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BOLIVIA: CHE GUEVARA IN GLOBAL HISTORY

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Otra vez siento bajo mis talones el costillar de
Rocinante, vuelvo al camino con mi adarga al brazo....

[Once again I feel beneath my heels the ribs of
Rocinante, I return to the road with my shield on my arm ....]

Che Guevara, from a farewell letter to his parents (1965)

Historic personalities are such precisely because in some way or other they embody the spirit of an era and, therefore, transcend their time. Ernesto Guevara de la Serna, commonly known as "Che," is one of them. Born in Argentina, he wandered through several Latin American countries, reaching the peak of his fame in Cuba. His tragic death in Bolivia contributed to making him one of the most significant figures of the twentieth century.

Armed conflict between Che's guerrilla group and the Bolivian army began with the first ambush at the river Ñacahuasu on March 23, 1967. Che's troops numbered less than four dozen, including twenty-three Bolivians, sixteen Cubans, three Peruvians, and two born in Argentina (Tania, the only woman in the group, and Che himself). This list does not count two "visitors," four who withdrew for health reasons, and two deserters. Even so, from March to October, the balance seemed favorable to Che. His guerrilla group caused forty-nine casualties among the Bolivian troops, wounded about as many more, and took a number of prisoners. They acquired a substantial pile of weapons and provisions as booty. Furthermore, on July 6, they succeeded spectacularly in conquering the village of Samaipata on the road from Cochabamba to Santa Cruz, a vital thoroughfare between the west and east of Bolivia.

Surrounded by thousands of soldiers

Nevertheless, the activities of Che's group were isolated and sporadic from the beginning. Nobody even knew for sure whether Che was in charge. He had nothing but the diffuse sympathies of left-wing parties and potential allies like miners, who, simply for showing sympathy for the guerrillas, had been hit by a brutal preemptive strike on June 24 that has gone down in history as the "Massacre de San Juan." (The

army took advantage of traditional festive bonfires marking the summer solstice, attacking peaceful mining camps by surprise at dawn and causing dozens of deaths.) Che's rearguard had been eliminated during an ambush on August 31, and on September 26, three hardened members of the advance guard fell. At the beginning of October, surrounded by thousands of soldiers, Che was in a desperate situation.

Che Guevara's lifeless body after his execution on October 9, 1967.

Under these conditions and with only seventeen men left, he was drawn into battle in the gorge of El Churo. On October 8, wounded in his right calf and without a functioning gun, Che was taken prisoner by a squadron of "ranger" soldiers who had recently been trained by US instructors. Together with Che was "Willy," a Bolivian miner named Simeón Cuba. The prisoners were led to the village of La Higuera and imprisoned in a small school where both were executed the next day by "orders from above."

A shock wave and radicalization

These events in Bolivia triggered a shock wave. As almost never before, the country was at the center of the world's attention. In Bolivia itself, broad swathes of society, above all the youth, grew more radical in their political convictions and started to fervently admire the romantic heroism of Che and his men, who had tried, from the heart of the continent, to alter the course of Latin American and world history. Even some sectors of the Bolivian military, without admitting it officially, let themselves be carried away by this tide. Between 1969 and 1971, the military pursued nationalizing policies and other measures regarded as patriotic and anti-imperialistic.

But Bolivia was not an island. So what events dominated the world stage at that time? First and foremost, Vietnam: a contest that

debased the superpower to the north and proved once again that tremendous military and economic power are not enough to win a war. The conflict came from the previous decade, since the US had replaced the defeated French colonial troops. By the mid-1960s, the US intervention in the Asian southwest had grown enormous, swelling from 23,000 soldiers in 1964 to the dizzying figure of over half a million in 1968. The fighting front between Marines and Vietnamese guerrilla forces—and the merciless bombing of cities and towns in the north—began precisely at this time and did not stop until America was finally defeated in April 1975. All this occurred against the backdrop of the Cold War. The Soviet Union, the other superpower, supported Vietnam, like China, but without compromising the precarious atomic balance.

