Anarchist Communist Federation
Myths and Legends
1998

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Saint of the Poor

The years 1946–9 saw workers wages go up by a third. But in February 1949 the stock market collapsed and after this Peronism became more openly anti-working class, with austerity measures being introduced. Spending was cut by 20% and real wages fell by 32% between 1949 and 1953. In 1950 Eva Peron attempted to stop a railworkers strike. When the strike action spread the following year, the Peronists declared military rule, sacked 3,000 workers and jailed 300. She began to be associated with the brutal methods of the regime.

Her early death in 1951 meant that the reputation she had built up was not too damaged by the increasing attacks of Peronism on the working class. In death she was transformed into a Virgin Mary style icon, a Saint of the Poor, easily managed in a predominantly Catholic country. In reality she was a corrupt and power-mad manipulator of the masses, helping bring about, in Juan Peron's own words :"A fascism that is careful to avoid all the errors of Mussolini".

deliver dramatic addresses to mass meetings and over the radio waves, bringing up her working class credentials, calling on the working class to back her and Peron. In the meantime she continued to do what she had been doing before Peron became President. She moved her relatives into positions of power. Her brother became Peron's private secretary. Husbands and lovers of her sister and mother were given influential positions. This nepotism benefited her family — it also allowed her access to provincial government, the Senate, the judiciary, communications, and her husband's daily schedule. At the same time she spent a fortune on jewellery, hats and clothes and an extravagant lifestyle- a long way from the lives of the people she made her impassioned speeches to.

Then there was the Eva Peron Foundation. She had set this up when she had been refused the Presidency of a national establishment charity sponsored by upper class women, shortly after Peron became President. From a show of egotism, the Foundation developed into a kind of welfare state, which built hospitals, schools, orphanages and old peoples' homes, distributing food, medicine and money. But each act of the Foundation was used as a publicity stunt to show how benevolent Eva Peron was. At the same time many gimmicks were used as grist for the publicity mill. Very poor children were housed and fed for a few days and then flung back into poverty, peso notes were flung at random into the crowd. At the same time money was raised by the Foundation by a compulsory levy on union members (3 days pay) a national lottery and enforced contributions from the industrialists. The Foundation gained publicity for Peronism for its good deeds, it bolstered popular support through its "good deeds"- and Eva was able to divert up to $700 million into overseas accounts!

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sections of the ruling class, the aristocracy, the landowners and big ranchers, who were wedded to the old ideas of outright repression. Peron did this too with the metalworkers, where a union led by a Trotskyist, was set up in opposition to the Communists! Where he could not control, outright repression was used, as with the building workers. Those who objected to Peron's politics were imprisoned and tortured.

Eva became a key player in this strategy. By now Peron had become Vice-President. He increasingly used nationalist rhetoric against British foreign investment and interests in Argentina (British companies owned most of the infrastructure- Argentina was virtually a British colony). The landowners and industrialists forced Peron to resign in 1945, after a wave of protests and strikes to defend the reforms put through by Peron. When Peron was arrested, Eva threw herself into frenetic activity to build up support among the unions. It is rumoured that the large amounts of cash used during this campaign was from that she had embezzled from the earthquake fund. In alliance with Cipriano Reyes, she visited many factories, docks and union HQs, singing the praises of Peron as the workers' friend. This culminated in a mass demonstration on October 17th, when 50,000 workers demonstrated in the capital.

Populist

It was Eva who had shown remarkable resolve when Peron was wavering and preparing to go into exile. It was she who was a chief architect in mobilising the masses in a populist show of support for Peron.

The following year Peron swept to power in a landslide election victory. In the next 3 years Eva, now officially married to Peron, would show how valuable she was to Peronism in enchanting the masses, tying them enthusiastically to the regime and thwarting any independent organisation of the working class. She began to

Colonel Imbert, Minister of Posts and Telegraphs. But her aims were higher. She deliberately sought out Colonel Juan Peron, seen as the strong man among the colonels. Peron, an ardent admirer of Hitler, had been a driving force in the Group of United Officers that had engineered the coup.

