

6. Some examples would be practitioners of non-violence such as Gandhi or Martin Luther King. Warrior intellectuals such as George Orwell, Albert Camus and Simone Weil belong there as well.

7. Of course, nobody completely transcends their origins and history. The above list of morally courageous persons could also apply as examples of people who have broken with the dominant patterns.

8. The problem is that the left still upholds him as someone to emulate.

SAINT CHE

*The Truth Behind the
Legend of the Heroic Guerrilla,
Ernesto Che Guevara*

Ernesto Che Guevara

“Che Was the most complete human being of our age.” Jean Paul Sartre

A peasant woman lights a candle to the saint and prays that her young son will get well and the potato crop will be a big one this year. Her prayers, and the prayers of other peasants, have been answered before, claim the villagers. “He looked just like Our Lord lying there dead in the schoolhouse”, she tells the television interviewer. The name of this miracleworking saint? Ernesto Che Guevara!

Let’s not laugh at these peasants. Don’t look down upon them with “developed world” arrogance. No doubt Che “does” intervene in their poverty-stricken lives – as do all the other saints. And who are we to claim absolute knowledge of the world and human mind and all its workings?

How would Che feel about the incense and candles burnt in his name? As a militant communist and atheist he would have dismissed it all as crude superstition from a reactionary past. How ironic for such a person to become a saint. But not only Bolivian peasants have reverence for the dead guerrilla. Thirty years after his murder, his picture is plastered on the walls of half the student residences of the world. His stern, ascetic gaze stares out at you from innumerable Tee shirts and badges. The Che Guevara mystique is all-pervasive.

One can’t help asking whether he deserves this idolatry. At first glance one could easily give an unqualified affirmative answer. Here was someone given the Number Two position in Cuba, who stepped down to light in the jungle for what he believed was liberation. Sick with asthma and with a tiny band of followers he was hunted down and murdered by the Bolivian army. Guevara was also the perfect romantic figure – handsome, charismatic, and genuinely loved by women. No lifeless intellectual Stalin-clone he, nor a secret pervert like Mao, or a megalomaniac like his old friend Fidel, but a real man. He could have stepped out of any romantic novel.

And he does look Christ-like lying dead in that famous photograph.

Yes, it is possible to understand the fascination that many people, particularly the young, have with the man. But understanding a phenomena is one thing, whether it presents a true picture of reality is another. For this, we must look behind the mystique.

THE YOUNG CHE, OR “DON’T CRY FOR ME ARGENTINA!”

During the Guevara’s formative years, Argentina was dominated by the Peronist Movement, Peronismo, largely the invention of Peron’s brilliant wife, Eva, was the nearest thing to perfect fascism that ever existed. Forget about all the propaganda and foolishness that has enrooted around the word fascist. Forget about Nazi-fascism and the clerical fascism of Franco and Saazar. By fascism mean the true essence of what was a revolutionary movement – or left-wing fascism.

San Crisobal- led the Agrarian Association, the sugar workers and tobacco workers unions.

Artemisia led tobacco workers and produced radio programs.

Havana – involved in leadership of electricians, food workers, transport, shoemakers, fishermen, woodworkers, medical, metal and construction unions. Some influence in student and professional associations. Published El Libertario (at one time a daily newspaper) and the monthly, Solidaridad Gastronomico (of the food workers union) and produced weekly public forums and radio programs.

Arayo Narajo – led Parent-Teacher Association, the local Cultural Association and the Consumer Co-op.

Itato – led salt workers union.

Ciego de Avila – produced radio programs as well as influenced peasant association, sugar workers and medical workers unions.

Nuevitas – led peasant union, established land co-op, led “various unions”

Santiago de Cuba – strong influence in food workers union.

Guantanamo – organized and led Coffee Producers Co-op.

The ALC also “had some influence” in at least one trade union or popular association in 23 other towns. (Taken from THE CUBAN REVOLUTION – A Critical Perspectives by Sam Dolgoff, Black Rose Books, Montreal, pages 56-59)

NOTES

1. The numbers in brackets refer to the page numbers of CHE – A REVOLUTIONARY LIFE by John Lee Anderson, Grove Press NY, 1997.

