Che Guevara and the Hombre Nuevo in Cuba
The Ideological Reformation of Foreign Policy

Robert Christensen

Abstract

Ernesto “Che” Guevara's contributions to Cuban foreign policy have been underestimated. Much has been written about his direct actions, but it was his indirect contributions that made the most dramatic impact. This paper explores Cuba's foreign policy as a derivative of Guevara's “new man” ideology by arguing that Cuba's support of guerrilla movements abroad was an outgrowth of domestic policy rather than an unprecedented top-down policy from Castro and his government. Guevara's writings and example of how to be a “new man”, fueled by government support, fundamentally changed the Cuban conception of themselves, the world, and their role in it. This new consciousness was evidenced by the thousands of Cubans who volunteered for internationalist missions. Accordingly, the Cuban Revolution became something both national and international; a Cuban man could fight in Bolivia to create a Bolivia for the Bolivians because he was a good Cuban. This paper also explores the abandonment of certain aspects of Guevara's thought, such as his unsuccessful military strategy of *foquismo*, by later generations who continued to venerate him as a hero. Thus, Guevara was selectively remembered by the Cuban government and people. The research also offers insight into the interaction of national heroes and ideology with international relations in a way that shows that they are inseparable.
When most people think of the Cold War threat to third world capitalism, they think of the USSR or China. The truth of the matter is that a fairly small island with only a fraction of the population of either exercised a wider and deeper practical influence in Latin America and Africa. Beginning in 1959, hundreds of thousands of Cubans went abroad to teach, perform medical services, and fight in a wide swath of foreign countries. Why would a country, struggling to meet its own basic needs, spend so much money and effort on such a costly enterprise? Part of the answer is the influence of Ernesto “Che” Guevara.

Ernesto Guevara was born in 1928 in Rosario, Argentina to a moderately wealthy family. While in his younger years he trained as a doctor, traveled through various parts of Latin America and became converted to the principles of communism. In Mexico he met a young Fidel Castro and joined with his group of Cuban exiles in their attempt to oust then dictator of Cuba Fulgencio Batista. The young Argentine rose to the rank of comandante (major), leading the rebel forces to victory in the Battle of Santa Clara against an enemy many times their number. After the revolution he worked in several government ministries before returning to the battlefield first in the Congo and then in Bolivia, where he was killed on October 28, 1967.

Guevara's ideology and example influenced Cuban thought in a way that made the government's internationalist policies the natural course of action. Guevara promoted the idea that Cubans had to become hombres nuevos, or “new men”, fundamentally changed in their nature to desire the welfare of the whole over the individual. This type of man would be willing to sacrifice his life in order to liberate his brothers in countries like Bolivia, and for having done so “El Che” passed into myth as the perfect example of Cuban masculinity. This would later help inspire many Cubans to follow his path and fight in such places as Angola, where they played a key role in achieving victory over invading South African troops.

Guevara's prolific writings aided not only the development of internationalism in Cuba but also the tactics and revolutionary theory used by Cubans once they were involved. He is the principal architect of a strategy for revolution known as focolismo by which the hombre nuevo could bring socialism and freedom to the world. Guevara explains the core of the theory as follows: “a small group of determined fighters with the support of the people and without fear of death can, if necessary, defeat a
regular and disciplined army.”\textsuperscript{1} Essentially, the determination of the guerrilla group (called a \textit{foco}) could overcome strategic disadvantages to establish a beachhead of revolutionary consciousness among local populations. The new ideology would then spread quickly as the rebels accelerated the development of oppressive conditions through their guerrilla activities. Reacting to these conditions, the locals would naturally join the rebels in exponentially increasing numbers, as had occurred in Cuba, and success would be assured. Guevara put this theory into practice by fighting in revolutions in the Congo and Bolivia, where he met his untimely end. Similar failures accompanied the majority of \textit{foco} based rebellions, which were increasingly avoided after Guevara's death. His most important contribution however, was not in theory but in providing revolutionaries with a patron saint, “San Ernesto of Latin America”\textsuperscript{2}.

Most people who know of Ernesto Guevara today are more acquainted with his mass produced image than his life. Che's image today is different from what it was before his face adorned thousands of t-shirts; he now is a larger than life figure who seems more than a man. His ideology and personality inspired a generation of Cubans to fight for the revolution. He continues to inspire the rising generation to do the same, but for different reasons. Before Che's ideas could take on a wider appeal however, they had to be reduced to simpler components. As a result, the global “Che” of today can appeal to leftist Zapatistas in Mexico and right-wing Hezbollah militants alike, both of which display him proudly in their heroic pantheon.

In short, Guevara affected past and present revolutions both theoretically and as a symbol. Through a review of his writing and actions, this essay will show that Guevara's contribution to Cuban military internationalism was in inspiring Cubans to act and providing a theory that detracted from the practical success of their actions.

To properly address Guevara's contributions to Cuban internationalism it is necessary to separate them into two categories: his contributions to revolutionary theory and his role as a symbol of revolution. In the first section of this essay I will outline Guevara's theory and its practical successes and shortcomings. Specifically I will consider the cases of Cuba,


Che Guevara and the Hombre Nuevo in Cuba

Bolivia, Guinea-Bissau and Angola to demonstrate how *foquismo* was (or was not) applied and the varying results. In the second section I will discuss the role of Guevara as a symbol: the role his ideology and image played in promoting Cuban internationalism and the subsequent myth that developed around him.

