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Sparks fly over diaries of Che Guevara

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LONDON—The last time the battlefield diaries of the late revolutionary folk hero Ernesto "Che" Guevara were seen in public was in June, 1968, a month before they were published in Cuba.

Then Sotheby's, the London auction house, announced last month that it had the diaries and would sell them on July 16. It set off alarm bells in Bolivia, where the diaries were supposed to have been held, and an international guessing game as to how the diaries made their way to London.

Sotheby's has said only that it did not receive the diaries from a Bolivian.

"What has happened to the diaries since they were last seen in public is highly speculative," said Peter Beal, a Sotheby's manuscript expert. "They may have changed hands several times."

There has been widespread but unconfirmed speculation that a corrupt Bolivian general smuggled the diaries abroad to be sold to the highest bidder. They were last known to be held by the Bolivian high command.

THE IMMEDIATE reaction from Bolivia and Cuba was that Sotheby's had acquired fakes. The Bolivian government now seems to accept that the diaries are genuine and has filed suit against Sotheby's to try to get them back.

But barring an adverse decision by the courts, Sotheby's says it is going ahead with the sale and expects the diaries to fetch about \$325,000.

This would seem to be an extraordinary price for a rather brief account of a failed military campaign. But Beal said the value of the diaries is in their authorship rather than their content.

"Che Guevara was the most famous revolutionary of recent times," he said. "He was the man who tried to start a second Vietnam, and he was a cult figure. This is the most famous diary of its kind ever written. I can't think of anything comparable."

Beal said the announcement of the sale has brought inquiries from all over Latin America, the United States, France, West Germany and even New Zealand.

"I WOULDN'T be surprised if the diaries fall to sell, and I wouldn't be surprised if they go for twice the estimated value," he said. "It's impossible to say."

As to who might buy them, Beal speculated that it might be an institution involved in war studies, a government or a private individual, such as "someone in the media who is wealthy."

Guevara, the right-hand man of Fidel Castro in the Cuban revolution, was captured by the Bolivian army on Oct. 8, 1967, 11 months after he had begun an attempt to foment a revolution in Bolivia that he hoped would spread to all of Latin America. He was killed by the army the day after his capture.

The diaries consist of a spiral notebook and a notebook with cheap plastic covers. They extend from Nov. 7, 1966, when Guevara began his campaign, to the day before his capture.

There is a third document, a series of notes taken from a smaller notebook, in which Guevara gives a personal evaluation of 43 men in his guerrilla force. At the bottom of some of these pages is a large X, Guevara's way of noting that the men referred to had been killed in battle.

AMONG THOSE evaluated is Regis Debray, the French left-wing writer who acts as an adviser to French President Francois Mitterrand. Debray was not a guerrilla, but he visited Guevara and was later captured by the Bolivian army and sentenced to prison.

Guevara's judgment on Debray was mixed: "A magnificent intellectual has been lost, but I doubt whether he would ever be a good guerrilla."

Sotheby's also plans to sell a diary kept by Guevara's deputy in the Bolivian campaign, a Cuban named Harry Villegas Tamayo, code-named "Pombo." One of three Cuban survivors of the campaign, Tamayo lives in Cuba. His diary is expected to sell for about \$75,000.

After Guevara's capture, the CIA is believed to have made several photocopies of his diaries. Antonio Arguedas, then the interior minister in Bolivia, fled the country with one copy and gave it to Castro, who immediately published it.

American journalist Daniel James subsequently published an English edition in the United States.

SOME PAGES OF the diaries, as well as the document in which Guevara evaluates his fellow guerrillas, have never been published. But Beal said there is nothing in the unpublished portions that sheds new light on the history of the guerrilla campaign.

Arguedas has been quoted recently as saying that Gen. Alfred Ovando, head of the armed forces when Guevara was captured, kept the original diaries for a time on his bedside table. He said they were subsequently placed in a shoe box that was locked inside a safe at high-command headquarters under the direct responsibility of the chief of military intelligence.

Col. Luis Arce Gomez, who headed this section between 1980 and 1982, has been named in some Latin American press reports as a leading suspect in the theft of the diaries. But his defenders say he is a leading figure in the Bolivian drug trade and therefore would not need the money from the diaries.

Beal said Sotheby's legal advisers are convinced the Bolivian government has no legitimate claim to ownership of the diaries.

GUEVARA'S FATHER still lives in Cuba, but Beal said he has not made a claim to the diaries. Nor has Pombo put in a claim for his own diaries.

Many of those involved in Guevara's capture and death have themselves come to a violent end.

Gen. Zenteno Anaya, the Bolivian field commander, was later assassinated in Paris. Sgt. Mario Teran, who shot Guevara, was "executed" by guerrillas.

Rene Barrientos, president of Bolivia at the time, was killed in a helicopter crash.