

Young Ernesto Guevara and the Myth of Che

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HST 499: Senior Seminar
Spring 2012

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June 6, 2012

Ernesto “Che” Guevara de la Serna is constantly dramatized and idolized for the things he did later in his life in the Congo, Guatemala, Cuba, and Bolivia pertaining to socialist revolution. The historical events Che partook in have been studied for decades by historians around the world and no consensus has been reached as to the morality of his actions. Many people throughout Latin America view Guevara as a heroic martyr for the people, whereas many people from the rest of the world see him as little more than a terrorist. What many of these historians fail to address is what exactly made Ernesto Guevara leave his relatively upper-middle class, loving family behind to pursue a life of revolution and guerrilla warfare. The fact is one cannot truly understand the complexities of Che Guevara, without first understanding just what it was that turned the young, brilliant Ernesto into the guerrilla tactician he would become known as throughout the world. Guevara’s early years in Argentina are rarely discussed because, as happens so often with historical figures, they are dwarfed by the world changing events of his later years. These early years, however, allow one to truly understand Guevara’s drive and ambition and provide the basis and reasoning for his eventual radical beliefs. Guevara’s image eventually went on to become synonymous with revolution throughout the world, but little was known about him until after his death. Because of this, as well as the T-shirts and posters bearing his likeness, much of Che’s original message was lost behind his image.

The myths surrounding Guevara’s life stem primarily from his relative obscurity until after his death. On one hand, many people see Che as a symbol of revolt against authority, while others see him as a heartless criminal. Few people outside the academic community understand who exactly Che was and what he stood for, they simply see him as a powerful image. This essay constructs Che’s early life and discusses how these generalities of Che prevail in the world today.

In order to address this topic, several primary sources were used when writing this essay. Several of these were written as diaries by Ernesto Guevara himself and then again rewritten later, so the reader must try and see some of the ulterior motivation behind Guevara's writings, such as promoting his ideas of revolution, as well as potentially making himself seem more like a revolutionary in his past (as with his *Motorcycle Diaries*). *The Young Che* was written by Ernesto Guevara Sr. and provides many details on Che's early years, but also tends to contradict other historical evidence at times, such as in how Guevara Sr. depicts his relationship with his son, which is believed to have been rather distant. Guevara Sr. wrote this book originally as two separate books in the year 2000, long after his son's death. It is very probable that certain details would have been forgotten or intentionally omitted.

That being said, however, the aforementioned sources were all used to discover how Che was viewed by others on a personal level, as well as how he viewed himself. They provided a great deal of insight into Che's actual personality, beyond the significant martyr myths as to who he was that would arise after his death. Taking a postmodern approach, much of Guevara's own writings, as well as those from other people were used for this paper. It is clear that Guevara himself participated in revisionism within his own writings, so this paper will attempt to look beyond what was written to the actual discourse. Because of this historiographic analysis, this paper will begin by addressing the actual deeds of Che's early life in a summarized biographic format. After that, the various Che Guevara myths of who exactly he was will be addressed and sorted between reality and fiction. While it is true that Che was a fearsome guerrilla fighter and is often looked down upon for this fact, he was also very human.

For the purpose of showing the evolution of Guevara's ideology, this essay goes into very little detail about his life after the motorcycle trip. This is because Che's ideology was largely

cemented into his personality by the time he got to Cuba and this paper is intended to show Che's humanity and to demonstrate how he developed his extreme beliefs. Therefore, the biographical content of the paper is intentionally focused on Ernesto Guevara before he became Che.

Guevara's political ideology evolved throughout his life. He did not always advocate violent revolution as he has become famous for doing later in his life. When he was a teenager, there is no evidence to suggest that he joined with his fellow youths to protest any of the spreading fascist propaganda or anti-semitism of the World War II period, nor did he join in any of the protests against Juan Peron's government.¹ While he always paid great interest to such matters, he never publicly protested against them until later in his life after his travels around Latin America. Guevara's zealous Marxist beliefs emerged most prominently during his time in Cuba, in which he wrote several articles about the struggles of the proletariat against the rich and the bourgeoisie. He believed that in the majority of cases, a peaceful socialist takeover would be impossible because the bourgeois legal systems would constantly attempt to check progress or break up any new social structures. For Guevara, power needed to be the absolute objective of all revolutionary forces and everything else must be subordinated to it. This is because he knew that if people did not focus their objectives on a total takeover, they would be distracted by trying to obtain small goals, which the bourgeoisie in power would not truly mind giving up.²

One is not simply born with these ideals, however, they are manifested and shaped in the individual as they grow up. In order to fully appreciate Guevara's early years, one must understand his family background. Guevara's father was raised from childhood to be a socialist.³

¹Daniel James. *Ché Guevara* (Toronto: Saunders, 1969), 45.

²Ernesto "Che" Guevara, "The Latin American Revolution According to 'Che,'" in *The Argentina Reader*, ed. Gabriella Nouzeilles and Graciela Montaldo (London: Duke University Press, 2007), 347.

³Ernesto Guevara Lynch. *The Young Che: Memories of Ché Guevara* (London: Vintage Books, 2007), 59.

