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## 'Strike a Pose, Companeros'

# GUEVARA'S GREAT ADVENTURE

by Eric Johnson

**A**N INTERNATIONAL furor arose over the release of Che Guevara's last diary by the Cuban Government. Even before reading it, one knew it was a key artifact of recent history—a mysterious man had defected from the headquarters of Bolivian reaction and risked his life to put the text into Cuban hands; CIA agents were cursing under their breaths; publishers flitting all over the world; authenticators yea-saying. The importance of these famous last words escaped no one. Here was the rosetta stone of guerrilla warfare, with all the riddles of a legendary life solved.

Nevertheless, it is a difficult document to discuss, since it was written sketchily and may not be a fair representation of the scope of

the man's thinking. And, of course, one feels its sacredness—the last words of one of the century's most celebrated revolutionaries. The idea that he went down fighting gives weight to this impression; his sacrifice seems to fix the cause into truth. But because the Cuban leadership offered the diary to the world as a testament it must be judged whether it is admissible as a guide to revolution.

In Fidel's introduction there is much emphasis on Che as example. What kind of example becomes clear in a notation from the diary emphasized by Fidel: "This type of struggle gives us the opportunity not only to turn ourselves into revolutionaries, the highest level of the human species, but it also allows us to graduate as men; those who cannot reach either one of these two stages should say so and leave the struggle."

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An example of a superman. If you want to be a man, if you secretly suspect mama was right, that you are a more advanced form of human, you must stay with Che to get your credentials. This is an incredible distortion of the role of a revolutionary. Could the girl Loyola hope to graduate as a man? Suppose we ignore the infantile male supremacy in such a statement; suppose he really means a quality of maturity developed through intense struggle. Then are the ordinary working people of Bolivia, who break their backs to keep their families alive, doomed never to graduate as men because they don't get a scholarship to Che's school? This is plain elitism. The inevitable logic is that those who organize a revolutionary movement are supermen.

We know that it takes Marxist-Leninists to begin a revolution, to sustain it, to seize and hold power. But at the same time these are ordinary people, harboring the same basic internal contradictions, and at every level there is the temptation to complacency. Leaders have suffered far more than Che, dealt successfully with new historical problems, and then still sold out the people, turned to revisionism. The new-species idea holds out the promise of sainthood. Somehow the lifelong struggle against bourgeois ideology will be over for some people. And essentially elitism says that this sainted race will liberate the people.

It is hard to see how Che expected even "very good prospects" to develop into men, since he tells his own guerrillas: "If you can't attain these heights, say so now and get out." How then are leaders going to develop in the mass movement? How can the people hope to develop men throughout society so that a revolution can be truly sweeping? "If anybody's chicken, say so now..." Isn't that what we said when we used to steal apples? If a man has his doubts, can't we talk it over, analyze the source of the fear, see its roots...?

In fact, Che is constantly thinking about cowardice vs. honor. "Naturally it is a typical case of cowardice...Camba is reaching the limits of moral degradation." Of course Camba may have been weak, but what is "moral degradation"? It seems clear from Che's contemptuous tone that if there were a way to cure this man's fear, or to correct the weaknesses in the guerrilla operation that caused it, Che was incapable of seeing it. Because his sense of honor was offended. Fidel begins with this theme of honor: "The formation of the guerrilla is a constant

call to the conscience and honor of every man." Without any class content, phrases like honor can only refer to a personal sense of morality, the supreme image of attainment as an individual that certain people create for themselves. To some it is "dishonorable" to be forceful. A communist, however, puts a class measure on all human behavior: Does it serve the working class or the bourgeoisie? If a man shows fear in the face of the enemy, it is certainly a serious matter; but how can you call it dishonorable? The very word puts him beyond remedy. The "formation of a guerrilla" can inspire a man to action; but if he puts off joining, if he doubts the rightness of the undertaking, is his honor sullied? Honor is a metaphysical quality that focuses, like sin, on the individual and thus serves as a cloak for some variety of bourgeois morality.

## One Against the World

How much Fidel and Che center on the individual becomes clear in Fidel's introduction: "From a continent oppressed...there surges this singular figure...The intrinsic value of the diary, the living expression of an extraordinary personality, is as a guerrilla lesson..."

