

Che Guevara's Bolivia Campaign: Thirty Years of Controversy

By

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In late 1966, Che Guevara arrived in Bolivia at the head of a small band of Cuban and Bolivian guerrillas. Eleven months later almost all the guerrillas were dead and Guevara himself had been executed at the orders of the Bolivian president and in the presence of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency's chief Che-hunter.

Because of Bolivia, the collective memory of Che Guevara that has come to predominate over all others is that of the failed revolutionary, the impossible dreamer. For most people--with the possible exception of Cubans on the island--Guevara's name brings to mind not the military commander of the war against Batista, not the hard-working and hard-nosed Minister of Industry of the early 1960s, but rather the "martyr" of Bolivia. The most common graphic image of Guevara is a perfect accompaniment to this view; besides his trademark beret, he is wearing a far-away gaze that is actually quite atypical of photographs of Che.

Historians and social scientists--who have the advantage, of course, of knowing the outcome--have portrayed the Bolivia campaign as a classic romantic adventure, doomed from the start. For them it is clear proof that Che was a utopian, that socialist revolution was impossible outside of Cuba and the strategy of guerrilla warfare a deadend.

Che's death has come to be considered more important than his life. And in fact it was the thirtieth anniversary of his death that prompted a flood of new books in 1997, including three massive biographies.¹ The Bolivia operation was such a disaster, almost from start to finish, that the authors of all the new biographies devote considerable space to trying to explain why Guevara was in Bolivia at all.

¹ Jon Lee Anderson, *Che: A Revolutionary Life* (New York: Grove Press, 1997); Jorge G. Castañeda, *Compañero: The Life and Death of Che Guevara* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1997); Paco Ignacio Taibo II, *Guevara, Also Known as Che* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).

For Jon Lee Anderson, author of the first and best-researched biography, “the most crucial single question about the life of Ernesto Che Guevara to remain unanswered: [was] *Who* decided he should go to Bolivia; when and why was that decision made?”² Anderson says that almost everyone in a position to know the answer to this “most crucial” question, including Fidel Castro, Cuban intelligence chief Manuel Piñero, Guevara’s bodyguard Harry Villegas, and Che himself, has always said Che was the one who, in late 1965, chose Bolivia for his next field of operation. Anderson tries to make a case that Fidel Castro was actually the first to say the B-word. But it almost doesn’t matter, because his account shows Guevara clearly in charge and committed to the operation from that moment on--sending advance scouts into the area, studying Bolivian history and geography, hand-picking every member of the unit, personally running the training camp and mapping out strategy.

Mexican political scientist Jorge Castañeda spins out an elaborate conspiracy theory in his 1997 biography of Che. According to Castañeda, Fidel Castro, with the help of Piñero, lured Che into the Bolivia campaign, deceiving him about the internal political situation by insisting that the Bolivian Communist Party would throw its resources behind the armed struggle even when the Cuban leadership knew the BCP would do nothing of the kind. Castañeda says Fidel then abandoned Che and let him die when he could have sent additional support or mounted a rescue operation. The impression the reader gets from *Compañero* is that Guevara really had no clear political goals in Bolivia, that he ended up there somewhat willy-nilly, pushed out of Cuba by an intolerable political reality there and drawn for nostalgic reasons to get as close as he could to his Argentine homeland.

²Anderson, 680.

I use a different method to try to understand why Guevara went to Bolivia. Instead of starting with the disastrous outcome--which is the overwhelming fact for us but which of course Che could not know ahead of time--I think we should start with Che's own writings and experience and with the international political situation as he saw it in 1965 and 1966. He laid out his reasons quite clearly in his 1966 "Message to the Tricontinental"³ and other writings of the time. In fact, if we look at the major episodes in Che's life from 1956 on, the mystery and need for a complicated conspiracy theory disappears, and Bolivia becomes the logical next step. I also want to suggest--and this is a heretical thing to say about the Bolivia campaign--that it was not doomed to fail, that, given a slightly different set of circumstances, Che's effort could have succeeded.

What were Guevara's goals? What did he hope to achieve? Why Bolivia? Who was he counting on to support him? What was his military and political strategy?