While not particularly radical, he always led his life as an example for his children by being incredibly generous to those less fortunate than him.⁴ He managed to find well-paying albeit inconsistent work as a civil engineer, and after receiving a modest inheritance from his father, he was able to purchase a 200 hectare estate in Misiones, Argentina. It was here that Ernesto Guevara Lynch and his wife Celia de la Serna raised enough money to comfortably provide for a family.⁵

Celia de la Serna came from a very strict, Catholic, Spanish family. She and her six siblings all attended Roman Catholic schools and were so fiercely religious, Celia would actually keep pieces of glass in her shoes to cause her near constant pain in repentance. Shortly before meeting her eventual husband, Ernesto, however, Celia left the Catholic church in favor of a happier lifestyle. Guevara Lynch described them as “true comrades” from the start of their relationship. This comradeship extended to Guevara’s socialist political views, which Celia not only adopted, but managed to far surpass her husband’s in fervor. As such, the family was often persecuted early on by Celia’s family and friends, as many believed it was Guevara’s fault Celia left her religious lifestyle, and he was blamed for turning her into a “communist red devil” as well.⁶ The validity of Ernesto Guevara Sr.’s claims of a perfect relationship can be brought into question, since the pair ended up separating years their first son, Ernesto Jr., had left on his now famous motorcycle trip around South America.⁷

Ernesto Guevara Jr. was born on June 14, 1928 in Rosario, Argentina. After he had begun to walk and play with other children, the family noticed he was constantly falling ill with respiratory issues. He was soon diagnosed with chronic bronchial asthma. Their doctor believed

⁴Guevara Lynch, 116.

⁵Guevara Lynch, 58.

⁶Guevara Lynch, 58-59.

⁷James, 33.

that his asthma could have been related to the climate of their home, so the family was forced to move constantly throughout the early years of Guevara's life, trying to find a region that would relieve his incredibly violent asthma attacks.⁸ During this time, Ernesto Guevara Jr. began to grow very attached to his mother since his father was often distant and working. Mother and son treated each other as equals and kept very few secrets from each other. Because of this, young Ernesto was heavily influenced by his mother's political beliefs since she spent most of her time lamenting the struggles of the working class and doing everything she could to improve their plight.⁹

As Guevara grew up, he tended to have a rather easy time making friends. Once the family moved to Alta Gracia in 1936 when Guevara was eight years old, he began sympathizing with workers on a personal level by interacting with many of his young friends' families, a majority of whom worked as miners, hired hands, or waiters. It was here that Guevara had his first glimpse of the injustices facing the working class and how little opportunity they had to improve their lives. Alta Gracia was a town of starkly contrasting social classes especially for the relatively well-off Guevara family and the other land owners when compared to the dominant, yet poor mining population of the town, and even before the age of ten, Guevara questioned these differences because it was difficult for him to understand why his poor friends were unable to afford small things like new soccer and rugby equipment.¹⁰

Furthermore, both parents recognized their eldest son's talent for leadership around this time. While he was timid at first because he was younger than many of his friends, Dolores Moyana Martin, a citizen of Alta Gracia, described Ernesto Jr. as the leader of a gang of young

⁸Guevara Lynch, 101.

⁹Guevara Lynch, 64-65.

¹⁰Guevara Lynch, 108-109

children, almost exclusively from proletariat backgrounds. He would constantly challenge the children of rich families to soccer matches with these boys in order to hustle them because he knew his team was far superior.¹¹

Surrounding Alta Gracia was a forest in which Guevara would constantly play with his friends. In one instance, where his parents were angry with him, Guevara ran off into the woods to escape punishment. His father spent quite some time looking for him before he hired a local boy (who was actually a celebrated local marathon runner and quite a few years older than Che) to go fetch him. This boy came back two hours later empty handed, saying Guevara was too quick in the woods and would quickly disappear into hiding spots whenever he got close to being caught. In these woods, Guevara learned many of the skills he later employed as guerrilla tactics in the hills of Cuba.¹²

As Guevara began studying at a higher level, his political awareness continued to grow. He was particularly affected by a family friend named General Juardo, who brought news of the Spanish Civil War. Juardo had fought on the Republican side of the conflict and would often spend dinner with the Guevara family, telling stories of his time in the war. Che saw Juardo as the model of what a military man should be, as he was a very charismatic speaker and his stories were almost always about the valor of his men, rather than about himself. Guevara was deeply saddened by the conflict in Spain and thought it was tragic that brothers were cruelly forced to fight their own people in an attempt to prevent fascism from taking hold. Ernesto Guevara's idolization of General Juardo ended up shaping his own style of command later on in his life.¹³

¹¹James, 35.

¹²Guevara Lynch, 116.

¹³Guevara Lynch, 122-123.

Perhaps an even greater influence on Guevara's political views was the year he happened to enter the Colegio Nacional Dean Funes at age thirteen. The year was 1941, which was the year the Nazis invaded Russia, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, and Argentina was caught up in the conflict because fascist propaganda was being spread throughout Latin America. Just five years later, in 1946, while Guevara was still in school, one of the most polarizing political figures took office in Argentina: Juan Peron. Peron led primarily by sympathizing with the majority. Radicals, such as Guevara's own mother, faced significant persecution from the Peron government because Peron was highly opposed to the far left and did everything in his power to appeal to the more moderate masses while shunning the far-left and far-right. Since Guevara entered school in a time of so much upheaval, he was constantly studying the conflicts and learning of the problems associated with fascism.¹⁴

There is much evidence to suggest that Guevara was a very caring and sympathetic person, despite the claims of his opponents in Cuba and Bolivia that he was cold and heartless. Armando March, a friend of Che's from before his college years, recalls that young Che had set up a makeshift laboratory in his home to perform experiments on guinea pigs in order to try and find some kind of cure for a tumor his mother had contracted. Che was devastated by his mother's illness because the two had always had such a strong bond.¹⁵ Some historians, such as Daniel James, argue that this desire to help his mother was a significant factor in Guevara pursuing a medical career. These experiments could very well have been the origins of this desire.

