

Che Guevara: The Triumph of Mystique

By Henry Butterfield Ryan

Thirty years ago last month, a Bolivian soldier stepped into an unused schoolroom in a dusty hamlet in the Andean foothills of southeastern Bolivia and shot Che Guevara. Thus, he gave the *coup de grace* to Fidel Castro's campaign in the 1960s to spread revolution throughout the hemisphere and helped forge the image of Guevara that lives today—not a totally inaccurate one—of an itinerant knight, a people's champion, a crusader for justice.

Guevara's memory has faded somewhat in the United States (far less in Europe), but it is being revived by a sudden outpouring of books about him (mine among them) to say nothing of Guevara beer mugs, T-shirts and a tourist trip in Bolivia that follows his footsteps through some of the most Godforsaken country in the world.

What is strange about the Guevara myth, with its extraordinary persistence, is how lacking it is in particulars. Most of the writing about Guevara since his death has lacked any real knowledge of what his enemies were thinking and planning in his final year. Until I battled with Washington for the secret U.S. documents that related to him, there was no solid evidence about how the U.S. government (including the CIA and the Green Berets) was responding to his insurgency in Bolivia. With so little information from Washington, authors were able to analyze Guevara endlessly, while mostly ignoring the geopolitical results of his defeat.

His Bolivia campaign, although little more than a seven-month series of backwoods firefights, changed a great deal—not only in the western hemisphere, but in the community of communist nations. Alas for Guevara, they were not the changes he sought:

- Guevara's defeat greatly diminished what the U.S. government considered to be a major challenge to its hegemony in the western hemisphere—Cuba's effort throughout the 1960s to "export revolution" to other Latin American countries. These efforts failed spectacularly, largely because U.S. ability to combat brush-fire wars in this hemisphere improved dramatically after the CIA's disastrous attempt to invade Cuba with an exile army in 1961.

- Castro's hopes of playing a leadership role among third-world communist nations received a sharp setback. The failure proved a landmark event in the decade-long fight between the Kremlin and Cuba. The Soviets believed that it was counterproductive to launch revolutions before their time. The successful revolutionary, they said,

waits and works for propitious conditions, then strikes. The Cubans, in the Kremlin view, were loose cannons, with their insistence that revolutionaries start revolutions at once, using any means available.

The Kremlin despised Guevara's insurgency in Bolivia, about which it had not been consulted, and the orthodox Communist Party in La Paz tried its best to hinder it. Therefore, Guevara's defeat constituted a victory for the traditional communist view of revolution, allowing officials in Moscow—not to mention Washington—to breathe easier.

But when all the geopolitical aspects have been considered, the question remains: Why has Guevara continued to be a popular hero in Europe and the Americas? After a rather humbling start as a guerrilla, Guevara improved and advanced, achieving the rebel's highest rank, major or *commandante*, during the Cuban revolution of the late 1950s. He fought capably and gained

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special renown, especially during his command in the battle of Santa Clara, one of the last of the war.

But other Cuban *commandantes* were equally daring and innovative—Camilo Cienfuegos and Huber Matos, to name two. For advocates of democracy Matos should certainly be one of the most memorable figures of the revolution. He persisted in his efforts to steer it into democratic channels, trying to counter the radical-left tendencies of Guevara and Castro's brother Raul. For his temerity he spent 20 years in Castro's prisons, often under appalling conditions, and now lives in exile in Miami.

Immediately after the Castros' triumph, Guevara was intimately involved in the bloody post-victory purges of hundreds of prisoners that revolted much of the world, however despicable many of the victims had been during the old regime. He then held a series of economic posts in which he sought to free Cuba from its dependence upon sugar exports. The goal was far from foolish but, as Guevara later admitted, his policies were misguided.

Where Guevara shone was in the role of a diplomat, especially on economic issues. He secured deals for Cuba within the communist bloc on terms that no other countries received and that helped Cuba enormously. Still, as a source of charisma, success as a trade negotiator does not rank very high.

Next, he disappeared from public view, but

was, in fact, trying to aid a rebel faction in the Congo in 1965, an effort which proved a fiasco. After the Congo disappointment, Castro's regime needed a revolutionary success badly. Its light was fading among communist nations. So Guevara was sent to Bolivia, where he tried to reproduce the Cuban campaign. But, besides the opposition of local communists, his insurgency faced constant hostility from the peasantry, as Guevara's Bolivian diary makes clear.

Furthermore, the United States aided the Bolivian armed forces, providing some arms, but more importantly importing a team of CIA agents to improve the Bolivians' nearly nonexistent field intelligence. It also flew in 17 Green Berets to train a Bolivian battalion in counterinsurgency warfare. Perhaps worst of all for Cuba's strategy, the United States did not panic and send combat troops: Rather, it kept the engagement small, avoiding the new Vietnam that Guevara hoped to ignite.

As in the amazing popularity of the late Princess of Wales, one must look somewhere besides a record of achievement to discover the roots of mass acclaim. Admittedly, Guevara's men loved him. He was courageous to the point of recklessness, and his style with his men was deeply egalitarian. He never sought personal gain and always shared their hardships. Certainly, that redounds to his memory in Cuba. But beyond?

It may seem simplistic, but I believe that much of Guevara's fame is the result of Alberto Korda's famous picture taken at a 1960 rally in Havana, one of the great photographic images of all time—the picture of Guevara gazing off as if into a great revolutionary future. In the 1960s, this photo was the perfect symbol of the hopes of a generation. A mystique of youth and beauty had gained even more sway than usual, and was linked with a yearning for rebellion, which was expressed in a range of ways from countercultural clothes to bombs planted in university buildings. In that milieu, Korda's photo made Guevara an instant star—young, handsome and dedicated to revolution.

Just as photography largely created the Diana that people loved (and helped destroy her), it also created the Guevara who people still admire even though they don't quite know why. Certainly, it is not because of his beliefs. He felt convinced that violent revolution was the only way to reform the nations of the western hemisphere and many others as well. Yet in most of the centers of thought and influence, people are sick to death of violence, even in just causes. Nor have they any yearning for the authoritarian, communist regimes that Guevara hoped violence would produce.

Certainly, we should be careful not to diminish Guevara's stature unduly. Yet were it not for Korda's camera and photography's wonderful ability to give us myths, as well as to document reality, I doubt that many of us would be writing or reading about Che Guevara today.

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