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# Che Guevara Told His Own Story

by Henry Butterfield Ryan

Probably no historical figure since Samuel Pepys has influenced his own biography the way Che Guevara has. His Bolivian diaries were the first of several of his journals to be published, appearing in 1968, within a year of his death in an ill-fated effort to create a continental revolution centered in South-eastern Bolivia. Numerous histories have been written about that calamitous adventure, but the spine of those accounts has always been the diaries Guevara wrote faithfully throughout those desperate days.

Guevara's notoriety reached a high point when he and some 800 other ragged and bearded fighters that made up Fidel Castro's guerrilla army seized power in Cuba on New Year's Day, 1959. His fame peaked again immediately after his defeat and death in Bolivia in 1967. At that time, a CIA agent discovered and photographed his Bolivian diaries, and a Bolivian Minister, Antonio Arguedas, surreptitiously made them public. They were soon printed in various forms and many languages around the world. But I have told that entire story in the new edition of those diaries, so I won't repeat it here.

Highly educated, extremely literate, and a tireless writer, Guevara developed the habit of recording his day-to-day experiences while still a young man. His first journal records his experiences in 1952 when he was 24 years old and, with a friend, Alberto Granado, he made an enormous journey through much of South America plus a side trip to Miami.

The journey, while full of fun and challenges for educated young men traveling rough, also greatly increased Guevara's growing concern about poverty and inequality in Latin America. His account of the trip, however, remained in manuscript form for decades until it was published in 1994 in Buenos Aires, with the title *Mi primer gran viaje*, and in English the following year as *The Motorcycle Diaries*. These, too, have been mined by Guevara biographers whose works poured out in the late 1990s, around the 30th anniversary of his death.

Guevara next chronicled his adventures with Castro and his rebel band from 1955, when he met Castro in Mexico, until the guerrilla victory in 1959. It was then that Guevara achieved his great reputation — and only success — as a revolutionary, spreading his fame throughout the world. This time, however, he recorded his experiences, not in diaries, but in articles that described the war and his role in it and that were written for various periodicals.

The Cuban government published these accounts in 1963 as *Pasajes de la guerra revolucionaria*, translated in 1967 as *Episodes of the Revolutionary War*. (Some later editions have been titled *Reminiscences of the Revolutionary War*.) A number of collections of Guevara's writing soon appeared, drawing heavily upon this source, and again, biographers have relied upon it extensively in telling his story.

In the 1990s, about the time that *The Motorcycle Diaries* emerged from obscurity, the growing world of Guevara students and writers became aware that he also had kept a diary during his months in the Congo in 1965. There, at the head of a Cuban expeditionary force, he had tried, hopelessly, to breath fire into a dying insurgency. Havana's bureaucracy kept the diary under wraps for years, but in mid-decade permitted Guevara biographers to use it, and eventually permitted its publication.

It first appeared in English in 1999 as *Che in Africa*. In recent years, authors writing voluminously about Guevara have undertaken hundreds of interviews with persons who interacted with him and have churned through thousands of documents from archives around the world. Some of the best new material has come from archives in former communist countries now open to researchers and from U.S. Government classified files (much of it pried out painfully for my book, *The Fall of Che Guevara*.) Biographers have interpreted Guevara's life in different ways. But at the core of their writing lies Guevara's own account of the high points of his life — his trip as a youth through Latin America, his participation in the Cuban Revolutionary War, his struggle in the Congo, and his disaster in Bolivia. Guevara has told us his own story; we then have elaborated upon it.

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