**Guevara's Revolutions and Theory**

Guevara's practical theories for revolution were enormously influential; his book *Guerrilla Warfare* constituted the main text of study for Latin American insurgents and counter-insurgents for many years. Over time this theory evolved and was adapted to make up for initial over-generalizations, but several key elements were maintained. Namely, that a small group of determined fighters could create the conditions necessary for popular uprising and, with the support of the people, defeat larger armies. The guerrillas also had to be morally virtuous if they were to inspire the masses to support them. Guevara's philosophy played heavily into the development of *foquismo*; in his mind it was not only logical but the best approach to achieving victory. This section will consider the actual effectiveness of the *foco* model by examining the events of Bolivian and African guerrilla conflicts while unfolding the experiences and ideas that gave birth to it. This will show that the model was the product of dramatic over-generalizations, ignored important details of the events it was drawn from and was unsuitable for application outside Cuba. This section will also show the distinction between Guevara's projects and other Cuban-sponsored revolutions in order to establish Guevara's ineffectiveness as a revolutionary leader.

It is perhaps easy to combine Guevara's influence on the theory of future revolutions and his role as part of their heroic pantheon, but the two are distinctly unique. The distinction can be seen by the degree to which his theory was implemented. The role of “El Che” as a symbol will be discussed later in second section of the essay. Guevara's theoretical model was followed more strictly during the approximate years of his lifetime, roughly the years 1959-1967. These years were characterized by overt optimism about the success of communist revolutions in Latin America, both based on the *foco* model and in a more general sense. Communists
and their opponents in Latin America all agreed that the conditions were ripe, despite the revolutions’ consistent failure.\(^3\)

For the purpose of this paper Cuba’s support for foreign revolutions will be separated into two categories: those Guevara led, and those he did not. These differ significantly in that the movements Guevara led stressed his idealistic revolutionary ideology more heavily than the other cases, which were much more directly involved in meeting practical needs. In the situations when Guevara was not present, Cuba supported local leaders, following their direction in how Cuba was involved and allowing the revolution to develop in a more organic manner that let theory adapt to local circumstances.\(^4\)

Two major works stand out among the development of *foquismo*: Guevara’s *Guerrilla Warfare* and Regis Debray’s “The Long March”. *Guerrilla Warfare* first appeared in 1961, soon after the victory in Cuba, expounding the tactics that the guerrillas had developed during their time in the Cuban Sierra Maestra as well as Guevara’s personal meditations on the guerrilla as a person. The impact was tremendous; for the first time there was a revolutionary alternative to Leninism considered viable for Latin America. A *foco* could take up arms without waiting for any necessary objective condition besides an oppressive regime. In this *foquismo* differed from the diverse schools of Marxism of the 1950’s, all of which coincided in counting as prerequisites the development of productive forces, creation of a party apparatus, and sundry other conditions. The war began; the guerrillas would use the revolution itself as a process to transform the country to meet the requisite conditions of mass uprising.\(^5\) This proactive approach was a reflection of Guevara’s own developmental experiences. Based on the “I will overcome” mindset developed from living with asthma and his ideological radicalization through combat, he overemphasized the process of revolution over other stages of socialism.\(^6\) The personal nature of the experiences Guevara drew

---

3 This point is obvious from the desperate conflict between the two sides. Why fight so hard for a lost cause?
5 This was one of the three main lessons that Guevara felt the Cuban Revolution could teach the rest of Latin America. See Ernesto Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*. (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1997), 50.
6 Many people have speculated that Guevara’s emphasis on willpower and recklessness were based in his own experiences in overcoming his asthma. An account of this can be
his theory from points to its eventual discredit as a universal model, for
the monolithic changes wrought in people through guerrilla warfare were
necessarily experienced differently by other people.

Combat had further implications for success in bringing institutional
change after victory. “For Che”, commented one combatant, “the
guerrilla war wasn't just a military proving-ground, but also a cultural and
educational one. He was concerned with forming the future cadres of the
Revolution.” Combat, then, was the first step in creating the Cuban
culture of revolution” in which he would later figure so prominently. It
also suggests that for Guevara, politics, warfare, and culture were a
complex tangle of mutually influential processes that historians should not
try to arbitrarily separate.

“The Long March” first appeared in the 1965 Leftist Political Review, and
incorporated the experiences of the revolution since then. It's publication
in the journal helped bring the ideas of Guerrilla Warfare to the wider
audience of leftists around the world. In this foquismo began to gain a
reputation, if not acceptance, among the international community.

