

The Myth of Che Guevara

Live Like him?

MLB

2017, Winter

Since the 1960s, Ernesto (Che) Guevara has been celebrated in leftist circles, and even among some anarchists, as the model of a revolutionary. A wide variety of musical and theater productions, political posters, T-shirts, bumperstickers, as well as advertisements for vodka, jeans, laundry soap, and promotions for church attendance bear his iconic image and proclaim: “Che, live like him!”

He is presented in innumerable books and articles as a shining example of an unrelenting fighter for justice and against imperialism and capitalism, a brave and determined man who rejected both bodily comforts and personal gain, who resisted and defied physical limitations and chronic health problems, and followed his dreams, a source of inspiration for youth everywhere.

But, is this the whole story? Are there other things about Che Guevara, how he related to other people, and what he was actually fighting for, that people should also know? Are there things that might not coincide with anarchist aspirations?

Some negative aspects of his personality and beliefs can be gleaned even from sympathetic sources. For example, in a well researched biography lauded by supporters, *Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life*, Jon Lee Anderson writes that Guevara was an ardent Stalinist who admired the dictator’s brutal rule in the Soviet Union.

Che was not politically naive and was fully cognizant of many of the brutalities that appalled others, including the infamous Moscow show trials of the 1930s that featured tortured Bolsheviks and others as traitors to be humiliated and executed, the Nazi-Soviet 1939 non-aggression pact, the crushing of the 1953 East German uprising and the 1956 Hungarian revolution.

Anderson also tells us that Guevara was convinced that individuals had to be subordinated to the collectivity, embodied in the political vanguard and the nation-state it developed. In the 1960s, he famously declared that “one has to constantly think on behalf of masses and not on behalf of individuals...It’s criminal to think of individuals because the needs of the individual become completely weakened in the face of the needs of the human conglomeration.”

Che maintained that the individual “becomes happy to feel himself a cog in the wheel, a cog that has its own characteristics and is necessary though not indispensable, to the production process, a conscious cog, a cog that has its own motor, and that consciously tries to push itself harder and harder to carry to a happy conclusion one of the premises of the construction of socialism—creating a sufficient quantity of consumer goods for the entire population.”

Guevara's admiration for authoritarian Communist principles went well beyond the abstract. He was integrally involved in developing and consolidating the Cuban vanguard for instructing, guiding and controlling the activities of the majority of people, both before and after the Castro regime took power.

As part of the July 26 guerrilla force that Fidel Castro established in 1956, Guevara enthusiastically embraced strict military discipline and authoritarian hierarchy. He willingly submitted himself and others to this discipline.

Several admiring authors, including Anderson, also report that Guevara bullied those below him in rank, often publicly expressing harsh judgments of them without concern for their feelings. Moreover, he had no qualms about cruelly punishing those who fell short of what he demanded of them.

For example, on several occasions he is known to have implemented mock executions, in order to humble and break the will of those who had committed offenses. He also proved well-suited as an emotionally detached executioner and supervisor of executions both during and after the guerrilla struggle.

However, most of the accepted leftist descriptions of Guevara are marred by the simplistic, dualistic perspective that can only recognize those who voiced criticisms of him or the Castro regime as counterrevolutionaries. They refuse to even consider that there might be valid reasons for opposing self-appointed liberators who act in authoritarian ways.

To gain a fuller understanding of the Cuban revolution as well as of the life of Che Guevara, it is necessary to read critical Marxists, such as Samuel Farber, and anarchists, such as Sam Dolgoff, Frank Fernandez, and Larry Gambone. Because of these authors' dedication to grassroots self-organized activity, and concern with opposition to dictatorial rule, they delve into aspects of Guevara's behavior and ideas that are all too often justified, glossed over or ignored by supporters of the Castro regime.

In "The Resurrection of Che Guevara" (New Politics, Summer 1998), Samuel Farber notes that Che Guevara unashamedly turned to the Cuban Communist Party, known at the time as the Partido Socialista Popular (Popular Socialist Party, PSP) for assistance in indoctrinating anti-Batista fighters with the Stalinist authoritarian ideas he admired as far back as 1957.

This despite the Party's history of collaboration with the dictatorial Batista regime. While the guerrillas were still fighting in the Sierra Maestra, Guevara utilized PSP instructors for political education of cadres to help consolidate Communist influence among the aspirants to power.

In his book *The Politics of Che Guevara: Theory and Practice*, Farber delineates how Guevara and Raul Castro both later facilitated the Castro government's adoption of the Soviet model of bureaucratic, centralized "monolithic unity."

Once Batista was overthrown, they both worked to consolidate the new government's power to administer society, instituting militarized hierarchical leadership in every phase of life. Guevara famously proclaimed that he wanted the entire Cuban nation to become a guerrilla army, always thinking and acting as part of a disciplined military. And he never wavered in his belief in the state as the institution best suited to shape the development of the new kind of person he wanted to create.

In early 1959, in consultation with agents from the Soviet Secret Police, Guevara, along with other top Cuban government officials, created a state security apparatus known as G-2. Guevara himself became the head of G-6, another agency in charge of ideological indoctrination of the military.

Che Guevara also had a key role in creating the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, locally and regionally based bodies for spying on and controlling people in the neighborhoods where they live.