Peron realised the regime could not survive for long without the help of other sectors of Argentinian society outside the military. He looked for the active support of the working class. He was put in charge of the ministry of Labour as a first step in this manoeuvre. Peron first met Eva Duarte at a concert given for survivors of an earthquake in January 1944. The charity work she did there was to become a large part of her future career. The publicity given from the charity work put her in the spotlight, helping her in her show-business career. Peron was also using the earthquake tragedy to put himself forward as a champion of the poor, indeed Eva Duarte sang his praises on the radio before she had met him. At the concert Eva jettisoned Imbert, and became Peron's lover.

Corporatism

As a result Eva Duarte began to get leading roles in radio plays, as well as starting to appear in movies. Now

Peron became Minister of War, an important position. At the same time he had been building up his control of the trade unions. The union leaders were coming together in an alliance to force a reformist project on Argentinian society. This coincided with Peron's populist plans, based on the tactics of Mussolini, to bind the unions to him. He encouraged a rank and file leader, Cipriano Reyes, to set up a meat-packers union in opposition to the one controlled by the Communists. In return for a no-strike pledge Peron engineered a small wage rise and better conditions. This tactic of corporatism, fully integrating the unions into the State apparatus and thus controlling the working class, was met with hostility by

Organise! is starting a new series, Myths and Legends, which will take a look at various 'Sacred Cows', diagnose BSE and recommend culling.

Gandhi

We kick off with a look at the 'saint' of non-violence, Mahatma Gandhi.

Mahatma Gandhi is often cited by pacifists as the shining example of how non-violent civil disobedience works successfully. Unfortunately, these paeans of praise leave out a close study of Gandhi's role in the Indian struggle for 'independence', and just as importantly, who were his class allies in that struggle.

By 1919 the Indian capitalist class had decided they wanted independence from the British rulers. However, as can be imagined, the British were reluctant to agree to this and a propaganda campaign for withdrawal had no effect. Indian workers and peasants also resented the yoke of British domination. In response to a mass rally at Amritsar in the Punjab, General Dyer ordered the machine-gunning of the crowd, resulting in over 300 dead and many thousands wounded.

The Indian capitalist class came to the conclusion that after the failure of the propaganda campaign, mass action was necessary to gain independence. However, they were haunted by the spectre of the Russian revolution, which had progressed from democratic demands to outright social revolution. They received the answer to their prayers in Gandhi, who had already led several campaigns of civil disobedience in South Africa against the racist laws there. He thus had a certain credibility, and was also not hindered by any identification with any particular region of the sub-continent.

Evita

Organise! continues its series Myths and Legends with a look at Eva Peron. Turned into a Latin American saint, worshipped by thousands of Argentinians, the subject of an Andrew Lloyd Webber musical and more recently a film starring Madonna, "Evita" has been the subject of much attention over the years. Part of this cult is due to her working class background, her ability to become a "working girl makes good" which appealed to a Tory like Lloyd Webber tuning into the Thatcherite yuppie boom where some people from a working class upbringing were able to make large sums of money. Also superficially appealing are her apparent championing of the poor and her welfare reforms which appeals to a Labourite like Alan Parker, director of the film and supporter of old Labour.

Hitler

Eva Duarte was born in a village 150 miles to the west of Buenos Aires. The facts of her early life are obscure, not least because of her efforts in later life to make out that she was younger and had come from a poorer background than was true. When her father died at seven, the financial position of her family took a plunge. By 1934, however, Eva's mother had increased her wealth by her running of a boarding-house.