¹⁴James, 39-40.

¹⁵Eduardo Galeano, "Magic Death for a Magic Life." *Monthly Review: An Independent Socialist Magazine* 59, no. 6 (2007): 22.

Guevara knew that he wanted to do something with his life that would help make the world a better place. In 1947, just before his nineteenth birthday, Guevara enrolled in the University of Buenos Aires and surprised many who knew him by enrolling in the school of medicine.¹⁶ He dreamed of discovering some miracle cure or new system of treatment that would revolutionize medicine and save the lives of millions of people. He called himself a “child of [his] environment” because of this, since much of this desire came from witnessing such bad conditions in the poor areas of Argentina throughout his early years.¹⁷ While this noble drive to save the proletariat could very well have been Che’s primary reason to pursue the profession, it is viable to assume that other reasons for his entering medical school exist. The most pressing desire for Che was not only understand his own asthma, but also to try and find any possible way he could help his mother, whose tumor was now cancerous.¹⁸

Guevara found life in medical school rather difficult, not because he was unintelligent. On the contrary, he routinely passed his exams with decent marks. His biggest issue with university life was how stagnant it was. Ernesto was very bright, but a particularly poor student because he would rarely attend his classes or spend any of his free time studying. He actually spent a majority of his time divided between poetry recitals and playing chess, at which he was incredibly talented, having been taught from a very young age by his father, and he found time to play regularly throughout his life, even during the Cuban period.¹⁹

Despite his lack of studiousness, Guevara managed to complete three quarters of his schooling towards getting his medical license when he visited his childhood friend, Alberto

¹⁶James, 49.

¹⁷Ernesto “Che” Guevara. “On Revolutionary Medicine.” *Monthly Review: An Independent Socialist Magazine* 56, no. 8 (2005): 40.

¹⁸James, 49-50.

¹⁹James, 50.

Granado, while on September vacation in Cordoba. Granado had been planning a motorcycle trip around Latin America “to know its beauties and the misery in which its inhabitants live.”

Granado asked Guevara if he would like to accompany him on this trip, and Guevara agreed immediately, provided they could hold off on the trip until the end of the term in December so he could finish his exams for the term. Guevara still had two terms to finish after that Autumn term and he was worried he might fall behind if he left, but he found himself unable to pass up such a momentarily life-changing opportunity. After promising his mother that he would return one day to finish his studies, Guevara managed to pass his December exams and began planning with Granado for a trip that he later credited for his eventual transformation from Ernesto Guevara into Che.²⁰

Both Guevara and Granado kept extensive diaries of this trip. Granado’s diary is a much lighter account of the trip, however, and seems to delve into far less advanced political rants by comparison with those in Guevara’s diary. Because Guevara ended up rewriting his diary while he was in Cuba, it is likely that he put more emphasis on class conflict. Because of this, Guevara’s diary is less useful for biographic information simply because it essentially becomes more of a propaganda piece rather than a diary at times. At the same time, it is difficult to decipher between what was written originally by Guevara and what was added in later.²¹

This trip was set to start in late December, 1951 in Cordoba, from where they would travel through the Patagonia, cross to Chile at Bariloche, then north through Chile, Peru, briefly Brazil, Colombia, and finally Venezuela.²² The first time Granado’s journal hints that the duo’s outlooks on life had begun to change was the entry on January 23, 1952 while they were in Bahía

²⁰James 59-60.

²¹ Rebecca Carte, "Trickster, Traveler, Cultural Hero: Ernesto "Che" Guevara," *Studies In Latin American Popular Culture* 27 (2008): 169.

²²Alberto Granado. *Traveling With Ché Guevara: The Making of a Revolutionary* (New York: New Market Press, 2004), xxi.

Blanca, Argentina. Here they met an office clerk who showed them around the city's nightlife. Granado described it as a rather boring night in which Guevara grew annoyed with the clerk's self-righteous attitude and obsession with money. After parting with this man, Granado and Guevara realized that this man embodied what they could have become had it not been for "something that made us rebel." Guevara realized here that he was on path to become a well-paid allergist who turned away those who could not afford his services, rather than a caring doctor, researching cures to diseases. In his eyes, he could do so much more to help the people than treat the allergies of old, wealthy ladies.²³ While this example seems a bit extreme, it is fair to assume that Guevara was worried he would become corrupted by wealth in the medical profession and lose his desire to really help the people.

Just four days later, in Chichinales, Granado and Guevara managed to get permission to stay overnight in an empty jail cell, where Granado makes first mention of their awareness of class conflict. Some rich prospectors were staying in town as well and they had bribed the very poor police there with a few bottles of wine to get the officers to wait on them hand and foot. Granado remarked that this was unfair, to which Guevara replied, "Heads and tails, always two sides of the coin. The beauty of the landscape and the natural wealth of the land set against the poverty of those who work it. The nobility and generosity of the poor set against the mean and sordid spirits of...those who rule the country." According to Granado, this observation stuck with him for years, demonstrating Guevara's talent for influencing others, as well as his compassion for the working man.²⁴ It is possible that Granado relies so heavily on quotes such as this one specifically to celebrate Che and to make his own role in the creation of Che seem greater.

