

The Legacy of Che Guevara

THE WORD THAT FIRST came to mind on meeting Che Guevara was simplicity. I had been waiting for some time to see him, late at night in the Cuban National Bank building in Havana. It was in 1960, during my first visit to Castro's Cuba. Che was then economics minister, a heady post for a wandering Latin American revolutionary. Waiting with me in the anteroom of his office on the top floor of the building were several members of the old oligarchy—suave, plump and cynical.

Guevara greeted me with a warmth I found puzzling until I learned that, a few years earlier, the U.S. Embassy in Mexico had accidentally touted me to him and his fellow revolutionaries. Che told me the Embassy had bought up every copy it could find of my *Hidden History of the Korean War* when it appeared in Spanish translation. The remaining copies were all the more widely read and appreciated, perhaps too highly. Che greeted me as a fellow rebel against "Yanqui Imperialism."

He was the first man I had ever met whom I thought not just handsome but beautiful. With his curly, reddish beard, he looked like a cross between a faun and a Sunday School print of Jesus. Mischief, zest, compassion and a sense of mission all flashed across his features during our interview. What struck me most of all was that he seemed in no way corrupted or intoxicated by the power which had suddenly fallen into his hands.

I met his lovely, dark-eyed Cuban wife for a moment before we sat down with an interpreter to a midnight supper. Che spoke with that utter sobriety which sometimes masks immense apocalyptic visions. His were beginning to be nothing less than a hemispheric showdown with the "Colossus of the North," and its final overthrow. He was already pictured in the U.S. press as the foremost communist in Castro's entourage. Talking with him, I soon began to see this as another reflection of our simplistic North American political universe. There were no communist clichés in Che's conversation. What might have been taken for them by an American reporter was his deep distrust of the U.S., which had multiple roots. He was an Argentine, a citizen of that Latin country which regards itself as our chief rival in the hemisphere. He had seen at first hand how crudely and brutally we had dealt with Latin aspirations in Guatemala, after the long night of a dictatorship whose horrors we had regarded with equanimity so long as no hand was laid on the United Fruit Company; in Guatemala, as in Cuba, land reform had set the alarm bells ringing in Washington.

Men become revolutionaries for diverse, often surprising and sometimes unworthy motives—rancor, dislike of themselves, greed for power or hatred of stupidity—which easily becomes contempt for humanity itself, since stupidity is its most salient characteristic. In Che, one felt a desire to heal and pity for suffering. As a doctor in self-imposed exile from

by I. F. Stone

Peronist Argentina, he had practiced medicine among the Indians in Bolivia and knew the misery of the continent at first hand. It was out of love, like the perfect knight of medieval romance, that he had set out to do combat with the powers of the world.

The focus of his political concern was not Moscow but his America—from the Mexican sierra to the Argentine pampas—the America we forget when we ethnocentrically use the word in the U.S. Of our talk on that first visit, I remember the vivid relic of a fragile hope soon dissipated. “We are going to be the Tito of the Caribbean,” Che said of the Castro regime. “You get along with Tito and you will gradually reconcile yourself to getting along with us.” But accommodation with a rebel from the Russian empire was quite different from accommodation with a rebel from the American empire. American policy soon demonstrated that Castro would have to be Khrushchev’s protégé if he were to survive our animosity.

On my second visit some weeks before the Bay of Pigs there was no more talk of Titoism. Che spoke with enthusiasm of what he had seen in his grand tour of the Soviet bloc. What impressed him most was the reconstruction of North Korea and the quality of its industrial output—here was a tiny country resurrected from the ashes of American bombardment and invasion. Perhaps he saw this as a preview of Cuba’s fate.

I was not surprised when the news broke that Che had suddenly disappeared and it was said that he had set out on a wider mission. He was not made for a desk. He was a permanent revolutionary. Even Cuba may have become too sedate for his taste. In the early years of the Castro regime, when heretical communist and anti-communist works could still be seen in Havana’s bookstores and there was still some faint hope of a peaceful settlement with the U.S., Latin exiles who had come to Cuba for support already began to complain that there was a palpable cooling off of revolutionary ardor. Like the Polish Jacobins fruitlessly having come for aid to revolutionary Paris, they began to feel that the interests of the new state in the international order had begun to blur revolutionary fraternity.