The method of securing popular support was the most important part of
creating a revolution. One of foquismo’s main contributions to the dialogue
of revolutionary theory was in focusing on the peasantry rather than the
urban proletariat as the most important support group in Latin America.
This is a window into larger debates in worldwide communism. José
Carlos Mariátegui was the first to suggest that Latin America would
require a different path towards communism than the more industrialized
parts of the world, theorizing that peasants, particularly the indigenous
populations, would be a more suitable base. This was significant in that it
broke with the prevailing theory among the predominantly USSR-aligned
communist parties in Latin America, who more closely followed an urban
proletariat Leninist model. Mariátegui’s theory actually aligned much more
with Mao than with Lenin, a contrast being debated among theorists the world over at the time. As Castro, Guevara, and the rest of the 26 July Movement in Cuba formed their strategy for taking power in Cuba, they reasoned that since the majority of the population was rural and quite possibly even more exploited than the urban masses, the guerrillas would be more successful if they drew support from the peasantry, which would also allow them to utilize the terrain of the countryside to help give them a combat advantage. Guevara was already well-versed in Mariátegui’s theory and a strong adherent to it before going to Cuba; his personal influence on Fidel Castro would have allowed him to mold their tactics along those lines. In this way the Cuban revolutionary experience incorporated contemporary debates and propelled them to new development through their propagation in *foquismo.*

The Cuban Revolution succeeded largely because Cuban peasants supported it. They provided food, recruits, and information, and helped the rebels move supplies and troops discreetly while contributing to the misinformation of Batista's troops. More than anything, this allowed the rebels to survive the initial stages of the war, which was the “essential task of the guerrilla fighter” and their first objective, as Guevara later wrote. It was also significant enough of a victory to demonstrate Batista's military incapability and buy the rebels the necessary time to organize themselves in the sierra and incorporate urban movements. That said, it is necessary that the urban movement's importance is not downplayed. This was one of the key faults in the codification of *foquismo* and Guevara's application of it, especially in Bolivia. It is also necessary to remember that it was not, as it may at first appear, a top down restructuring of the country to reflect the desires of a few individuals. Rather, it was a movement that enjoyed a level of popular support even before the guerrilla's arrival from Mexico. This support steadily increased during the rebels' time in the Sierra


10 One aspect of peasant support that is particularly interesting is the gendered division of activities. Women transported weapons by hiding them under their skirts. They also posed as guerrilla's wives to help them move around the countryside unmolested and unsuspected, because a man traveling with a woman was thought unlikely to be a guerrilla. Julie D. Shayne. *The Revolution Question: Feminism in El Salvador, Chile, and Cuba.* New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 2; 5; 8.

Maestra and exploded as they marched west, continuing strong all through the early years.\(^\text{12}\)

Guevara’s main method for attracting popular support was agrarian reform. This was the key tenet of the 26th of July movement during their struggle, and Guevara acknowledges the vital role that it played in garnering popular support. He does not claim that the rebels even proposed the idea; the peasants compelled the rebels to enact the law. It formed a sort of pact between the two and solidified their relationship.\(^\text{13}\) Not only did he see land reform as just and popular, but also as one of the best ways to stimulate industrial growth in the new state. Impoverished peasants would finally be able to afford non-essential goods, and therefore create a market for domestic production.\(^\text{14}\) The future influence of Guevara and Cuba’s focus on agrarian reform is evident in other Latin American revolutions that followed. In El Salvador, the reform followed similar terms as in Cuba: land was redistributed in areas the rebels conquered as one of the first priorities.\(^\text{15}\)

It is interesting to note that Guevara felt that a different course was necessary for Africa. In a speech at a congress for the liberation of Africa in Dar es Salaam during his 64-65 trip to Africa, Guevara downplayed the need for “long term mobilization of the peasant masses”. Also present at the conference were Jonas Savimbi, who would later lead UNITA, and Eduardo Mondlane of Mozambique, both of whom strongly disagreed with Guevara's interpretation of the situation and preferred a Maoist peasant-based revolution. A *foco* type revolution had failed disastrously in Mozambique only a few months before and ultimately it was a mass peasant revolution that succeeded there.\(^\text{16}\) It certainly seems strange that


\(^{14}\) Ibid. 93.


Guevara found conditions ripe for a working class based revolution in Africa when he did not see it as such in the more developed countries of Latin America. It is peculiarities like this one that lead Michael Casey to speculate that perhaps the reason Guevara was so interested in foreign revolutions was because he wanted to prove his theory. Similarly, he could have been acquiescing to Soviet pressure to diminish Chinese influence by de-emphasizing the distinctly Chinese theory of peasant revolution.

Where Guevara most broke from Leninism however, was in his belief that the traditional concept of a pre-existing party organization was not necessary for the mobilization of the masses. These organizations could be just as well created by guerrillas during the conflict. Guevara felt that the efforts of many pre-existing organizations were often misdirected and out of touch with the masses. For him, the keenest example of this is the failure of the Cuban general strike of April 9, 1958. He expressed his frustrations with the experience in his address to the Rebel Army in January 1959 as follows: “the masses were led down false paths because their leaders did not create revolutionary spirit and unity.” Afterward it seems that the 26th July Movement took over the job and helped the workers organize more effectively. Significantly, Guevara said that this came as a result of the movement realizing that the revolution belonged to no group but to the whole Cuban people. This was a process he attempted to mirror in taking the revolution to a worldwide scale.