The central political force driving Che at this point in his life was his hatred for U.S. imperialism. It jumps out from all Che's writings but is strangely underplayed by his biographers. He called the U.S. government "the great enemy of the human race" and saw it as the main obstacle to efforts by the peoples of Asia, Latin America and Africa to overcome poverty and dependence.⁴ In 1965 he had been drawn to fight in the Congo because of the fact that nationalist fighters were standing up to the United States, Belgium and S.Africa, and because of strategic and mineral importance of the Congo to the U.S. (In that case, the anti-imperialist struggle had really

³Ernesto Che Guevara, "Message to the Tricontinental," in *Che Guevara and the Cuban Revolution: Writings and Speeches of Ernesto Che Guevara* (Sydney: Pathfinder Press, 1987), pp. 347-360.

⁴ Ibid, 359.

been defeated before he arrived.)

Che outlined in his “Message to the Tricontinental” the world view that took him to Bolivia. He had already chosen his destination and was in training in Cuba when he composed it, and by the time it was published in April 1967, he was in the Andes. When news of the Message’s publication arrived, Guevara commented to a comrade that there could no longer be any doubt about his presence in Bolivia.⁵

The central theme of the Message was that Vietnam must not continue to stand alone in the world in its fight against U.S. imperialism and that a new front had to be opened in Latin America. Che had angry words, not just against the U.S. for its aggression but also against the Soviet Union and China for not doing more to help Vietnam. Their support, he charged “has something of the bitter irony of plebians cheering on gladiators in the Roman Circus. To wish the victim success is not enough; one must share his fate.”⁶

It was clear that the author of the Message to the Tricontinental was preparing for battle, and we know that Che was in fact already training for Bolivia. “We consider ourselves,” said Che, “no more than a part of the great army of the proletariat.” What was the job of this army? “Since the imperialists are using the threat of war to blackmail humanity, the correct response is not to fear war. Attack hard and without letup at every point of confrontation -- that must be the general tactic of the peoples.”⁷

In his Message, Guevara surveyed the world situation as he saw it. Sobered by his own

⁵Anderson, 716.

⁶Guevara, “Message,” 349-350.

⁷Ibid, 351.

experience in the Congo, he did not see the possibility of successful liberation struggles in Africa in the short term. The situation in Asia and Middle East was explosive, he said, but the only place conditions existed for socialist revolution was Latin America. “Almost all the countries of this continent are ripe for a struggle of the kind that, to be triumphant, cannot settle for anything less than the establishment of a government of a socialist nature.”⁸ Che believed a revolutionary struggle on the South American continent with socialism as its goal would inevitably draw in the United States, thereby internationalizing the conflict and giving it a national liberation dynamic.

Of the South American nations, Bolivia was particularly strategically located, bordering on five countries, all of which had traditions of labor and peasant militancy and most of which had recent experiences with guerrilla warfare. Bolivia was not just a gateway to the Southern Cone; it also had its own history of resistance, which Guevara refers to in the Message to the Tricontinental and goes into detail about in his *Bolivian Diary*. He saw a historic continuity between Andean resistance to Spanish rule and the mobilization of Indian miners and peasants in 1952. More recently, mass protests, including a general strike, had broken out following the 1964 Barrientos coup in Bolivia, especially in response to the government’s repression of miners’ organizations and leaders.⁹

The 1966 Message was not the first of Che’s writings to argue that the material conditions for revolution existed around Latin America. In his works of the early 1960s analyzing the Cuban revolution and the reasons for its success, he insisted that the same objective conditions existed in many Latin American countries. What was lacking, he said, were the “subjective” conditions, by

⁸ Ibid, 354.

⁹See Ernesto Che Guevara, *Bolivian Diary* (NY: Pathfinder Press, 1994).

which he meant a leadership willing to see the struggle through to a socialist conclusion.

Bolivia itself was an example of this failure of leadership. The group put in power by the popular upsurge of 1952, the Revolutionary Nationalist Movement (MNR), was incapable of defending the gains of the revolution or ultimately even of defending itself.

More and more during the course of 1965 and 1966, however, Guevara was pointing, not to middle-class parties like the MNR but to the orthodox Communist parties, as responsible for the leadership default. He accused Moscow and the Latin American parties that followed its line of refusing to put into action the Marxist ideas they claimed to support. Some of these polemics were very sharp--it was not Che's style to pull punches.