Eva Duarte moved to Buenos Aires, where she became an actress. She was a successful radio performer in 1943 when the Army overthrew the Castillo government. Realising that the Army were the important people to know now, Eva Duarte became the lover of

peror being kept in total ignorance of the situation. A look at the facts shows this to be impossible. Selassie knew what he was doing when he stuffed the money stolen from his subjects under his mattress and encouraged others in his employ to do likewise. Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski wrote of Selassie: "the Emperor himself amassed his great riches. The older he grew, the greater became his greed, his pitiable cupidity…he and his people took millions from the state treasurer and left cemeteries full of people who had died of hunger, cemeteries visible from the windows of the royal palace" (The Emperor (1984) Picador p.160).

Haile Selassie was not God or a great reformer; but a callous, greedy, thieving autocrat, who should be remembered for the murdering leach that he was.

Trustees

His theories of civil disobedience were rooted in Hindu theology. He preached the unity of classes among Indians, the rich to be "trustees" to the poor. This message of class unity was vital if he was to create an alliance between the industrialists and the rich peasants. Indian capitalists enthusiastically welcomed these ideas, and he was financed by some of the leading industrialists in West India, the Sarabhais, textile magnates in the Gujarat, and the Birlas, second largest industrialist group in all of India. Millions of rupees were given to him over a period of 25 years. The rich peasants and shopkeepers also provided a pool of activists for his Congress Party. Gandhi, due to his simplicity of life style, was able to mobilise peasants and workers behind him in the cause of nationalism, where the Indian politicians in top hats and morning suits would have found it very difficult. He facilitated a cross-cross alliance for nationalism.

Gandhi had advocated his doctrines of non-violence from early on. This did not stop him from supporting the British in 1899 in the Boer War, volunteering to help them and organising an ambulance corps. As he said, "As long as the subjects owe allegiance to a state, it is their clear duty generally to accommodate themselves, and to accord their support, to the acts of the state". When Gandhi was organising a mass march in South Africa in 1913, to obtain rights for Indians there, the white railway workers went on strike over pay and conditions. Gandhi immediately cancelled his march, saying that civil resisters should not take advantage of a government's difficulty .On the outbreak of the First World War, Gandhi actively recruited for the British war effort, despite his 'pacifism'. On the outbreak of the Second World War, he publicly pledged not to embarrass the British, and would lend moral support to the Allies.

Obey

Each of Gandhi's mass campaigns of civil disobedience (1920–1922, 1930–1933,1942) took place when British capitalism was in trouble. Each crisis broke a few more links with Britain. They also strengthened the Indian capitalists. Fair enough, one can argue, it was good tactics to attack British imperialism when it was in difficulties. What Gandhi failed to do was tie the second campaign to a massive working class upsurge, in conjunction with a mass campaign against a British Parliamentary Commission touring India (both in 1928). Instead he waited till 1930 to launch the campaign. He rejected the idea of teaming workers struggles with a campaign for British withdrawal because he was an advocate of peace between the different classes of India.

Gandhi never questioned the concept of "legality" either. He told his supporters to obey the law and he always insisted that the British had a "legal right" to arrest them. Once arrested, the campaigners were told to cut themselves off from everything outside and passively await their release.

When in April 1946 Indian sailors mutinied in Bombay and Indian soldiers refused to fire on them, Gandhi's Congress Party refused to support them, which effectively broke the mutiny. Workers demonstrated their support in mass strikes, and the thought of workers and rank-and-file soldiers combining in action must have been troubling to Gandhi.

Gandhi's use of the Hindu religion as justification for civil disobedience was disastrous. Not only did it alienate the members of other religions in India, principally the Muslims, but it legitimised the caste system. Gandhi opposed one caste oppressing another, but he never came out in favour of the abolition of the caste system itself. Many "untouchables" were alienated in this way. The massacres that took place after independence were at least partly due to Gandhi's reluctance to include the Muslims within his Congress Party.

police and military personnel, 1% of the state budget was allocated to the farmers and 40% to the army and the cops.

