

# MONSTER



**By Humberto Fontova**

Center for Study of Popular Culture

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In August of 1960, a year and a half after Che Guevara entered Havana ahead of this "column" of "guerrillas," *Time* magazine featured the revolutionary *comandante* on its cover and crowned him the "Brains of the Cuban Revolution." (Fidel Castro was "the heart" and Raul Castro "the fist.")

"Wearing a smile of melancholy sweetness that many women find devastating," read the *Time* article, "Che guides Cuba with icy calculation, vast competence, high intelligence and a perceptive sense of humor."

"This is not a Communist Revolution in any sense of the term," *The New York Times* had declared a year earlier. "Fidel Castro is not only not a Communist, he is decidedly anti-Communist."

"It would be a great mistake," Walter Lippmann wrote in the *Washington Post* that same month, "even to intimate that Castro's Cuba has any real prospect of becoming a Soviet satellite."

A few months earlier the *London Observer* had observed: "Mr. Castro's bearded youthful figure has become a symbol of Latin America's rejection of brutality and lying. Every sign is that he will reject personal rule and violence."

*Time* magazine was in perfect sync with her major-media peers - utterly wrong. Guevara was no more the brains of the Cuban Revolution than Cheka-head Felix Drezhinsky had been the brains of the Bolshevik Revolution, or Gestapo chief Himmler the brains of the National Socialist Revolution, or KGB head Beria the brains behind Stalinism. In fact Che performed the same role for Fidel Castro as Drezhinsky performed for Lenin, Himmler for Hitler and Beria for Stalin. Che Guevara was the Castro regime's chief executioner.

Under Che, Havana's La Cabana fortress was converted into Cuba's Lubianka. He was a true Chekist: "Always interrogate your prisoners at night," Che commanded his prosecutorial goons, "a man is easier to cow at night, his mental resistance is always lower."

A Cuban prosecutor of the time who quickly defected in horror and disgust named Jose Vilasuso estimates that Che signed 400 death warrants the first few months of his command in La Cabana. A Basque priest named Iaki de Aspiazu, who was often on hand to perform confessions and last rites, says Che personally ordered 700 executions by firing squad during the period. Cuban journalist Luis Ortega, who knew Che as early as 1954, writes in his book *Yo Soy El Che!* that

Guevara sent 1,897 men to the firing squad.

In his book *Che Guevara: A Biography*, Daniel James writes that Che himself admitted to ordering "several thousand" executions during the first year of the Castro regime. Felix Rodriguez, the Cuban-American CIA operative who helped track him down in Bolivia and was the last person to question him, says that Che, during his final talk, admitted to "a couple thousand" executions. But he shrugged them off as all being of "imperialist spies and CIA agents."

Vengeance, much less justice, had little to do with the Castro/Che directed bloodbath in the first months of 1959. Che's murderous agenda in La Cabana fortress in 1959 was exactly Stalin's murderous agenda in the Katyn Forest in 1940. Like Stalin's massacre of the Polish officer corps, like Stalin's Great Terror against his own officer corps a few years earlier, Che's firing squad marathons were a perfectly rational and cold blooded exercise that served their purpose ideally. His bloodbath decapitated literally and figuratively the first ranks of Cuba's anti-Castro rebels.

Five years earlier, while still a Communist hobo in Guatemala, Che had seen the Guatemalan officer corps with CIA assistance rise against the Red regime of Jacobo Arbenz and send him and his Communist minions hightailing into exile. (For those leftists who still think that Arbenz was an innocent "nationalist" victimized by the fiendish United Fruit Company and their CIA proxies, please note: Arbenz sought exile not in France or Spain or even Mexico — the traditional havens for deposed Latin-American politicians — but in the Soviet satellite, Czechoslovakia. Also, the coup went into motion, not when Arbenz started nationalizing United Fruit property, but when a cargo of Soviet-bloc weapons arrived in Guatemala. "Arbenz didn't execute enough people," was how Guevara explained the Guatemalan coup's success.<sup>2</sup>

Fidel and Che didn't want a repeat of the Guatemalan coup in Cuba. Equally important, the massacres cowed and terrorized. Most of them came after public trials. And the executions, right down to the final shattering of the skull with the *coup de grace* from a massive .45 slug fired at five paces, were public too. Guevara made it a policy for his men to parade the families and friends of the executed before the blood, bone and brain spattered firing squad.

Had Ernesto Guevara De La Serna y Lynch not linked up with Raul and Fidel Castro in Mexico city that fateful summer of 1955, had he not linked up with a Cuban exile named Nico Lopez in Guatemala the year before, who later introduced him to Raul and Fidel Castro in Mexico city, everything points to Ernesto continuing his life of a traveling hobo, mooching off women, staying

in flophouses and scribbling unreadable poetry. Che was a Revolutionary Ringo Starr. By pure chance, he fell in with the right bunch at just the right time and rode their coattails to fame. His very name "Che" was imparted by the Cubans who hob-knobbed with him in Mexico. Argentines use the term "Che" much like Cubans use "Chico" or Michael Moore fans use "dude." The Cubans noticed Guevara using it so they pasted it to him. And it stuck.

Fidel had brought the recently monikered "Che" on the *Granma* invasion of Cuba as the rebel group's doctor, based on his bogus credentials. On the harrowing boat ride through turbulent seas from the Yucatan to Cuba's Oriente province in the decrepit old yacht, a rebel found Che lying comatose in the boat's cabin. He rushed to the commander, "Fidel, looks like Che's dead!"

"Well, if he's dead," replied Castro. "Then throw him overboard." In fact Guevara was suffering the combined effects of seasickness and an asthma attack.<sup>3</sup> Evidently, Che was not regarded as an invaluable member of the expedition at the time.

But today his famous photo by Alberto Korda ranks as the most reproduced print in the world. Last year Burlington Industries introduced a line of infant wear bearing his famous image. Even the Pope, on his visit to Cuba in 1998, spoke approvingly about Che's "ideals." Che owes all this hype and flummery to the century's top media swindler, Fidel Castro, who also dispatched the hero deliberately to his death. As those who know say "Fidel only praises the dead."

## A Lifetime of Failure

As for the rest of Time's assertions, other than his competence at murdering bound, gagged and blindfolded men, Che Guevara failed spectacularly at everything he attempted in his life. First he failed as Argentine medical student. Though he's widely described as a medical doctor by his hagiographers (Castaneda, Anderson, Taibo, Kalfon) no record exists of Guevara's medical degree. When Cuban-American researcher Enrique Ros inquired of the Rector of the University of Buenos Aires and the head of its Office of Academic Affairs for copies or proof of said document, Ros was variously told that the records had been misplaced or perhaps stolen.<sup>4</sup>

In 1960 Castro appointed Che as Cuba's "Minister of Economics." Within months the Cuban peso, a currency historically equal to the U.S. dollar and fully backed by Cuba's gold reserves, was practically worthless. The follow-

ing year Castro appointed Che as Cuba's Minister of Industries. Within a year a nation that previously had higher per capita income than Austria and Japan, a huge influx of immigrants and the 3rd highest protein consumption in the hemisphere was rationing food, closing factories, and hemorrhaging hundreds of thousands of its most productive citizens from every sector of its society, all who were grateful to leave with only the clothes on their back.

