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**Ernesto "Che" Guevara, His Impact on South America and the World**

**Mark Haner  
May 31, 2005**

Ernesto “Che” Guevara de la Serna was a great figure in the revolutionary movements of Latin and South America. His dynamic personality and inspirational ideals lead many to follow him and many other great historical figures. His lasting impact still has many people continuing his changes as well as praising his name and actions due to his great role played in the Cuban Revolution, his solid efforts in Bolivia and the rest of South America. Che is still as inspirational today as he was in 1967, the year of his assassination.

Ernesto “Che” Guevara was born in 1928 in Rosario, Argentina to his parents of middle class stature. During his childhood, and the rest of his life, Che was subjected to the unfavorable effects of asthma; which kept him home from school quite often. Che was restricted to only attending the second and third grades, and then the fifth and sixth grades if his body would allow him. Alta Gracias, the school Che attended, enabled him to interact with a variety of social and ethnical backgrounds very early in his life. Although Che came from a very privileged background, he spent much time with children and people from el campo, urban morochos and students of Italian, Spanish, and rural backgrounds. During the time he spent out of school, Che experienced a home based education and could be found reading one of the 3000 philosophical books, novels, and political publications of his home library.

“In 1942, Che was enrolled in the Colegio Nacional Dean Funes of Cordoba, a public secondary school run by the Ministry of Education, and less exclusive than the Colegio Montserrat, which was usually attended by the children of the regional elite.<sup>1</sup>” As Che grew older, he decided that he would like to become a doctor. He accomplished this admirable feat in 1953 when he earned his license to practice from the University of Buenos Aires.

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<sup>1</sup> “Revolutionary Leadership and pedagogical praxis: revisiting the legacy of Che Guevara”

Just prior to the year that Che finally earned his medical license, he and his comrade, Alberto Granado, traveled across South America by motorcycle, witnessing poverty first hand. The two young men visited five countries in a time span of eight months. The two traveled on a 500 cc British manufactured Norton motorcycle. Che kept a regular diary of the scenery, people, and daily experiences that the men encountered. During this time Che as well as Granado worked for a small yet significant amount of time at the San Pablo Leper colony. It was during this great adventure that Che studied his surroundings quietly and developed his radical, revolutionary, Marxist ideas. They addressed poverty, humanitarian beliefs, and political corruption that would change Latin America, South America and the world forever.

Che joined the leftist regime of Jacobo Arbenz Guzman in Guatemala. When Arbenz was overthrown in 1954, Che fled to Mexico City and met Fidel Castro as well as many other Cuban rebels. Fidel and Che both began military training at an estate in Chalco, Mexico. Where they began to plan the historic Cuban Revolution. "A self-taught Marxist and an important political theorist in his own right, his vision of social change was pure and uncompromising: 'I believe in the armed struggle as the only solution for people who fight to free themselves.'<sup>2</sup>" It was at this time that Ernesto "Che" Guevara would begin to slowly unleash his great potential and start to evolve into one of the greatest revolutionaries in Latin, and South America.

In 1956, Che along with Fidel Castro and a small number of other Cuban rebels crossed the Caribbean Sea in the shaky yacht Granma. Their mission was to invade Cuba and overthrow the ferocious dictator, Fulgencio Batista.

The group reached Cuba hungry, tired, and weak only to be ambushed by

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<sup>2</sup> New Internationalist: "The Meaning of Che."

Batista's troops as they landed in a horrendous swamp, were they lost most of their belongings and men. Out of the 82 guerrillas that came ashore, only 22 regrouped at the Sierra Maestra, Che was one of them. The survivors fought their way to the Sierra Maestra, a rugged mountain range, surrounding Santiago de Cuba City that would become the base of operations for Castro, Guevara and their men. Che became Fidel Castro's chief lieutenant soon after the group made it to the Sierra Maestra. It was here in this rugged terrain that Che proved to be a great, resourceful guerrilla leader.

"Che won Fidel's abiding respect. In spite of fierce asthma attacks that made him helpless, Che was daring, often reckless in battle, always ready to sacrifice his life. He developed a guerrilla ethic: comradeship under fire brings fraternity, a spirit of love and purpose that transforms the ego-ridden individualist human being into the socialist 'New Man.'<sup>3</sup>"

Che was a very selfless and almost immortal figure as he would go into battle and fight. "Consider yourselves already dead," Che would say. To be a guerrilla and pick up a rifle, a person would assume both roles and obligations of fighting and changing the current, brutal situation.

As Castro's chief lieutenant, it was Che's responsibility to carry out the first execution of the Chivatos or informers who were a constant threat. Che would carry out executions at Fidel's first command and on a daily basis would let every revolutionary know that he would do it again as his essential duty and obligation to the revolution in Cuba. Che oversaw the trials and executions of hundreds of "traitors" and would state "the revolution has to be radical...to destroy the roots of evil that afflicted Cuba...in order to eliminate injustice. Those who resist losing

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<sup>3</sup> "A Revolutionary Life"

their privileges are counter revolutionaries.<sup>4</sup>”

After Fidel, Che, and the many other guerrillas and revolutionaries accomplished the great feat of toppling the Batista regime, Che became the president of the national bank in January 1959. “...he was instrumental in cutting Cuba’s traditional ties with the United States and in directing the flow of trade to the Communists.<sup>5</sup>” Che headed the newly formed Department of Industrialization from 1961 through 1965. It was during this time that Cuba was able to secure an alliance with the Soviet Union. Che began to build the bridge that would directly connect Cuba and the U.S.S.R. in the sugar market that allowed Cuba to flourish economically.

