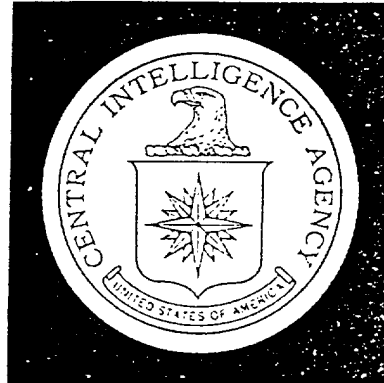


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DIRECTORATE OF  
INTELLIGENCE

*The Che Guevara Diary*

Special Report  
WEEKLY REVIEW

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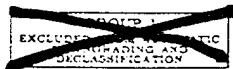
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## THE CHE GUEVARA DIARY

The diary of Ernesto "Che" Guevara is the protracted memoir of the ill-fated guerrilla movement he led in the Bolivian backlands from 7 November 1966 to 8 October 1967. The account, which was found with Guevara after his capture, reveals that the guerrilla band suffered from the outset from dissension and ineptitude that compounded the hardships of jungle operations. Guevara's movement ultimately failed because the Bolivian peasants received the guerrillas with fear and suspicion.

Guevara, in his diary, wrote simply, without metaphor or embellishing prose. He did not discuss ideological or substantive political matters and avoided personal ruminations and reminiscences. He said virtually nothing that can be turned into inspiring mottoes or myths. It seems, moreover, that when the diary is published the Guevara legend will only be dulled by this account of the pathetic struggle in Bolivia.

### Cuban Attempt to Export Revolution

The diary shows that Guevara's 11-month odyssey was a concerted attempt by Cuba to open the central heartland of South America to international guerrilla insurgency. Since the first Tri-Continent Conference in Havana in January 1966, Fidel Castro had been insisting that "it is the duty of every revolutionary to make revolution." Jules Regis Debray in his *Revolution Within Revolution* charted the ideological fiber of Castro's militant stand, and it was left to Guevara, presumed revolutionary consummate, to lead the "inevitable struggle."

It is clear from the diary that the guerrillas were carefully selected and trained, and were well equipped by Cuba. At least three members of the central committee of the Cuban Communist Party, and perhaps a dozen or so other Cubans--all followers of Guevara and experts in guerrilla tactics--were with the band. In short, Castro and Guevara set out systematically to prove Debray's corollary to militant Castroism: that the Latin American guerrilla movement ought to be an internationalized rural insurgency springing from the rebellion of a frustrated and oppressed peasantry.

Guevara's hopeless struggle and demise, however, proved only

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# BOLIVIA: Area of Guevara's Guerrilla Activity



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the futility of the approach. The Debray strategy and the guerrilla tactics that Che compiled in his handbook *Guerrilla Warfare* proved to be empty theoretics. Guevara was unable to win the support of the Bolivian Communist Party (PCB-S) and could not prevent his own group from splitting into conflicting factions. The peasant support considered essential to the revolutionary thesis was entirely lacking. It was, in fact, the hostility and suspicion of the Bolivian peasants that forced the band to continue its endless flight through the jungles. Finally, after some months of ineffective counter guerrilla activity by Bolivian Army units, the Bolivian Rangers were assigned to the operation. The Rangers, well trained in pursuit and harassment, eventually destroyed most of the guerrillas.

#### Failure of the Guerrilla Tactics

A disciplined, loyal, and tightly organized revolutionary cadre is the first requirement in the Castro-Guevara-Debray blueprint for insurgency. In *Guerrilla Warfare*, Guevara said that "homogeneity, respect for the leader, bravery, and familiarity with the terrain" are the essential characteristics of the guerrilla band. In Bolivia, however, most of these basic concepts were violated or ignored. The band was composed of Cuban, Bolivian, and Peruvian nationals, none of whom was very familiar with the operational zone.

Guevara vainly attempted to remedy these deficiencies. Ac-

ording to the diary, he spent the first three months securing bases of operations and training and indoctrinating the guerrillas. His first attempt at an exploratory familiarization trek through the jungles, however, was plagued by inaccurate maps and the group became discouraged and weakened by heavy rains, insects, and a shortage of food and water. Tensions between the Bolivians and Cubans became serious in the first months, and the initial exploratory patrols were characterized by ineptitude, flagging morale, and poor leadership.

#### Ineptitude

Communications with Havana and La Paz were lost as early as January when a transmitter rusted because it was stored in a damp cave. On 26 February, the band suffered its first personnel loss when a member drowned attempting to cross a turbulent stream. On 17 March, a second member was lost in a similar accident. Thus, neither of Che's initial objectives--training and exploration--was completed, and various accidents had already taken their toll.

On 23 March, the guerrillas ambushed a Bolivian patrol and killed eight of its members. A second battle on 10 April accounted for seven army dead and also for the first Cuban loss. Capt. Jesus Suarez Gayol, a former vice minister of the Ministry of Sugar Industries, was killed. Guevara was discouraged with the results of these skirmishes, which showed that the guerrillas were still divided and insufficiently trained.