Notwithstanding the revolution's universal inclusiveness, Guevara believed that the peasants were the key to success in Latin America. He recognized that they did “everything the rebel soldier could not do” for the movement. The reason for his failure in Bolivia was that the peasants responded to the guerrillas very differently than he expected. He records in his diary that most of the peasants were “terrorized by our presence”, and largely uncooperative as a result, making it very difficult to obtain food and impossible to obtain recruits. Guevara writes that the only reason they were sold food at all was because the guerrillas were willing to pay outrageously high prices and the peasants believed the rebels would leave more quickly if they simply acquiesced. Acquiescence

---

17 Casey, *Che’s Afterlife*, 54.
19 Ibid. 89.
20 Ryan, *The Fall of Che Guevara*, 90.
was not enough to bring in recruits however; not one of the peasants joined the group.22 Furthermore, the people of the eastern lowlands had no conception of national identity, as Bolivia's president René Barrientos lamented, and so were little inclined to risk their lives for anyone else (government or rebels) in order to improve the country.23 Even positive coercion could not win the Bolivians over. The free services performed by the 26th July Movement in Cuba that earned Guevara the peasant's trust and the nickname “sacamuelas” (tooth puller) were unsuccessful in Bolivia. Guevara's diary reveals that the peasants were willing to refuse treatment and give false information of impending army advances just to speed the guerrillas' departure.24

Failure in Bolivia was the result of a combination of more factors than just lack of peasant support, important as it was. These factors include Guevara's oversimplification of the Cuban model, poor planning and execution, and a misunderstanding of the situation in Bolivia. Guevara's policies and headstrong attitude impeded alliance with local pre-existing organizations. For someone so purportedly disinterested in personal glory he was quite determined on personally leading the rebellions as much as he could. While in the Congo, Guevara worked for a time more or less independently of the movement's leader Laurent Kabila. After Kabila's arrival in Guevara's region, the Argentinian quickly deemed him incapable of any serious achievement, preferring his own methods of operation, and became visibly frustrated. This had the effect of further demoralizing Cubans and Congolese troops alike.25 Shortly thereafter, Che and the Cubans left the Congo. In Bolivia there were initial attempts made to cooperate with the Bolivian Communist Party under the leadership of Mario Monje, but these were soon frustrated by a dispute between Monje and Guevara over who would lead the guerrilla band. Monje believed that, as general secretary of the party, it was his right and duty to lead the revolution, at least until it spread outside of Bolivia (as they believed it inevitably would). Guevara refused to accept the condition however, and broke off ties to the party, effectively isolating the group.26 He also tried to set up his own support network utilizing Moisés Guevara, the leader of

---

22 Guevara, Bolivian Diary, 113. and Ryan, The Fall of Che Guevara, 78.
23 Ryan, The Fall of Che Guevara, 43.
24 Guevara, Bolivian Diary, 114.
a Bolivian communist splinter group and rival of Mario Monje, but they were completely unsuccessful at finding even one recruit. Eventually this course of action was abandoned and Moisés Guevara rejoined the guerrillas in the jungle, though he was not utilized for any significant leadership post within the guerrilla unit. Che Guevara had complete control of the column and managed the affair personally with little to no collaboration from Moisés. Granted, the Bolivian was certainly no military commander, especially of the caliber that could compare with the experience and iconic power of “El Che”, but the group's foreign leadership could only have contributed to the peasants' fear of the group. This further worked to deprive them of the necessary peasant support base.

One example of poor planning was the selection of Ñancahuazú as the center of the foco. Both Debray (who was working as an informant for the group) and Guevara concurred that the site was unfavorable, being positioned too far from centers of population and discontent. Guevara chose the site in the end from the combination of fear of betrayal by Mario Monje and the Communist Party of Bolivia, who knew their other sites' locations, and (perhaps incidentally) because the Bolivian Army discovered the location of their base camp prematurely, preventing their transfer of the camp to a locale further north. 27

Another reason for Guevara's failure in Bolivia was his misinterpretation of conditions there. The rallying banner of the 26th of July Movement in Cuba had been agrarian land reform. In Bolivia, significant land reform had already taken place. In a way, they already had their revolution. Furthermore, the industrial workers were unable to organize. Although miners and students in the capital supported the guerrillas, no unified movement ever emerged from it. 28

In the end, the guerrillas were defeated. On October 8, 1967 the Bolivian Army surrounded Guevara's tiny force with 1800 soldiers, quickly defeating them. Almost all were captured and killed, including Guevara himself. His death made his legend more viable, allowing him to be commodified and appeal to wider audiences. Shortly before his death, he wrote a letter to the Tricontinental Congress of third world revolutionaries which prophetically outlined his eventual fate: “Wherever death may surprise us, let it be welcome, provided that this, our battle cry,

28 Ibid. 98-99.
may have reached some receptive ear and another hand may be extended to wield our weapons and other men be ready to intone the funeral dirge with the staccato singing of the machine-guns and new battle cries of war and victory.”29 Such was to be the case for “El Che”.

Another of Guevara’s significant contributions to Latin American revolutionary theory is the same idea that motivated him and many of the other Cubans to go to Bolivia in the first place: the ideas embodied in the hombre nuevo, which will be touched in greater detail further on. Guevara did not believe that these were only the key to a happy, moral life however, but also to military success. The most militarily successful guerrillas will be those who best embodied the hombre nuevo because physical strength comes from the power of the will and the mind. This led to the blurring of the line between military theory and Marxist theory, with results like those Guevara had in Bolivia. According to this theory, a group of “ideologically sound” rebels would be wise to alienate themselves from any existing communist organizations that were not ideologically solid. This was another reason Guevara and the ELN (Ejercito para la liberación nacional) broke with Mario Monje and the Bolivian Communist Party (PCB). They, aligned with the Soviet Bloc Guevara often criticized, held very different beliefs about how and when the Bolivian revolution should take place. Accordingly, they would be a disadvantage to the group and unnecessary to success.