²³Granado, 11.

²⁴Granado, 15.

As the duo neared the Chilean border, they began investigating more thoroughly the plight of the workers in the area around Bariloche. This region was known for its wool and the land owners were extremely exploitative. When shearing time arrived, they posted fliers boasting excellent wages. Once workers turned up in the hundreds, the owners announced that they could not employ them all, so they always had the workers bid their own wages downward in an effort to secure a job. Furthermore, the sheep were always sheared near a river, making it so the owners never had to improve the land by building roads which could improve national infrastructure. On the contrary, they simply loaded the wool onto boats in the nearby river and shipped it all out of the country to the developed nations of Europe and North America, so they were not helping their own nation at all. Hearing of these injustices made Guevara livid. He could not understand why the workers would not simply work together and refuse to do any work if they were not all paid fairly.²⁵

Guevara's dream of becoming a doctor seems to have begun to shift while on this trip. While he did eventually return home and complete his degree, as he promised his mother he would, several instances during his trip with Granado suggest Guevara's view of his future was beginning to evolve. While the two were in Peru, they stopped at a town called San Pablo with the intention of visiting a leper colony. The inhabitants of this colony loved the pair a great deal because they treated them like human beings, rather than as something to be reviled. Risking contact with the dangerous disease, Guevara organized hunting trips with the patients and even played soccer with them a few times. He resented the way the doctors working in the colony treated the people like they were just business, rather than actual victims who needed their support.²⁶

²⁵Granado, 27-28.

²⁶James, 64.

Because of this trip, Guevara began to question the worth of his medical aspirations. He worried he would become cold and detached like the doctors at the leper colony and this is revealed in many of his later writings. As Guevara later said, “Isolated individual endeavor, for all its purity of ideals, is of no use, and the desire to sacrifice an entire lifetime to the noblest of ideals serves no purpose if one works alone.” Guevara said this in a speech given to Cuban revolutionaries in 1960 that has since been transcribed into a text called “On Revolutionary medicine.” Granted, much of this speech could very well have been propaganda, but it is clear to see from the way he spoke of it, that his views on medicine’s use in the world had greatly changed. He came to believe that while it was a great thing to help individual people, it would not come to bring any real change. For one to truly be a revolutionary doctor or even a revolutionary at all, Guevara began to believe that an actual revolution was required. If revolution was not achieved, he would never go on to save Latin America from the evils that plagued it.²⁷

Thanks to his experiences on his motorcycle trip with Granado, Guevara’s political and social ideology was able to blossom. Seeing those doctors’ cold attitudes towards their patients made him realize the value of socialized school systems, even for the traditionally expensive medical profession. One of Guevara’s major selling points for the revolution in Cuba was the fact that the medical profession would no longer be open only to children of rich families, who were the only ones who could afford to pay their way through medical school. Guevara claimed that many people from wealthy families became doctors with the goal of status or wealth, rather than the drive to help humanity. According to Guevara, if people from impoverished backgrounds were given the opportunity to complete medical school, the first thing they would do is rush off to their hometowns and try and improve conditions. This would be in stark contrast

²⁷“Revolutionary Medicine,” 41.

to the doctors who came from wealth who would focus on staying in the big cities because of the lifestyle they would bring. Guevara hypothesized that the socialization of medicine would allow for massive changes in the attitudes of doctors, as well as a complete revolution to the medical profession, allowing doctors to focus on prevention, rather than treatment.²⁸

In order for any of this change to come around, Guevara realized that he could not cause it alone. Later in his life, he was able to garner support for his ideals by calling for people to unite as one mass for the betterment of humanity. He called for the creation of a “new type of human being,” one who was compassionate to all and would lay down his life for the good of the whole. Guevara’s thoughts on medicine began to shift so dramatically, he even questioned the field of medicine as a whole. Guevara attacked modern medicine, saying that it should not be used as a crutch for the weak, but rather as a preventative method for keeping away diseases. He called for all people to begin taking better care of themselves and to learn more about medicine so they could treat their own illnesses, rather than putting so much emphasis on professionals, who he came to believe should only be called upon in great emergencies for things like surgery.²⁹ When one attempts to understand the discourse of this speech, it is possible to conclude that part of Che’s reasoning for making these claims was due to Cuba’s relative lack of infrastructure and hospitals at the time. Therefore, it would be beneficial for the government if people were able to take better care of themselves because the government simply did not have the means to treat every little illness at the time.

Furthermore, Guevara called on physicians to change the way they approach their professions. Seeing the Peruvian leper colony as an example, Guevara said that doctors must not stop at just helping the individuals who come in for care. He always maintained that doctors

²⁸“Revolutionary Medicine,” 44-45.