The role of the Bolivian Communist Party has long been one of the controversial aspects of Guevara's 1967 defeat. Fidel Castro, in his introduction to the 1968 edition of Guevara's *Bolivian Diary*, accused the BCP of failing to provide necessary support. According to Anderson, Che's widow still blames BCP chief Mario Monje personally for his husband's death. The *testimonios* of two survivors of the guerrilla campaign, Inti Paredo and Harry Villegas, are extremely critical of the Bolivian party. One of the contributions of the new biographies is that the authors interviewed Mario Monje in Moscow, where he has lived for decades. Monje told Anderson and Castañeda frankly that his goal was to keep Guevara out of Bolivia if possible and, failing that, to prevent him from starting an insurrection, and that he lied to everyone concerned toward that end. According to Anderson, Monje walked away from Che's guerrilla camp and commented to a friend, "either we bury it or it will bury all of us."¹⁰

¹⁰See Fidel Castro, "A Necessary Introduction," in Guevara, *Bolivian Diary*, 51-73; Inti Paredo, "My Campaign With Che," in Guevara, *Bolivian Diary*, 322-408; Anderson, 706.

Where I differ from Guevara's biographers is in my estimation of the extent to which Che expected anything different from the BCP. They assume Guevara believed Monje's lies (or, in Castañeda's scenario, Castro's lies and "the fantasies of Cuban intelligence") and that his decision or agreement to go to Bolivia was based heavily on his expectation of active support from the local party. Castañeda chides Guevara for his failure to realize that the PCB was just a different kind of party, much more focused on its election campaigns and the unprecedented number of votes its candidates had just gotten than on the armed struggle. I believe Guevara had a much better understanding of the BCP than his biographers give him credit for. Che, after all, had some experience with Communist parties, starting with Guatemala in 1954 and continuing through the Cuban revolution. At the same time that he was organizing the Bolivia campaign, he was giving his followers in Argentina orders to stay away from the CP entirely and work with anyone they could to the left of the party. As soon as he started considering Bolivia, he put his own agents in La Paz, who were not members of the BCP. He worked extremely closely with the young Bolivian Communists training in Cuba so that if and when they had to choose between party discipline and loyalty to him--as they eventually did--they would choose him. Guevara's very detailed and specific "Instructions for Cadres Assigned to Urban Areas," written in the mountains in January 1967, never even mentions the Bolivian Communist Party. It's as if the party didn't exist. Che's diary notes on the "fateful" meeting with Monje are matter-of-fact in tone, with none of the outrage or confusion that characterizes Paredo's and Villegas' accounts of the same meeting.¹¹ I think Che may have hoped to get more than he did out of the BCP, but the idea that

¹¹Guevara, *Bolivian Diary*, 101-102, 330-342; Harry Villegas, *Pombo: A Man of Che's Guerrilla* (NY: Pathfinder Press, 1997), 134-135.

he was ever counting on them to make the difference in Bolivia I find quite inconsistent with everything Che was saying and doing at the time.

Guevara saw the guerrilla unit he commanded as a school for training a new revolutionary leadership for Bolivia, something different from both the MNR and the BCP. His strategy for Bolivia was based on his interpretation of what had happened in the Cuban revolution--an interpretation that his biographers and most other scholars who have studied the Cuban revolution do not agree with. For Che, the crucial factor leading to victory in Cuba was the leadership provided by the July 26th Movement, especially its military component based in the Sierra Maestra, and within that the special role played by Fidel Castro as a mass leader. In a "Message to the Miners of Bolivia," written in June 1967 (and probably not ever read by any Bolivian miner), he outlined his vision of a guerrilla army that could inspire and hook up with miners' struggles. "We are patiently preparing," he wrote, "for a deep-going social revolution that will transform the system from top to bottom."¹²