In his famous message to the Tricontinental Conference, which Che wrote in hiding in Cuba before leaving for Bolivia and which was read in April 1967, Che compared the solidarity of all progressive forces in the world with Vietnam to the audience cheers for gladiators in Rome. The message was unmistakable: "To create two, three, many Vietnams…." And this is exactly what he tried to achieve in Bolivia: consistency, however quixotic, between what he thought and what he did in terms of how he perceived himself.

Interwoven facts and figures

Then, in 1968, the French May occurred, with vast repercussions. Promoted by the students and, at its height, drawing in millions of workers, this movement was stamped by the creative daring of its intellectual proposal, which aimed to destroy the dominant concepts and frameworks. The storm of rebellion turned the crusty ideological and institutional bases—those of both the right and left—upside down. The slogans "Everything is possible," "Imagination to power," "Forbid the forbidden," along with portraits of old Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Mao, Ho Chi Min, Fidel Castro, and Che Guevara, set the tune.

Subtle laces wove situations, events, and characters together. One focal point of the protests was the University of Nanterre, where students named the theater after Che Guevara, who had died in Bolivia months earlier. A university committee had passed repressive directives in support of Vietnam, sparking the uprising.

Spurred by these incidents and encouraged by the example of Cuba, armed movements began to spread through several Latin American

countries, driven especially by the youth. A wave of readiness to make sacrifices engulfed the continent, and the military dictatorships supported by Washington reacted with destructive, genocidal policies. This included Hugo Banzer's dictatorship in Bolivia (1971–1978). What followed was the successive establishment of neoliberal political models. After the utopias of great change appeared to have been eradicated forever by violence, activists agitated for the only achievable programmatic goal, to attain democratic liberties once again.

Lasting popularity

Nevertheless, as we enter a new millennium under local, regional, and worldwide circumstances very different from those of the 1960s and 1970s, the winds of change are blowing once again. A new generation has taken the stage and, although its political proposals have their own stripe and do not repeat the misfortunes of the past, they are somehow related to the ideas of those years. Che has reappeared as a symbol in the background, as well. In Bolivia, the first indigenous president, Evo Morales Ayma, mentioned Che in his inaugural address on January 22, 2006, as one of his precursors. He hung a huge portrait of him in the government palace and paid his respects to him on the fortieth anniversary of his assassination.

Evo Morales Ayma, however, has probably never heard of the programmatic speech Che outlined in Ñacahuasu, which has remained almost unknown. In it, Che formulated this stirring slogan: "Democratization of the country with the active participation of principle ethnic groups in the big decisions of government." The speech demanded that the country cultivate endemic languages and incorporate them into its technological infrastructure, eradicate diseases that had long since been eradicated in other countries, allow workers and peasants to participate in planning both the uses of natural resources and the fertile land, and the development of the communications system "to turn Bolivia into a great, unified country rather than a fragmented giant in which the departments and provinces are strangers to each other."[1]

Che Guevara as a symbol of struggle

It is also quite possible that Che himself paid little attention to programmatic ideas for Bolivia, since he was principally concerned

1 "Departments" refers here to the nine politico-administrative territorial units into which Bolivia is divided. They remain weakly integrated and regionally diverse up to today.

with a plan for the continent that was supposed to culminate in his return to Argentina as a guerrilla fighter. Later he was chiefly concerned with helping his bedraggled and famished troop survive. So what connects this project of armed struggle of 1967, which had no popular support, to the social movements of peasants and indigenous peoples fighting for democratic rights that finally won the elections at the end of 2005?

To find an answer, we must consider the following: the symbolic image of Che became an icon that always and everywhere accompanies the struggle of the poor, the outcast, and the excluded; also, the events in the 1960s and 1970s raised issues that have remained—revitalized humanism, visionary ecological ideas, radical democracy, unattained social equality, and longed for respect between nations and countries. And thus, *mutatis mutandis*, the old battle cries of liberty, fraternity, and equality, now freed of their exclusively liberal bonds, have today gained a new validity.

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