²⁹“Revolutionary Medicine,” 41-42.

should get to know their patients and truly understand their pain and suffering. This close relationship, he said, was essential to revolutionizing the field of medicine and truly helping the masses because doctors would better understand diseases and how to prevent them in others.³⁰

Che's life changed dramatically after leaving for his motorcycle trip in 1948. After graduating with his medical license in 1952, he left home and traveled north, eventually enlisting in Jacapo Arbenz's military in Guatemala in 1954. The leftist Arbenz was soon killed and it was rumored that the CIA played a major role in his death. Guevara soon left Guatemala as a right-wing dictatorship was put into place. After spending some time in Mexico, where he met and worked with Fidel Castro, before following him to Cuba in 1956 to fight the Cuban Revolutionary War. It was here when most of Guevara's writings were published and he began to grow in popularity among the revolutionaries. After the war, he worked for awhile in Castro's government, but warfare was where he excelled and Guevara strove to spread socialist revolution around the world. In 1965, Castro sent him to the Congo to help spark a revolution, which ultimately failed in his eyes because his forces were "incompetent" in Marxist theory. Finally, after returning to Cuba, he was sent by Castro to Bolivia in 1966 to lead yet another popular revolution. The fact that Bolivia's terrain was completely different from what he was used to in Cuba is a major reason his guerrilla tactics were far less effective here, and Guevara was ultimately captured and killed by the Bolivian military.³¹

After Guevara's death at age 39 on October 7, 1967, he was rapidly catapulted to martyrdom, once the photograph of his corpse was revealed to the world. Up until his death, Che was relatively unknown to the world, aside from those he fought with and against, as well as those who had seen his iconic photograph, taken by Alberto Korda March 5, 1960. This photo

³⁰“Revolutionary Medicine,” 43.

³¹ James, 154-5

was featured on the cover of Time Magazine, in which he was mentioned as being a guerrilla leader, but his picture was mostly used because it looked heroic and depicted the plight of the revolutionaries. After his death, however, Che was seemingly promoted from a well-respected guerrilla warrior to a pop culture icon. His face was soon emblazoned posters, coffee mugs, watches, ash trays, T-shirts, and several film biographies were later made. A man who lived to further socialist revolution across the world, quickly became a capitalist tool in death.³²

Che's career as a pop culture icon exploded in 1968, about a year after his death, when posters featuring his face were first mass-produced. Not only was Guevara a popular name at leftist protests, but his face was suddenly everywhere. A dorm room was not complete in the late sixties without a poster of Guevara on the wall. From 1968-69 the New York Times seemed to identify any and every particular socialist movement in the world with Guevara. This is not to say that Che did not inspire workers across the world, but even the New York Times was on the Che bandwagon, attributing to the socialist Guevara, protests, many of which were anarchist in nature, in Spain, France, Brazil, Germany, as well as in the United States.³³

Since his image can be seen so readily across the world, one must wonder whether his face has lost its power to actually signify one particular ideology or revolutionary group. Of course Guevara hoped for a worldwide socialist revolution, but Che's image seems to have lost even its socialist symbolism in modern times. Do high school students in America wearing shirts with his image understand who Che was and what he hoped to represent? By no means has Che's image become de-politicized entirely, although much of the original ideology has been lost in the Guevara myth. Even in more recent times, Guevara has been used as a more general symbol for revolution of the masses, be it socialist in nature or otherwise. Since 1994, the anarchist, Marxist,

³²J. Hoberman, "Behold the Man." *Virginia Quarterly Review* 85, no. 1 (2009): 203-4.

³³ Jeff Larson and Omar Lizardo, "Generations, Identities, and the Collective Memory of Che Guevara." *Sociological Forum* 22, no. 4 (2007): 428-9.

and libertarian Zapatista rebels in Mexico have used Guevara's image on clothes, flags, and banners. In 2000, French protestors flaunted Guevara flags at the trial of antineoliberalist, José Bove, who had blown up a McDonald's. Ironically, in 2002, Italian peace activists passed out T-shirts featuring the face of the man who helped popularize guerrilla warfare and oversaw the deaths of thousands of Cuban loyalists in the years following the Cuban Revolution. Che stressed the importance of violent revolution against the bourgeoisie, so it seems plainly ignorant to use his face to symbolize peace. Clearly Che's identity was greatly overshadowed by his image after his death.³⁴

Guevara's historical actions, as well as his personal ideology, are largely ignored for many reasons. Historically, significant figures tend to achieve fame throughout their lifetime based on their actions. Much is known about Mao Zedong because his face could be seen in every household in China and he was constantly in the news across the world. Guevara was the complete opposite. Since ordinary people around the world knew very little to nothing of Guevara and his ideology while he was alive, they really only became aware of him when they began to see his image everywhere after his death. Guevara's rise to fame was almost entirely posthumous, which helps explain why his likeness is shown to represent so many different things.³⁵

While the myth of Che Guevara has clearly grown beyond his identity when alive, his own personality is truly very complicated when he is studied. In his own writings, Che describes himself as being no more special than the common man, saying like his only dream was to succeed, just like everyone else.³⁶ He rarely if ever saw himself above others and there are several photographs showing him hard at work after the revolution in Cuba on the 'voluntary

³⁴ Larson and Lizardo, 429.

³⁵ Larson and Lizardo, 432.