The break with the Bolivian Communist Party also served to scuttle any potential coordination with the miners or urban populace. In order for Castro and the barbudos who fought in the Sierra of Cuba to maneuver themselves into the main positions of power in Cuba they de-emphasized the importance of the urban movements who were necessary for their success. In codifying and applying the theory behind it, Guevara neglected their support and relied almost entirely on the rural movements. Much of this can be attributed to his preoccupation with the fight and his idea that urban areas were “unfavorable ground” for guerrilla warfare. Since urban and semi-urban areas were easier for the regime to utilize and more favorable to life in general, guerrilla warfare would be most effective in areas where the iron will of the guerrillas to endure harsh conditions could be maximized.30 After the break with the PCB, the ELN made only lackluster attempts at working with urban proletariat, and these were met

30 Guevara, Guerrilla Warfare, 69.
with apathy. This was only one of many factors that contributed to failure in Bolivia, but it was likely the choice that did most to negatively impact their success.

Cuba treated revolutionary conflicts that Guevara did not lead in a very different manner. In the cases of Guinea-Bissau and Algeria for example, Cubans simply provided supplies, training, personnel and advice in exactly the quantity and method prescribed by local leadership. Victor Dreke, Guevara's second in command in the Congo, was later made commander of the Cuban operation in Guinea-Bissau. He said of the experience, “it was their country and their war... Sometimes he (Bissau-Guinean rebel leader Amilco Cabral) followed my advice, sometimes he didn’t”, and the Cubans accepted that and worked with it.31 In these revolutions the Cubans allowed the movement to develop from the ground up and only facilitated them materially by working with existing organizations rather than forcing an ideological and theoretical model on them or creating a new organization, as happened in Bolivia and the Congo. When the Cubans allowed a more organic development of the revolution, they were much more successful. A number of these projects succeeded, including Angola, Guinea-Bissau, Nicaragua, and other countries, while not one Cuban-commanded project succeeded. This was no silver bullet for success; there were still many more native-led revolutions that Cuba sponsored which failed than succeeded, but it certainly is a crucial factor in understanding the failures and successes of Cuban sponsored revolutions.

It is significant that many of the successful revolutions were contemporary with Guevara's two failed attempts. This shows that Cuban policy did not shift as a result of failure, but rather consisted of coexisting elements, one of which died in the jungles of Bolivia in 1967 with its main proponent and others that continued afterward. Cuba was already involved in more than one front when Guevara died but did not withdraw from any except Bolivia. Rather, Cuban numbers in Guinea-Bissau for example, remained constant from April 1967 to the end of the conflict.32 Many fighters from the aborted Congo affair went on to be involved in other international conflicts.33

32 Ibid. 54 and 61.
33 Ibid. 54.
Guevara's image was no less present after his death. His theories were not taken as seriously in practice, but this led to greater overall success for revolutions. In fact, one may contend that because revolutionary theory was more successful in practice during these years, it broadened appeal and drew more people into the Guevara myth than his strict theory had. In 1970 Bolivians took up arms once again in the revolutionary cause, this time with a mind to compensate for Guevara's theoretical mistakes and avenge his death. They were defeated with even less difficulty than Guevara, being inexperienced university students with no military background or training in arms.

After Guevara's complete failure in Bolivia, Castro and others in Cuba began to heed the criticism of the model directed at it from countries such as China for the past decade (only responding discreetly, of course) and began to modify their theory to better account for factors outside the determination and ideological purity of the band of guerrillas. In a way, they began to choose their battles more carefully, not throwing their support behind every single leftist revolution in order to build economic ties. One good example of this is Mexico, in which Castro agreed not to arm rebels in exchange for maintaining political and economic ties. Historian Jorge Domínguez describes the situation as an agreement “to advance other, more important goals”. It is true however, that Cuba had little to gain economically from involvement in countries like Bolivia and Guinea-Bissau, but these were mixed in with others like Angola, which became a major supplier of oil to Cuba. It was during these years that the Cubans found some success in their support for international revolutions, to the discredit of the strict Guevarian model. In the end, rather than leave them a perfect model, Guevara had left an incomplete one with a good case study to show how it could be improved. More importantly, he left the legacy of a man not afraid to die for an international cause. This would motivate future Cubans and leftist rebels from all over the world to stand up and fight against oppression.

34 Mexico was the only member of the OAS not to break diplomatic ties with Cuba.
“El Che” As a Symbol

The most significant way Guevara affected Cuba's foreign policy was by providing a definition and example of what an ideal post-revolutionary Cuban should be. He was so successful at it, although not completely intentionally, that he came to now be regarded as the most widely-disseminated political icon in the world. But how could a person with such radical ideas and esoteric philosophy attain such a popular appeal? As historian Richard Fletcher has noted, “national myths have to simplify if they are to be widely accessible and acceptable.” His ideas were often reduced to generalizations in order to package them for the masses. This is inherent in the nature of popular movements; broader principles allow the average person to identify more deeply with an icon or ideology. What makes Che unique is that he is also the measuring stick for many of his followers. Che's simplification allowed him the broad appeal he now commands for Cubans and non-Cubans alike, for as a myth rather than a man he can fit more neatly into what people are seeking in a symbol. The ideas that survive the straining process are for the most part lofty political ideals with little specific application, such as anti-materialism, and are easily applied to the new man and other state objectives.

