Ernesto "Che" Guevara: The Life of an Argentine Revolutionary

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

Nichole Waha

Thesis Advisor
Gary Pavlechko

Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana

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Abstract

The judgment of prominent historical figures is a controversial matter. Judging someone’s character, whether famous or not, marks his or her life. The question here is whether we can adequately judge someone’s character based only on select actions. The purpose of this project is to document the major life events of Ernesto "Che" Guevara and his impact in the world. Throughout the years, Guevara’s reputation has fluctuated. The analysis of his life provides an idea as to why the character of a person is not simply one extreme or another. Throughout the course of this document, I will provide evidence to suggest that there are many factors to be taken into consideration, and why it is important to keep these factors in mind.
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Throughout my career as a Spanish student, the vast array of material to cover seems daunting. The number of historical figures, maps, cities, and food dishes all has their own place in the context of their own culture. My high school Spanish classes first peaked my interest in Latin American culture. From then on, I have continued to study this great interest of mine, and have learned so much along the way. One figure in particular that has interested me to learn more about is Ernesto “Che” Guevara.

Historical figures and events are often a matter of contention. There are many factors to consider before defining an event as a success or a failure, a person as good or evil. I would argue that it is nearly impossible to fully define something as completely one way or another. It is important to remember that there are different perspectives to be taken into account and analyzed before making a definitive choice.

Throughout my thesis, I would like us to take a step back and examine how our perspectives can change and how we can look differently at events, people, concepts, or any number of other topics. To go a step further, I would like to examine why it is important to see things from a different point of view instead of being stuck in the rut of our own opinions. Having an open mind can do wonders for the potential future peace of not only our country, but also the whole world. To narrow my focus, I will be examining the life and practices of Ernesto “Che” Guevara, the Argentina revolutionary and his leadership style.
The Young Life of Che Guevara

As an important note, the term “Che” is an Argentine commonality similar to saying, “you” or “Mac.” I believe that this is significant in the identification of this Latin American leader and his future reputation. It implies that he was first and foremost a man, like any other. This identifier signifies that he was no more and no less. While he would prove to be an outstanding leader, this nickname from his homeland would be telling of his popularity among the people. He would adopt this title later in life and is more commonly known by this name.

Ernesto “Che” Guevara was born in Rosario, Argentina on June 14, 1928 to Ernesto Guevara Lynch and Celia de la Serna. Che Guevara had two brothers and two sisters. Over the course of their life, this family would move throughout Argentina from Rosario to Misiones, where Guevara Lynch would become a poor tea farmer. From here, they moved to the capital, Buenos Aires. They moved once more to Córdoba, before eventually settling in Buenos Aires once again. Along with their humble lifestyle, they faced yet another challenge.

When “Ernesito,” little Ernesto, was only two years old he was diagnosed with asthma, which would plague him all his life. This was a burden on the whole family. His asthma was the principal reason for the family’s early moves throughout Argentina. It was a struggle to find an adequate environment for the young child to breathe properly. Even though this disease is normally considered to be a limitation,
it could be said that this was one of Guevara's strengths. Despite the fact that he was often sick, he led a fairly active childhood. He learned how to swim and was particularly active in rugby.

Another one of his hobbies included reading. While far less physically demanding, Guevara kept his mind active from a young age. Reading allowed him to abate boredom while his physical activity was limited. He was fairly well read at a young age, being exposed to writers such as Jules Verne, Pablo Neruda, Jack London, Horacio Quiroga, and Charles Baudelaire. This helped expand his horizons to the different perspectives of the world around him (Sánchez).

Aside from reading, another major influence in his life was his family. Being the oldest child in his family, there was a lot of pressure from his parents to succeed. Guevara initially wanted to pursue a career in engineering. However, at the end of his secondary education he stayed with his grandmother in Buenos Aires when she became ill. It was during this time that he decided that he wanted to pursue a career in medicine instead and chose to attend the University of Buenos Aires. Specifically, he chose to research asthma in hopes that he could potentially find a cure for his own ailment. Despite his dedication to furthering his education, the life of a med student was too stagnant for the young Guevara. In the early 1950s we can see the next journey of Guevara's life, one both physical and metaphorical.
The Young Travels of Che Guevara

The first of many journeys made by Che Guevara would be his 4,500-kilometer bicycle trip throughout Argentina. He attached a small motor to his bike and set out through the plains to Córdoba where he would meet with long time friend Alberto Granado. Throughout the course of this first trip, Guevara continued to study medicine on the road. Upon his arrival in Córdoba in October 1951, he proposed to Granado that they proceed to travel together throughout South America and onto North America.