³⁶ Revolutionary Medicine, 40.

work day' he proposed on a Sunday to help build Cuba's infrastructure. While Cubans stayed home and relaxed on this half day of work, Che refused to let people think he was lazy or in any way against the revolution.³⁷

Without a doubt, Guevara is one of the most interesting and unusual figures to study in the 20th century. Since so little of his life was understood until after his death, historians are left to sort the realities against the myths of Guevara, as well as the multiple personalities within himself at different points in his life. Historians tend to rely on the writings of Guevara himself, as well as references to him by those he knew, particularly Castro and Granado. Unfortunately, these sources are of course highly biased, but very little else was written about Guevara while he was alive. It is possible to highlight a key difference in Guevara's ideology and demeanor before and after his motorcycle trip with Granado. This trip serves essentially as the marker for the 'death' of Ernesto, the impetuous boy, and the birth of Che, the determined revolutionary. Guevara himself wrote of his own motorcycle diaries after editing them the year following the trip, saying that the person who wrote them was gone and that "I'm not the person I once was. All this wandering around "Our America with a capital A" has changed me more than I thought."³⁸

More specifically, Guevara's changing personality is demonstrated while on the trip in the diary in the way as well as the frequency with which he describes his and Granado's attire and how it changes over time. He describes and almost seems embarrassed by their clothing initially in the trip because he feels like a member of the "wandering aristocracy," or what basically amounts to a tourist. As time wore on, Che practically romanticized how they began to dress more practically and began to be constantly covered in the dust and grime of a life on the

³⁷ Osvaldo Salas and Roberto Salas, "Che Guevara Internet Archive," *Marxists.org*, accessed 5/2/2012, <http://marxists.org/archive/guevara/1961/misc/x001.jpg>.

³⁸ Carte, 169.

road. Here he describes himself and his partner as “shadows of our former aristocratic selves.” While Che did not necessarily realize the magnitude of this statement at the time, it clearly marks a turning point in his diary where the duo become much more aware of the squalor and social injustice around them on their journey.³⁹ While it is possible Guevara added emphasis to this section when he rewrote his diary, the change in tone seems to continue throughout the remainder of the diary, suggesting that around this time, Che actually was beginning to politicize his writing.

As Ernesto’s diary continued, he suddenly seemed proud of his shaggy, dirty clothing. He described how he and Granado searched through the poorest areas they could find to speak to beggars and the homeless, and began to identify himself more and more with these people. Occasionally, Che contradicted himself in the diary, speaking as both an aristocrat and one of “the people,” revealing an inner conflict that suggested he and Granado were suddenly no longer the young men who took off on a road trip on a whim.⁴⁰

Eventually, much later in the diary, the evolution from Ernesto to Che is fully revealed in one of Guevara’s notes in the margins. In his diary of the motorcycle trip he wrote near the end, “I knew that when the great guiding spirit cleaves humanity into two antagonistic halves, I would be with the people. I know this, I see it printed in the night sky that I...will assault the barricades or the trenches, will take my bloodstained weapon, consumed with fury, slaughter any enemy who falls into my hands...I steel my body, ready to do battle, and prepare myself to be a sacred space within which the bestial howl of the triumphant proletariat can resound with new energy and new hope.”⁴¹

³⁹ Carte, 172.

⁴⁰ Carte, 174.

⁴¹ Carte, 176.

Despite Che's own writings as evidence to his generally bright personality, many people throughout the world had considerable trouble viewing Che, who was essentially a terrorist in the minds of many, as real human being with both strengths and weaknesses. When the film "The Motorcycle Diaries" was released in 2004, popular opinion of Guevara's personality skyrocketed. The movie was based on Che's own diaries, and unlike the more lengthy biographical films previously released⁴², the movie only covered Che's life prior to his time as a revolutionary. Mexican actor Gael Garcia Bernal portrayed Guevara as a very compassionate, handsome, and idealistic doctor who was greatly affected by the social injustices he witnessed along his trip. Seeing Che before he became a hardened and decorated war veteran gives the audience a much greater appreciation of his personality, as well as allowing them to identify with him more. Therefore, after 2004, Guevara's popularity began to skyrocket once again since he suddenly seemed so much more like a human with real ideals, rather than just a face on a T-shirt.⁴³

Most historians and Rosario, Argentina natives (Rosarinos) will agree with the claim that Che is by far the most famous person born in Rosario, and some would even argue that he is the most influential Argentinean in history, more so even than prominent men like Juan Peron and Juan Manuel de Rosas. Despite this, Che was never publicly celebrated in Rosario until roughly thirty years after his death. It seems strange that the most celebrated man to come from a city with over a million inhabitants like Rosario would not have been commemorated by the city itself for so long. The attitude and cultural memory of Che Guevara in his hometown of Rosario

⁴² In 1969, Richard Fleischer made "Che!" in America about Che's life from 1956 in Cuba to his death. Much of this film was exaggerated and much of it seems devoted to making Fidel Castro appear weak, as the film portrays Guevara arguing with Castro and calling him a Soviet tool. Steven Soderbergh's 2008 two-part biopic, Che, starring Benicio Del Toro is a far more accurate portrayal of Che's entire life.