Through official sponsorship and popular appeal, the “hombre nuevo” became the ideal of masculinity for Cubans. In simplest terms, this ideal was to “be like Che”: brave, authentic, well-read, emotionally connected, and committed to the welfare of the entire human race. This is significant for understanding Cuba's involvement in international guerrilla struggles because this was something the “new man” would naturally do. For true peace in Cuba and in the heart of the hombre nuevo, it would be necessary for the world to pass through violent revolution to put in place a socialist government, eliminating oppression, suffering, and ignorance.

The hombre nuevo is by definition an internationalist. Fidel Castro related it to the hombre nuevo as follows: “. . . the spirit of solidarity and the spirit of internationalism . . . are the most outstanding features of the new man.” The hombre nuevo seems almost tailor-made to be directed at international solidarity, and perhaps it was. Guevara no doubt wrote his own positive

38 Ibid, 61-63.
characteristics into the ideal. It would not be too much to claim that he hoped and expected that others would only reach their true potential through internationalism, especially as soldiers, since he had done so. Therefore, his support for internationalism can be seen as a way of providing Cubans with the opportunity to grow.

At the beginning of their revolution however, solidarity with people they had never heard of was one of the last things on Cubans' minds. It came out of its revolution in a spirit of nationalistic fervor, seeing their victory as a distinctly Cuban achievement. Guevara saw the success of both the worldwide and Cuban revolution as dependent on Cuba participating in “proletarian internationalism”. “Proletarian internationalism is a duty, but it is also a revolutionary necessity. This is the way we educate our people.” It then became necessary to convert the revolutionary momentum from nationalism to internationalism, and in order to do so Guevara faced several key problems. The first hurdle was the radicalization of the revolution; turning a revolution that originated as opposition to capitalist exploitation to one that opposed capitalism as a whole. The cultivation of internationalism was part of this process. In strict Marxist terms, the Cuban proletariat had to be redefined as one particle orbiting the nucleus of proletarian internationalism rather than its own nucleus. One notable example of how Guevara internationalized the Cuban revolution is in his famous speech in the Organization of American States Conference at Punta del Este, Uruguay in 1962. He drew on the writing of José Martí (the father of Cuban nationalism) to say that economic and political union could only be achieved on a worldwide scale, not even on a regional one. By citing Martí, he made internationalism into a Cuban cause.

The use of Martí reflects not only the nationalist nature of the government's program but also its cultural aim. Creating a national culture of revolution was in fact the most important goal of the Castro government. Although national cultural distinctiveness may appear to stand at odds with the idea of a united international proletariat, Cuban

40 Yinghong Cheng goes so far as to call it a “self-proclaimed radical/democratic nationalist revolution”. See Yinghong Cheng. Creating the “New Man”: From Enlightenment Ideals to Socialist Realities. (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2009), 127.
leadership did not see it this way. They were able to reconcile the
difference by deferring to Lenin’s explanation: “proletariat culture does
not abolish national culture; it gives it content; and, on the other hand,
national culture does not abolish proletariat culture, it gives it form.”
Therefore, promoting internationalism with nationalistic symbols and
language did not contradict their Marxist ideology.44

Cuba believed that the best way to progress as a nation was to focus on
people rather than economics. In this they differed from their main ally,
the USSR, which saw the development of people as naturally following
the development of production. The Cuban regime was convinced that
once a proper revolutionary culture could be established the economy
would explode with growth. Disagreement was no problem for Cuba
however, “for them, it was just another opportunity to make history”.45
This reveals some of the tension that would later be played out relating to
their foreign policy.

Internationalism was no new concept in Marxism but still created tension
with Cuba’s most significant supporter, the USSR. It stood directly in
conflict with the “socialism in one country” policy of then Soviet premier
Nikita Kruschev. This idea stated that socialism had to be fully
implemented in the USSR before it could be properly exported, which
fundamentally opposes the Cubans’ actions. Although Washington DC
saw Cuba as receiving all its orders from Moscow, it is important to
understand that Cuban foreign policy cannot be reduced to simply being a
function of Soviet policy. Although the two countries coincided on many
issues, Cuba pursued its own directions that often aggravated and
frustrated the Soviets, especially in the period between ’59 and ’67
(Guevara’s lifetime). This makes the fact that Cubans went out all the
more significant because they risked relations with their main trading
partner and committed so much time and so many resources of their own
initiative.46

44 Bunck. *Fidel Castro and the Quest for a Revolutionary Culture in Cuba*, 2.
Vladimir Lenin in Manuel Jorge. *Para compreender Angola: Da política à economia*. (Lisbon:
Publicações Dom Quixote, 1998), 168.
46 Historians have argued over Cuba-Soviet relations with regard to internationalism
mainly as part of a political agenda. Although there are many books written (principally by
Cuban expatriates) to suggest Cuba acted as a Soviet pawn or in self-interest, none have
argued so convincingly as Piero Gleijeses, who refutes this claim in his book *Conflicting
Che Guevara and the Hombre Nuevo in Cuba

To reduce Guevara's contributions to merely his practical model for revolution is to miss the larger point. As James Petras argues, Guevara's ethics and political theory were his most enduring legacy. Petras also recognizes a fundamental link between Guevara's revolutionary theory and his political theory. Che believed that in order for a society to rid itself of exploitation it had to be remade through the direct processes of revolution, mirroring and negating the imperialist processes that had formed the exploitative system. In this he challenged the inevitability of organic development of the “imperialist” system being preached by developmentalist economists from developed countries. What Petras does not acknowledge however, is that Guevara's military tactics were actually derived from his understanding of politics. In other words, Guevara's theory for how to make a revolution tactically successful was a product of his political and philosophical views mixed with his experiences in the Sierra Maestra.