This is the definitive biography of Guevara, containing much heretofore unobtainable documentation. Anderson’s work has been attacked by critics as a “hagiography”. He is sympathetic to Che and some of the ideology that motivated him. But this only serves to make the quotations even more devastating to the mythical image.

2. THE CUBAN REVOLUTION – A Critical Perspective, Sam Dolgoff, Black Rose Books, Montreal, p. 27

3, ibid, p. 99

4. ibid, p.100

5. ibid, p.150

image of the Peronism, romanticism, machismo, and xenophobia so prevalent in 1950's Argentina. His sympathy for Stalinism was something shared by most intellectuals of the time. Even his bohemianism fit the common pattern for well-read upper class youth. The truly Great Man or Great Woman transcends his or her era and social environmental influences, breaking the time-worn habits and giving rise to a new set of ideas. Che, stripped of his immense courage and fanatical zeal, was therefore essentially an average man.

CHE DIED FOR OUR SINS

Che was Everyman not "a complete man" as Sartre, that most incomplete of men, claimed. (Sartre never met a left-wing dictator or terrorist he didn't like) Che is every one of us who has ever felt like killing a political opponent. Che is every one of us who has hated of someone with a different viewpoint. Che is everyone of us who has become sucked into the vortex of some political cuR-ideology. Che is every one of us who has apologized for a terrorist act. Che is everyone of us who has ever believed in "by any means necessary". Che is me. Che is you. Che only put into determined action the hates and fears we feel inside. He was a normal man, not a pervert like Hitler or Stalin - despots who can simply be written off as monsters and thus have no relationship to me and my possible courses of action. Che, in a sense, "died for the sins" of normal people trapped in ideology, constricted by moral weakness and psychological problems they are incapable of resolving in a constructive manner.

Che doesn't sound much like a saint, does he? But there is one thing to take into account - the greatest sinner can sometimes become a saint. Only one example of this was St Paul, who one time was a violent persecutor of Christians. Of course, Che was murdered before he had a chance to see his errors, and given his hard-headedness he may not have ever done so, but who knows? However, his suffering, self-destruction (and destruction of others) and his ultimate failure serve as an example for young people for all time. DO NOT FOLLOW THIS PATH! If Che's sacrifice dissuades the young from falling into this ideologically created hell, perhaps he deserves the mantle of sainthood.

Maybe then, we should burn a candle to St Che. And pray, "Please, no more heroic guerrillas!"

APPENDIX

THE CUBAN ANARCHO-SYNDICALISTS, IN THE 1950's.

The most important Cuban anarchist organization was the Libertarian Association of Cuba (ALC) Here below is a partial listing of their groups:

PinarDe/Ria - ALC members participated in the leadership of the tobacco workers, electricians, construction workers, carpenters, bank employees and medical workers unions. Also produced local radio programs.

San Juan y Marnnez- led the tenant farmers union.

True pure fascism, as envisaged by Mussolini, grew out of the militant left-wing of Italian Socialism, It was an attempt to impose the Social Democratic program through dictatorship and armed force. The movement dispensed with the sterile positivism and evolutionism of Orthodox Marxism, substituting romantic emotionalism, extreme nationalism, a cult of the will and of the "man of action?" The goal was to nationalize industry and subordinate all classes to the needs of the State. The working classes were to benefit from this revolution - but only so long as they remained subservient to the Fascist State. Mussolini's problem was that he never had the support of the working class and thus had to turn to the traditional middle classes. Thus much of his revolution only remained on paper.

This was not the situation which faced the Perons. More than 15 years before they took power, the generals smashed the powerful anarchosyndicalist trade unions and only small remnants remained. The workers were poor, unorganized and voiceless. Eva Duarte-Peron was able to build a labour movement by filling an organizational vacuum. (And where necessary smashing her weakened opponents) Thus Peronism (Argentine fascism) had a solid base among the workers. With prodding from the everenergetic Evita, the movement nationalized the banks, insurance companies, mines and railroads. As a result, Argentina had probably the largest state-capitalist sector outside of a Stalinist regime. Wages were forced up by decree and a host of social benefits introduced for Los Descamisados (Literally 'the shirtless ones', the working class followers of the Perons) Even the Church was attacked. The "anti-imperialist" game was played to an excess, alternating between violent anti-Americanism and anti-British sentiment. The foreigner was made the scapegoat for all of Argentina's problems.