Most observers attribute this to "Communist mismanagement." Che himself confessed to his multiple economic errors and failings. Actually, given the goal of Cuba's ruler since January of 1959 - i.e., absolute power - the Cuban economy has been expertly managed. Castro inherited a vibrant free market economy in 1959 (something unique among communist rulers). All the others - from Lenin to Mao to Ho to Ulbricht to Tito to Kim Il Sung - took over primitive and/or chaotic, war ravaged economies.

A less megalomaniacal ruler would have considered that a golden goose had landed in his lap. But Castro wrung its neck. He deliberately and methodically wrecked Latin America's premier economy. A Cuban capitalist is a person that couldn't be controlled, Castro reasoned then, and continues to do so to this day. Despite a flood of tourism and foreign investment for over a decade, Cuba in 2005 is as essentially as poor (and Communist) as it was in 1965 or worse. The Castro brothers are vigilant in these matters.

Che actually believed in the socialist fantasy. When he pronounced in May of 1961 that under his tutelage the Cuban economy would boast an annual growth rate of 10% he seemed to believe it.

Castro didn't care. He simply knew as a result he'd be running Cuba like his personal plantation, with the Cuban people as his cattle.

This is where libertarian/free-market ideologues get it wrong. They insist that with the lifting of the embargo, capitalism will sneak in and eventually blindside Castro. All the proof is to the contrary. Capitalism didn't sweep Castro away or even co opt him. He blindsided it. He swept it away. He's not Deng or Gorbachev. In 1959 Castro could have easily left most of Cuba's economy in place, made it obedient to his whims, and been a Peron, a Franco, a Mussolini — the idol of his youth. He could have grabbed half and been a Tito. He could have demanded a piece of the action from all involved and been a Marcos, a Trujillo, a Mobutu, a Suharto. But this wasn't enough for him.

Castro lusted for the power of a Stalin or a Mao. And he got it



## Missing In Action

Che Guevara's most famous book is titled *Guerrilla Warfare*. His famous photo is captioned "Heroic Guerrilla." On the other hand his most resounding failure came precisely as a guerrilla, while there is no record of him prevailing in any bona-fide guerrilla battle. In fact, there are precious few accounts that he actually fought in anything properly described as a battle. The one that describes his most famous military exploit is referred to as "The Battle of Santa Clara," which took place in December 1958. The loss of this "battle" by the Batista forces is alleged to have caused Batista to lose hope and flee Cuba. To commemorate this historic military engagement, Castro has built a Che Guevara museum in Santa Clara.

"One Thousand Killed in 5 days of Fierce Street Fighting," proclaimed a *New York Times* headline on Jan 4, 1959 about the battle. "Commander Che Guevara appealed to Batista troops for a truce to clear the streets of casualties" the articles continued. "Guevara turned the tide in this bloody battle and whipped a Batista force of 3,000 men."

"Those of us who were there can only laugh at this stuff," say participants on both sides who live in exile today.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the Battle of Santa Clara despite what those early versions of Jayson Blair reported - was a puerile skirmish. Che Guevara's own diary mentions that his column suffered exactly one casualty (a soldier known as El Vaquerito) in this ferocious "battle." Other accounts put the grand total of rebel losses as from three to five men. Most of Batista's soldiers saw no reason to fight for a crooked, unpopular regime that was clearly doomed. So they didn't fire a shot, even those on the famous "armored train," that Guevara supposedly attacked and captured.

Today that armored train is a major tourist attraction in Santa Clara. The train, loaded with 373 soldiers and \$4M worth of munitions, was sent from Havana to Santa Clara in late December of 1958 by Batista's high command as a last ditch attempt to halt the rebels. Che's rebels in Santa Clara bulldozed the tracks and the train derailed just outside of town. Then a few rebels shot at it and a few soldiers fired back. No one was hurt. Soon some rebels approached brandishing a truce flag and one of the train's officers, Enrique Gomez, walked out to meet them. Gomez was brought to meet *Comandante* Guevara.

"What's going on here!'" Che shouted. "This isn't what we agreed on!"

Gomez was puzzled. "What agreement?" he asked.<sup>6</sup> It turned out, unbeknownst to the troops inside, Guevara had used funds the revolutionaries had raised from anti-Batista Cubans to buy the train and all its armaments had from its corrupt commander Colonel Florentino Rossell, who had already fled to Miami. The price was either \$350,000 or \$1,000,000, depending on the source.<sup>7</sup>

Actually Che had every reason to be upset. Actual shots fired against his troops? Here's another eye-witness account regarding Che's famous "invasion" of las Villas Province shortly before the famous "battle" of Santa Clara. "Guevara's column shuffled right into the U.S. agricultural experimental station in Camaguey. Guevara asked manager Joe McGuire to have a man take a package to Batista's military commander in the city. The package contained \$100,000 with a note. Guevara's men moved through the province almost within sight of uninterested Batista troops."<sup>8</sup>

Francisco Rodriguez Tamayo was a Rebel captain who had been in on many of these transactions but he defected mere months after the Rebel victory. In an *El Diario de Nueva York* article dated June 25th 1959 he claimed that Castro still had \$4,500,000 left in that "fund" at the time of the Revolutionary victory. "I don't know what might have happened to that money." Rodriguez Tamayo adds.

Yet immediately after the Santa Clara bribe and skirmish, Che ordered 27 Batista soldiers executed as "war criminals." Dr. Serafin Ruiz was a Castro operative in Santa Clara at the time, but apparently an essentially decent one. "But *Comandante*" he responded to Che's order. "Our revolution promises not to execute without trials, without proof. How can we just....?"

"Look Serafin" Che snorted back. "If your bourgeois prejudices won't allow you to carry out my orders, fine. Go ahead and try them tomorrow morning but execute them NOW!"<sup>9</sup> It was a Marxist version of the Red Queen's famous line to Alice in Wonderland: "Sentence first verdict afterwards!"

Che Guevara's own diary puts the grand total of his forces' losses during the entire two-year long "civil war" in Cuba at 20, about equal to the average number dead during Rio de Janeiro's carnival every year. To put it briefly, Batista's army barely fought.

Officials in Cuba's U.S. embassy at the time became a little skeptical about all the battlefield bloodshed and heroics reported in the *New York*

*Times* and investigated. They ran down every reliable lead and eyewitness account of what the *New York Times* kept reporting as bloody civil war with thousands dead in single battles.

They found that in the entire Cuban countryside, in those two years of "ferocious" battles between rebel forces and Batista troops, the total casualties on *both* sides actually amounted to 182.<sup>10</sup> New Orleans has an annual murder rate double that.

Typically, Che Guevara doesn't even merit credit for the perfectly sensible scheme of bribing rather than fighting Batista's army. The funds for these bribes derived mostly from Fidel's snookering of Batista's wealthy political opponents, convincing them that he was a "patriotic Cuban, a democrat," and that they should join, or at least help fund, his 26th of July Movement in order to bring democracy and prosperity to Cuba.

In late 1957 Castro signed an agreement called "The Miami Pact" with several anti-Batista Cuban politicians and ex-ministers in exile at the time. Most of these were quite wealthy. Indeed if the term, "rich, white Miami Cuban exiles," that liberals scornfully use against current Cuban-Americans ever fit - it was for the mulatto Batista's liberal opponents, for Fidel Castro's early backers. Among these was former president Carlos Prio who Batista had ousted in his (bloodless) coup in 1952, along with many of Prio's ministers and business cronies.