"This singular figure, this extraordinary personality." No one can pick up where such a man leaves off—the goal is already reached, he has created himself. In his zeal, Fidel simply lies, trying to put a little extra radiance on Che's accomplishment: "The fight alone against the hostile environment in which their action took place constitutes an insuperable page of heroism....Never before in history has such a small number of men undertaken such a gigantic task..."

First of all, every revolution has had its moments of "small number of men, gigantic tasks." How does the contrast affect us if we think of the undertaking of the Chinese Revolution? There is no victory in being the handful of beginners, unless you cease being a handful. No praise is due a man merely for standing alone against odds (except in the individualist culture of the bourgeoisie).

As for the fight against the hostile environment, one can also find such "heroism" in the exploits of the early explorers, who faced the angry elements for months and also had their troubles with the natives. In fact the whole tone of the diary makes it sound like an extended hunting expedition. Certainly it takes determina-

tion to pack into the wilds and hunt dangerous creatures—but heroism too has a class content for a Marxist. Think of the numberless exploits of the Vietnamese people or the Chinese in their protracted wars. Che's performance is puny by comparison. But the difference is really based on the content, since gangsters and mercenaries live "rough" lives too.

Che himself once understood this: "The guerrilla fighter needs full help from the people of the area. This is an indispensable condition. This is clearly seen by considering the case of bandit gangs that operate in a region. They have all the characteristics of a guerrilla army: homogeneity, respect for the leader, valor, knowledge of the ground and, often, even good understanding of the tactics to be employed. The only thing missing is support of the



people; and, inevitably, these gangs are captured and exterminated by the public force." (Guerrilla Warfare)

Compare that to the revealing conclusion of Che's farewell letter to his parents: "Many will call me an adventurer, and that I am—only one of a different sort, one who risks his neck to prove his platitudes....Now a will which I have polished with delight will sustain some shaky legs and weary lungs. I will do it. Give a thought once in a while to this little twentieth century soldier-of-fortune." A sad—and tragic—change!

It is truly bourgeois to try to persuade the people of the correctness of Che's mission based on the brave form it took. Fidel obviously assumes that Che's example will intimidate anyone from questioning the soundness of the theory behind it. Any argument is pre-judged as a mask for avoiding the armed struggle: "Since no one really has an honest answer... the most honest thing to do would be to remain

silent." But there are many ways to use a gun once it is picked up. It is true that the revisionists of the Soviet type have tried to vilify the whole idea of armed struggle because of Che's failure. What we are saying is that this failure, and Che's revelations, show that the Cuban concept of revolution is doomed. Its net result will be also to turn honest people away from the necessity of People's War, and certainly away from Marxism-Leninism, the science of revolution.

### Brave Men, Elite Men

What exactly is the theory that Che went to execute? One can only guess, since neither he nor Fidel talk about it. It sounds like a vision of a new continental revolt patterned after Bolivar. The goal is, once again, "independence"—this time from the USA. But since in our era it is obvious that a social upheaval is necessary, the plan is filled out with much rhetoric about improving the conditions of the masses.

However, there is little use of scientific socialist theory by Che. He opposes the need for a proletarian party, the cornerstone of Lenin's teaching; makes no conscious fight against bourgeois ideology, revisionism, in the ranks of the socialist movement; totally rejects all the theories of People's War, the ideas of creating bases amongst the masses, the Marxist concept that the masses make history; and appears to be totally unaware of the class struggle around him. The future is a vague "socialism." What it boils down to is to drive U.S. imperialism from South America by means of elite guerrilla bands in order to achieve the second independence. No theory is developed as to what happens then: How is the fight for independence transformed into the rule of the working class?

Fidel says truthfully that this would be a revolutionary transformation. But in the interest of which suppressed classes? Lifting the yoke of imperialism would be a big shot in the arm for much of the national bourgeoisie, the petty-bourgeoisie and the peasantry (if land reform is introduced); but only the smashing of the whole capitalist system can be of any use to the proletariat.

The most telling proof of the diary's elitism is in the lack of involvement with the Bolivian people. There are scattered encounters with peasants, most of the time when the guerrillas detain someone who chances on their position.