Within only a couple of months the duo would prepare for this extensive journey. From Córdoba, they travelled to Buenos Aires in December to say farewell to Guevara's family and set out on their way later that month. Their mode of transportation was Granado's motorcycle dubbed, La Poderosa II, or The Might One. Instead of travelling by airplane, they chose to travel like common tourists. With the help of this motorcycle, they encountered many unforeseen adventures along the way.

"Real travelers are the ones who just take off somewhere for the sake of it; with a light heart, floating like a balloon, always following their destiny. And though they didn't always know why, they always say, 'Let's go (Sánchez, 25)!" I believe that this quote from Baudelaire encompasses the purpose of this South American journey. The important thing to note here is that the destination was not the
purpose of the trip. Certainly, the two were interested in arriving in North America, especially Guevara. However, the physical journey through South America was also important to them. Travelling was not merely a means to get from Point A to Point B. Their physical journey was also a mental and emotional one. They wanted to experience and learn from the world around them. Despite Guevara’s asthma limitation, it was more important to take risks and explore the world than to stay confined at home. Though the majority of this trip was incredibly unpredictable, fate stepped in and helped the two young men survive. I believe that this journey was a catalyst to Guevara’s future as a revolutionary.

Over the course of the next eight months or so, Guevara and Granado travelled across five countries. The first leg of their journey brought them to Santiago, Chile, which took almost two months. Upon their arrival, their motorcycle broke down and had to continue on foot. They relied on kindness and hospitality from strangers. At one point, a photo of the two was printed in a local Chilean newspaper describing them as experts in the leprosy field. Here is that photograph, Guevara on the left and Granado on the right.
The title of the article reads *Two Argentine Experts of Leprosy Traverse Through South America on a Motorcycle*. The caption is, "Dr. A. Granado and student E. Guevara." This is from *The Daily Austral* on February 19, 1952 (Sánchez, 34).
It is said that the two used this in order to gain respect and trust, and thus food and shelter from people throughout their trip. This is not to say that this one photograph in a newspaper made their journey neither easy nor plentiful. However, it was certainly not the end of the world. This dive into poverty was jokingly considered a gift by Guevara and Granado. Despite their many struggles, they somehow managed to keep an air of optimism through their long and difficult voyage.

The two proceeded through Chile and moved on to Peru. They visited the Incan ruins of Machu Picchu in the Cuzco region. Throughout his journal writings during this time, Guevara describes the immense power that this ancient indigenous group had. His appreciation of this experience shows his pride to be from South America. “The spectacular landscape circling the fortress supplies an essential backdrop, inspiring dreamers to wander its ruins for the sake of it; North American tourists, constrained by their practical world view, are able to place those members of the disintegrating tribes they may have seen in their travels among these once-living walls, unaware of the moral distance separating them, since only the semi-indigenous spirit of the South American can grasp the subtle differences (Guevara 111).”

Here we see Guevara’s high respect for his open-minded way of life. By criticizing the North American practical worldview, he is praising the value of
travelling for the sake of travelling. I admire this philosophy and would like to aspire
to live my life this way rather than the average North American.

Che Guevara and Alberto Granado’s next destinations are two leper colonies
in Peru. Particularly the one in San Pablo was influential to Guevara. He spent his
24th birthday here. There was a large party in his honor. In a speech he gave,
Guevara thanks the people of the colony for the warm welcome they gave him and
Granado although they were virtually strangers. He also speaks of wanting to unite
Latin America. This became one of Guevara’s main life goals later in his
revolutionary career.

“This is not a story of heroic feats, or merely the narrative of a cynic; at least I
do not mean it to be. It is a glimpse of two lives running parallel for a time, with
similar hopes and converging dreams (Guevara, 31).”

From these Peruvian leper colonies, Guevara and Granado moved on to
Venezuela where they would part ways. Granado would stay in Venezuela and work
in a local leper colony. Guevara flew in a cargo plane to Miami. Here we see a major
change in Guevara’s approach on life.

From the surface it seems as though the childhood and early youth of this
future revolutionary was relatively normal. Traditional schooling, the search for
one’s self, travelling, and adolescent angst all seem to reign true of the typical youth. Here is where we see a major shift in the life path of Che Guevara.