This machinery was used from early on to repress dissidents, including anti-Communist democrats, socialists, and anarchists who challenged the consolidation of a single-party dictatorship in Cuba. Many of those who had been part of the July 26 Movement in the cities or as guerrillas in the mountains were not spared.

In both his articles and books, Farber notes that Guevara was intolerant of individuality, and opposed to “politically conscious, independent-minded, rational individuals who hammer out collective goals and programs through democratic discussion and voting.”

Not all dissenters were right-wing as Castro regime supporters would want people to believe. Farber describes leftists in the July 26 urban underground who were anti-imperialist, but had a “strong critique of the Communists, who they considered to be conservative and sectarian,” and who they hated because of their collaboration with the Batista regime for most of its existence.

One glaring omission from Farber’s writings is discussion of the anarchists who were part of the anti-Batista resistance and were among the earliest victims of the Castro regime’s repression when they dared to express dissenting opinions. Many were punished with imprisonment or even death. This is clearly documented in *The Cuban Revolution: A Critical Perspective* (1976) by Sam Dolgoff, and in *Cuban Anarchism: the History of a Movement* (2001) by Frank Fernandez, an exiled Cuban anarchist union activist.

In February 1961, Guevara became the head of the newly created Ministry of Industry, and supervised the completion of the subjugation of the trade union movement, making it a tool of the state, while justifying this policy with the argument that the government was the best representative of the interests of the people.

He was directly involved in suppressing independent union activists, including anarcho-syndicalists and other non-Communists. Fernandez describes how the combined application of political manipulations, lying propaganda and brutal repression succeeded in completely destroying the Cuban anarcho-syndicalist movement, something neither the Spanish colonialists nor a succession of dictators could do.

In *Saint Che: The Truth Behind the Legend of the Heroic Guerilla, Ernesto Che Guevara*, (1997) Canadian anarchist author Larry Gambone describes the active role Che played in the elimination of the remnants of workers’ control of their unions, making it much more risky for workers to engage in strikes or other on-the-job resistance. Guevara strongly supported Law 647, which specified that, “The Minister of Labor can take control of any union, dismiss officials and appoint others” when he deems it necessary.

Guevara was also the prime author of the policy requiring people to do unpaid, so-called voluntary work in order to develop communist consciousness. As the head of the Ministry of Industry, he developed a system for punishing employees for moral offenses not specified in the criminal code, such as favoritism shown to relatives or friends, intentionally covering up a mistake, or having an affair with another man’s wife.

Those judged guilty of such offenses were expected to volunteer to go to a special labor camp at Guanahacabibes, the westernmost point on the island, where they worked under very harsh conditions, for between a month and a year depending on the offense.

This practice set the precedent for the later development of non-voluntary, non-criminal labor camps known as Military Units to Augment Production for the punishment of those deemed po-

litical dissidents and social deviants, including homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, practitioners of Afro-Cuban religions, and others.

Some of these policies have been made less stringent or stopped since Che's death and the end of the Soviet Union, and the Cuban state now tolerates homosexuality and offers perhaps the best medical support for AIDS victims in the world—a few decades too late for those oppressed by the earlier cruel treatment.

Moreover, the regime still retains the form that Guevara helped give it—a centralized one-party state that closely supervises public expression and limits grassroots self-activity of all sorts.

Are these really the kinds of accomplishments anarchists aspire to?

Did Che Guevara live in a way compatible with the struggle to create a non-hierarchical, self-organized and egalitarian society, in which people decide their own fate without reliance on dictates from above?

The answer should be an unequivocal, "No!"

MLB lives in the Pacific Northwest. They do not play or watch baseball.

Related

The Diary of Che Guevara Book review by Hank Malone Fifth Estate #62, Sept. 19–Oct. 2, 1968 <https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/62-sept-19-oct-2-1968/the-diary-of-che-guevara/>

Cuba: Dawning of American Imperialism The Spanish-American War by Bob Nirkind Fifth Estate #269, February, 1976 <https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/269-february-1976/cuba-dawning-american-imperialism/>

An Anarchist in Cuba Socialism or Cell Phones by Walker Lane Fifth Estate #378, Summer 2008 <https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/378-summer-2008/anarchist-cuba/>

Cuba: From State to Private Capitalism Adios Socialismo by Walker Lane Fifth Estate #383, Summer, 2010 <https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/383-summer-2010/cuba-state-private-capitalism/>

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"We Want to Revive Anarchism in Cuba" The Cuban movement erased by Castro is coming back & they need our solidarity by Dmitri Prieto, Isbel Díaz, Mario Castillo Fifth Estate #395, Winter 2016 <https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/395-winter-2016-50th-anniversary/we-want-to-revive-anarchism-in-cuba/>

The Train to Matanzas Cuba: A tsunami of tourism & Foreign investment hits the island by Peter Werbe Fifth Estate #396, Summer, 2016 <https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/396-summer-2016/the-train-to-matanzas/>

See also:

The Authoritarian Vision of Che Guevara Review of Samuel Farber, *The Politics of Che Guevara* by Wayne Price *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review* 68, Fall, 2016, page 9 http://www.anarkismo.net/article/29795?print_page=true

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