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The legacy of Che Guevara: internationalism today

*Che's legacy, as even the briefest summary of his life brings out, is the legacy of internationalism. Quite independent from other successes he achieved in a short and intense life of barely 39 years, Che embodied the spirit of internationalism as it existed in his own age. More than anybody else of his epoch, Che Guevara embodied the ideal of solidarity with oppressed people struggling to achieve their own emancipation worldwide, writes **Dr Peter Custers** in an essay serialised in two parts*

PERHAPS the most authentic way to start this essay is by indicating how it got written. Several weeks ago I was approached by two high school students from Amsterdam, Samira and Eva, with a request for an interview in connection with their study. The young women duly sent me their list of questions which further drew my curiosity, since it indicated that the central question the two women pose themselves is this: why do so many (young) people continue to look at Che Guevara as a popular hero? Although I am not the best judge or expert on the motivations that drive Dutch youngsters today, I decided to respond to the interview request. Having made an appointment on a Saturday afternoon, I first asked the two female students, before answering any questions, to explain why they decided to focus on Ernesto Che Guevara for their study. The answer offered was very frank. As Samira and Eva stated, they want to study the story behind the T-shirt with Che's image. So many young people in the Netherlands wear shirts bearing the well-known image of Che as martyred fighter, but do they really know who he is? Since the young women themselves pleaded they did not know the full story and, in fact, wondered how many Dutch high school students of their own age do, they decided to write on Che while preparing for their final examinations.



This commencement of the interview immediately gave me the scope to explain two contradictory facets of Che Guevara's continuing, worldwide popularity. On the one hand, it is true as the example of the visiting students brings out that there are youngsters, in particular in a consumerist society such

as exists in the Netherlands, who buy a Che Guevara T-shirt simply because they like the person's image, and perhaps because it reminds them of Jesus Christ. Here, Che – oh irony of ironies – draws added popularity from the fact that Western consumers buy commodities at face value, without knowing much about the background or material content of the goods they purchase, and without knowing the barest facts about the working conditions faced by the producers of the goods. On the other hand, as I was quick to point out in the interview, it would be wrong to think that the majority of people who show Che's image in public do so without knowing anything about his legacy. In fact, as my own experience of participating in globalised resistance since the 1990s brings out, the most conscious section of today's generation of youngsters is fully aware of the significance which Che Guevara still holds for the ideal behind his death, i.e. internationalism.

In this essay I will pay my tribute to Che Guevara, the Argentinean doctor who fought alongside Fidel Castro in the 1959 Cuban Revolution, and who died in the jungle of Bolivia in the year 1967. Che's saga has been depicted in numerous movies and biographies. Hence, it hardly needs to be recalled in detail for a progressive audience. After touring Latin America in his adolescent years, Che joined the group of guerrilla fighters established under the leadership of Castro in the Sierra Maestra mountains of Cuba. He further led one of the two guerrilla columns that took the armed struggle westwards, in the final stages of the revolutionary war. During the early phase of Cuba's social experiment after power had been captured, Che served in several top functions of the new government. He was president of the National Bank, and then became the minister of industries. While serving in these functions, he developed views on the building of socialism which stood out as unique. Then, Che's life took another turn in 1965. Since he continued to feel restless and was eager to see the process of social change in the south advance, he stepped down from power so as to dedicate himself once more to guerrilla struggle. Hidden from public view, he travelled first to the east of Congo where he joined Kabila's guerrilla band. Subsequently, after his return and a secret sojourn in Cuba, he initiated armed struggle in the mountains of Bolivia. Here he was murdered in 1967, at the instigation of the CIA.

Che's legacy, as even the briefest summary of his life brings out, is the legacy of internationalism. Quite independent from other successes he achieved in a short and intense life of barely 39 years, Che embodied the spirit of internationalism as it existed in his own age. Which means, as I was at pains to explain to my students from Amsterdam, that, more than anybody else of his epoch, Che Guevara embodied the ideal of solidarity with oppressed people struggling to achieve their own emancipation worldwide. And he embodied this ideal not just via actions of political support staged from a distance but instead by personally participating in (what he saw as) the highest form of struggle the oppressed can wage, i.e. guerrilla resistance against the army of a colonial or neo-colonial state. It is for this overwhelming reason that Che continues to be cherished by today's activists. Che personally embodies internationalism. This was borne out, for instance, by the globalised resistance waged by hundreds of thousands of people in Genua, Italy, in 2001 (see Peter Custers, 'Globalisation from Below. The Genua Protests against the G-8. An Eyewitness Report', the Economic and Political Weekly, Mumbai, India, August 2001). As a participant in

the massive blockades staged against the G-8 here, I was moved by the fact that numerous activists carried banners, wore T-shirts and carried flags showing images of Che.