In fact, Guevara went ballistic over the Miami Pact, when he first learned of it, over this shameful deal with "bourgeois" elements. "I refuse to lend my historic name to that crime!" he wrote. "We rebels have proffered our asses in the most despicable act of buggery that Cuban history is likely to recall!"<sup>11</sup>

It was despicable buggery for sure. But Che had the buggerers and the buggerees reversed. Lenin coined the term "Useful Idiots," but to this day Castro remains history's virtuoso at snaring and employing them.

That a "guerrilla war" with "peasant and worker backing" overthrew Batista is among the century's most widespread and persistent academic fables. No Cuban Castroites who participated actually believe this. The Associated Press dispatches about Castro and Che's "war" were actually concocted and written by Castro's own agent in New York, Mario Llerena, who admits as much in his book, *The Unsuspected Revolution*. Llerena was also the contact with Castro's most famous publicity agent, the *New York Times*, Herbert Matthews. *National*

*Review's* famous 1960 cartoon showing a beaming Castro, "I got my job through the *New York Times*!" nailed it.

To give them credit, most of Castro's *comandantes* knew their Batista war had been an elaborate ruse and gaudy clown show. After the glorious victory, they were content to run down and execute the few Batista men motivated enough to shoot back (most of these were of humble background), settle into the mansions stolen from *Batistianos*, and enjoy the rest of their booty.

British historian Hugh Thomas, though a leftist Labour Party member who sympathized with Castro's revolution, studied mountains of records and simply could not evade the truth. His massive and authoritative historical volume *Cuba* sums it up very succinctly: "In all essentials Castro's battle for Cuba was a public relations campaign, fought in New York and Washington."

Che Guevara, himself, possessed an immense capacity for self-deception. On a state visit to Czechoslovakia in 1960 his Cuban companions pointed out the numerous prostitutes on the streets and in the very hotel where they stayed. Che nodded wearily. Back in Cuba when one of them winked and brought up the prostitutes Che flared indignantly. "I didn't see any prostitutes there!"<sup>12</sup>

The Cubans looked at each other shrugging but knew better than to press the issue. Che didn't want to remember the sight of prostitutes. He wanted to convince himself that such a thing was impossible in a glorious Socialist nation, a sister republic.

That gift for self-deception probably led him to believe the guerrilla war fable. And while trying to duplicate it in Bolivia he paid for his obtuseness and wishful thinking with his life. In Cuba, Che couldn't find anyone to fight against him. In the Congo, scene of another of his guerrilla forays, he couldn't find anyone to fight with him. In Bolivia he finally started getting a tiny taste of both. In short order he was betrayed by the very peasants he set out to liberate (but who didn't see it quite that way), brought to ground and killed.

Shortly after entering Havana with the revolutionary forces, Che was already advising, equipping and dispatching guerrilla forces in an attempt to duplicate the Cuban Revolution in the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Panama, Nicaragua and Venezuela. Every one of those guerrilla forces (which were Cuban Communist-led and staffed) was wiped out in short order, usually to the last man. Rafael Trujillo and Luis Somoza weren't about to follow Batista's example of pussyfooting against guerrillas.

A few years later Che equipped, advised and sent more guerrillas to Argentina and Guatemala. Again they were stamped out almost to a man. These guerrilla expeditions cost the lives of two of Che's fatally credulous friends: the Argentine Jorge Masseti and the Guatemalan Julio Caceres.

Leftist "scholars" complain about The Bay of Pigs invasion as "Yankee intervention" (though every single invader, including the commanders was Cuban) against an innocent nationalist revolution that wished only to be left alone. They might revisit the documentary evidence. In fact Castro and Che launched five of their own versions of the Bay of Pigs invasions before the U.S. had even started contingency planning for theirs.

Castro seemed to know these invasions to spark revolutions were futile. But for Castro they still had a handy rationale. "These foreigners are nothing but troublemakers," he told a Cuban rebel named Lazaro Ascencio right after the revolutionary triumph. "Know what I'm going to do with Che Guevara? I'm going to send him to Santo Domingo and see if Trujillo kills him."<sup>14</sup>

How serious was Castro? We can only guess. But he found a way for Che to earn his keep and stay of trouble in Cuba by assigning him as commander of La Cabana, the fortress where political prisoners were held and killed.

Che's role in "Imperialism's First Defeat!" as Castro refers to the Bay of Pigs invasion merits mention. The American invasion plan included a ruse in which a CIA squad dispatched three rowboats off the coast of western Cuba in Pinar Del Rio (350 miles from the true invasion site) loaded with time release Roman candles, bottle rockets, mirrors and a tape recording of battle.

The wily Guerrilla Che immediately deciphered the imperialist scheme. That little feint 300 miles away at the Bay of Pigs was a transparent ruse, he determined. The *real* invasion was coming in Pinar Del Rio. Che stormed over to the site with several thousand troops, dug in, locked, loaded and waited for the "Yankee/mercenary" attack. They braced themselves as the sparklers, smoke bombs and mirrors did their stuff offshore.

Three days later the (literal) smoke and mirror show expended itself and Che's men marched back to Havana. Somehow Che had managed to wound himself in the heated battle against the tape recorder. The bullet pierced Che's chin and excited above his temple, just missing his

brain. The scar is visible in all post April '61 pictures of Che (the picture we see on posters and T shirts was taken a year earlier.)

Cuban novelist Guillermo Cabrera Infante, a Fidelista at the time, speculates the wound may have come from a botched suicide attempt. Che hagiographers John Lee Anderson, Carlos Castaneda and Paco Taibo insist it was an accident, Che's own pistol going off just under his face.

Jorge Castaneda in his *Companero: The Life and Death of Che Guevara* cannot resist giving Che some credit for "Imperialism's First Defeat." The Mexican author (and recent foreign minister) writes that Che's role was "crucial," explaining that Cuba's 200,000 man militia played a "central role in the victory." The training of these militia had been in the hands of Che since 1960. "Without Che" Castaneda gushes, "the militias would not have been reliable."

Here's a summary of the Battle of the Bay of Pigs, and the militia's performance: 51,000 Castro troops and militia with limitless Soviet arms, including tanks and planes and batteries of heavy artillery met 1400 mostly civilian exile freedom-fighters most with less than a months training. These men carried only light arms and one day's ammunition. The Che-trained militia hit them, then immediately halted and fled hysterically.

They were ordered back, probed hesitantly again, got mauled again and retreated in headlong flight again. They marched back again, many at gun-point, and rolled in battery after battery of Soviet 122 mm Howitzers. They rained 2000 rounds of heavy artillery into lightly-armed men they outnumbered 50 -1. ("Rommel's crack Afrika Corps broke and ran under a similar bombardment," explains Bay of Pigs historian Haynes Johnson.) Then Castro's unopposed air force strafed the invaders repeatedly and at will.

The invaders stood their ground to the last man and the militia was forced to probe yet again - and retreat again in headlong flight. They eventually stopped and brought in reinforcements. (50-1 was not enough.) They rained another Soviet artillery storm on the utterly abandoned and hopelessly outnumbered freedom fighters and finally moved in to overwhelm them - after three days of effort in which the invaders hadn't eaten, drank or slept, and had run out of ammunition. Castro's forces took 5200 casualties in the process. The freedom fighters suffered 114.<sup>14</sup>

Che did show up at the battle site, but the day the shooting ended. He walked into a building strewn with captured and wounded freedom-fighters and looked around with his wry Argentine smile. "We're going to execute every one of you," he barked. Then he turned on his heels and walked out.<sup>15</sup> As usual, Castro had a much shrewder plan for the prisoners. His regime reaped a propaganda windfall and 62 million American dollars when JFK ransomed them back.

