
Ernesto 'Che' Guevara (1928 - 1967)

Guerrilla Warrior

National Hero of Cuba

Biographical Notes

'Che' Guevara was born Ernesto Guevara de la Serna on 14 June 1928 in **Rosario, Argentina**, into a relatively upper-middle class family. His father was a construction engineer. He was the first of five children.

Develops a severe asthmatic condition at the age of two, prompting his family to move to the drier climate of Alta Gracia, Cordoba.

Most of his early education was provided by his mother at home. He is reported to have read widely and deeply from his father's library, encountering Marx and Freud in his early teens.

In 1941, he attends the Colegio Nacional Dean Funes, a secondary school in Cordoba.

Enrolled in the University of Buenos Aires in 1948, studies medicine, becomes interested in leprosy. His asthma disqualifies him for military service.

Makes a 4,000 mile long journey through Northern Argentina alone on a moped, encountering many indigenous tribes and experiencing first hand the impoverished conditions of their lives.

In 1951, he takes off on a motorcycle journey with his good friend, Alberto Granado. They travel from Buenos Aires, down the coast of Argentina, through the Andes into **Chile**, and then north into **Peru**, **Columbia** and **Venezuela**. The diary Che kept during this time has been published as: *The Motorcycle Diaries: A Journey Around South America*.

He qualifies as a doctor in 1953, specializing in dermatology. Around this time he was exposed to the attempted worker reforms following the National Revolution of 1952 in **Bolivia**.

Walks and hitchhikes to **Guatemala**, witnesses the overthrow of the radical socialist government of Jacobo Arbenz by USA-supported Castillo Armas. He could not help but note the vital role that the CIA played in the counter-revolution. Establishes connections with Peruvian Apristas and other Latin American radicals.

In September of 1954, he moves to **Mexico City**, finding work in the General Hospital. Through Hilda Gadea, a Peruvian Marxist, he meets **Fidel Castro** and involves himself in the planned invasion of **Cuba**. He marries Gadea. They have a daughter, Hildita.

Under the influence of Castro, Alberto Bayo and the writings of Mao Tse-tung, he begins to form the primary axioms of his philosophy of guerrilla warfare. In this time he also began to be called 'Che', for his habit of ending his sentences and calling his friends 'Che'- which is an Argentinian expression for buddy. In 1956, the revolutionaries land in Cuba on the "yacht" *Granma*, initiating a three-year guerrilla war against the dictator, Fulgencio Batista. Che is included at first for his medical expertise but soon rises through the ranks to become the Commandante of the Revolutionary Army of Barbutos. In this role, he is directly responsible for dozens of executions of defectors and Batista loyalists.

The revolutionaries succeed in overthrowing the Batista regime in January of 1959. Che is now considered second only to Castro, who appoints him Governor of the National Bank.

He marries Aleida March de la Torre, with whom he eventually has four children.

He is made Minister for Industry in 1961, becomes increasingly hostile towards US interests in the Cuban economy, strengthens relationship with USSR. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, Che advocates nuclear confrontation.

From 1961 to 1965, he travels with his wife around the world as an ambassador for Cuba.

Becomes disillusioned with Soviet Communism, makes a formal break in a speech delivered in February of 1965. Calls for guerrilla-type revolutionary actions in Africa, Asia and South America.

Che goes underground, traveling through **Africa**, eventually assembling a group of Cubans to fight in the Kinshasa rebellion in the **Congo**. The rebellion fails and Che withdraws in August of 1965.

Castro informally removes Guevara from office, their ideas for the future of Cuba having radically diverged.

He disguises himself as Uruguayan economist, shaving off his beard and not wearing his famous beret, in order to travel incognito through Latin America.

In November 1966, he leads a group of guerrillas through southeastern Bolivia, hoping to inspire the peasants and workers into a revolutionary movement that would spread all throughout Latin America, sparking off "twenty new Vietnams". Dispirited by casualties, illness and depression, the ragged group is cornered by a Bolivian battalion (which had been trained by US Special Forces in anti-guerrilla warfare) in

a gorge on October 8. Two jets and a helicopter provide air support. Che is taken to the nearby town of La Higuera.

He refuses all attempts at interrogation by CIA and Bolivian officials. The Bolivian president, General Rene Barrientos, orders the execution of Guevara as soon as possible.

9 October 1967. After a few false starts and Che's telling them to get it over with, six or more shots are fired into Guevara's torso. One version of his reported last words were: "I knew you were going to shoot me; I should never have been taken alive. Tell Fidel that this failure does not mean the end of the revolution, that it will triumph elsewhere. Tell Aleida to forget this, remarry and be happy, and keep the children studying. Ask the soldiers to aim well." Others have claimed his last words to have been: "Shoot, coward! You are going to kill a man."

After his death, a death mask was made and his hands were cut off to ensure identification. His body was buried in a secret grave. Guevara was 39 years old.

In June of 1997, a team of Cuban and Argentinian scientists recovered the skeleton, missing both hands, of Guevara in the town of Vallegrande, Bolivia. The bones have since been "repatriated" to Cuba.