

Che Guevara, Apostle of the Oppressed : His Legacy. Symbol of Resistance

Part IV

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The fiftieth anniversary of the death of Che Guevara, assassinated in Bolivia on October 9, 1967, offers us an opportunity to look back on the journey of the Cuban-Argentine revolutionary who dedicated his life to defending the “damned of the earth”.

Was Che the public face of the Cuban Revolution?

Fidel Castro has always been the emblematic figure of the Cuban Revolution. Che was its international representative. He made his first diplomatic world tour in June of 1959, a trip which lasted three months. Fidel had entrusted him with the mission of traveling to Africa and Asia in search of political support, a gesture that illustrated the enormous trust he had in him. Che met Nasser in Egypt, Sukarno in Indonesia and Nehru in India. He also visited Burma, Japan, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Hong Kong, Pakistan, Greece, Yugoslavia, Italy, Sudan and Morocco.

A year later, in October of 1960, he undertook a diplomatic tour of the socialist countries. This time his objective was more economic in nature. He visited Czechoslovakia, Russia and China. He was warmly received in these countries and applauded by the crowds that gathered at each of his public appearances. In this manner, he took the measure of the Cuban Revolution's popularity throughout the world.

Finally, his participation at the conference of the Inter-American Economic and Social Council in Punta del Este, Uruguay, in August of 1961, transformed him into the iconic figure of the Latin American left.

Did the CIA attempt to assassinate Che?

The United States, from the beginning, opted for the political assassination of the leaders of the Cuban Revolution. Their main target was Fidel Castro, who was the victim of more than 600 assassination attempts. But Che and Raúl Castro were also among those targeted.

What was the message of Che's famous speech at the United Nations in December of 1964?

The speech was an indictment of imperialism, colonialism and neocolonialism. In it, Che strongly advocated self-determination for the peoples of Latin America, Africa and Asia. Cuba symbolized the small nation that aspires to sovereignty under the constant threat of a powerful neighbor. Many Third World countries recognized themselves in the Cuban people's struggle for dignity. Che brought a message of peace, calling for peaceful coexistence among all nations of the world, regardless of the differences in their societies,

not just among the most powerful. Che denounced imperialist aggression against Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. He also denounced Belgian imperialism in the Congo and the segregationist apartheid regime in South Africa.

A little known fact, Che launched one of the first calls for nuclear disarmament. He also militated for an undivided China and for its entry into the United Nations. He ended his speech denouncing the US-imposed state of siege against Cuba and recalling the internationalist mission of its Revolution.

What role has Che played in supporting struggling peoples around the world?

Che, in the name of the Cuban Revolution, lent his support to all anti-colonial movements around the world, in Latin America, Africa and Asia. He believed that the struggle for human emancipation must, of necessity, be global and that all progressives have an obligation to participate. Che's revolutionary "foco" theory presupposes the possibility of a guerrilla war without necessarily waiting for all of the subjective conditions (organization of the people, powerful unions, predisposition to the struggle) to be in place. At the same time, the objective conditions (misery, poverty, exploitation, oppression) were already in place everywhere. The goal is to trigger, through guerrilla warfare, an uprising of the masses. Further, guerrilla action should take place in the countryside. Guevarism is the rupture of the old order through armed struggle. It is based on both anti-imperialism and Marxism. According to Che, if objective conditions are met, guerrilla warfare can create the subjective conditions for overthrowing the established order and for building a socialist society.

What did Che's call to "create two, three ... many Vietnams" mean.

For Che, solidarity with the Vietnamese people's struggle for freedom, confronted as they were by a particularly ruthless form of US imperialism, was to be the priority of all revolutionaries. Vietnam was fighting the toughest of all battles against the United States. In order to weaken imperialism, it would be necessary to open armed struggle movements throughout the Third World, thus forcing the enemy to divide its resources.

What was the moral pact between Che and Fidel Castro?

During their first meeting in Mexico, Che, when he joined the July 26 Movement, had asked Fidel Castro's permission to leave the group once the triumph in Cuba was assured in order to launch a revolutionary movement in Argentina. Because Che was a principal leader of the Revolution, Fidel Castro was resolutely opposed to his departure. But for him his word, once given, was sacred. Because the conditions necessary to launch an armed struggle in Argentina had not been met, Fidel Castro did not wish to risk Che's life unnecessarily.

While waiting for the creation of these conditions, Fidel Castro proposed that Che go to the Congo where a revolutionary movement was already occurring. The story is well known and recounted in Che's Congo journal. The action, however, was a bitter failure because of the fighters' lack of discipline and the conduct of the military chiefs who preferred to bask in the luxury of the capital instead of facing the inclemencies in the field as leaders of their troops.

In 1965, Fidel Castro published Che's Farewell letter because of the many rumors circulating about his intentions. After the failure of the Congo effort, Fidel suggested he return home to prepare in Cuba for his next venture in Bolivia. Che was reluctant to return to Cuba after the publication of his farewell letter. After much effort, Fidel managed to convince him to return.

Still, Che returned secretly, disguising his face in a manner that proved quite effective.

After his capture and execution, why was Che's body mutilated and concealed?

Following his assassination on October 9, 1967, the CIA and the Bolivian army decided to film his corpse in order to prove to the world that Che was in fact dead. His hands had been cut off to allow the Argentine Federal Police to use his fingerprints as a check on his identity. His body was buried secretly in Valle Grande, Bolivia. Discovered in 1997, it was repatriated to Cuba where it rests in a mausoleum in memory of Che in the city of Santa Clara.

What is Che's legacy today?

Che persists in our collective memory as the Apostle of the oppressed and the symbol of resistance to the humiliation and indignation that injustice gives rise to. Renouncing his own class interests, he took up arms in the name of the higher interests of the disinherited. He is the archetype of the internationalist who extends a fraternal and generous hand to those who fight for their emancipation. Che's ideals and his example live on despite the many attempts to mask and distort his struggles and sully his memory.

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