In fact, Castro was fuming at his Militia's performance. A week after the battle he visited some of the freedom-fighters in their Havana prison cells. One had been an old acquaintance from college. "Hombre, If I had 20,000 men like you guys," Castro beamed to his old friend. "I'd have all of Latin America in my hands right now!"<sup>16</sup>

## The Gleeful Executioner

One of the longest and bloodiest guerrilla wars on this continent was fought not by Fidel and Che but against Fidel and Che - and by landless peasants. Farm collectivization was no more voluntary in Cuba than in the Ukraine. And Cuba's *kulaks* had guns, a few at first anyway, and put up a heroic resistance until the Kennedy-Khrushchev deal during the "Cuban Missile Crisis" finally starved them of supplies. Cubans know this war as "The Escambray Rebellion."

It's rarely reported, but Che Guevara had a very bloody hand in one of the major anti-insurgency wars on this continent. Seventy to 80 percent of these rural anti-communist peasant guerrillas were executed on the spot on capture. "We fought with the fury of cornered beasts" was how one of the few lucky ones who escaped alive described the guerrillas' desperate freedom-fight against the totalitarian agendas of the Cuban regime. (In 1956, when Che linked up with the Cuban exiles in Mexico city, one of them recalls Che railing against the Hungarian freedom-fighters as "Fascists!" and cheering their extermination by Soviet tanks.)

In 1962 Che got a chance to do more than cheer from the sidelines. "Cuban militia units (whose training and morale Jorge Castaneda insists we credit to Che) commanded by Russian officers employed flame-throwers to burn the palm-thatched cottages in the Escambray countryside. The peasant occupants were accused of feeding the counterrevolutionaries and bandits."<sup>17</sup>

The Maoist line about how "a guerrilla swims in the sea which is the people, etc.," fit Cuba's anti-Communist rebellion perfectly. Raul Castro himself admitted that his government faced 179 bands of "counter-revolutionaries" and "bandits." at the time.

So in a massive "relocation" campaign reminiscent of the one Spanish General Valeriano "The Butcher" Weyler carried out against Cubans during their war of independence at the turn of the century, Castro's Soviet trained armed forces ripped hundreds of thousands of rural Cubans from their ancestral homes at gunpoint and herded them into concentration camps on the opposite side of Cuba.

According to evidence presented to the Organization of American States by Cuban-exile researcher Dr. Claudio Beneda 4000 anti-Communist peasants were summarily executed during this rural rebellion.

*Time* magazine notwithstanding, Fidel Castro - and Fidel Castro alone - was the "brains" of the Cuban Revolution. And part of his acumen was his proficiency at sizing up his revolutionary *companeros*, then delegating jobs - then eliminating them in various ways as circumstances dictated. With Guevara he performed masterfully. First he assigned him to be commander of Havana's La Cabana fortress, which Che promptly converted to a prison and killing field.

"Crazy with fury I will stain my rifle red while slaughtering any enemy that falls in my hands! My nostrils dilate while savoring the acrid odor of gunpowder and blood. With the deaths of my enemies I prepare my being for the sacred fight and join the triumphant proletariat with a bestial howl!"

Che Guevara wrote these lines while in his early twenties, before he had gotten his hands on any such enemy. The passage appears in Che's *Motorcycle Diaries*, recently made into a heartwarming film by Robert Redford - the only film to get a whooping standing ovation at the Sundance Film Festival. It seems that Redford omitted this inconvenient portion of Che's diaries from his touching tribute.

Two weeks after Che entered Havana and took his post at La Cabana fortress, Castro saw his instincts as a personnel manager fully vindicated. The "acrid odor of gunpowder and blood" never reached Guevara's nostrils from actual combat. It always came from the close range murder of bound, gagged and blindfolded men. "We must create the pedagogy of the *paredon* (firing squad.)" Che instructed his Revolutionary Tribunals: "We don't need proof to execute a man. We only need proof that it's necessary to execute him. A revolutionary must become a cold killing machine motivated by pure hate."<sup>18</sup>



Actually, Che Guevara was anything but a "cold killing machine." The term implies a certain detachment or nonchalance towards murder. In fact Che gave ample evidence of enjoying it. Almost all Cubans who knew him and are now in exile and able to talk freely (Jose Benitez, Mario Chanes de Armas, Daniel Alarcon among others ) recall Che Guevara as a classic psychopath.

In January 1957, shortly after landing in Cuba aboard the yacht *Granma* with Fidel and Raul Castro, Che sent a letter to his discarded wife, Hilda Gadea. "Dear vieja (i.e. Ole Lady' - on top of everything else, Che was also a notorious misogynist) I'm here in Cuba's hills, alive and thirsting for blood."<sup>19</sup> His thirst would soon be slaked.

In that very month, January 1957 Fidel Castro ordered the execution of a peasant guerrilla named Eutimio Guerra who he accused of being an informer for Batista's forces. Castro assigned the killing to his own bodyguard, Universo Sanchez. To everyone's surprise, Che Guevara - a lowly rebel soldier/medic at the time (not yet a *comandante*) - volunteered to accompany Sanchez and another soldier to the execution site. The Cuban rebels were glum as they walked slowly down the trail in a torrential thunderstorm. Finally the little group stopped in a clearing.

Sanchez was hesitant, looking around, perhaps looking for an excuse to postpone or call off the execution. Dozens would follow, but this was the first execution of a Castro rebel by Castro's rebels. Suddenly without warning Che stepped up and fired his pistol into Guerra's temple. "He went into convulsions for a while and was finally still. Now his belongings were mine." Che wrote in his *Diaries*.

Shortly afterwards, Che's father in Buenos Aires received a letter from his prodigal son. "I'd like to confess, papa', at that moment I discovered that I really like killing."<sup>20</sup>

This attitude caught Castro's eye. More executions of assorted "deserters," informers" and "war criminals" quickly followed, all with Che's enthusiastic participation. One was of a captured Batista soldier, a 17-years old boy totally green to the guerrilla "war," hence his easy capture. First Che interrogated him.

"I haven't killed anyone, *comandante*," the terrified boy answered Che. "I just got out here! I'm an only son, my mother's a widow and I joined the army for the salary, to send it to her every month...don't kill me!" He blurted out when he heard Che's unmoved reply, "Don't kill me! why?"

The boy was trussed up, shoved in front of a recently dug pit and murdered.<sup>21</sup> Fidel was privy to these events. He thought executing Batista soldiers was incredibly stupid, compared to the propaganda value of releasing them since most weren't fighting anyway. But Castro recognized the value of executions in intimidating other Cubans, and recognized Che's value as someone who enjoyed the job. By the summer of 1957 Che Guevara had been promoted to full-fledged Major or "*comandante*," the Rebel army's highest rank. His fame was spreading.

But not all the revolutionaries were favorably impressed. In mid-1958 one of the rebels was wounded and made his way to a Dr. Hector Meruelo in the nearby town of Cienfuegos. The good doctor patched him up and a few weeks later informed him that he was well enough to return to Che's column.

