castro had invited Guevara, the only non-Cuban in the group, to join as a medic. Shortly after landing in Cuba, the small guerrilla force ran into a military ambush that wiped out about half the group. Forced to choose between a first-aid kit and a box of bullets, Guevara took the ammunition, which symbolized his conversion from a medical doctor to a guerrilla fighter.

Guevara fought with the Cubans for 2 years in the Sierra Maestra, eventually rising to the rank of Rebel Army commander. He became the number three leader after Fidel Castro and his brother Raúl. In the mountains, Guevara kept a diary that he later published as *Reminiscences of the Cuban Revolutionary War*. Building on these experiences, he wrote his most famous essay, *Guerrilla Warfare*, in which he used the Cuban revolution as a model to conduct other guerrilla wars to overthrow a dictatorship and implement a new and more just social order. In *Guerrilla Warfare*, which was part theory, part practical information, and part political tract designed to press the left into action, Guevara made three main points that formed the basis for what came to be known as his *foco* theory of guerrilla warfare. First, Guevara argued that the guerrilla victory in Cuba demonstrated that a small guerrilla army could overthrow a large, powerful, established regime. Second, popular movements did not have to wait for the proper economic conditions before organizing a revolutionary war; the insurrectionary guerrilla force can create them. Third, Guevara believed that in Latin America revolutionary struggles should be based in a rural, peasant population.

After the January 1959 triumph of the revolution, Guevara became a Cuban citizen and legally adopted Che as part of his name. He assumed a series of positions in the new revolutionary government, including with the agrarian reform institution, head of the National Bank, and Minister of Industry—jobs for which he had no training or expertise. Guevara played a key role in shaping the country's economic policy, advocating a centralized economy based on broad government ownership of industry. He advocated creating a “new socialist man” who would be motivated to support the revolution through moral rather than material incentives. Guevara could be a ruthless leader,

demanding high levels of performance from those under him. However, he held himself to higher standards than anyone else and worked impossibly long hours. He rejected privilege and luxury, living an austere life and setting an example for others by devoting his weekends and evenings to voluntary labor, including cutting sugarcane to support the revolution.

In Cuba, Guevara divorced Gadea and married Aleida March, whom he had met during the revolutionary war. Together, they had four children. The oldest, Aleida Guevara March, became a medical doctor like her father and also traveled internationally in support of revolutionary movements.

Guevara was better suited to the life of a vagabond or guerrilla fighter, and soon became restless as a bureaucrat in the new revolutionary Cuban government. Increasingly, he traveled internationally as an ambassador for Cuba. Finally, in 1965 he renounced his governmental positions and Cuban citizenship, disappeared from public view, and left the island to continue the revolutionary struggle. In what had long been seen as his “lost year,” Guevara clandestinely traveled to Africa to fight in the Congo. As later recounted in his diary *Che in Africa*, it proved to be a frustrating experience. Guevara pointed to the local forces' incompetence, intransigence, and infighting for their failure. As an outsider, he felt he lacked the authority to address these problems.

After spending time in Tanzania, Czechoslovakia, and the German Democratic Republic, Guevara clandestinely returned to Cuba and to a region where he felt he had more legitimacy to lead a revolution. He became increasingly vocal in denouncing U.S. imperialism. 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 to strike a deadly blow against imperialism.

In 1966, Guevara traveled to Bolivia disguised as a middle-aged Uruguayan businessman to launch a new continental Latin American revolution. Despite the fact that Bolivia had a radical urban labor movement, he chose to position his guerrilla army in the isolated eastern jungle, which was geographically more appropriate to his military strategy. This turned out to be a

costly mistake. Guevara struggled with the Bolivian Communist Party for control over the guerrilla movement, and failed to gain the support of the local peasantry who had received land from the government and felt little animosity toward the Bolivian army (which was often recruited from their own ranks). Without local support and facing internal divisions and a harsh inhospitable terrain, a disaster seemed to be inevitable.

For several months, Guevara engaged in skirmishes with the Bolivian military but was always on the defensive. On October 8, 1967, a crack anti-guerrilla military unit trained by U.S. Army Special Forces captured Guevara and his few remaining guerrilla fighters near the small village of La Higuera. Fearing the potential publicity of a political show trial and possible release or escape, Bolivian dictator René Barrientos ordered his execution. On October 9, the Bolivian Special Forces shot him below the head to simulate battlefield wounds. To prove that Guevara was dead, they brought his body to Vallegrande for public display and amputated his hands for fingerprint verification. The army subsequently buried his body in a mass grave where it remained until it was repatriated to Cuba in 1997 with a hero's welcome. Guevara kept a diary during the guerrilla campaign in Bolivia that was subsequently transcribed and published in various editions.