Usually they are paid handsomely for their time; in one case \$1,000 is given a peasant to buy and fatten some pigs, even though Che remarks that he has "capitalist ambitions." Only three or four times does Che even mention the class position of a peasant ("brother of a rich peasant") in passing, but nowhere is there a notion that there is any oppression, any class struggle going on among these people—no involvement with their battles at all.

Every month Che mentions the "lack of incorporation of the peasants" as a major problem, yet it seems he expects to win them over by becoming notorious in the area—just by their activity against the troops. At one point he says, "Through planned terror we can neutralize most of them; support will come later." But the problem continues: "Out of all the peasants we have met, there is one, Simon, who is cooperative though frightened." And after a year he says in a summary, "The mass of peasants do not help us at all and have become informers." Is this what Fidel meant by "hostile environment"? In whose interests is this struggle being waged?

It is so easy for such an experience to be used as proof that the masses can't be trusted, that a new species of men must make the revolution despite the people. Certainly there are many in this country who will find their "suspicions" about the working class confirmed by Che. Of course the people are not thoroughly virtuous. There are always some who will aid the oppressor classes against their own best interests. But if a communist works among people for a year and succeeds only in making the mass of them hostile, he might be inclined to question his methods. Che has no concept of a mass line; that is, he does not agree with the aim of communists to unite and organize the masses against their class enemies.

It is interesting that most of the diary is a record of physical hardship and tactical maneuvers. One might have expected a glimpse of the rich history of the people that one imagines the guerrillas to be participating in. If the diary of a SNCC worker were published, for instance, one should expect an insight into the true conditions and struggles of the Southern Black people, not an account of the diet of the SNCC worker.

The other weakness that Che repeatedly refers to is the lack of a system of "contacts." Behind this practical inconvenience lies Che's theoretical rejection of the need for a revolu-

tionary party. Obviously, the party as Lenin and Mao have developed it, able to carry out a revolutionary line among all sectors of the oppressed, to coordinate and unify their struggles, would from the beginning make the "contacts" problem negligible. Without such a party, Che was forced to make deals with traitors like Monje, and to depend, ultimately, on an allegiance to himself as a unifier.

After forcing a split in Monje's party and receiving the group of militants into the guerrilla band, he makes them pledge that there will be no ideological struggle among them: "...no political organization yet, and the necessity to avoid polemics about national and international discrepancies." In other words,



he forcibly halts the revolutionary political struggle that has led these men to break with revisionism, and prevents the possibility of their introducing new ideas among his Cuban cadre, just as Fidel once forbade his army to read Peking Review. By implying that such matters will only distract them from their life-and-death struggle and that they are secondary matters, he simply makes his own ideology the law. But despite his own admonition, Che held classes in Debray's ideas.

Only with a party is there any assurance that the members will constantly be in a process of struggle to rid themselves of their ingrained bourgeois ideology, particularly the individualism that prevents a revolutionary

from serving the interests of his people unreservedly. Through what forms could one expect Che to overcome this in himself? There is no real self-criticism in the diary. No man is so strong a proletarian that he won't be overcome by self-aggrandizing ideology when he never even thinks of the possibility of such a weakness. The struggle recorded in the diary is mainly the efforts of Che to keep his men from cowardice and undiscipline. Certainly a necessary struggle, but there is little evidence of real criticism-self-criticism sessions where the root of the problem is found. Rather, Che gets angry and gives a bracing lecture.

What Fidel lauded as "stoicism," when Che stayed steady in the last few months as failure mounted upon failure, is a product of this refusal to admit the possibility of error. With everything falling apart—no help from outside, no growth, enmity from the peasants—there is no hint from Che that he sees anything wrong with his plans. That he will not learn from mistakes that have apparently gone on for years, including his Congo adventure, seems really to be arrogance, rather than any kind of revolutionary stoicism.

Fidel and Che do not learn from these experiences precisely because they cling to the individualist dream that they have discovered a "new" theory, their own theory. The answers to the problems Che encountered (need for a



base, need for a party, understanding of revisionism) should have led to an alignment with the Chinese Communist Party. Many of the problems of guerrilla warfare and revolution in an exploited nation have already been encountered by the Chinese people, and the syn-

thesis of this experience led to the policy they now pursue. Theory is not personal property; it is the discovery of general laws based on the experience of the masses.