Che Guevara was sympathetic to Peronism and imbibed most of its ideas. In many ways he was to remain under the spell of Peronist ideology all his life, In 1955, after he had opted for Stalin, he could also claim that "we have to give Peron all possible support..." (127)¹ When Peron fell he stated; "I will confess with all sincerity that the fall of Peron deeply embittered me. Argentina was the Paladin of all those who think the enemy is in the North." (182) During the Cuban revolution, Che called his new guerrilla recruits Los Descamisados (231), the name Peron gave to his followers.

This affection for Peronism never ceased. Che told Angel Borlenghi (Peron's former Minister of the Interior) in 1961, that Peron was the most advanced embodiment of political and economic reform in Latin America. In 1962 Che declared the Peronistas had to be included within Argentina's revolutionary front. Fidel asked Peron to visit Cuba, John Cooke, Peron's personal representative, visited Cuba and lauded the Revolution. (539)

THE FASCIST ROOTS OF CHE'S WORLD VIEW

One can see Peronist (and generally fascist) influence in many aspects of Che's thinking. In terms of what was needed to make a revolution, Che believed that "What was required to make political headway... was strong

leadership and a willingness to use force (50) Che was never concerned about Fidel's dictatorial and autocratic ways. He believed the true revolution could only be achieved by a "strongman." (319)

He also had the fascist obsession with the will - "will power will overcome everything... Destiny can be achieved by will power... Die, yes, but riddled with bullets.. a memory more lasting than my name is to fight to die fighting." Thus wrote an 18 year old Ernesto Guevara in 1947. (44) This was not just teen age melodrama. At the age of 25, while in Guatemala, Che had a "revelation" of which he wrote: "And I see... how I die as a sacrifice to the true standardizing revolution of wtUs...now' my body contorts, ready for the fight, and I prepare my being as if it were a sacred place so that the bestial howling of the proletariat can resonate." (124)

Fascist ideology dismisses "moderation" and rational compromise with contempt, seeing these as weakness and decadence. For Che, moderation was something to be avoided at all cost and was one "of the most execrable qualities. Not only am I not moderate, I shall try not ever to be and when I recognize that the sacred flame within me has given way to a timid votive light, the least I could do is vomit over my own shit" he wrote in 1956. (199) Many years later, he expressed the opinion that "all those who are afraid or considering some form of treason are moderates." (477) He had a very poor opinion of populist revolutionaries such as Venezuela's Betancourt and Costa Rica's Figueres, feeling that their willingness to compromise with the Americans was a result of weakness and lack of resolve.

Fascism also glorifies war and idolizes militarism and the military. Che identified war as the ideal circumstance in which to achieve socialist consciousness." (299) He regarded the revolutionary army as the "principle political arm of the Revolution" and felt that "freedom of the press was dangerous." (422)

Rabid nationalism, hate-mongering and the scapegoating of other nations and peoples has always been an important aspect of fascism. Che was "obsessed" by the idea the US was to blame for everything. This scapegoating began to take serious shape on his first motorbike tour of Argentina in 1950, when he discovered rural poverty, (52) He had a "...deep seated hostility toward the US... The only things he liked about this country were its poets and novelists." (63) Che once said, I'd die with a smile on my lips fighting these people." (the Americans) (345) He often referred xenophobically to the "blonds of the North" (But was ever so ready to join those other "blonds of the North" the Russians) The positive aspect of African colonialism for Che was the hate which colonialism has left in the minds of -the people." (619)

Nihilism and the view, that the "end justifies the means" are essential fascist traits. (Also shared with Marxist-Leninism) All of the past must be swept away in a great conflagration and a superior "New Man" created by force

revolutionary." His mother characterized this new Ernesto as "intolerant and fanatical". His parents were-not opposed to left-wing politics, only what these politics were doing to their son. (605)

Che was, for all his reading, essentially naive. Consider the naivety of becoming a Stalinist in 1955, not breaking with the cult during the Khrushchev revelations of 1956 (When thousands of Western intellectuals fled the CP) and then, at the very end, wishing to exchange Russian Stalinism for the Chinese variety. It's not that the horrors of Stalinism were not well known - we didn't need Solzenitzen to tell us about the gulag - any anarchist, trotskyist or anti-stalinist socialist could have told him the truth. Perhaps one did, but he must have refused to listen.