Sumptous Banquets

Selassie bred corruption in Ethiopia, he maintained a backward and inhuman system in which millions of his subject lived In degrading poverty, oppressive misery and ignorance. Nowhere in the world was the gulf between rich and poor greater. In 1973 Jonathan Dimbleby visited northern Ethiopia and made the film which was to signal the end for Selassie. The film for the first time showed that people were starving to death in their multitudes, despite the money for 'development' which was being pumped into the country. At the Palace the splendour and riches seemed to know no bounds. The juxtapositioning of the two contrasting images in the film was striking; the pigs with their sumptuous banquets were growing fatter on the backs of walking skeletons. Of course this hunger suited Selassie as people could hardly rebel when they were starving to death. There was in fact, however, plenty of grain in Ethiopia. But landowners took the harvest from the peasants, grain prices doubled and the farmers who grew the grain could not afford to buy it.

As the dying continued, western journalists were no longer allowed into Northern Ethiopia. Selassie preferred to show off his great 'developments' to the world press. The suffering could not be hidden indefinitely so, as the situation became a bigger and bigger embarrassment to the Emperor, the Police began to kill off the starving en masse.

It is ironic that Selassie liked to project an image of himself to the world of a kind, tolerant and benevolent soul, yet those in his country who detracted from this image were usually executed. Supporters of Selassie could argue that it was his underlings and not he that were responsible for the atrocities and corruption, the Em-

rich. An example of this was his practice of throwing coppers to the poor to celebrate his birthday each year.

Always Selassie had to exercise absolute control, punishing those who undermined his authority, two examples being Prince Imru and Tekele Wolda Hawariat. Prince Imru gave some of his lands to the peasantry without the Emperors permission and as a result he was exiled form Ethiopia for twenty years for "disloyalty". Tekele Hawariat, a celebrated war hero, refused bribes and special privileges and so was imprisoned and finally executed by decapitation. If Selassie couldn't have someone in the palm of his hand then he would get rid of them.

Progressive

The image Selassie liked to project to the West was always one of being somehow progressive. To this end many youngsters were sent abroad to be educated, though when they returned Selassie's megalomania and greed meant that this education could never be employed to initiate any reforms in the country. Yet, as we have said, Selassie is remembered by many as a great reformer. Rather than being interested in reform, Selassie was interested in 'development'. This allowed him to appeal for funds to help this process. To this end hospitals, bridges, factories etc. were built, all bearing the name of the emperor. But as the money poured into Ethiopia much of it was misappropriated by Selassie and hundreds of millions of dollars found their way into his personal bank accounts. The West, however, continued to back Selassie, who they regarded as a bulwark against 'communism' in Africa.

In the sixties, when Selassie had begun to lose his grip following an attempted coup d'etat, he found it necessary to pay Army officers and his Police obscene amounts of money to maintain loyalty and order. Thus, in a country of 30 million farmers and 100,000

Although Gandhi admitted that he had read certain libertarian thinkers, principally Kropotkin, he had very little in common with their ideas. While Kropotkin was committed to the end of class society, Gandhi never repudiated either the class or the caste system, and never tried to reach out to the working class, in India or internationally. For that matter, his Puritanism, his dislike of sexuality, his cult of martyrdom, have very little to do with militant anarchism.

Che Guevara

In the second of our series we look at the life and ideas of Ernesto Che Guevara. Che has been in the news a lot lately, with his remains being dug up in Bolivia and reburied in Cuba, the publication of hitherto unknown photos of his Bolivian campaign and two new biographies. The heroic cult that has developed around him has taken on new life. Whilst his image — on T-shirts, posters, and beer labels- continues to make money for capitalists, there seems to be a revival among the young in the idea of Che as idealistic hero and fighter for freedom. This hero cult seems to have infected many young radicals, some of whom regard themselves as anarchists.

