

Who was Che?

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Dave Kelloway reviews Allan Todd's timely new book about Che Guevara

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"Above all, always be able to feel deep within your being all the injustices committed against anyone, anywhere in the world. This is the most beautiful quality a revolutionary can have.

Create two, three, many Vietnams, that is the watchword.

At the risk of seeming ridiculous, let me say that the true revolutionary is guided by a great feeling of love. It is impossible to think of an authentic revolutionary lacking this quality"

How many activists today would recognise these words of Che Guevara? It would be interesting to survey people here about their knowledge of Che and his life. It is easy for militants of a certain age to assume that everyone knows about the Argentinian who helped Fidel lead the successful armed revolution in Cuba to victory in January 1959. How many people today on the left are aware of the debates Che led against the Stalinist Soviet model of economic transition after the overthrow of capitalism? Or that, eager to go back to the front line, he abandoned his ministry to go to Africa and Bolivia to lead uprisings that ended in defeat and his death at the age of 39?

A lively accessible book

Allan Todd provides a lively, accessible book that allows Che's story to be retold today. His book brings together in a new way, both the narrative and assessments made by all the previous books written about Che. There are detailed footnotes and a bibliography that allows the reader to delve further if they wish. Maps, family trees and lists of the main characters in his life are also included. The collection of photos - some of which I had not seen - helps to further flesh out the personal story. History is a lot more than objective economic trends and class forces. It is also about how people become radicalised, how they develop as leaders.

Ultimate victories and defeats are always bound up with both objective and subjective factors. While it may be true that you cannot, through sheer will, overcome overwhelming objective difficulties, it is

true that similarly favourable conditions can lead to different outcomes depending on how a political struggle is led. A case can be made that the quality of the Cuban leadership was decisive once they were reduced to just a dozen fighters in the disastrous first days after landing in the Granma ship in December 1956.

His family, education and travel radicalised Che

The first few chapters outline Che's upbringing and education. With hindsight you can see how his background led him to what he became. He was very adventurous and liked to take risks, just like his mother, with whom he was always very close throughout his life. Che played sports, he was known for his ferocious tackling on the rugby field and he liked a game of golf. At the same time, he suffered from chronic asthma which stayed with him right to the end in Bolivia. Enforced individual recovery meant he had lots of time for reading. Again his progressive parents encouraged him to read widely. He particularly loved the exotic adventures of Jules Verne and identified with Cervantes' Don Quixote. It is as though his reading continually pulled him away from the tranquillity of a quite bourgeois life in Argentina.

Che growing up was no angel and his relationship with women reflected the macho customs and culture of his class. His position of relative power allowed him to have sexual relationships with the indigenous servant girls in his own house and in those of his friends or relatives. Once he became a mature revolutionary in Cuba this attitude ended. In fact, on occasion he reprimanded women comrades who tried to flirt with him. All evidence suggests a strong, exclusive and romantic relationship with his second wife, Aleida March from the time of the battle of Santa Clara.

For many months on several occasions, he travelled widely in Latin America. Readers may be familiar with the film made of his [*Motorcycle Diaries*](#). He was already half qualified as a doctor, and he did some medical work in the leper colonies and among the most deprived during these journeys. It opened his eyes to the extreme poverty of the indigenous and working-class communities that existed alongside the luxury of the landed and bourgeois classes whom he was familiar with through his own family. I think it also probably prevented Che ever becoming an Argentinian nationalist - a supporter of the Peronist movement.

He became an internationalist and gradually, through his meetings with Marxists in various countries, he identified generally with the international communist movement. Above all he angrily opposed US imperialism's domination of his continent. Che was in Guatemala just after the US organised coup against Arbenz in 1954 and this was a final eye opener for him about political reality in Latin America. He just about escaped to Mexico where he joined up with Fidel and his Cuban comrades who were preparing to go back and start the uprising a year or so later in Cuba.

The Cuban Revolution

Todd provides a very good summary of the way the Cuban revolution unfolded and how Che developed into one of the three or four key military commanders. He shows how the guerrilla force in the Sierra Maestra had to assert its political leadership over the more moderate opposition leaders elsewhere in the country. All Che's previous love for the outdoors, sport and exercise meant that he adapted well to the life of guerrilla. He won the respect of his troops because he led from the front - sometimes taking foolhardy risks.

Although discipline was tough - deserters and traitors were dealt with severely - Che made sure that prisoners were not summarily shot after surrender and were given medical attention if wounded. Local peasants had to be treated with respect and any food paid for.

He understood that war was politics by other means. You need to destroy the morale of your enemy, win them over and to secure a base among the local population. Where it was possible rudimentary social and economic projects were set up in liberated zones, as well as literacy and political education. Che's column led one of the decisive battles of the campaign when he secured the strategically important town of Santa Clara which prevented Havana organising a counter offensive against the Sierra. Unsurprisingly the big Che memorial is based in that town and today you can still see the enemy train that was successfully attacked.