His personal cult of the will was also halve, ultimately leading him to his death. In spite of adhering to a belief system which incessantly dodders on about "the material conditions", he ignored "material reality" in his last illfated struggle. How could he brush aside the fact the Bolivian peasants had gotten land during the populist revolution of 1952 and were not interested in another armed uprising? How could he not know this? Look at his statement to the Tricontinental - as though attacking a country would break the will of its people - as though he could scare the Americans into defeat.

Anybody who knows history, knows well this is not the case - trying to terrorize a nation only heightens the resolve of its people. And if the US was the "greatest enemy of mankind", what then was Russia (or China) with its tens of millions slaughtered at the whims of megalomaniac dictators? How could he not know these things? Was it because he didn't want to?

There is no denying Che was physically very courageous, time and time again he put himself in the greatest danger in the guerrilla struggle. He was a truly brave warrior. While harsh in his methods, he was no hypocrite - his sacrifices, his sufferings, were examples to his men. But physical courage is not that rare, many front line soldiers have it, some criminals as well. Many people who belong to the worst sort of political or religious cults act with immense bravery.

Another matter is the combination of physical and moral courage. The latter he did not have, and no one does, who believes the "end justifies the means". To show moral courage, he, or anyone else in his position, would have to be willing to sacrifice the revolution for higher humanitarian principles. Better no revolution than one based upon terror and mass murder. Better to risk the organization than shoot peasants who want to go home. ("deserters") But for Che, as for Stalinists, fascists and all fanatics in general, such principles were examples of weakness and liberal sentimentality. In fairness however, the combination of physical and moral courage is very rare. How many of us have both these traits?

Che reflected his environment but did not transcend it. He was a mirror

new phoney co-ops - essentially state farms. On February 20 1960, Che announced "Soviet-style planning" for Cuba, (462) something that had been his desire all along. (Che's tenure as head of the Cuban economy was a total disaster and probably helped propel him toward his suicidal Bolivian exploit.)

As head of the Cuban economy, Che was ultimately responsible for the abolition of workers' rights and of the destruction of the independent trade union movement. Of the former, by late 1960, workers had lost the right to strike, job security, sick leave, the 44 hour week, overtime at time and a half, paid vacations, and were forced to do "voluntary labor". As for the trade unions, as well as liquidating anarcho-syndicalism, the regime tried to get the Communist Party slate elected to the leadership of the Cuban Labor Confederation. (CTC) This was rejected by 90% of the delegates. The Stalinists were imposed from above by the State. The leader of the OTC, David Salvador, a important member of the 26th of July Movement noless, was sentenced to 30 years in prison for his opposition to the Stalinist takeover of his union. He spent his time behind bars in a prison with some 700 other political prisoners, many of whom, no doubt, were trade unionists, Che's guilt in these matters could not be plainer, for in October 1960 he stated, "The destiny of unions is to disappear" and supported Law 647, by which "The Minister of Labor can take control of any union, dismiss officials and appoint others..."

THE TRAGEDY OF CHE GUEVARA

Che stripped of the mythology isn't too pretty a sight - unless you admire people who are full of hate, violence and apologies for despotism. But let's not go too far with this. Che was no reptile-eyed sociopath like Stalin or some bloodless intellectual fanatic such as Pol Pot. Until he became the guerrilla Savaronola of the Sierra Maestra, he was noted for being a joker and a prankster. A hippie before his time, a lover of poetry, late night conversations, travel, soccer, food, motorcycles and women. Few of his friends could believe the transformation that had overcome their old pal El Chanchito after he went to Cuba. (El Chanchito was his nickname and means "The Pig". He was called this because of his fondness for dirty, ragged clothing and his aversion to bathing - one of his ways of rebelling against his upper class origins) Che was essentially a normal but rebellious, intelligent and well read young man.