The truth may be unpalatable to many. After all, the Che cult is still used to obscure the real nature of Castro's Cuba, one of the final bastions of Stalinism. As jaded Stalinists and fellow-travelling Trotskyists celebrate Che's anniversary we take a look at the real man behind the legend.

Born in Argentina to a Cuban aristocratic family who had fallen on hard times but who still had much wealth, Guevara had a comfortable upbringing. When Juan and Eva Peron started on their rise to power, using populism and appeals to workers and peasants to install a regime that had many fascist characteristics (1944–1952) Guevara was still a youth. At this period he seemed remarkably disinterested in politics and failed to offer any opinions for or against the Peron regime.

Events in Guatemala were to change this. Arbenz, a leftist army officer, was elected as President. In 1952 he nationalised the property of the United Fruit Company, a major US company which owned much land and had great economic and political influence.

Haile Selassie

Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia has almost universally been remembered as a kindly benefactor, yet the evidence suggesting otherwise is overwhelming. It is argued that he implemented many reforms in his country and Rastafarians believe him to be God incarnate (as prophesied by Marcus Garvey, who surely deserves his own Myths and Legends page?) but how justified are these suggestions?

If we take as starting point Fascist Italy's invasion of Ethiopia we find Selassie fleeing to Britain in a brave attempt to rally support for his country. He remained in Bath for the duration of the war, but on returning to take his place on the throne he became paranoid about the partisans who had stayed and fought the Italians, fearing their bravery and preferring obsequiousness. Thus, they were gradually removed from positions of authority and replaced with those who had collaborated with the Italians as he knew they could be easily kept in line and would be open to the methods Selassie used to control his dignitaries. Selassie's methods of asserting and achieving and maintaining power involved breeding an atmosphere of distrust and corruption, where government officials would inform on each other in a constant vying for power, each wanting to be noticed and promoted by the Emperor, as the financial rewards could be great.

Ethiopia had much in common with any other capitalist society. For instance, starving peasants felt themselves privileged to even see a rich person in the flesh (shades of the homeless in Britain grieving over a recently deceased Princess). To achieve this state of affairs, Selassie would throw crumbs to the poor and bribe the

Yes, Che was very brave physically. Yes, he was single-mindedly devoted to what he saw as the revolution and socialism. Yes, he refused the privilege and luxury granted to other leaders of Castroist Cuba, taking an average wage and working hard in his various government jobs. But many militarists, fascists and religious fanatics share these characteristics of bravery and self-sacrifice. Che's good looks and 'martyr's' death turned him into an icon, an icon duly exploited by all those wanting to turn a fast buck selling 'revolutionary' chic.

But good looks and bravery camouflage what Che really was. A ruthless authoritarian and Stalinist, who expressed admiration for the Peronista authoritarian nationalists, Che acted as a willing tool of the Soviet bloc in spreading their influence. Even when he fell out with the USSR about the possibility of guerrilla war in Latin America, he still remained a convinced Stalinist with admiration for China and North Korea. He had no disagreements with the Soviets about what sort of society he wanted -a bureaucratic authoritarian state-capitalist set up with contempt for the masses.

Che may look like the archetypal romantic revolutionary. In reality he was a tool of the Stalinist power blocs and a partisan of nuclear war. His attitudes and actions reveal him to be no friend of the working masses, whether they be workers or peasants.

He also began to nationalise the land of the local big ranchers and farmers. Guevara was caught up in enthusiasm for this experiment in 'socialism' which infected middle class Latin American youth. Just before a trip to Guatemala he wrote: " 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".