⁴³ Eric Carter, "Where's Che? Politics, Pop Culture, and Public Memory in Rosario, Argentina," *American Geographical Society's Focus On Geography* 55, no. 1 (2012): 7-8.

actually reveals a great deal about how Latin Americans view the Guevara myth versus the reality that was Ernesto Guevara.⁴⁴

The major barrier preventing Che from becoming a public icon in the city was the fact that the 1960's-80's were years of great political violence in Argentina due to the continual governmental upheavals. Since Che was a guerrilla revolutionary, he essentially represented the embodiment of all this violence, making him an inflammatory figure for many Argentineans. As time passed and the political climate of Latin America slowly cooled, the Rosarinos began to cling to Che's memory more and more, partly in an effort to bring their city out of Buenos Aires' shadow. Since the late 90's, Rosario has completely changed its treatment of Che. Where he was once an uncomfortable subject for Rosarinos, Che suddenly became a point of pride and his face quickly spread around the city as it had already done throughout the world.⁴⁵

The first official celebration of Guevara in Rosario came in 1997, when a marble plaque in Che's memory and a large mural of Che were hung at the *Plaza de la Cooperacion* just two blocks away from the home Guevara was born in. As a matter of fact, the current owners of Che's birthplace refused to allow any markers or acknowledgments of the historical significance of the building until 2008, when a single banner was hung, commemorating the building as his birthplace. Ironically, the ground floor of the birthplace of one of the most influential socialists in history is currently home to the insurance company, MAPFRE, on the ground floor. Just across the street, however, is the Che Guevara hostel, which has commemorated Che for several years with posters bearing Che's likeness in just about every window.⁴⁶

Truly demonstrating how much the perception of Che has improved in Argentina is one of the most recent monuments to him. The four-meter-high statue of Che in *Parque Yrigoyen*

⁴⁴ Carter, 1.

⁴⁵ Carter, 1-2.

⁴⁶ Carter, 2-3.

reveals the public affirmation of Guevara, especially when one considers the story of its origin. The sculpture, Andres Zernerer believed that any true monument to Che needed to be a collaboration of “the people” for whom he had given his life trying to help. To achieve this, Zernerer started a campaign across Argentina for citizens to donate old keys and other pieces of brass to be melted down in order to create the statue. After just over a year, Zernerer collected over three and a half tons of metal and set to work on the statue. At the same time, an internet poll was set up allowing people to decide the final location of the statue, with Rosario winning in a landslide. A massive parade was held in Buenos Aires to celebrate the completion of the statue as it was driven through the city, and it was finally dedicated in June of 2008 on Che’s 80th birthday. This celebration essentially brought the memory of Guevara back into the spotlight in Argentina and allowed for him to be fully appreciated for his worldwide significance in his homeland.⁴⁷

The most bizarre thing about Guevara’s modern skyrocketing popularity in Rosario is the fact that he is being used as a nationalist symbol. Guevara stressed the importance of worldwide communist revolution against things like imperialism and nationalism. He resented the notion that political borders separated equal human beings into separate groups. Furthermore, Guevara never returned to Argentina after leaving for Mexico, where he met Castro, so he really had very little to do with Argentina, other than living in it for a little over the first half of his life.

One man’s writings have starkly contrasted with what the majority of other associates of Guevara have said of Guevara himself. Regis Debray is mentioned by Che in his Bolivian Diary several times as “Danton” and “the Frenchman,” and he was with Che’s unit in Bolivia for just less than a month up until a few days before Che’s death. Prior to the 1990’s, Debray always spoke of Guevara rather highly and promoted “Guevarism” as the one true road to revolution. In

⁴⁷ Carter, 4-5.

1996, however, Debray released an article to be followed by a book to precede the 30th anniversary of Che's death. In these works, Debray changes his stance on Guevara entirely.⁴⁸

Here, Debray suddenly not only denounced Che's political ideals, but also attacks his personality at the same time. Debray describes Guevara as a hard man who was overly demanding of the people working underneath him. Debray actually goes as far to call Guevara an authoritarian, which seems a bit out of place because there is little evidence to suggest that Guevara had political aspirations after his time as a guerrilla fighter. Once Debray's article was released, it was immediately attacked by Che supporters and many historians, such as Carlos Vilas, because essentially all of the first hand evidence, from family and friend accounts, to statements made by soldiers who fought under him in Cuba, suggests that Guevara was a very responsible, thoughtful leader and an entertaining person to be around. One must attempt to try and understand why exactly Debray changed his stance on Guevara so thoroughly.

Che's daughter, Aleida Guevara (from his second wife, Aleida March⁴⁹), actually went as far as to place the blame on Debray for the Bolivian army finding Che and his men, which would lead to his death. Once Debray left Guevara's unit of soldiers, he was captured along with Carlos Bustos, another man attempting to leave the country to organize guerrilla action in Argentina. Guevara had allowed Debray to leave in hope that he could bring news of the war to Cuba, where Debray also hoped marry his girlfriend.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Carlos Vilas, "Fancy footwork: Regis Debray on Che Guevara." *NACLA Report On The Americas* 30, no. 3 (1996): 9.

⁴⁹ Che first Hilda Gadea in 1955. They had one child together. She actually introduced Che to the Castro brothers in Mexico. Once Gadea arrived in Cuba to live with her husband in May 1959, Che told her he was involved with another woman, Aleida March, and asked for a divorce. The two split on decent terms and Che married March less than a month later and would remained betrothed until his death. Both women wrote books about their time with Guevara (Gadea's My Life with Che and March's Evocation) and they both remained staunch leftists after Guevara had died.

⁵⁰ Vilas, 9.