"No, doctor," the boy responded. Please be discreet with this because it could cost me my life, but I've learned that Che is nothing but a murderer. I'm a revolutionary but I'm also a Christian. I'll go and join Camilo's column (Camilo Cienfuegos) - but never Che's."<sup>22</sup>

As commander of the La Cabana prison, Che often insisted on shattering the skull of the condemned man by firing the *coup de grace* himself. When other duties tore him away from his beloved execution yard, he consoled himself with watching the executions. Che's office in La Cabana had a section of wall torn out so he could watch his firing squads at work.

A Rumanian journalist named Stefan Bacie visited Cuba in early 1959 and was fortunate enough to get an audience with the already famous leader, whom he had also met briefly in Mexico city. The meeting took place in Che's office in La Cabana. Upon entering, the Rumanian saw Che motioning him over to his office's newly constructed window.

Stefan Bacie got there just in time to hear the command of *fuego*, hear the blast from the firing squad and see a condemned prisoner man crumple and convulse. The stricken journalist immediately left and composed a poem, titled, "I No Longer Sing of Che." ("I no longer sing of Che any more than I would of Stalin," go the first lines.)<sup>23</sup>

A Cuban gentleman named Pierre San Martin was among those jailed by Che Guevara in the early months of the Cuban Revolution. In an *El Nuevo Herald* article from December 28, 1997 San Martin recalled the horrors: "Thirty-two of us were crammed into a cell. Sixteen of us would stand while the other sixteen tried to sleep on the cold filthy floor.

We took shifts that way. Dozens were led from the cells to the firing squad daily. The volleys kept us awake. We felt that any one of those minutes would be our last.

One morning the horrible sound of that rusty steel door swinging open startled us awake and Che's guards shoved a new prisoner into our cell. He was a boy, maybe 14 years old. His face was bruised and smeared with blood. "What did you do?" we asked horrified. "I tried to defend my papa," gasped the bloodied boy. "But they sent him to the firing squad."

Soon Che's guards returned. The rusty steel door opened and they yanked the boy out of the cell. "We all rushed to the cell's window that faced the execution pit," recalls Mr. San Martin. "We simply couldn't believe they'd murder him."

"Then we spotted him, strutting around the blood-drenched execution yard with his hands on his waist and barking orders Che Guevara himself. Kneel down!" Che barked at the boy.

"Assassins!" we screamed from our window.

"I said: KNEEL DOWN!" Che barked again.

The boy stared Che resolutely in the face. "If you're going to kill me," he yelled, "you'll have to do it while I'm standing! Men die standing!"

"Murderers!" the men yelled desperately from their cells. "Then we saw Che unholstering his pistol. He put the barrel to the back of the boys neck and blasted. The shot almost decapitated the young boy.

"We erupted 'Murderers! Assassins!'" His murder finished, Che finally looked up at us, pointed his pistol, and emptied his clip in our direction. Several of us were wounded by his shots."

After a hard day at the office, Che repaired to his new domicile in Tarara, 15 miles outside Havana on the pristine beachfront (today reserved exclusively for tourists and Communist party members, by the way). The "austere idealist," Che, hadn't done too badly for himself in this real estate transaction, known in non-revolutionary societies as theft.

"The house was among the most luxurious in Cuba," writes Cuban journalist Antonio Llano Montes. 'Until a few weeks prior, it had belonged to Cuba's most successful building contractor. The mansion had a boat dock, a huge swimming pool, seven bathrooms, a sauna, a massage salon and

several television sets. One TV had been specially designed in the U.S. and had a screen ten feet wide and was operated by remote control (remember, this was 1959.) This was thought to be the only TV of its kind in Latin America. The mansion's garden had a veritable jungle of imported plants, a pool with waterfall, ponds filled with exotic tropical fish and several bird houses filled with parrots and other exotic birds. The habitation was something out of *A Thousand and One Nights*.

Llano Montes wrote the above in exile. In January 1959 he didn't go quite into such detail in his article which appeared in the Cuban magazine *Carteles*. He simply wrote that, "*Comandante* Che Guevara has fixed his residence in one of the most luxurious houses on Tarara beach."

Two days after his article ran, while lunching at Havana's El Carmelo restaurant, Llano Montes looked up from his plate to see three heavily armed Rebel army soldiers instructing him to accompany them. Shortly the journalist found himself in Che Guevara's La Cabana office, seated a few feet in front of the *Comandante's* desk which was piled with papers.

It took half an hour but Che finally made his grand entrance, "reeking horribly, as was his custom" recalls Llano Montes. "Without looking at me. He started grabbing papers on his desk and brusquely signing them with 'Che.' His assistant came in and Che spoke to him over his shoulder. "I'm signing these 26 executions so we can take care of this tonight."

"Then he got up and walked out. Half an hour later he walks back in and starts signing more papers. Finished signing, he picks up a book and starts reading - never once looking at me. Another half hour goes by and he finally puts the book down. "So you're Llano Montes, he finally sneers, "who says I appropriated a luxurious house."

"I simply wrote that you had moved into a luxurious house, which is the truth," replied Llano Montes.

"I know your tactics!" Che shot back. "You press people are injecting venom into your articles to damage the revolution. You're either with us or against us. We're not going to allow all the press foolishness that Batista allowed. I can have you executed this very night. How about that!"

"You'll need proof that I've broken some law" responded Montes.

"We don't need proof. We manufacture the proof," Che said while stroking his shoulder length hair, a habit of his. One of his prosecutors, a man nicknamed 'Puddle-of-blood' then walked in and started talking. 'Don't let the stupid jabbering of those defense lawyers delay the executions!' Che yelled at him. 'Threaten them with execution. Accuse them

of being accomplices of the Batistianos.' Then Che jerked the handful of papers from Mr. Puddle and started signing them.

"This type of thing went on from noon until 6:30 PM when Che finally turned to his aides and said. Get this man out of here. I don't want him in my presence."<sup>24</sup>

This was Che's manner of dealing with defenseless men. He acted this way when he held the hammer. Against armed men on an equal footing his behavior was markedly different. Two years earlier in the Sierra, Castro had ordered Che to take command over a guerrilla faction led by a fellow 26th of July Movement rebel named Jorge Sotus, who had been operating in an area north of the area where Fidel and Che were and had actually been confronting and fighting Batista's army. Che and a few of his men hiked over to Sotus command station and informed him that Che was now in command.

"Like hell," responded Sotus.

"It's Fidel's order," responded Guevara. "We have more military experience than you and your group."

"More experience in running and hiding from Batista's army perhaps," Sotus shot back. Che dithered and Sotus added. "Besides my men and I aren't about to take orders from a foreigner."<sup>25</sup>

Che backed off, hiked back and informed Fidel who didn't press the issue. But a few weeks after Batista's flight and Castro's triumph, Sotus was arrested without warning and shoved in the Isle of Pines prison. The intrepid Sotus managed to escape, made his way to the U.S. and joined an exile paramilitary group, taking part in many armed raids against Cuba from south Florida until the Kennedy-Khrushchev deal ended them.

Guevara also had a run in with a rebel group named the Second Front of the Escambray. These operated against Batista in the Escambray mountains of Las Villas province. When Che's column entered the area in late 1958, Che sought to bring these guerrillas under his command and met much resistance, especially from a *comandante* named Jesus Carreras who knew of Che's Communist pedigree. Again Guevara didn't press the issue.

A few weeks into the January 1959 triumph Carreras and a group of these Escambray commanders visited Che in La Cabana to address the issue of how they'd been frozen out of any leadership roles in the new regime. On the way in, Carreras ran into a rebel he'd known in the anti-Batista fight and stopped to chat while the rest of the group entered

Che's office. Once the group was inside, Che began to rip into Carreras (who was still not present) as a drunkard, a womanizer, a bandit and a person he'd never appoint to any important position.