Debates about the transition to socialism

A feature of this book is how Todd deals in some detail with the big debate that Che started as the minister in charge of industrialisation. Even people who know about Che's role in the Cuban uprising are unaware of the significance of these discussions. Once the US blockade had started and the foreign industries had been taken over the new regime had little choice but to get support from the non-capitalist bureaucratised states of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The economic advisors who flocked to Cuba from these countries put forward the orthodox Stalinist line that in such countries you could not fundamentally challenge the law of value, the markets and the need for material incentives. You had to build up the productive forces until some unspecified time when you could make a socialist transition.

Che disagreed and said that you had to begin to reject such criteria. For instance, you had to reject generalised material incentives and encourage collective voluntary labour to improve production. He linked this to a philosophical understanding based on Marx's early writings - you had to begin to overcome individualist alienation and develop the "new man." Che wrote:

"the decisive factor in the transition from capitalism to socialism remains the raising of class consciousness of the proletariat."

Che invited Marxists from other countries to come to Cuba to discuss these issues. Ernest Mandel, an economist and leader of the Trotskyist Fourth International was invited and spent many hours discussing with Che. Charles Bettelheim, a French Marxist, had a different view but he was invited to take part. Truly Havana at that time - although it was a single party state - had a degree of intellectual freedom and debate that has long since been extinguished. At that time the Chinese were not on the same wavelength as the Soviets and Che tended to take their side in opposing peaceful coexistence. On one thing Che was prophetic. He predicted that capitalism could come back to Soviet Union if there was no dramatic policy change.

Although, unlike the Soviets, he saw a need for workers to be more involved in the planning process, Che never developed a critique of the single party state in the transition to socialism. Understanding the importance of real socialist democracy - freedom of expression and organisation - was a step too far. To some degree the instrument for revolutionary success in Cuba - a revolutionary army - does not necessarily favour democratic self-organisation once you seize power. If you can overthrow Batista without extensive democratic organisation, you could develop an illusion that such forms are not necessary. The revolutionary army becomes the revolutionary party which automatically represents the whole working class just as the guerrillas in the Sierra expressed the will of the whole people.

Che's position was not adopted, and this may have been one of the factors inspiring him to leave his ministries and join the front line in the Congo and then Bolivia. It is worth linking this discussion with some of the [debates](#) Michel Pablo, once secretary of the Fourth International, had in Algeria

when he was an advisor to the revolutionary regime on the land reform. Pablo had a different position on the question of material incentives. The political strategy of “focoism” – focused guerilla struggle exemplified by the Cuba revolution where you establish a secure base in the countryside, engage the enemy once you are able and then build support elsewhere as a result – is not really relevant to advanced capitalist countries.

However, the debate on transition, material incentives and a new humanism is extremely relevant to us today. In our discussion in the [ACR ecosocialist manifesto](#) we emphasise the importance of common, publicly provided goods that challenge the law of value and combating the ideology of individual capitalist consumption.

Fighting in the Congo and Bolivia

What happened with Che in the Congo is probably a lot less known about. Che left Cuba and took on another identity. The adventure only lasted seven months. It was difficult enough to apply the foco theory to Latin American countries with different types of states and social structures to Cuba, employing it in Africa with a more limited political and cultural knowledge was a disaster. The local nationalist leaders were not clear about their overall strategy and certainly did not lead from the front. Discipline among their rebels was poor and inevitably this led to tensions with the largely black more battle-hardened Cuban volunteers.

The local leaders ended up negotiating with the regime and Che wrote some bitter self-criticism of how he handled the whole affair. Nevertheless, this Cuban solidarity with the African revolution was ignited by this effort and Cuban troops played a heroic role in the later struggle for the independence of Namibia, Angola and in weakening the South African apartheid army. Fidel Castro was one of the first leaders Nelson Mandela met after being freed from prison.

Bolivia on paper looked like a better organised and more coherent project. If you were able to establish a bridgehead in that country it could work like the hub of a wheel with rebel spokes raising revolution in all those countries bordering Bolivia. However, from the start the local communist party was very cautious and ultimately withdrew all support from the operation. The second Che [movie](#) starring Benicio del Toro, directed by Steven Soderbergh, does a pretty good job of showing the difficulties of the campaign. Che and his group maybe had not picked the best starting base for the operation – Todd suggests the Bolivian CP were happy to have them operating in that unpropitious area. Although he had begun to recruit some Bolivian fighters and engaged the army in a few skirmishes it was never enough.

Another factor to be taken into consideration was that the imperialist enemy never stands still. After Cuba, where the US failed to recognise the Fidelista threat until too late, the CIA and the US army organised a huge programme of counter-insurgency operations in Latin America. A key CIA agent was on Che’s case from the start of the Bolivian campaign. The Bolivian ranger regiment was no Batista rabble.