Some critics condemned Guevara for mechanically applying his lessons from Cuba and theories of guerrilla warfare to the Bolivian situation where they did not fit so well, and thus ultimately leading to his failure and death. Elsewhere in Latin America, attempts by revolutionaries to apply his *foco* theory that a guerrilla force could create the objective conditions necessary for a guerrilla war similarly met with disaster. Others have criticized Guevara 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.

In death, Guevara looked like a sacrificed Christ, which helped create an image of Guevara 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. Since his death, Guevara's

supporters have celebrated October 8 as the Day of the Heroic Guerrilla. Protestors began to use a photograph of Guevara that Alberto Korda took in 1960, and this image subsequently became one of the most famous and recognized in the world. In death, Guevara became a more potent symbol than he had ever been in life.

Although a dedicated communist revolutionary, Guevara was highly critical of bureaucratic Soviet communism for having lost its revolutionary fervor. While as a Cuban government leader it complicated the relationship between the two countries, it also earned Guevara the respect and admiration of the New Left that was drawn to his open and voluntarist interpretation of Marxist theory. Following in the footsteps of earlier Latin American Marxist thinkers such as José Carlos Mariátegui, Guevara argued that subjective conditions, including the role of human consciousness, were more important for creating a revolutionary situation than an objective economic situation. Rather than waiting for a highly developed capitalist economy to collapse due to its internal contradictions, a dedicated cadre must engage in the political education of the masses. Despite his failure to spark an international socialist revolution, Guevara is admired for his creative adaptation of Marxist theory to his Latin American reality.

Decades after his death, Che Guevara continues to be championed as a revolutionary hero in a struggle for social justice and against oppression, exploitation, and marginalization. Although often reduced to a chic icon on T-shirts, his 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.

—Marc Becker

See also Anti-Colonial Movements, Latin America; Anti-Imperialism; Arbenz, Jacobo; Castro, Fidel; Marxist Theory; Urban Guerrilla Movements

Further Readings

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GUNDER FRANK, ANDRE (1929–2005)

Andre Gunder Frank is known throughout the world for his work on injustice, especially in dependency economics, political change, and history. His early focus on the factors leading to economic underdevelopment and inequality in Latin America has helped social activists focus on central issues of injustice. The recent extension of his work to the global economy and its roots in Asia more than 5,000 years ago extended our world system vision. He usually is recognized as the leading force in showing why capital accumulation by rich nations and the “profit-motive” are detrimental, especially to economically developing, poor countries, and how we can act to change such inequality.

Much of his lifelong work revolved around promoting diversity and justice. Frank explicated the dangers in the sweeping and increasing commodification and homogenization of all forms of life. While many elites have tried to portray him as a deviant, his personal and professional actions clearly reveal the

positive nature of his deviance. He was sensitive to the difference between radical and radical chic behavior. He departed from the norm to help the poor, the oppressed, and the dispossessed, and has been a major influence on liberation theology. Frank stood in the line of fire for telling the truth, from his debunking of the claim that dependent development was good for poor countries to his challenges to orthodox macroeconomics. He helped lead the struggle for justice and articulated the significant difference between being economically poor and culturally rich. He presented seminal evidence on the ostensible periphery (economically poor countries or technologically developing ones) and the relevance of their “richness” in many other ways.

Frank's writing and participation in social movements also exhibited his lifelong concern with equality before efficiency. Along with his spouse, Marta Fuente, Frank helped other activists avoid the misguided historical and nonempirical interpretations of the causes and consequences of worldwide social movements. Fuentes and Frank presented an analysis of social movements that have appeared, disappeared, and reappeared for centuries and, in some cases, for millennia throughout the world. Their analyses examine countless social movements, such as the Spartacist slave revolts in Rome, religious wars, peasant movements, historical ethnic and nationalist conflict throughout the continent, and women's movements, that unleashed backlashes of witch hunts and more recent forms of repression. Frank noted the multiple forms of social movements that have been the agents of social resistance and transformation throughout history in Asia, the Arab world, Africa, and Latin America.

Frank explained why the majority of large-scale movements in core countries are middle class, while those in the poor countries have been primarily popular or working class. So-called Third World movements typically emerged from world economic crises, and the participants were (and are) struggling for sheer physical and economic survival and cultural identity. Focusing on the women's movement, Fuentes and Frank note how virtually all religious, ethnic, and nationalist movements, and working-class and ostensibly radically oriented movements and political