

Caribbean Lives

Che Guevara

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Contents

	Introduction: The last armed prophet.....	vi
1	Argentina and beyond (1928–1953).....	1
2	Meeting his destiny (1953–1956).....	26
3	Revolutionary war (1956–1959).....	46
4	The revolution in power (1959–1965).....	71
5	Heart of darkness (December 1964–November 1965)....	106
6	A lonely death (1966–1967).....	123
7	The legacy	142
	Select bibliography.....	153
	Index.....	157

Introduction

The last armed prophet

One of the most instantly recognisable and influential figures in twentieth-century Caribbean history, Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara began his life several thousand miles from the region. If he played a hugely important role in changing the course of Cuba’s history in the second half of the twentieth century, he lived on the island for less than a decade, and was a Cuban citizen for fewer than seven years. Yet though born in distant Argentina in 1928, there is no doubt that Cuba and the Caribbean gave Guevara the chance to apply his ideals and convictions directly in the real world. Although by temperament he was a perpetual outsider, the political and social injustices he found in 1950s Cuba helped him focus his seemingly limitless energies on a single project: to bring about revolutionary change in order to transform society and each and every individual living in it.

Che Guevara was also fortunate in meeting the man who proved to be the perfect foil for his own qualities of devotion to a cause: the Cuban revolutionary Fidel Castro. Much has been written about their hugely different personalities and approaches to politics and to life. It has often been said that, after the success of their revolutionary campaign and the installation of a new regime in Cuba, the two men could not agree on the path to take. Some writers have even suggested that Fidel sent Guevara on his final, fatal expedition to Bolivia in order to be rid of him once and for all. What seems more likely is that the bonds of mutual respect forged during the long months of precarious struggle in

the Sierra Maestra mountains of Cuba from 1956 to 1958 were stronger than any political divergences. If Che went to Bolivia and almost certain failure in 1966, it had much more to do with the forces driving him ever since he left his native Argentina in 1951 on his first voyage of discovery: a need to expose himself to the often harsh realities of the continent, and to play as prominent a role as possible in changing those realities according to principles he also discovered as he went along.

It is sometimes hard to judge exactly what Che Guevara's personal qualities were from the accounts of those who knew him or have written about him. According to the official Cuban version, promoted by everyone from Fidel Castro downwards, Che was the model revolutionary, the man who sacrificed himself entirely for the cause, without thought for his own comfort, ambition or personal safety. He was the model of the revolutionary 'new man', the kind of person he himself wrote about in his essay on *Man and Socialism in Cuba* in 1965. Here he described how individuals could fully realise their potential only when they had absorbed the lessons of socialism and its basic tenet: 'from each according to their ability, to each according to their need.' For many years after his death in 1967, Cuban schoolchildren used to start their day with the slogan: 'We will all be like Che,' while government officials and party activists would chant: *sus enseñanzas fortalecen nuestro trabajo* ('his teachings strengthen our work'). In 2006 Fidel Castro delivered this verdict on him: 'Che symbolised the highest human values, and he was an extraordinary example. He created a great aura, a great mystique. I admired him a great deal, and loved him. It always produces a great deal of affection, that admiration.'

Those at the opposite end of the political spectrum to Guevara and Castro do not share that affection. The right-wing view of him

was put most trenchantly in the international business magazine *The Economist* on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of his death in October 2007: ‘Rather than a Christian romantic, Guevara was a ruthless and dogmatic Marxist, who stood not for liberation but for a new tyranny. In the Sierra Maestra, he shot those suspected of treachery; in victory, Mr. Castro placed him in charge of the firing squads that executed “counter-revolutionaries”; as minister of industries, Guevara advocated expropriation down to the last farm and shop. His exhortation to guerrilla warfare, irrespective of political circumstance, lured thousands of idealistic Latin Americans to their deaths, helped to create brutal dictatorships and delayed the achievement of democracy.’