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# "CHE" GUEVARA in BOLIVIA

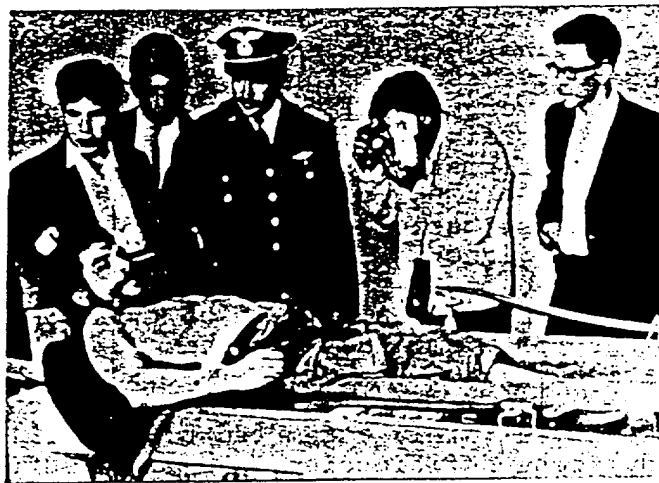
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Disguised - November 1966



Sometime in 1967



Corpse at Vallegrande, October 1967

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### Morale

Che was particularly disturbed with the reluctance of the Bolivians to work with the Cubans, and on 12 April reminded them that "the first blood drawn was Cuban." On 25 April, Capt. Eliseo Reyes Rodriguez (San Luis), a member of the central committee of the Cuban Communist Party, was killed in combat. The loss of San Luis was a major psychological blow to Guevara, who for the first time was unabashedly despondent. He mourned that San Luis was "the best man in the guerrilla band" and a comrade "since (San Luis was) practically a child."

The loss of San Luis was a turning point that caused Guevara to view the guerrillas' chances very critically. In his monthly summary for April, he pessimistically enumerated at least three major problems undermining his efforts. For the first time, he discussed in some detail the isolation of the band. He complained that the peasants were not responding and that there had been no enlistments.

According to Guevara, the arrests of Jules Regis Debray and the Argentine journalist, Ciro Bustos, that month further isolated the band from possible sources of foreign assistance.

Finally, Che opined that "the Americans will intervene here strongly." His basic strategy was to provoke US military intervention in Latin America, but it seems that he was unprepared to cope with such an intervention as early as April.

### Leadership

During the following months, the band suffered a slow attrition while morale continued to plummet. Several more guerrillas were lost in skirmishes and others, including Guevara, were weakened and incapacitated by various ailments and injuries. By the end of July, Guevara was emphasizing only the "negative aspects" of the campaign and reiterated daily complaints about his asthma attacks. He was weak and ill, unable at times to carry his own knapsack.

The band of 22 was entirely on the defensive in remote and unplotted terrain while the Bolivian military was slowly increasing its effectiveness and encircling the guerrillas. In these circumstances, Guevara was facing increasingly serious problems, including chronic food shortages. Once, during a long period on reduced rations, members of the band suffered "fainting spells."

By the end of August, after almost ten months of attrition and debilitation, Guevara admitted that it had been "without a doubt the worst month yet." His illness, Che said, had "caused uncertainty in several others...and (was) reflected in our only encounter (with the army)." This was his only admission that his primacy was ever doubted.

In fact, however, Guevara had discipline problems almost from the outset. These resulted from the friction between the

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Bolivians and Cubans in the band, and from the lessening of morale as the hardships and setbacks increased. Che's leadership may also have been undermined by his own physical weakness and inability to engineer an effective offensive. In 11 months, Che had not been able to nurture his movement beyond the most preliminary stage of incipient insurgency.

#### The Guerrillas' Failure With the Peasants

In his handbook, *Guerrilla Warfare*, Guevara explained in detail how the guerrilla must win first the sympathy and trust and then the full collaboration of the rural peasants in order to sustain the struggle. In Bolivia, however, he found this goal impossible from the beginning because of the suspicions, fears, and torpor of the Indian peasants.

In April, Guevara complained that "the peasant base has not yet been developed although it would appear that through planned terror we shall keep some neutral." He admitted the extent of the guerrillas' isolation on 17 April, when he said that "of all the peasants we have seen, there is only one who appears to be cooperative, but with fear." In June, moreover, he warned that the Bolivian Army was "working on the peasants and we must be careful that they are not changed into a community of informers." Fearing betrayal by virtually everyone they encountered, Guevara and his followers wandered in isolation through the sparsely populated jungles.

#### The End of a Legend

During September and the first week of October, the guer-

rillas were constantly on the run, trapped in a maze of jungle arroyos. During the last weeks, when he must have known that his chances were bleak, Guevara continued to write in the same brief style with mystic hopes for victory. He made his last entry on 7 October, after exactly 11 months in Bolivia. He said the day "was spent in a pastoral setting," but apparently it was a peasant woman from that area who betrayed the guerrillas to the Bolivian forces. The woman had been bribed to keep the guerrillas' location secret, but Che confided in his last entry that he had "little hope she would keep her word."

Guevara was wounded and captured by Bolivian Rangers on 8 October and died the following day. On 16 October, Fidel Castro admitted Guevara's defeat. Two days later, he delivered a lengthy eulogy and declared a month of national mourning in Cuba.

In the diary, Che mentioned frequent communications with Castro. Though his transmitter was destroyed in January, Guevara communicated through couriers and was able to receive coded radio messages from Havana. There were no indications of differences between the two men.

Guevara, his lessons, and his legend were perhaps simultaneously stifled. Though Castro and other revolutionaries may insist that the struggle will endlessly continue in his name, they must now be having serious doubts about their prospects.

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