In Cuba, the "mother column" in the Sierra Maestra had spawned other guerrilla columns, including the one commanded by Che. His goal in Bolivia was to create a "mother column" in the Andes that would have international dimensions. His idea was to set up a training camp in a remote area, which he thought could get started with about twenty Cubans and sixty Bolivians--numbers he did not actually achieve. After a period of hardening and sorting out and some skirmishes with the army, he planned to move to a more populated agricultural area northeast of La Paz and begin to do political work among the peasantry, as had been done in the Sierra Maestra. If the guerrilla unit was able to survive for a year or two and win some clashes with the

¹²Guevara, *Bolivian Diary*, 313.

army, he believed it would attract revolutionary fighters from other countries. As political conditions developed in various South American countries, Guevara anticipated new guerrilla columns being formed. He was personally especially interested in eventually joining a guerrilla column in Argentina. The first mission of the Bolivian campaign--the one Guevara and everyone else realized was the most difficult and dangerous--was simply to survive. They never got to the rest of the plan.

Guevara was right about some things. The United States did get involved. As soon as the guerrillas' presence was known, Washington sent military "advisers," followed by a group of Green Berets. The CIA flew in its number-one Che-hunter, Felix Rodriguez. The parallels with the early stages of the Vietnam war are eerie.

Even though the guerrillas were not yet prepared for battle, Guevara's band had several encounters with the Bolivian Army which were devastating for the army without the guerrillas suffering any casualties. These early clashes caused demoralization and disarray in the Bolivian military, which continued fighting only under heavy pressure from the United States. At the end, even encircled and hunted, five guerrillas did escape and make their way to safety.

Guevara was also right in believing that popular resistance would continue in Bolivia and in the central role he expected the miners to play in national and class struggles. In 1970 the protest activities of miners and their supporters nearly created a situation of dual power in Bolivia, with a massive general strike and the creation of a popular assembly.

The years immediately after Che's death saw an upsurge in political activity around the Southern Cone, much of it with the stated goal of socialism. In 1969 there were explosive worker and student uprisings in the Argentine cities of Rosario and Cordoba. Several years of strikes and

mass struggles led up to the 1970 election of Allende as president of Chile. All these struggles ended up in defeat, and in fact in brutal military dictatorships. If there had been a real rebel army with mass support fighting in Bolivia during these years--a goal Guevara's ELN never achieved--it seems at least possible that the outcome of some of these struggles might have been different. The United States thought Che's campaign posed a serious threat. According to CIA agent Felix Rodriguez, the U.S. government put the highest priority on capturing Che because they thought that "with a secure Cuban base [in Bolivia] they could easily expand the revolution to important countries like Brazil, Argentina."¹³

It is easy to say after the fact that a defeat was preordained or even a foolish adventure. If Fidel Castro had been killed in the 1953 raid on the Moncada Barracks, it is possible there would have been no Cuban revolution of 1959--and I'm quite sure many people would now say it was ridiculous to ever think a revolution could be made 90 miles from the United States. The Nicaraguan revolutionary Carlos Fonseca Amador was fighting in his own guerrilla operation in 1967, during the same months Che was in Bolivia. If Fonseca had been killed then, I do not believe there would have been a Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua in 1979. I am sure then that if anyone even remembered the FSLN was fighting a guerrilla war against Somoza in the 1960s, they would have said it was crazy to think a revolution could take place in a small underdeveloped country like Nicaragua.

To understand why Che Guevara went to Bolivia in 1966, we cannot start with what happened in October 1967. We should look at the world Guevara lived in and at his own experience and ideas. The stakes involved were very high, there was of course the danger that the

¹³Anderson, 718.

effort would fail and everyone be killed, victory was certainly not guaranteed. But Bolivia seemed to be the best place to start. The alternative was to do nothing, to wait for a revolutionary situation to develop. This was simply not an alternative for Che, for reasons he laid out in his own writings on revolutionary theory. As he explained in his first writings on guerrilla warfare, revolutionaries could not wait for all the conditions for victory to exist before beginning to fight. Revolutionary war itself, Guevara believed, could change the balance of forces and eventually create the conditions for victory--by demoralizing the army, inspiring new young rebels, internationalizing the conflict, shaking up existing opposition groups, and changing the revolutionary fighters into "new" men and women. That was the task he set himself in Bolivia. With a different combination of chance events (and luck is surely a factor in warfare), it is not impossible that he would have succeeded.