In 1965, Che left Cuba because he wanted to be a revolutionary rather than a president, minister, or administrator. He began to promote revolutionary activities in the Congo as well as Africa and other countries. One of these countries included Bolivia where Che took part in a small campaign of armed rebellions. Although Che was now in a different part of the world, he still remained the same dynamic individual. While in the Congo, he would teach the Congolese troops classes on ‘general culture,’ French, and Swahili.

It was during this small campaign in Bolivia that Ernesto “Che” Guevara was captured during an ineffective guerrilla movement, in 1967, by Bolivian Government troops. “...he was captured and executed by Bolivian soldiers, who were reportedly trained, equipped, and guided by U.S. Green Beret and CIA operatives.<sup>6</sup>” This question of United States involvement created controversy in itself.

“In the mid-morning of 9 October 1967, at the request of Colonel Zenteno, Warrant Officer Mario Teran of the Bolivian Rangers fired a six round volley from an M2

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<sup>4</sup> “A Revolutionary Life”

<sup>5</sup> <http://reference.allrefer.com/encyclopedia/G/GuevaraC.html> “Che Guevara, Cuban History, Biographies

<sup>6</sup> “Guevararama”

rifle into the emaciated body of Che Guevara de la Serna.<sup>7</sup> Prior to the actual executing shot, Che lay wounded and exhausted on the dusty dirt floor of a school building in La Higuera, near the Vallegrande military base. He articulated these few last words, "Shoot, coward you are only going to kill a man."

After Che was dead, the men pillaged his body for money and anything of value. These items included two berets, one of which bore a bullet hole from a missed shot fired by Sergeant Huanca just minutes before Che's capture, a Parker fountain pen, a belt, a stainless steel dagger, and two pipes. The Bolivian operatives had killed a man labeled by Jean-Paul Sartre as "the most complete human being of our age."

It is the norm in our world for such a dynamic and boisterous person to create great controversy on the topic of their worth to society. This is not the case with Ernesto "Che" Guevara though. The people that followed Che found him to be more of an astonishing hero after his execution. Che stared death in the eye and challenged his killer before he was executed. He was then elevated as Sergeant Major Carlos Perez fires two more postmortem shots into Che's lifeless body. After Che was flown by helicopter and his stretcher lashed to one of the skids, he underwent an autopsy at Senor de Malta Hospital. The men in the room cut off his hands and placed them in formaldehyde, as if they were more afraid of his wrath in death than in life.

"While earlier that day Roger Schaller, the Swiss Jesuit parish priest from Pucara, had closed the eyes of Che after his body had been attached to one of the skids of the helicopter, his eyes were now reopened to heighten the dramatic exhibition of his corpse. Che lay on a stretcher suspended across the length of a concrete laundry sink, seeming appared in a mystical light, his green eyes almost

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<sup>7</sup> Revolutionary leadership and pedagogical praxis: revisiting the legacy of Che Guevara

transparent, his lips tracing an enigmatic smile, and his body lying peacefully, seemingly in a state of grace, a position that dovetailed quite nicely with Christian iconography.<sup>8</sup>

Che Guevara is still a popular figure today and has almost become a pop icon in some areas of Latin and South America, as well as in Europe. A Volkswagen Beetle commercial was released in mid-2004 that opens with John Lennon's song "Instant Karma" playing, in a scene of a red living room with a poster of Che Guevara hanging on the wall. Images of Bruce Lee, Andy Warhol, and Lennon then began to flash by. The closing line at the end of the commercial read (*en François*, as I live in France), "If you are going to be a legend, you might as well be a living legend."<sup>9</sup> Many novelty items can be seen around shops and in the possession of many of the youth of these places as well. Items such as T- Shirts, wrist bands, cologne, metal cigarette cases, cigarette rolling paper, sweatshirts, wallets, key chains, lighters, cloth posters, and caps are just a few. Che's image was also on a Rage Against the Machine album, which is great evidence of his prominence even today. His physical appearance was very appealing to the great counterculture movements of the 1960's and 1970's in the United States too.

The humanitarian causes Che Guevara laid his life on the line for many times created and still creates change in many parts of South America, where his strength and perseverance for, improved the conditions for the suppressed people of this land. Although some may not know the entire story of this dynamic figure, they still bear the symbols and face of Che, by owning novelties associated with him. This just further proves his legends ability to permeate the

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<sup>8</sup> Revolutionary leadership and pedagogical praxis: revisiting the legacy of Che Guevara

<sup>9</sup> Guevararama



walls of death.

Although Ernesto "Che" Guevara participated in small revolutions in Bolivia and Africa, his main role was in the country of Cuba. This country, which still is superseded by Fidel Castro is just one of the lasting affects of the fatal efforts put forth by this great revolutionary figure. The humanitarian and radical ideas he stood for still echo in the hearts of today's youth in many parts of Europe, Latin and South America.

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