In death of course, which he faced with his legendary courage, Che’s example had an international impact. Posters and T shirts with the iconic image were carried on demonstrations throughout the world. People also become radicalised through the example of others. Che could have stayed a minister in Cuba and lived out a secure life. His moral integrity was a shining contrast to all those corrupt bureaucrats in the east or the social democrat reformists elsewhere. He refused any special rations or better accommodation when in Cuba – sometimes to the irritation of his partner! On one occasion Aleida, his wife was keen to accompany him on an official trip to Europe, Fidel was fine with it, but Che refused this ‘privilege’. Whatever else you knew about him you knew he had followed the slogan about revolutionaries live to make a revolution, not just to talk about it or

become academic experts about it.

The armed struggle discussion on the left

However, some reactions to Che and the tactics of the Cuban revolution definitely led to some ultra-left positions when the difference between reform and revolution was simplistically reduced to a binary of armed struggle (=revolutionary) versus patient mass work in unions, mass campaigns or the institutions (= reformist). This was particularly a problem when such an outlook was applied to advanced capitalist societies in the West or even in different countries of Latin America or the Global south. The adoption of a form of armed struggle by the Red Brigades in Italy in the 1970/80s led tens of thousands of their supporters into a dead end of death, imprisonment or disillusion with politics. It sabotaged the possibilities of building a mass radical alternative to the reformists in Italy.

Even in Bolivia the rural “foco” strategy was not viable particularly when Che’s courageous groups of fighters were not able to generate the mass urban support that ensured the success of the Cuban revolution. In much more urbanised countries like Argentina the *guevarist* groups failed to make a breakthrough but many good comrades were killed. Daniel Bensaid, who was in close contact with these militants, gives us the painful account in his autobiography. The revolutionary MIR organisation in Chile kept sending militants back to Chile after the 1973 coup to engage in military actions with no results. Extreme courage and commitment cannot make up for a wrong strategy.

In fact, the only other country where there were some similarities with the Cuban revolution that led to success was in Nicaragua in 1979. But throughout the rest of Central America armed groups were massacred. Inside Latin America there was a re-evaluation of the Cuban model. For some this meant an adaptation to reformism and working only within the institutions. For others it was a question of building independent mass organisations with radical programmes of rupture with capital – such as the first phase of Lula’s PT in Brazil. That debate continues as the hopes of such parties faded as their leaders adapted to reformist alliances.

Often, discussion at world congresses of small revolutionary organisations is not particularly edifying. However, the documents on the armed struggle in Latin America at the 9th World Congress of the [Fourth International](#) and then the self-criticism at the 10th World Congress have stood the test of time. It was politically necessary to draw a balance sheet of the armed struggle tactic. This was not just an academic debate since many comrades who were members or friends of this current suffered the consequences of associating with armed groups.

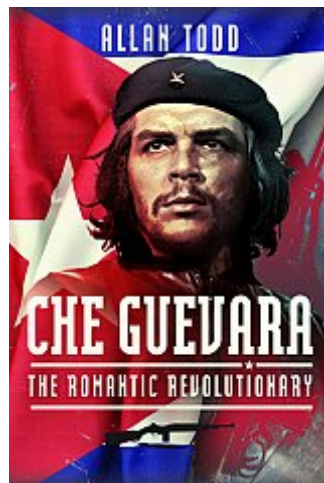
We still have to deal with the armed power of the state

Dealing with the state’s repressive apparatus is still crucial for the left. The “guevarists,” unlike the reformist CPs or nationalists, were right to point to the armed power of the state. Che was a 100% correct that the powerful will not peacefully hand over their economy and state. Mass action can disable the capacity of the ruling class to repress our movement. Their army can be disrupted and split. Mass self-organised armed defence can resist. Small groups cannot substitute for such a mass movement. Although is important for the most radicalised activists to raise these issues now – you cannot improvise armed defence or militias at the last minute if the state is collapsing.

Allan Todd provides a service to the movement in telling the story of Che’s life as well as discussing his legacy, all in a couple of a hundred pages. Che’s example is therefore still relevant today. He was no Stalinist, a copy of Trotsky’s *History of the Russian Revolution* was found in his knapsack in Bolivia. Nothing is possible if we just accept nothing can really change. His love of humanity, his poetry shows us that we are fighting for an infinitely better world. As Ernest Mandel, quoted in the book, said: “*Hopes and dreams are ... categories of revolutionary Realpolitik.*”

Dave Kellaway

[Che Guevara: The Romantic Revolutionary](#) was published by Pen and Sword in June 2024



Allan Todd's Che Guevara

P.S.

- Anti*Capitalist Resistance. 21 Jul 2024:
<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/who-was-che/>
- Dave Kellaway is on the Editorial Board of Anti*Capitalist Resistance, a member of Socialist Resistance, and Hackney and Stoke Newington Labour Party, a contributor to International Viewpoint and Europe Solidaire Sans Frontieres.