Guevara's most significant role in later revolutions, like those of El Salvador and Nicaragua, was as a symbol or sort of secular saint. *Guerrilla Warfare*'s real value was its symbolic brandishing of Che, and thus was seen as more of a holy book than a combat manual. Guevara's image stood more independently of his revolutionary theory after his death. One significant use of his image was that of Leonel Rugama, Sandinista leader, would later say that “to be like Che is to be a Sandinista”. Regardless, Guevara became the symbol that revolutionary Latin America needed. Patrick Symmes writes, “Che was a necessity, not a possibility; if he hadn't existed, they would have invented him anyways, and often did.” He filled a hole Latin America did not know it had.

Guevara was the perfect example of an internationalist. As an Argentine fighting in the Cuban Revolution he was already set apart, but this became even clearer when Argentine journalist Jorge Masetti visited him in the Sierra Maestra in 1958. When questioned why he was fighting in Cuba,

---

48 Casey, *Che's Afterlife*, 55.
Guevara pointed out that the US (which he considered his personal enemy) was meddling in Cuban affairs already, helping Batista. Che also told him, “I consider my fatherland to be not only Argentina, but all of America.” Che justified his involvement in the Cuban conflict as a response to US imperialism— one global force to combat another. Perhaps most telling of his, Masetti also noted that Guevara had lost his Argentine accent, which had been replaced by a mixture of Cuban and Mexican.51

After the revolution’s victory he spent a few years working extra hours as a government minister for a salary well below norm, after which he took off again to fight in other places. Not only that, he famously renounced his Cuban citizenship in a letter to Fidel Castro, preventing his future return and sealing his fate as a permanent revolutionary. Without Cuban citizenship (his welcome in Argentina long-since worn out) he effectively had no home to return to, making him an internationalist in the most basic sense of the word. “Che belonged nowhere, which also meant he belonged everywhere.”52 It is for this type of reason that historian Andrew Sinclair claims that although Castro was capable of being a permanent revolutionary within Cuba, Guevara could only be one outside of it.53 Such was Guevara’s drive that it leads Keberlein Gutiérrez to claim that Castro could not have stopped him from fighting in Bolivia even if he wanted to.54 It follows naturally that any man trying to “be like El Che” would be willing to sacrifice his time, goods, or life for this end.

The internationalist element of Cuban policy was also supported by the fact that it drew support from other foreigners. Important figures in the international communist community like Régis Debray and Tamara Bunke praised and supported Guevara in his internationalist endeavors. Both went on to participate as informants in the Bolivia guerrilla operation. The combatants in the Bolivian foco itself consisted of participants from Peru, Cuba, Argentina, and obviously Bolivia.55 Notable intellectuals like Frenchmen Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir also threw their weight behind the Cuban Revolution. Sartre has even been quoted validating the hombre nuevo in his praise for Guevara, calling him “the most cultivated man … of the revolution”; “the most complete human being of

51 Anderson, Che Guevara, 309.
52 See Casey, Che’s Afterlife, 58-59.
Che Guevara and the Hombre Nuevo in Cuba

our age”.56 If every Cuban could be like Guevara then, what a country it would be!

It was these principles that motivated many Cubans to participate in international conflicts, which were done on a strict volunteer basis and with little of the compensation typically given to US soldiers fighting abroad. Volunteer labor was in fact one of the key points Guevara directly addressed in his writing.57 The idea that so many Cubans fought and died without themselves or Cuba receiving much material reward may be astonishing to most of us, but to be true “new men”, they would have to be motivated by something higher than money.58

That being said, there are definite questions about the altruism of Cuban policy and volunteers. There are recognizable benefits to internationalism that may have been a more important motivating factor in Cuban participation. The government received millions each year from Angola in exchange for the Cubans stationed there, propping up an economy desperately in need of foreign currency.59 On an individual level, the government provided some material incentives for working abroad, like access to housing during shortages, promotions (and most importantly meaning raises) for soldiers, and access to special goods not available to other citizens. It also provided Cubans an opportunity to travel, a privilege neither afforded nor affordable to the average worker through other means. As Juan del Águila said, “In effect, as long as the costs of serving abroad were not intolerably high, and with the expectation of

58 Of course, the actual “volunteer” status of the Expeditionary Force can be questioned. Cuba often used informal intimidation to coerce its citizens into patriotism. One such example is the story of the internment of Guevara’s remains in Cuba. Workers were not forced to attend, though encouraged to do so, but those who did not were passed over for raises and promotions. In some cases they were even replaced in their jobs when a more patriotic comrade could be found. One such event was the internment of Che’s body after it was found many years after his death, recounted in Symmes. *Chasing Che*, 292-295.
material rewards present, internationalism became a vehicle through which unsatisfied desires could be realized.”60

It is unclear to what exact degree or proportion the Cubans who participated in international operations were motivated by self-interest or hombre nuevo ideology. Furthermore, lack of access to or nonexistence of government reports has prevented the analysis of actual costs and income to the Cuban government or of public opinion about these issues. Notwithstanding, it is certain that a significant amount of Cubans participated in international missions for ideological reasons, if for nothing else but the mountains of testimonial books and articles written on the subject by participants.