Something happened to him. Yes, he had absorbed many of the unpleasant ideas of Peron, but so had lots of peoples. Such individuals went on with their lives and were not destroyed by an ideology. Politics really wasn't all that important to Che until he went to Guatemala. There he discovered an ideology which "clicked" with his underlying beliefs and prejudices, seemed to explain the world and give his life substance and meaning. Che was a fundamentally normal, decent human being who became a slave of a cruel secular religion. His belief system consumed him, forcing him to do things he would not normally do. He made himself hard fanatical As his father, Guevara-Lynch Stated, "Ernesto brutalized his sensibilities to become a

- if necessary. The New Man is necessary - for the Old Man - present humanity - is weak and bourgeois and is only useful as cannon-fodder in the struggle for the glorious future. To sacrifice a generation or two for the cause Is nothing to get upset about according to the fascist mentality. As he steed, " almost everything we thought and felt in the past epoch should be filed away, and a new type of human being created.' (479)

His willingness to sacrifice Innumerable lives for the "glorious future". made the beatings and imprisonments administered by the Perons seem gentle by comparison. After the Russlans withdrew their rockets, ending the Cuba Missile Crisis of 1962, Che "fumed over the Soviet betrayal." and told the Daily Worker (London) reporter if the missiles had been under Cuban control, they would have fired them off."The reporter "thought he was crackers from the way he went on about the missiles." (545) In 1965 he demanded a revolutionary and apocalyptic world war, even if it unleashed the atomic bomb. "Thousands of people will die everywhere ...But that should not worry us..." (Emphasis added) Out of this mass destruction the new socialist order was supposed to wise. 604)

Che's plan for the ill-fated Bolivian campaign entailed that "Bolivia [was] to be sacrificed for the cause of creating the conditions for revolutions in neighboring countries."The idea was to cause new Vietnam-type wars in Latin America, thereby pinning down and weakening the US. This was to cause Russia and China, plus the Third World guerrilla movements to unite in one powerful block to then destroy the United States (703) Once again, even though such a scheme might bring about atomic war.

Che's message to the Tricontinental meeting in Havana April 1967 brought his fascist, nihilist, and romantic impulses to a gory climax. He desired nothing less than a "long and cruer global confrontation. The important quality required in this world war was " a relentless hatred... impelling us above and beyond the natural limitations that man is heir to, transforming him into an effective, violent, seductive and cold killing machine.." (Emphasis added) This war must be "total" and waged inside the us as well as without, waged until the American's "moral fibre begins to decline" which was to be symptomatic of US "decadence." "How close we look into a bright future should two, three many Vietnams flourish... Our every action a battle hymn for the people's unity against the greatest enemy of mankind: the USA. Wherever death may surprise us, let it be welcome." (719) It must be mentioned that the glorification of death is a distinctly fascist trait and the Falangist "Long Live Death!" is echoed in the Castrolte slogan, "Patria o Muerte" i.e., "Nation Or Death!"

By 1955, Che had become a convinced Stalinist, writing, " I have sworn before a picture of the old and mourned comrade Stalin that I won't rest until I see these capitalist octopuses annihilated." (126) He shad remained a sceptic [about marxism] until his discovery of Stalin in books' while in Guatemala. (565) (Che always had some level of sympathy for the USSR and wrote-off anti-communism as an example of low culture.)

It is not that difficult to make the passage from fascism to Stalinism. (or the reverse for that matter) The similarities between the two ideologies - the glorification of violence, dictatorship, statism, nationalism, the scapegoating - tend to outweigh their differences. Where there is a difference is in the realm of philosophy. Stalinism, unlike fascism, still clings to the pseudoscientific baggage of marxism. Belief that the "laws of social development, are on their side give the Stalinists a sense of psychological comfort. It also creates an unbridgeable contradiction - an underlying philosophy which is woodenly deterministic combined with a practice which is highly voluntaristic. (The Party being the subject of history - the group that makes the revolution and controls the future development of the socialist State.)