Che's legacy: armed struggle in the 'third world'

THE first point or lesson regarding Che is thus that his legacy of internationalism is alive, and that many among today's generation of activists identify with this legacy. However, let me move on to discuss his legacy a bit systematically. To start, let me discuss what is a somewhat controversial part of this legacy: his theory regarding armed struggle. Like other Southern leaders of his epoch, such as Mao Tse-Tung, Ho Chi Minh and Amilcar Cabral, Che Guevara believed that people living in countries still ruled by colonial powers, or living in countries chained by a new form of economic, i.e. neo-colonial exploitation, could best liberate themselves by taking up arms (for various interpretations of the strategy of guerilla war, see e.g. Mao Tse-Tung, 'On Protracted War', in Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung, Volume II, Foreign Language Press, Peking, China, 1965, p 113; Russell Stetler, ed., The Military Art of People's War. Selected Writings of General Vo Nguyen Giap, Monthly Review Press, New York and London, 1971; and Basil Davidson, ed., Unity and Struggle. Speeches and Writings of Amilcar Cabral, Monthly Review Press, New York and London, 1979; for anthologies on the strategy of guerilla war, see e.g. Gerard Chaliand, ed., Strategies de la Guerilla. Anthologie Historique de la Longue Marche a Nos Jours, Editions Marazine, Paris, 1979; and William Pomeroy ed., Guerrilla Warfare and Marxism, International Publishers, New York, 1973).

Like other theoreticians, he too believed that armed resistance needed to be built not by concentrating one's forces in urban centres, but rather through accumulation of strength in mountainous and rural regions where the enemy's presence was weak. Che's military theory, which after the Cuban revolution he put into writing, came to be known as the foco theory. This theory, in particular as put into practice by Che when he formed his foco in Bolivia, has been interpreted to mean the following. The initiation of armed struggle by guerrilla fighters itself can generate the energy and enthusiasm for a multifaceted people's resistance, including the mass actions and the unity that are essential for any revolutionary victory (for Che's writings on guerrilla warfare, see Ernesto Che Guevara, Reminiscences of the Cuban Revolutionary War, Monthly Review Press, New York and London, 1971; and Ernesto Che Guevara, Oeuvres I. Textes Militaires, Francois Maspero, Paris, 1976; on Che's guerrilla experience in Bolivia, see Regis Debray, Che's Guerilla War, Penguin Books, London, 1975).

Towards an evaluation of his experience, it today is perhaps not very important to focus on Che's theory regarding armed struggle. Rather, from today's perspective, it is crucial to recognise that the enduring legacy of Che Guevara's participation in armed combat lies in the fact that during his epoch – the epoch of the 1950s and 1960s – guerrilla struggle was embraced as appropriate by people in many countries of the 'Third World' or what's now called the Global

South. Hence, by participating in guerrilla warfare, in Cuba, in the Congo and in Bolivia, the three countries where he fought, Che came to embody two things at the very same time. He embodied the then widely recognised truth that the South needs to liberate itself from Northern dominance via armed combat. And he also embodied the spirit of internationalism of his epoch. This latter point too needs to be emphasised. Here it is perhaps best to recall what I experienced in 1994, when attending the Cuban World Solidarity Conference held in Havana. What struck me most when visiting the homes of Cuban comrades was that the spirit of internationalism Che embodies was fully alive. So many who had served in Cuba's armed force which helped liberate the former Portuguese colony of Angola (on Cuba's internationalist role in Angola's liberation war, see notably Gabriel Garcia Marquez, 'The Cuban Mission to Angola', *New Left Review* No 101-102, London, February-April 1977, p 123). So many who recalled their service to the same, to Che Guevara's cause.

The best example of the fact that Che's spirit is alive is the example of his lasting presence in Bolivia. From the moment Che Guevara died in Bolivia, in 1967, a controversy erupted over the validity of his Bolivian experience. Numerous were the critics who argued that this was a failed experiment, that it was bound to fail because of Che's limited knowledge of Bolivian realities. After all, support from the side of Bolivia's own leftwing political parties and groups towards Che's armed efforts had been limited. Did not this prove that Che after all had been wrong? Yet, and here the critics' point of view is exposed as wrong, the Bolivian people have unhesitatingly revived the memory of Che. Witness the massive demonstrations with images of Che, held several years ago by Bolivian peasants and workers, by indigenous men and women, actions which paved the way for the rise to power of Bolivia's current president, Evo Morales. Witness the fact that Che Guevara is back in view, at a moment when the Bolivian people, through a combination of insurrectionary and electoral tactics, have chosen to embark on a new political path, and have rejected the neo-liberal economic model of the North. Does not this bring out crystal clear that Bolivian activists recognise the validity of Che's legacy, the fact that even in his 'failed' attempt to form a guerrilla force he embodied the spirit of internationalism of his age?

Che's contribution to the building of Cuba's socialism

PERHAPS this is a good moment to break my story so far, and devote some words to Che's contribution to the building of Cuban socialism. As stated, before resigning from power to re-devote himself to armed liberation struggles in the mid-1960s, Che had both been president of the National Bank and served as a minister of industries. In these capacities he worked, of course, very closely together with Fidel Castro as head of government. How to evaluate this period in Che's life? My willing students, Samira and Eva, did include a question on this period in their list, when approaching me. For they asked me to clarify the relationship between Che Guevara and Fidel Castro. Apparently, at internet sites where the young women collected their data, various stories have been floated stating that the given relationship turned from friendly to bitter, even hostile. It is being insinuated for instance that Fidel was eager to see Che leave Cuba. These stories can be confronted head on, by referring, for instance, to the letter

Che wrote to Fidel in 1965, in which he explained why he had chosen to resign. Nevertheless, to do justice to both great personalities, it is necessary to focus on the nature of Che Guevara's views on the building of socialism. Here the point is not that there have never been differences of view between the two revolutionary leaders, but rather that Fidel Castro ultimately chose to uphold Che's views on building socialism.

To be continued

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