On April 23rd, 1967, Che writes that Debray and Bustos' (referred to by Che as "El Pelado" or "baldy") fates were unknown, and then makes mention of them again on the 27th, stating that he received confirmation that the two were captured and being held prisoner by the Bolivian army. On April 30th, Che remarks that Debray and Bustos were too hasty in their departure, but practically blames himself and his own "lack of energy to deter them" for their capture. Later on June 29th, Che says that the Bolivian commander-in-chief, Alfredo Ovando Candía, had announced that Bolivia was now aware of Guevara's presence in the country, based on statements made by Debray. Guevara seemingly defended Debray saying that they cannot know the circumstances under which Debray divulged this information, hinting that it may have been possible Debray was tortured. Che makes much mention of Debray from then up to his last mention of the Frenchman on October 3rd, where Guevara says that Debray was "very courageous" when a public interview was broadcast in Bolivia of Debray. Guevara was killed just five days later.⁵¹

While it is fairly simple to understand where Aleida Guevara may have drawn her conclusions as to why Debray changed his opinions on Guevara, possibly out of guilt, one must consider the idea that Debray could have simply been attacking Guevara's political ideology because of how far Cuba's government had strayed from Marxist ideology.⁵² While Guevara was associated with and was even friends with Fidel Castro, Guevara had very little to do with the actual administration of government in Cuba, other than leading much of the fighting that brought it to power. Perhaps Debray's seemingly damning portrait of Che was nothing more than a discription of the man desperately trying to win a losing battle in Bolivia, but it seems highly

⁵¹ Vilas, 9.

⁵² Vilas, 9.

possible that Debray, who went on to maintain a modest political career in France, was simply trying to distance himself from the violent revolutionary for political purposes

Fidel Castro had a very different view of Che than Debray and had a much more developed relationship with the revolutionary. Since Guevara fought for Castro and served briefly in his government, it is very possible that Castro wants to paint Guevara in the absolute greatest light possible to show him as a strong-willed communist. To be sure, Castro gives his fair share of accounts of Guevara's dedication, saying that he and Guevara were in prison together in Mexico in June, 1956, and recalling that Guevara was interrogated and always refused to deny he was a communist out of sheer pride and determination. Guevara actually got into an argument with the police and a judge over Josef Stalin's faults in running the Soviet Union. While Guevara applauded Stalin's economic successes, he accused Stalin of corrupting the ideal communist system with things like his personality cult.⁵³

All praise of Guevara's dedication to Marxism aside, Castro had very positive things to say of his old comrade. Castro said of Guevara in Castro's own spoken autobiography, "[Che] had a gift for people. He was one of those people that everyone immediately cares about – it was his naturalness, his simplicity, his sense of comradeship and all his virtues."⁵⁴ Castro said all of this about Che in 2006, long after the two had their final contact in the 60's, suggesting that Che left a very significant impression on the Cuban dictator.

Some of Castro's accounts of Guevara are up for debate simply because there is little evidence to suggest some of them are true, such as whether Guevara ever said to Castro that his only request was that he be allowed to return to Argentina to lead a revolution.⁵⁵ It is actually

⁵³ Fidel Castro and Ignacio Ramonet, *Fidel Castro: My Life A Spoken Autobiography*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Scribner Press, 2006), 180-1.

⁵⁴ Castro, 173.

⁵⁵ Castro, 174.

rather easy to believe that Guevara had this desire because he longed to spread worldwide revolution, but there is simply no evidence of the matter other than Castro's testimony because Guevara was still just another soldier under Castro when he is supposed to have said this in 1956. Since he had such a small role at this point, people simply did not see much need to keep significant records of Che at the time.

Despite the validity of some of Castro's comments being difficult to verify, it is hard to imagine Castro going to such lengths to build up the character of Guevara if he did not genuinely feel that way, especially so long after Guevara's death. Castro went into great detail describing Che's determination and work ethic, talking about Che's attempts to climb Popocatepetl, a volcano near Mexico City over 5,000 meters high. According to Castro, Che tried to reach the summit every weekend, but his asthma always prevented him from his goal. Despite this, Che would always return the following weekend. Castro claimed that he liked Che so much as a person, that he often refused to let Che go on certain missions during the Cuban Revolution. He did not want Che to get killed, despite Che typically being the first to volunteer for every dangerous mission.⁵⁶

In contrast to Castro, however, more conservative critics of Guevara, such as Debray or Daniel James, condemned him simply for being a communist revolutionary, and therefore, being guilty by association with the atrocities committed by self-professed "communists" like Josef Stalin, Mao Zedong, and Pol Pot. These accusations have little basis in reality considering the fact that Guevara never advocated any form of genocide and was really in no way related to the aforementioned leaders aside from how they all referred to themselves as communists. Still more critics point out Guevara's friendship with Castro and criticize the Cuban economic program and government decades after Guevara's death. While Guevara was certainly instrumental in helping

⁵⁶ Castro, 176-7.

Castro obtain power through his ideas and implementation of guerrilla warfare, it is quite a stretch to argue that Guevara had much influence on Castro's government in the subsequent decades, other than being used as an inspirational figure in propaganda.⁵⁷

Whether or not one condones what Ernesto "Che" Guevara went on to do in his life, it is impossible to deny the importance of his youth and his brief stint in the medical profession when attempting to understand who he was. He is one of the most influential people of the 20th century for the actions he took in life, but far more significant for the way the world began to see him after his death. Guevara's own message has been changed time and again to fit the ever changing political movements throughout the world. In order to see beyond the mythology, one must look deep into his past to understand who Guevara was. From the young asthmatic soccer player being carried off the field by his friends, to the steadfast and dedicated guerrilla fighting for his life in Bolivia, Ernesto Guevara was an incredibly complex and influential man, even beyond the myth that has become Che.

⁵⁷ Carter, 9.

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