Aside from grandiose monuments, lauds in nearly every one of Castro’s numerous public speeches, and an endless stream of publications about Guevara, Cuban schools today still teach children how to “be like Che” so that they become a society of “new men and women”. Thus, in many ways, Cuba’s support for these movements may be seen as a derivative of domestic policy; Castro certainly understood the link between the two.61 If the people could be made into “new men and women”, Cuba would achieve more as a state. The same process intended to make Cuba great was also intended to make many people willing to, and often fulfill, the call to go abroad.

For the most part, Guevara was not intentionally creating a personality cult as grandiose as it came to be; this was done by those around him, especially after his death. There were a few notable examples of his embellishment however. One such embellishment is how Guevara censored and rewrote a lot of the Cuban experience in his publications on it. Clear exaggerations and intentional obscuration of truth are evident by comparing Che’s actual diary to the publication. He was often far more critical and less idealistic in his journals, a strong contrast to the pure idealism that today constitutes his myth.62

60 Ibid. 130.
62 Casey, Che’s Afterlife, 53-54.
Che Guevara and the Hombre Nuevo in Cuba

Guevara's other diaries were also heavily edited by prior to their release, though this time by the state. The image presented to the Cuban masses is the product of official lauds supported by documentation carefully edited assembled by the Centro de Estudios Che Guevara (CECG), run by his widow Aleida March. As the CECG website states, one of their express goals is to “watch over and control the image of Comandante Ernesto 'Che' Guevara so that it is reproduced for proper use, coordinating as a guiding center for the organs and organisms of the state and its subordinate entities.” The picture they pass along is a figure who is almost larger than life. Rather than a man he is a sort of demigod, hardly subject to human limitations. His diary of a trip across South America at 23 is one of the few sources that reveals his humanity. This diary reveals a revolutionary yet unpolished; sexist, impulsive and all. Guevara obviously matured much through over the years and during his time as a guerrilla, but it seems unlikely that he (or anyone) could become the man from Reminiscences of the Cuban Revolutionary War.

Perhaps the most vocal of those who contributed to the myth of “El Che” after his death was Fidel Castro. Nearly every one of his speeches contains at least a few references to Che in one of his various capacities, depending on the motive of Castro's speech. This could be education, voluntary labor, or any number of things, Che was capable to do it all. The following quotation is likely the most powerful and clear indication of the degree to which Castro praised Che:

> If we could choose how we would like our revolutionary fighters, our militants, our men, to be, then without hesitation we should say: We want them to be like Che. If we were to choose how we would like the our future generations to be, then we should say: We want them to be like Che. If were to say how we want our children educated, then without hesitation we should say: We want them to be educated within the spirit of Che. If we want to follow the example of a man, of a man who did not belong to these times--an example of the man of the future, I wholeheartedly say that this man, without a single stain on his conduct, attitude, and actions, that example of man, is Che. If we could

---

65 For more info on the editing of Reminiscences on the Cuban Revolutionary War see Anderson, Che Guevara, 213 and the corresponding endnote on 756.
choose how we would like our children to be, then, we must wholeheartedly, and with revolutionary spirit say that we want them to be like Che.”

Guevara was Castro's “one-size-fits-all” cure for any problem, and came to be the same for the rest of Cuba. A particularly striking example of this is the comment of a Cuban man for whom Guevara represented something good in communism that had been lost in modern Cuba. “If he were still alive... none of this would be happening.” Even for Cubans disillusioned with the system and with communism, Guevara was still their savior.

Conclusion

It would be inappropriate to try to explain the entire success or failure of so many revolutions by reducing them to the contributions of one man. Nevertheless, he was a major influence in how people fought, especially during his lifetime. The *foco* theory that Guevara contributed to, though fairly unsuccessful, was enormously influential to both revolutionaries and their opponents, who alike studied his writings profusely to gain the upper hand. The failure of this theory, or at least Guevara's application of it, was the cause of many lives, including Guevara himself. More importantly, Ernesto Guevara gave Latin America a new way to see itself. He helped its people see that it didn't have to always be unfair, and gave them a way to do so. He may not have succeeded in helping bring that to pass by his direct actions, but people today from every side of the political spectrum, from Cuba to Africa, to look to “El Che” for inspiration and courage to stand up and fight for equality. His role as a symbol has both greater depth and width of impact than his theory ever did; his portrait *Guerrillero Heroico* is now the most reproduced image in the world. To finish, I think it is appropriate to return to the question that prompted me to begin this inquiry: who was Che Guevara before he was a t-shirt? The simplest answer is that he was a man in a way the t-shirt image never could be. He had his shortcomings and failures, but the image he left behind is enduring and inspiring to people in Cuba and all the rest of the world.

67 Symmes, Chasing Che, XVII.
68 Casey, Che's Afterlife, 28-32.
Che Guevara and the Hombre Nuevo in Cuba

Bibliography


BBC Online News [http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/ accessed 3 August 2011](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/)


Castro Speech Database. [http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/ch/cuba/castro.html](http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/ch/cuba/castro.html)


Paolucci, Gabriella. “Sartre's Humanism and the Cuban Revolution.” *Theory and Society* 36 no. 3 (June 2007): 245-263.