When Che found himself betrayed and disgusted by the head of the Bolivian CP and others, why didn't he consider joining the fight led by the Chinese CP against the worldwide spread of revisionism headed by the USSR? If one people has experienced the treachery and fought it, doesn't that experience, and the theory derived from it, belong to all? Einstein said the reason he could see so far was that he stood on the shoulders of giants. If Che were a scientist he would have worried not about his prestige as an originator, but about the truth.

It is clear from what we know of the political relationship of Cuba and China that Fidel and Che are consciously avoiding conclusions that might seem "Maoist," and trying to establish a "third" path, between the USSR and China. The publication of the diary is an effort to spread this "centrist" ideology throughout the world in opposition to Marxism-Leninism. Fidel even mentions the great effect of Che's legend on the North American movement.

What then does this legend inspire? What tendencies, what world view in our own movement? For many it shows the way to be militant without having to deal with the stress of belonging to a disciplined party. In other words, a way to retain your individuality with "honor." This is very appealing to the intelligentsia; Lenin would have called it petty-bourgeois revolutionism. The force of individualism is one of the most successful weapons of the ruling class in this country. Che's legend is a prime example; it assists those who need illustrious backing as a bulwark against a collective mode of life. And if one identifies with the Hemingway image that Che paints of himself, one most certainly will feel some bitterness towards the masses who worked against him. He will also be contemptuous of the idea of a communist party, since Che seems to have been scuttled by this "type" of grouping.

Two misleading strategic concepts can be drawn from a reading of the diary: If the heart is with Che, then it will strengthen the notion of taking the most extreme actions NOW, regardless of any ties with the people. Che says in anger once, "A war is won with bullets" (not people?); and at another point, "The government is disintegrating rapidly—it is a pity we don't

have 100 more men right now." Such an outlook suggests that only an elite crew, weapons and timing are needed to make the revolution. Many such groups already exist in our country.

But the diary spurs a second conclusion: The plan was so obviously doomed to fail that one "would have to be mad to believe in the success of any armed struggle nowadays." Many people will not be able to avoid the sense of futility in the diary and will just take it as another justification for their cynicism or fatalism. This is one thing the revisionists are banking on.

The emergence of the Cuban revolutionaries on the world scene gave a lot of young people in this country a style to strive for. Those who wanted to rebel needed an image to copy, since those regions of "personality" were relatively uncharted. From Che's writing, it now seems that this preoccupation with image was overpowering in the guerrilla band itself. But it's all a waste of time; it is intense self-indulgence under the guise of revolutionism. To emulate Marx, Lenin or Mao is to strive to give oneself utterly to the historic needs of the working class. The question is not, How does my behavior look, but rather, Is it true to the science of revolution? What matters is doing what must be done, as far as it is humanly and collectively possible to determine it; let the chips of personality fall from that necessity of history. The self is always waiting like a leech to sap the energy that should go for the good of the people and turn the best intentions into their opposite: self-aggrandizement. What must replace the desire to become legend is the willingness to change utterly.

Perhaps it seems cruel to be so critical of a man who after all was not afraid to die for his cause. But do we have to agree with the strategy of the monks who burned themselves to protest the war? Some people are more afraid of changing, of killing a "cherished" part of themselves, of immersing themselves in the working class than they are of death itself.

Once a revolutionary fixes on an unchangeable picture of his "essence" (perhaps a likeness of Che?) he has fallen into philosophic idealism; he has recognized a God. Marxists know that there is nothing in existence that is unmoving or unchanging. Certainly, man's own being, mind, heart, call it what you will, at every point of intersection is a part of this flux of matter. No one can become a communist and yet preserve a nest egg of consciousness for private viewing. All of it must be put to work; and as it is, it changes, and as it changes, a new person emerges, a new "image." Yet if we stop to admire the bold, noble, honorable person we have become, overcome by self-admiration, our advance turns into its opposite: a hindrance. The self expropriates the creation for its own use and beats down the clamor for further change. Here precisely is what Che is the "example" of, and what he and Fidel exhort the world's revolutionary people to emulate. Strike a pose, companeros... look death in the eye... we can make you legendary... the world will speak your name... you will achieve the highest level of the human species... you will graduate as Men from our University of Adventure...