“I will take the side of the people, and I know, because I can see it written in the night, that I, an eclectic dissector of doctrines, a psychoanalyst of dogmas, screaming like a man possessed, who would attack the barricades and the trenches, and drench my weapons in blood... I am tensing my body, ready for the fight, and preparing my being as a sacred shrine so that it might resound with the new vibrations and hopes of that primordial cry of the triumphant working class/proletariat (Sánchez, 38-39).”

I believe this quote is exceptionally important. As seen through his journeys through South America, Che Guevara had a desire to help people. Now, we see his self proclaimed lengths at which he his willing to go to fulfill this desire. His first and foremost importance was that of the people. Yet we also see that Guevara is willing to go to extraordinary lengths to achieve this. Indeed, he will employ some violent tactics in his search for freedom and unification of Latin America.

Ernesto “Che” Guevara is more commonly known, neither for his humble beginnings nor his youthful kind nature, but rather for his guerilla warfare tactics and his alliance with Fidel Castro. We can see the beginning of this interest manifest itself in his introduction to Castro in Mexico City, Mexico in 1955. Guevara had initially met Raúl Castro, Fidel’s younger brother. However, later that year, Che and
Fidel would meet. By this time Castro was already an established revolutionary for Cuba, interested in overthrowing the dictator of Cuba, Fulgencio Batista. Slightly older than Guevara, Castro would take the young man under his wing and bring him on his own journey to political revolution.

As to Guevara's own political beliefs, he was strongly in opposition to imperialism and capitalism. This meant he was very much against the support to Batista Cuba from the United States. He aided Fidel Castro in the Cuban revolution between the years of 1956 and 1959 when Castro orchestrated an armed attack on Cuba. Throughout the course of these years many lives were lost on both sides. Guevara was in charge of a small battalion of soldiers, which he led to Santa Clara, Cuba. This was a major city at the time. After months of struggles, the revolutionaries succeeded in taking over the city. However, the revolution was far from over. Guevara was well on his way to making a name for himself.

He continued to be influential in the development of the new regime in Cuba. He became a political representative of Cuba. Guevara met with various presidents of other Latin American countries. He continued to travel throughout Latin America, Africa, and also Europe. A more impending issue was starting to develop. In the 1960s, Guevara renounced his leadership position in Cuba.

"I repeat that I release Cuba from all responsibility, apart from the example it has given to me. [And] if I should spend my last hour under other skies, my last
thought will be for the Cuban people, and especially for you (Sánchez, 164).” This was his farewell letter written to Fidel Castro in 1965. He travelled during this time and took on a fake persona. However, he could not stay away from Cuba for too long. Guevara eventually returned, in disguise, and began training and getting into shape again. There was to be a mission in Bolivia. What came next is the beginning of the end for Guevara. He has one final journey to undertake before we lose the legendary “Comandante,” Commander.

Bolivia, a Symbolic Death, and His Remembrance

In November of 1966, Guevara arrives in Bolivia. He begins keeping a war diary. Throughout the course of almost the next year, Guevara’s health declines. At 38, his asthma began to give him more problems. Medical supplies also began to decline and eventually vanish. “Che’s illness became his personal hell within the collective hell (Sánchez, 181).” The collective hell of war brought an onslaught of death and destruction. Guevara remained dedicated to the cause despite the oncoming violence. “Wherever death may surprise us, we will welcome it, so long as our battle cry has reached at least one receptive ear... (Sánchez, 177).”

This dedication would not last forever. On October 8, 1967 Guevara is wounded and captured by Bolivian soldiers in La Higuera. He and his fellow detainees are sentenced to be executed. October 9 was the last day of Che Guevara’s life. His demeanor never diminished even through torture and the entrance of his
executioner. He was shot twice. After his death, his body was cleaned and his hair trimmed in order to make him look more presentable. His remains were flown to a different city in Bolivia, Vallegrande.

He was not to be buried there nor returned to Cuba. This was deemed too dignified for the man who had caused so much trouble in the preceding months. Instead of an official gravesite, he was buried in a common grave, but not before the government cut off his hands. As opposed to some of the other radical ideas proposed to desecrate his remains, the removal of his head or perhaps simply a finger, it was decided to remove the hands of the revolutionary. The hands that held a gun, that turned pages of book, that moved chess pieces, that operated his inhaler, were removed and preserved in formaldehyde, stolen by Antonio Arguedas, the maverick Bolivian minister at the time, and returned to Cuba.

Over the next three decades, the location of his body remained a mystery. In 1997, Guevara's remains were officially identified and sent to Santa Clara, where there is now a statue commemorating his life's works.