For the Revolution, as for the Church, the world is full of snares and pitfalls: the unavoidable minimum of intercourse with things-as-they-are, the need for trade to earn one’s bread, the necessity for some diplomatic relations, the lure of friendly hands in ideologically repugnant places (like Franco’s to Castro), and the logic of statecraft which demands weapons, technology, compromise and duplicity. With the assumption of temporal power, the Revolution, like the Church, enters into a state of sin. One can easily imagine how this slow erosion of pristine virtue must have troubled Che. He was not a Cuban and could not be satisfied with building freedom from Yanqui Imperialism in one Latin country only. He thought in continental terms. In a sense he was, like some early saint, taking refuge in the desert. Only there could the purity of the faith be safeguarded from the unregenerate revisionism of human nature.

CHE WILL LIVE WITH Bolivar and Juarez among the heroes of the Latin American hemisphere. His little book on guerrilla war has become not only a bible of revolutionaries, but the anti-bible of the Green Berets of Fort Bragg where John F. Kennedy initiated the training of Special Forces as the Janissaries of the counter-

revolution. But few in my own country pay much attention to those sober reflections with which Che begins his practical and unrhethorical little handbook. He says that where there is some hope of peaceful change, even if only the simulacrum of democracy, the conditions are not yet ripe for successful guerrilla action. This is in accord with the ideology of 1776, but everywhere, out of politically mindless military logic or anti-communist panic, we ourselves—as most recently in Greece—lay down the welcome mat for our adversaries.

I have always felt there was something anachronistic in Castro’s Cuba and in Che’s mission to build a new and bigger Sierra Maestra in the Andes. The musical accompaniment of the Castro Revolution was Chopin and the spirit of Garibaldi hung over it. It had all the naive hopefulness and humanitarian faith of the 19th century. It had not heard of Hiroshima or of IBM’s new Sinai, the computer. The hard realities of the hemisphere are very different from the revolutionary clichés of Castroism. How do you create new managerial and scientific cadres to replace the old oligarchies and American aid? How do you inspire and organize for hard work over many hungry years an illiterate mass quite different in its conditioning and past from, let us say, the immemorially productive people of China? For after the music of the Revolution dies down, everybody still has to go to work.

There are riches at hand easy to seize, but how do you cash in the swag? If you expropriate U.S. oil in Venezuela, how do you sell it in a world where the cartel controls the tankers and the outlets, and the Soviet bloc has surpluses of its own to sell? If you expropriate U.S. copper in Chile, how do you refine and sell it under U.S. blockade or attack? How many Cubas can Moscow support in a style to which they would otherwise never hope to become accustomed? How do you persuade to the revolutionary course men of good will appalled by the harvest of hatred in our time—the crematoriums, the liquidation of the kulaks, Hiroshima and Nagasaki? These mass murders were committed under the influence of a vision that this was the way to the earthly paradise. How convince us that a New World can only be built after another outburst of bloodshed?

I recognize the Shelleyan purity of Che’s intentions. I mourn the prospect that he may be dead. I welcome the fact that new Ches will spring up to carry on his work—for without the fear of revolutionary challenges neither the Latin oligarchy nor Washington will make peaceful change possible. But I believe their success would be out of all proportion to the terrible cost, and I believe this romantic handful underestimates the power, flexibility and intelligence of the American colossus. Yet when I see the follies my beloved country commits in Vietnam and elsewhere, the billions we spend on “defense” while hate, misery and despair build up to volcanic proportions in our black slums, I wonder whether Che’s long-range estimates may not prove more realistic than mine. Lyndon Johnson may precipitate what Che Guevara alone could never accomplish.