Midway into Che's tirade, Carreras entered the office, having overheard much while outside. "Che went white," recall those present. An enraged Carreras jumped right in his face and Che backed off. Finally Carreras challenged Che to a duel, "right outside in the courtyard," he pointed.

"How is it possible," Che quickly smiled, "that two revolutionary *companeros* get to such a point simply because of a misunderstanding?"

The subject was dropped and they turned to other issues, but a year later Jesus Carreras found himself a prisoner in a La Cabana dungeon. A few months later he was defiantly facing a firing squad. *Fuego!* The volley shattered his body. And yes, Che was watching from his window.<sup>26</sup>

Even the *New York Times* admits that the first two months of the Cuban Revolution saw 568 firing squad executions. A study by Cuban-American Scholar Armando Lago doubles that figure. One by Dr. Claudio Beneda triples it. The preceding "trials" shocked and nauseated all who witnessed them. They were shameless farces, sickening charades. Guevara clarified the matter. "Evidence is an archaic bourgeois detail," he explained. "We execute from revolutionary conviction."<sup>27</sup>

Not that the slaughter ended after the first few months, as most "scholars" imply. In December 1964 Che addressed the U.N. General Assembly. "Yes, we execute, " he declared to the claps and cheers of that august body. "And we will keep executing as long as it is necessary. This is a war to the death against the Revolution's enemies."

According to the *Black Book of Communism* those executions had reached 14,000 by the end of the decade. (Cuba is a small country. In American terms, this would amount to more than three million executions.)

On the eve of his trip to New York, Che gave a speech in Santiago Cuba where he declared: "We must learn the lesson of absolute abhorrence of imperialism. Against that class of hyena there is no other medium than extermination!"<sup>28</sup>

Two years earlier, Guevara had gotten tantalizingly close to that medium. "If the missiles had remained we would have used them against the very heart of the United States, including New York," he told the

London *Daily Worker* in November of 1962. "We must never establish peaceful co-existence. We must walk the path of victory even if it costs millions of atomic victims."<sup>29</sup>

"Extermination," Che stressed. "Millions of atomic victims," he said for the record. "Pure hate, as the motivating force," he repeatedly declared.

*T*ime also erred regarding Che's sense of humor, which was on par with Nurse Ratched's. As most Latin Americans of a certain age know, Che was a ringer for a Mexican Movie star of the fifties named Cantinflas. Shortly after Che entered Havana, one of Cuba's traditionally sassy newspapermen made sport of this resemblance.

He did it exactly once. Those firing squads were working triple-shifts at the time. The reporter heeded Che's warning not to do it again.

Che's first decree when his guerrillas captured the town of Sancti Spiritus in central Cuba during the last days of the skirmishing against Batista's army, outlawed alcohol, gambling and regulated relations between the sexes. Popular outcry and Fidel's good sense made him rescind the order.

"I have no home, no woman, no parents, no brothers and no friends," wrote Guevara. "My friends are friends only so long as they think as I do politically."<sup>30</sup>

In 1960 at a town named Guanahacabibes in extreme Western Cuba, Che initiated Cuba's concentration camp system. "We send to Guanahacabibes people who have committed crimes against revolutionary morals. . it is hard labor...the working conditions are harsh..."<sup>31</sup>

Among the many categories of criminals against revolutionary morals were "delinquents." Please take note Che T-shirt wearers: this "delinquency" involved drinking, vagrancy, disrespect for authorities, laziness and playing loud music. Among the more hilarious manifestations of Che idolatry was the rock musician Carlos Santana's grand entrance to the 2005 Academy Awards ceremony where he stopped, swung open his jacket, and proudly displayed his Che T-shirt as the cameras clicked.

By the late 60's among the tens of thousands of inmates at Guanahacabibes and the rest of the UMAP concentration camp system in Cuba were "roqueros," hapless Cuban youths who tried to listen to Yankee-Imperialist rock music. Carlos Santana, was grinning widely - and oh so hiply - while proudly sporting the symbol of a regime that made it a criminal offense to listen to Carlos Santana.

## The Apostle of Economic Ruin

By late 1964 Minister of Industries' Che had so badly crippled Cuba's economy and infrastructure and so horribly impoverished and traumatized it's work force that the Russians themselves were at wits end. They were subsidizing the mess, and it was getting expensive - much too expensive for the paltry geopolitical return. "This is an underdeveloped country?!" Anastas Mikoyan had laughed while looking around on his first visit to Cuba in 1960. The Soviets were frankly tickled to have a developed and civilized country to loot again, the countries of Eastern Europe after WWII.

Alas, the looting, at first, went in the opposite direction. Castro was no chump like Ulbricht or Gomulka. A French Socialist economist, Rene Dumont, tried advising Castro as the wreckage of Cuba's economy spiraled out of control. "The Cuban Revolution has gone farther in its first three years than the Chinese in its first ten," he observed.<sup>32</sup> Hence the mess.

As Cuba's Minister of Industries, Che wanted to refashion human nature. With hapless Cubans as his guinea pigs, he was intent on creating a "new socialist man," diligent, hard-working, obedient, free from all material incentives and always ready to go with the program - in brief, lobotomized shirkers or smartalecks who offered lip would find themselves behind the barbed wire, watchtowers and guard dogs of Guanahacabibes in short order.

Interestingly, Jack Nicholson whose film character in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* continually ran afoul of Nurse Ratched is among Communist Cuba's most frequent visitors and Castro's most fervent fans. "Fidel Castro is a genius!" gushed Nicholson after a visit in 1998. "We spoke about everything," the actor rhapsodized. "Castro is a humanist like President Clinton. Cuba is simply a paradise!" This may have more to it than the usual Hollywood vacuity upstairs. "My job was to bug Jack Nicholson's room at the hotel Melia Cohiba when he visited Cuba," says high-ranking Cuban intelligence defector Delfin Fernandez, from Madrid today, "with both cameras and listening devices. Most people have no idea they are being watched while they are in Cuba. But their personal activities are filmed under orders from Castro himself. Famous Americans are the priority objectives of Castro's intelligence."<sup>33</sup>

One day Che decided that Cubans should learn to play and like soc-



cer (*futbal*) like the citizens of his native Argentina. A Sugar plantation named Central Macareno near Cienfuegos had been recently stolen from its American owners (not that most Sugar plantations in Cuba were American-owned as leftist mythology holds. Barely one-third were.) The plantation also included a huge orchard of Mango, Avocado and Mamey trees that were just starting to give fruit. Che ordered them all cut down and the ground razed in order to construct a soccer field.

A year later the field was weed grown, pot-holed and unusable. The decaying trunks of the formerly fruit-yielding trees were still piled up around the edges of the field even as most Cubans scrambled for fresh fruit on the new black market (under that arch-villain of leftist lore, Batista, Cubans had no need for a black market.) At any rate, it seemed that the threat of Guanahacabibes or not - Che's Cuban subjects simply didn't take to Che's *futbal*.<sup>34</sup>

Che's fetish to "industrialize" Cuba immediately and by decree, as he thought his role model Stalin had "industrialized" the Soviet Union, ended Cuba's status as a relatively developed and civilized country. In one of his spasms of decrees, Che ordered a refrigerator factory built in Cienfuegos, a pick and shovel factory built in Santa Clara, a pencil factory built in Havana. Supply? Demand? Costs? Such bourgeois details didn't interest Che. None of the factories ended up producing a single product.