The following photographs depict two of the most recognized images of Che Guevara.
This portrait of Guevara can be seen on a number of t-shirts and other memorabilia today. He has become somewhat of a pop culture icon.
This is a photograph of Guevara’s corpse taken on October 10th, 1967, the day after his execution. It was a widely publicized photo throughout the world during this time.
"He is the most fascinating and most dangerous member of the triumvirate. He has a sweet and melancholy smile that many women find quite devastating. Che is steering Cuba with a coldly calculating mind, exceptional competence, exceptional intelligence, and a great sense of humor (Sánchez, 120)." This passage was posted in Time magazine in August of 1960. In addition to this snippet, Time also named Guevara one of one hundred of the most influential people of the 20th century. It could not be denied that Guevara was a great and charismatic leader. He was a hero, and very much so remains to be one.

A Modern Analysis of a Controversial Figure

Now that we have examined the question, "Who is Che Guevara?" the next question might be, "So what?" After looking at all the facts, it might be easy to categorize this man in a negative way. It might be easy to ignore all of the good intentions, all of the normalcy of this man's life. We could declare that because of the violence that plagued his existence and his alliance with notorious Fidel Castro we must write off any merit this man might have had as a revolutionary. We can easily focus on the bad and ignore all the good. It is without a doubt that Che Guevara changed the world. His influence is still very prevalent today.

What I would like to propose is that we attempt to keep an open mind when judging people, and I have chosen Che Guevara as my focal point. I had heard of Che Guevara during my secondary education but had never really investigated the facts.
In high school I had seen the movie *Motorcycle Diaries*, which is a fictionalized account of Guevara’s trip through South America with Alberto Granado. This movie profoundly spoke to me when I was a teenager, and I have held it dear to me ever since.

In the fall of 2013, I studied abroad in Rosario, Argentina, the birthplace of Che Guevara. He still has a strong presence in this community that he spent very little time in. His birth home has a sign in front of it commemorating his earliest roots. It is an apartment, which currently has people residing in it. In addition to this commemoration, there is also a park dubbed the Ernesto “Che” Guevara Plaza. The following are pictures that I took while in Rosario.
The sign marking this apartment. It reads, "Birth house."
A statue of Che. The sign reads, "Che lives."
A mural in the plaza, which reads, "An always living example for the small towns of the world." Accompanied are a portrait of Che and a map of South America.
While in South America, I learned that not everyone is quick to jump to judge Che Guevara as a complete tyrant. Over the course of my time there, I also came to believe that it is not possible to simply categorize people as one extreme or another. During the process of deciding on a thesis topic I had numerous people tell me what I was doing was immoral, that I should not glorify this soldier who can be blamed for various deaths and violent happenings. My intent throughout this thesis is not to deny any of the damage Guevara might have caused. Rather, it is my intention to take everything into account and ask that individual conclusions be made based on the whole story.

The cliché that comes to mind is, “Do not judge a book by its cover.” We cannot pick and choose what details to declare important and which ones to toss aside. Every choice we make as individuals becomes a part of who we are as a whole. Che Guevara came from humble beginnings. He travelled throughout South America in attempt to find himself. Along the way, he discovered a greater purpose. Throughout his journey he learned that he wanted to help people. Though his means to an end might not have been the most ethical, we must look to his intentions to understand more about his true character.

Living in the United States, we have a skewed opinion on the historical events of the world. Every nation has its own skewed version of the truth. I would argue that there is no such thing as the truth. There is also a bias behind anything. It could be said that Che Guevara helped Fidel Castro overthrow the Cuban government, or it
could be said that they were revolutionizing the world. Depending on the wording, there is always an underlying bias. What I would like to try to do is eliminate this bias, to try to examine this time period from the perspective of young Guevara and try to understand his point of view.

We see a man who grew up in South America, seeing the various injustices of the world, who wanted to make a difference. Not everyone who wants to make a difference marches into Bolivia to do so, however, it is those who are different that make the difference.

Perspective. Truth. Innocence. Revolution. It might be simple to look up all of these words in a dictionary, but each word can be perceived differently depending on what side of the world you live in. History is told from the winning perspective. It is at times difficult to separate fact from opinion. How you choose to define these words is based upon your level of open mindedness.

Goodness is not a black and white subject. There are a number of different factors that are attributed to a situation. People involved, the time period, the thinking of time all influence the perspective of a certain situation. It is our responsibility to rise above the simplicity of categorizing people, events, and concepts and instead provide a just analysis, especially to those like Che Guevara who have seemingly been dealt an unfair hand.
Bibliography