Army

Guevara was in Guatemala when a US backed invasion force smashed the Arbenz regime. He was able to flee to Mexico. Here he joined up with the Cubans around Fidel Castro and his brother Raul. In November 1956, Che and 80 other members of the July 26 Movement (J26M) founded by Fidel had landed in Cuba to carry on a guerrilla campaign against the US backed dictator Batista. Here Che proved to be the most authoritarian and brutal of the guerrilla leaders. In fact Che went about turning volunteer bands of guerrillas into a classic Army, with strict discipline and hierarchy. As he himself wrote: "Due to the lack of discipline among the new men... it was necessary to establish a rigid discipline, organise a high command and set up a Staff". He demanded the death penalty for "informers, insubordinates, malingerers and deserters". He himself personally carried out executions. Indeed the first execution carried out against an informer by the Castroists was undertaken by Che. He wrote: "I ended the problem giving him a shot with a .32 pistol in the right side of the brain". On another occasion he planned on shooting a group of guerrillas who had gone on hunger strike because of bad food. Fidel intervened to stop him. Another guerrilla who dared to question Che was ordered into battle without a weapon!

Apart from the drive towards militarisation in the guerrilla groups, Che also had another important duty. He acted as the main spreader of Stalinism within J26M. He secretly worked

towards an alliance with the Popular Socialist Party (the Cuban Communist Party). Up to then there were very few Stalinists within J26M and other anti-Batista groups like the Directorate and the anarchists were staunchly anti-Stalinist. The communists were highly unpopular among the anti-Batista forces. They had been junior partners of the regime and had openly condemned Castro's previous attacks on Batista in 1953. They belatedly joined the guerrilla war.

With the Castroite victory in 1959, Che, along with his Stalinist buddy Raul Castro, was put in charge of building up state control. He purged the army, carried out re-education classes within it, and was supreme prosecutor in the executions of Batista supporters, 550 being shot in the first few months. He was seen as extremely ruthless by those who saw him at work. These killings against supporters of the old regime, some of whom had been implicated in torture and murder, was extended in 1960 to those in the working class movement who criticised the Castro regime. The anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists had their press closed down and many militants were thrown in prison. Che was directly implicated in this. This was followed in 1962 with the banning of the Trotskyists and the imprisonment of their militants. Che said: "You cannot be for the revolution and be against the Cuban Communist Party". He repeated the old lies against the Trots that they were agents of imperialism and provocateurs. He helped set up a secret police, the C-2 and had a key role in creating the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution, which were locally and regionally based bodies for spying on and controlling the mass of the population.

Missile Deal

Che was the main link, indeed the architect, of the increasingly closer relation between Cuba and the Soviet Union. The nuclear missile deal which almost resulted in a nuclear war in 1962 was

engineered at the Cuban end by Che. When the Russians backed down in the face of US threats, Che was furious and said that if he had been in charge of the missiles, he would have fired them off!

By 1963, Che had realised that Russian Stalinism was a shambles after a visit to Russia where he saw the conditions of the majority of the people, this after "Soviet-style planning" in the Cuban economy had been pushed through by him. Instead of coming to some libertarian critique of Stalinism, he embraced Chinese Stalinism. He denounced the Soviet Union's policy of peaceful co-existence, which acknowledged that Latin America was the USA's backyard, and gave little or no support to any movement against American control. Fidel was now obsessed with saving the Cuban economy, himself arguing for appeasement. Against this Che talked about spreading armed struggle through Latin America, if necessary using nuclear war to help this come about!

Shambles

It was on this basis that Che left Cuba never to return. He went to the Congo, where he worked with the Congolese Liberation Army, supported by the Chinese Stalinists. This was a shambles of a campaign, and Che ended up isolated with many of his band dead. Despite this, Che still believed in guerrilla struggle waged by a tiny armed minority. His final, fatal, campaign was in Bolivia.

This also was a fiasco. Basing himself once more on old Castroist strategies, he failed to relate to the industrial working class. The Bolivian working class, and especially the tin miners, had a recent record of militancy and class consciousness. The peasants, on the other hand, among whom Che hoped to create an armed insurrection, had been demobilised by the land reforms of 1952. So, Che was unable to relate to either workers or peasants. The local Communist Party failed to support him. Robbed of support, Che was surrounded in the Andean foothills, captured and executed.