I. F. Stone has recently been vacationing in Europe while recuperating from an operation. The only article he wrote during his long tour was this assessment of Che Guevara, which originally appeared in the New Statesman of London.

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to rubble. Then the tanks moved to Dan's home which suffered the same fate.

Dan, trailed everywhere by Nhu's police, came in desperation to my office at 23 Gia Long, just off Freedom Street (Tu Do). He knew as well as I in what regard he was held in Embassy circles and that he was *persona non grata* in the Vietnam of American make-believe.

"I don't worry about being arrested again," he said. "I know that is coming. But I want to hear from your ambassador, in his own words, that he does not stand for a two-party system in Vietnam and the building of a democracy."

Inately, I felt like laughing, but couldn't, at the intensity of his request.

"You know as well as I what he'll say."

His eyes blazed. "I want to hear it from him. Please, there may not be much time."

I called Durbrow, flagging the message to his secretary as urgent. In a few seconds I had him. "Mr. Ambassador, I have Dan in my office. He's terribly upset about his presses and his home being smashed. He'd like to talk to you."

"Who?"

"Dan."

"Dan Who?"

"Phan Quang Dan."

There was a short pause. "Fuck him."

Dan was put away in 1960, trussed and thrown into a dark cell of a secret jail under the Saigon Botanical Gardens. While the slime dripped and his body was a carpet for rats, he saw no light except when a disembodied arm threw him food and, monthly, when a torch blazed him to near-blindness and Ngo Dinh Nhu appeared in a ghastly Torquemada reenactment pleading with him to recant, give up, join the holy crusade.

Each time he refused, Dan was kicked in the teeth by the guard. Today he refuses to have them fixed, as a reminder to himself and those he meets in the National Assembly of what sacrifices have gone into the making of Vietnam.

It was while Dan was being tortured that the November 11, 1960 military coup against Diem, led by Colonel Thi, failed.

The reaction of the State Department was expected: expressing satisfaction that the regime of the Ngos had survived, the statement asked for "rapid implementation of radical reforms and energetic action against corruption-suspected elements." Even the New York Times, its view toward Vietnam unexplainably shrouded, expressed editorial happiness "that President Ngo Dinh Diem has survived this major test of his power."

But the Ngos were not about to implement radical reforms or energetic action against themselves, or to heed Article 11 of the much-praised and discarded Constitution which banned torture—"inhuman or degrading punishment or treatment"—or Article 10 which provided protection from arbitrary arrest.

The repressions intensified and arrests for suspected activity against the state became tantamount to death sentences. Uncle Sam flashed his teeth, doffed his top hat, and went into a buck-and-wing to divert attention from the fact that his tails were hiding the smut of Vietnam. He got away with it.

A little over a month later, on December 20, 1960, the National Liberation Front of Vietnam was founded.

Hunton Downs, a novelist and journalist, is currently assistant editor of the Honolulu Advertiser.

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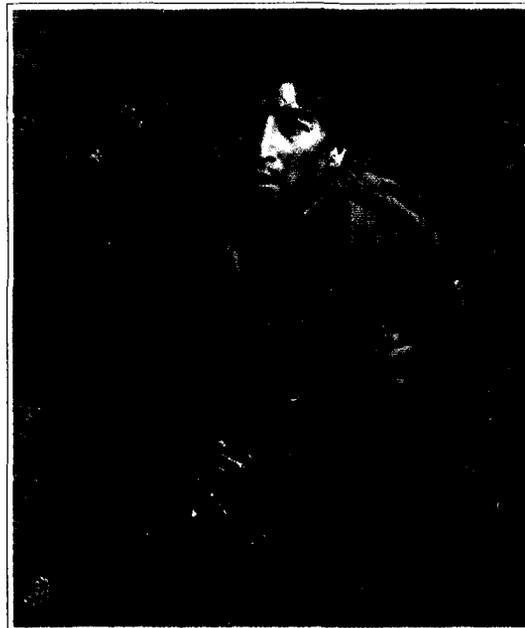
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