Che Guevara was only thirty-nine when he met a miserable end in the wilds of Bolivia. This early death made it easy for him to become the model of the ‘heroic *guerrillero*’ which has not merely lasted but has grown even stronger over the years since he was killed. In Cuba, he very soon became part of the pantheon of national heroes, alongside José Martí and Camilo Cienfuegos. It is striking that it is Che’s image rather than that of Fidel which dominates the central public square in Havana, where a five-storey high portrait of him hangs on the side of the Ministry of the Interior building overlooking Revolution Square. He also provided the Cuban state media with a perfect opportunity for glorification; the ICAIC (Cuban Institute for Cinematographic Art and Industry) made propaganda films of his participation in the revolutionary struggle, and the state-run recording industry produced a wide variety of popular songs about ‘Comandante Che Guevara’ and the example he set.

It was not only in Cuba that Che Guevara quickly became a symbol of revolutionary endeavour and purity. Throughout Latin

America, and in particular in his native Argentina, his figure was a rallying point for the radical movements espoused by a new generation. Many young people were convinced by his idea of the revolutionary *foco* – the attack on established regimes by a small, totally committed group who would quickly win converts and expose the basically oppressive nature of ‘bourgeois’ rule, sweeping away the rotten governments and replacing them with truly democratic rule by ‘the people’. All too often, this was seen as a shortcut that could do away with the need to build any real mass movement based on class or identity of interest, rebellions in which violence took the place of argument and persuasion.

This view of Che as the revolutionary hero who was the model of a way of life and action was also taken up by dissident youth in the United States and Europe. This generation was anxious to shake the old order which it saw as standing in the way of freedom and equality. For many, Che Guevara’s life seemed to prove that the world could be changed sooner rather than later, and that individual will rather than adherence to any ‘scientific’ doctrine was the most valuable quality that could help usher in such change. Despite the violent disruptions of 1968 in the United States and Europe, often inspired by this idea of Che’s legacy, the hope that western capitalist society could be easily overthrown was soon thwarted. The more extreme left-wing groups were quickly snuffed out in the developed capitalist world, while in Latin America attempts to bring in socialism or to achieve ‘national liberation’ from US imperialism were crushed by some of the most brutal military dictatorships ever seen on the continent.

Only in Nicaragua in 1979 did some of the seeds of Guevara’s promotion of revolutionary movements appear to bear fruit, when the rebel Sandinistas ousted the dynastic Somoza family and tried

to put into practice their socialist beliefs. As Che Guevara himself had predicted almost two decades earlier, however, Washington could not allow the revolution to thrive, and used every means possible short of direct military intervention to bring about the downfall of the revolutionary regime, which surrendered power at the ballot box in 1989.

This was also the year when the collapse of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe became dramatically evident. Marxist theory crumbled under the weight of reality, as citizens chose the capitalist market and freedom as consumers over the threadbare promises of communism. What had been a 'bipolar world', as the Cubans called it, was now 'unipolar', with globalised capitalism and the United States' model as apparently the only available option.

In this globalised world, the image of Che Guevara survived, and fulfilled two very different functions. On the one hand, he was promoted as an icon to sell everything from ice-cream (Cherry Guevara flavour) to dark glasses, from the ubiquitous T-shirt to tattoos on the arms of the internationally famous (from the heavyweight boxer and 'bad boy' Mike Tyson to the Argentine footballer Diego Maradona). Che Guevara as a brand name was cleverly exploited as a symbol of the 'rebel' consumer – the canny individual who can see through the game of the big companies, and is able to assert his or her own distinctive individuality. On the other, his name and image have been used to represent a challenge to authority in any guise, a 'cry for freedom' that no longer has any specific meaning to it.

In this short biography, my aim is to provide readers with enough information about Che Guevara's life and writings to be able to make up their own minds about his value to them today.

He was a man in a hurry to learn about the world, and to put what he had learned to the test. More than forty years after his death, Che Guevara continues to fascinate and intrigue people all over the world. This book tries to bring to the fore the man and the context in which he lived and fought, to provide information for a better appreciation of him than one based solely on an image on a wall or T-shirt.