Che railed against the chemists in the newly socialized Coca-Cola plant because the Coke they were producing tasted awful. Some of the flustered chemists responded that it was Che who had nationalized the plant and booted out the former owners and managers, who took the secret Coca-Cola formula with them to the United States. This impertinence was answered with the threat of Guanahacabibes.

During this time Che's ministry also bought a fleet of snow plows from Czechoslovakia. Che had personally inspected them and was convinced they could easily be converted into sugar cane harvesting machines, thus mechanizing the harvest and increasing Cuba's sugar production. The snowplows in fact squashed the sugar cane plants, cut them off at the wrong length and killed them. Four years into the revolution Cuba's 1963 sugar production was less than half of its pre-Revolutionary volume.

The Soviets themselves finally put their foot down. Their Cuban lark was getting expensive. In 1964 they told Castro that Che had to go. Castro knew who buttered his bread and had never much liked Che any-

way. Besides, the Revolution was well entrenched by then, and in any case there were many willing executioners now, so Che might have outlived his usefulness.

Here we come to another hoary myth spun by Che's hagiographers: his "ideological" falling out with the Soviets. Che's pureness of revolutionary heart, we're told, led him to clash with the corrupt Soviet *nomenklatura*.

In fact it was a purely practical conflict. The Russians were fed up and simply refused to bankroll Che's harebrained economic fantasies any longer. Che saw the writing on the wall. In December 1964, right after his visit to the U.N., he visited his friend Ben Bela in Algeria and delivered his famous anti-Soviet speech, branding them, "accomplices of imperialist exploitation."<sup>35</sup>

To many it looked like Che was setting the stage for a role as the Trotsky of his generation. Che probably saw it as a more seemly role than that of a hopeless economic bumbler.

When he touched down in Havana after the speech, the regime's press was absolutely mute regarding both his speech and his recent return. Soon he was invited to visit the Maximum Leader and Raul. In fact, Maximum Brother Raul had just returned from Mother Russia itself, where Che's Algeria speech had caused quite a stir. As soon as he got within earshot, both Castros ripped into Guevara as undisciplined, ungrateful and plain stupid.

"Fidel!" Che shot back. "Dammit, show me some respect! I'm not Camilo!" Che's wife, Aleida (he'd ditched Hilda by then) was forced to jump in between the men, exclaiming, "I can't believe such a thing is happening between longtime *compañeros*."<sup>36</sup>

Che finally went home where he found his telephone lines cut. Much evidence points to Che being held in house arrest at this point.<sup>37</sup> And it was under that house arrest that a seriously chastened and apparently frightened, after all, who better knew the consequences of upsetting the Maximum Leader? - Che composed his famous "Farewell Letter to Fidel," in which his groveling and fawning was utterly shameful.

"I deeply appreciate your lessons and your example my only fault was not to have had more faith in you since the first moments in the Sierra, not having recognized more quickly your qualities as a leader and a revolutionary. I will take to my new fields of battle the faith that you have inculcated." and on and on in relentless toadying.<sup>38</sup>

Che's few public appearances between his return from Algeria and his

departure for the Congo always found him in the company of state security personnel. His Cuban welcome had worn out. By April 1965 he was in Tanzania with a few dozen black Cuban military men. Code named "Tatu," Che and his force entered the eastern Congo, which was convulsed at the time (like now) by an incomprehensible series of civil (actually, mostly tribal) wars.

Tatu's mission was to help the alternately Soviet and Chinese backed "Simbas" of the Congolese red leader, Laurent Kabila. These were fighting the forces of the western-backed Moise Tshombe. Tshombe's forces consisted of Belgian foreign legionnaires, mercenaries under the famous "Mad" Mike Hoare, Congolese who opposed Kabila, and a handful of Cuban Bay of Pigs veterans sent by the CIA. The Cubans were mostly pilots who provided close-in air support for "Mad" Mike.

Here's Mike Hoare's opinion, after watching them in battle, of his CIA allies: "These Cuban CIA men were as tough, dedicated and impetuous a group of soldiers as I've ever had the honor of commanding. Their leader [Rip Robertson] was the most extraordinary and dedicated soldier I've ever met."<sup>39</sup>

Together Mad Mike, Rip and the Cubans made short work of Kabila's "Simbas," who were murdering, raping and munching (many were cannibals) their way through many of the defenseless Europeans still left in the recently abandoned Belgian colony.

"Tatu's" first military mission was plotting an attack on a garrison guarding a hydroelectric plant in a place called Front Bendela on the Kimbi River in Eastern Congo. Che's masterstroke was to be an elaborate ambush of the garrison. Tatu himself was stealthily leading his force into position when ambushers became the ambushed. Che lost half his men and barely escaped with his life.<sup>40</sup>

His African allies started frowning a little more closely at Tatu's c.v. and asking a few questions (but in Swahili, which he didn't understand.) Tatu's next clash with the mad dogs of imperialism was at a mountain-top town called Fizi Baraka. And another hideous rout ensued. Che admits as much in his Congo Diaries, but he blames it all on Congolese who were terrible soldiers. Yet, for some reason, the Congolese on Hoare's side seemed to fight rather well.

One thing that did impress the Simbas about Tatu, was that, "he never went down to the river to wash."<sup>41</sup>

## The End of Che

Tatu's Congo mission was soon abandoned as hopeless and in a humiliating retreat across Lake Tanganyika Che and the Castro Cubans barely escaped Africa with their lives. Che now set his sights on Bolivia for the next guerrilla adventure, for living his dream of turning the Andes "into the Sierra Maestra of the Continent," for creating "two, three many Vietnams."

It would be difficult to imagine a more cockamamie plan for Bolivia than Che's. Under President Paz Estenssoro in 1952-53 Bolivia had undergone a revolution of sorts, with an extensive land reform that - unlike Che's and Fidel's - actually gave ownership of the land to the peasants, the tillers of the soil themselves, much like Douglas McArthur's land reform in post-war Japan. Even crazier, Che himself, during his famous motorcycle jaunt had visited Bolivia and witnessed the positive results of the reform. Still, his amazing powers of self-deception prevailed.

Che convinced himself that in a section of Bolivia where the population consisted - not of landless peasants - but of actual homesteaders, he'd have the locals crowding into his recruitment tent to sign up with a bunch of foreign communists to overthrow the government that had given them their land, a series of rural schools and left them completely unmolested to pursue their lives. These were Indians highly suspicious of foreigners and especially of white foreigners, to boot. Che was undaunted by any of these facts. *Hasta la victoria siempre!* as he liked to say. At this stage in his life Che was probably more deluded than Hitler in his Bunker.

There is no evidence that Castro took the Bolivian mission seriously. His Soviet patrons were certainly not behind it. They knew better. They'd seen every guerrilla movement in Latin America wiped out. The only thing these half-baked adventures accomplished was to upset the Americans, with whom they'd cut a splendid little deal during the Missile Crisis to safeguard Castro. Why blow this arrangement with another of Che's harebrained adventures? Much better to work within the system in Latin America, reasoned the Soviets at this time, subtly subverting the governments by using legitimate Communist parties. A few years later Allende's electoral victory in Chile seemed to bear the Soviets out.