For Che's foco theory, which dispenses with the Party and the mass movement in favor of a tiny band of guerrillas, this contradiction is intensified to the ultimate degree. See the difficulty with which he tries to overcome this problem: Around the time of the Bay of Pigs Invasion (1962) Che wrote, "The peasant class of America, basing itself on the ideology of the working class, whose great thinkers discovered the social laws governing us." However, what was missing was the so-called subjective factor - "the consciousness of the possibility of victory which was to be galvanized by the guerrilla band's armed struggle. (505)

As a Stalinist, Che had some extremely important duties to perform in the interest of the Communist movement and the Soviet Union. The first of these was to orient the 26 of July Movement in the direction of Stalinism. Very few of the 26 July Movement were Communists or even Communist sympathizers. Other revolutionary groups like the Directorate or the Anarchists were militantly anti-stalinist. (Che and Raul Castro were Stalinists, Fidel was very friendly to the CP but quiet about it) Che became the "key participant in the delicate talks with the Popular Socialist Party." (Cuban Communist Party) (363) He "worked secretly to cement ties with the PSP." (389) The alliance between 26 July and the PSP had to be secret not to split the revolutionary movement and arouse American hostility. Most Cuban patriots hated the CP, which was very late in getting into the struggle and had formerly been in alliance with Batista!

After the Revolution, Che became the liaison between the KGB and the new revolutionary government, when relations between Cuba and Russia had to be clandestine not to anger the average Cuban and frighten the US State Department. (440) As the former KGB agent who was involved with him stated, "Che was practically the architect of our relations with Cuba." (492) Nor was this the only relation he had with the Russians. The nuclear missile deal with Russia which almost started World War II was also concluded by Che. (530) By 1963 Che had become despondent, as he realized the Russian model, which in his naivety he had passionately embraced, was not very good. (565) Soon after, evidently not learning from his mistakes with Russian Stalinism, he became enamoured of Chinese Stalinism, writing, "sacrifice is fundamental. The Chinese understand this very well, much better than

the Russians do." (605) Earlier on, Che also had "special praise" for China and North Korea. (495)

CHE THE EXECUTIONER

In the Sierra Maestra Che was always quick to demand execution for guerrillas and local peasants who were not up to his standards. Informers, insubordinates, malingerers and deserters got a bullet in the head. Fidel was far more tolerant of human frailty and reversed several of Che's execution orders. Executions were quite frequent during the guerrilla campaign. (231) He was notoriously severe with his punishments. One time he threatened to shoot a number of guerrillas who had gone on a hunger strike over the bad provisions. Only Fidel's intervention stopped him. (346)

Shortly after the fall of Batista, Che helped to form the C-2 or the new secret police. He was also in charge of purging the army and government bureaucracy of traitors, spies, and Batista henchmen." However, it was mostly minor individuals that were arrested, since the officers and top bureaucrats fled with the dictator. Che was the "supreme prosecutor" who made the final decision to execute or not. (385) And execute he did. Che was "merciless" (390) and between January and April 1959 more than 550 people were shot by firing squad. (419) By January 1960 alleged Batista supporters were not the only ones getting the bullet. Some young Catholics were executed for distributing anti-communist leaflets. (458)

Che is implicated in the destruction of Cuban anarcho-syndicalism. (And Trotskyism as well) Cuba in the 1950's was the scene of the last of the great Latin American syndicalist movements. (See appendix) Libertarians controlled many trade unions and were an important anti-Batista force. The anarchists had survived the Machado and Batista dictatorships but did not survive two years of Castroism. By 1962 the movement was down to 20 or 30 members, hundreds of others having fled into exile, imprisoned or executed. (For anyone still harboring any illusions about Che's alleged libertarianism, the following quote should put this to rest: "Individualism... must disappear in Cuba ...fit] should be the proper utilization of the whole individual for the absolute benefit of the community," (478) Such an opinion on the individual was about as far removed from libertarianism as you could possibly get.

CHE THE BUREAUCRAT

Late in 1959 university autonomy - which had managed to survive under Batista - was abolished with Che's approval. A new State curriculum was introduced (449) and the universities became simple tools of the regime.

In 1960 the National Institute of Agrarian Reform ONRA) was formed under Che. This organization took control of the entire economy. Initially though, its job was to run the State "co-ops". (458) Now, a State Co-op is a contradiction in terms, for co-ops are by nature voluntary associations and locally owned and managed. What INRA did was to nationalise existing co-operatives (some of which were anarchist) and set up a host of