In fact, the East German female guerrilla, Tamara Bunke or "Tania" who linked up with Che in Bolivia (they'd met as early as 1961 and were reputedly lovers) was actually a KGB-STASI agent sent to keep an eye

on Che.<sup>42</sup> Alas, poor "Tania" (remember Patty Hearst's Symbianese Liberation Army moniker?) was mowed down by machine gun fire along with her entire "rearguard" group after a Bolivian peasant relayed their position to the army and helped plan an ambush.

The Bolivian Communist party itself stood aloof from Che's final mission. Its head, Mario Monje, was a faithful follower of the Soviet party-line. The only Bolivians Che managed to recruit were renegade Communists and Maoists. Che's guerrilla force averaged 40-45 members and was pompously named the "National Liberation Army." Yet at no point during its 11 month venture did Bolivians make up more than half of its members. And most of these came from the cities and areas far distant from the guerrilla base. The rural population shunned their "National Liberation Army" like a plague.

"We cannot develop any peasant support," Che admits in his diaries. "But it looks like by employing *planned terror* (emphasis mine) we may at least neutralize most of them. Their support will come later."

It never did. It was the *campesinos* themselves who kept reporting the guerrilla's whereabouts to the army, with whom they were generally on excellent terms. And for an excellent reason: it was composed mainly of Bolivian *campesinos*, not bearded foreigners who stole their livestock.

Among the unreported idiocies regarding Che's Bolivian debacle, was how he split his forces into a vanguard and a rearguard in April of 1967, whereupon they got hopelessly lost and bumbled around, half-starved, half-clothed and half-shod, without any contact for 6 months - though they were usually within a mile of each other.<sup>43</sup> They didn't even have WWII vintage walkie-talkies to communicate. Che's masterful *Guerrilla War*, gives no explanation for such a tactic.

Daniel Alarcon, a Cuban who was one of the three guerrillas who managed to survive and escape Bolivia, reports in his book, *Benigno: Memorias de un Soldado Cubano* how in the very midst of this blundering around, Che was obsessed with posing for photos. One was Che atop a (presumably stolen) horse on a ridgeline where he was strategically silhouetted against the bare sky. Che handed Alarcon his Pentax and had him back off just the right distance to capture the entire scene. Che nodded then plucked out a machete and waved it high over his head, even adding a sound score to the scene, shouting: "I am the new Bolivar!" as Alarcon dutifully clicked away.

While Che was posing for pictures neither he nor anyone in his group

had any way to communicate with Cuba. Castro had sent an agent named Renan Montero to La Paz to keep in touch with Che, but Montero abruptly left Bolivia in July of 1967 and returned to Cuba. Significantly, just a week earlier, Alexie Kosygin had visited Cuba and met with Castro, where he laid it on the line.

Kosygin had just come from a meeting with Lyndon Johnson where the U.S. President had laid it on the line, complaining about Castroite subversion in Latin America, and how this was a clear breach of the deal the U.S. and Soviets had cut back in October 1962 that had kept Castro unmolested. Now this mischief in Bolivia might force the U.S. into an agonizing reappraisal of that deal.<sup>44</sup>

Well, Castro didn't have his heart in the Bolivian adventure anyway. And now he could finally rid himself of the Argentine popinjay. Montero came home and Che was cast completely adrift.

Barely two months later the "National Liberation Army" was wiped out. Che's capture merits some clarification. His hagiographers have romanticized his last day alive. Che was defiant, they claim. Che was surprised, caught off guard and was unable to properly defend himself or to shoot himself with his last bullet as was his plan.

Nothing in the actual record supports this fantasy. In fact everything points to Che surrendering quite enthusiastically, right after he ordered his men to fight to the last man and the last bullet.

Most did, but Che was captured with a full clip in his pistol. Even more suspiciously, though he was in the bottom of a ravine during the final firefight and could have escaped in the opposite direction like a few of his men, Che actually moved upwards and towards the Bolivian soldiers who had been firing. Yet he was doing no firing of his own in the process. Then as soon as he saw some soldiers he yelled, "Don't shoot! I'm Che!"<sup>45</sup>

Immediately after his capture his demeanor was even more interesting "What's your name, young man?" Che asked a soldier. "Why what a great name for a Bolivian soldier!" he blurted after hearing it.

The firefight was still raging after Che's surrender. His men, unlike their *comandante*, were indeed fighting to the last bullet. Soon a wounded Bolivian soldier was carried by.

"Shall I attend him?!" Che asked his captors.

"Why? Are you a doctor?" asked Bolivian army captain Gary Prado.

"No, (the truth at last!) but I have some knowledge of medicine," answered Guevara, resuming his pathetic attempt to ingratiate himself with his captors.<sup>46</sup>

Another interesting factoid is that Che was captured wearing his famous black beret, and it sported a bullet hole. Yet those on the Bolivian mission with him like Dariel Alarcon attest that Che never once wore that beret during the Bolivian campaign. Che had always worn a military cap, all pictures of him in Bolivia back this up. Some speculate that Che put on his famous black beret (and even shot a hole in it) to make a dramatic celebrity surrender and impress his captors. He probably expected a few snapshots in the process.

After a peaceful capture, Che seemed to have expected a trial which would become a worldwide media sensation, with pleas for his freedom pouring into Bolivia like a blizzard from leftists in every corner of the globe. This would have been the case had the Bolivians been foolish enough to try him. The trial of Regis Debray a few months earlier had given them a taste.

Debray was a French Communist journalist who had spent much time in Cuba and was a serious Castro/Che groupie. He had gone to Bolivia and met with Che and his band and seemed poised to do for Che in Bolivia what Herbert Matthews had done for Castro in Cuba. But Debray would also act in a more official capacity as a recruiter and messenger for the guerrillas.

Debray was captured by the Bolivian Army, worked over, and sang like a canary about Che's presence in Bolivia (not completely known in April of 1967) and what he was up too. The U.S. was alerted and sent some green Berets to help train a Ranger Battalion of the Bolivian Army, along with some Cuban-American CIA men to help with intelligence work. One of these, Felix Rodriguez (currently President of the Bay of Pigs Veterans Association, and a friend of mine I'm very, very proud to say) convinced the Bolivian military to stop summarily executing all the guerrilla prisoners. Questioned properly and treated decently, they could provide valuable information and help close the net on Che and his group.

And so it happened with a prisoner named Jose Castillo Chavez. Rodriguez played good cop with him and deciphered Che's whereabouts. He persuaded the Bolivian military to send their Ranger battalion to the area post-haste.

"But their training isn't complete," replied the Bolivian commander.

"No matter!" answered Rodriguez. "I think we've got Che pin-pointed! Send them in!" Barely a week later Che was yelling his pitiful plea to those Bolivian Rangers. "Don't Shoot! - I'm Che, I'm worth more to you alive than dead!"<sup>47</sup>

The Bolivian high command didn't see it that way. Though he was captured alive, Che was executed the next day. Compared to the courageous and defiant yells of his own firing squad victims - "I kneel for no man! Viva Cuba Libre! Viva Cristo Rey! Abajo Comunismo! Aim right HERE!" - Che Guevara proved on his last day alive that he was unworthy to carry his victims' slop buckets.

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### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Humberto Fontova. *Fidel; Hollywood's Favorite Tyrant*. Regnery, 2005

<sup>2</sup> Enrique Ros, *Che; Mito y Realidad*. Ediciones Universal. Miami, 2002

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