

CHE GUEVARA AND THE CUBAN REVOLUTION

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- CHE: A REVOLUTIONARY LIFE.* By Jon Lee Anderson. (New York: Grove, 1997. Pp. 814. \$35.00 cloth.)
- COMPAÑERO: THE LIFE AND DEATH OF CHE GUEVARA.* By Jorge G. Castañeda. (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1997. Pp. 456. \$30.00 cloth.) Available in Spanish as *COMPAÑERO: VIDA Y MUERTE DEL CHE GUEVARA.* (New York: Vintage, 1998. Pp. 553. \$16.00 paper.)
- GUEVARA, ALSO KNOWN AS CHE.* By Paco Ignacio Taibo II. (New York: St. Martin's, 1997. Pp. 691. \$35.00 cloth.) Available in Spanish as *ERNESTO GUEVARA, TAMBIEN CONOCIDO COMO EL CHE.* (Mexico City: Benito Juárez, 1996. Pp. 860.)
- EL AÑO QUE ESTUVIMOS EN NINGUNA PARTE: LA GUERRILLA AFRICANA DE ERNESTO CHE GUEVARA.* By Paco Ignacio Taibo II, Froilán Escobar, and Félix Guerra. (Mexico City: Joaquín Mortiz/Planeta, 1994. Pp. 255.)
- EL SUEÑO AFRICANO DE CHE.* By William Gálvez. (Havana: Casa de las Americas, 1997. Pp. 374. \$26.95 paper. Distributed in the U.S. by Pathfinder Press.)
- POMBO: A MAN OF CHE'S GUERRILLA.* By Harry Villegas. (New York: Pathfinder, 1997. Pp. 365. \$21.95 paper.) Available in Spanish as *POMBO: UN HOMBRE DE LA GUERRILLA DEL CHE.* (Havana: Editora Política, 1996. Pp. 273.)
- THE BOLIVIAN DIARY OF ERNESTO CHE GUEVARA.* By Ernesto Che Guevara, edited by Mary Alice Waters. (New York: Pathfinder, 1994. Pp. 467. \$55.00 cloth, \$21.95 paper.) Available in Spanish as *EL DIARIO DEL CHE EN BOLIVIA* (Havana: Editora Política, ca. 1996. Pp. 428. \$29.95 paper. Distributed in the U.S. by Pathfinder Press.)
- GUERRILLA WARFARE.* By Che Guevara, with a revised introduction and case studies by Brian Loveman and Thomas M. Davies Jr. (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1997. Pp. 442. \$55.00 cloth, \$21.95 paper.)
- EPISODES OF THE CUBAN REVOLUTIONARY WAR, 1956-58.* By Ernesto Che Guevara, edited by Mary-Alice Waters. (New York: Pathfinder, 1996. Pp. 483. \$65.00 cloth, \$23.95 paper.)

The thirtieth anniversary of Che Guevara's defeat and murder in the Bolivian mountains in October 1967 has been commemorated with a flurry of new books, articles, press interviews, films, and international conferences—as well as with the much-noted skis, watches, and beer mugs. The books reviewed here include three lengthy biographies (totaling nearly two thousand pages), two chronicles of the unreported Congo campaign of 1965, one book-length *testimonio*, and new and more complete editions of Guevara's classic war diaries. In addition to the books examined in this essay, at least nine other new books about Guevara were published in several languages around the anniversary year.¹ As of early 1999, still more books about the "heroic guerrilla" were in the publishing pipeline, including a narrative of the Bolivia operation by "Urbano," one of the three Cuban survivors.

The sheer volume of this literature demands explanation. The twentieth and twenty-fifth anniversaries of Che's death witnessed no comparable literary outpouring. The thirtieth anniversary of the May 1968 protests of French workers and students passed almost unnoticed, even on the Left Bank in Paris. One way to understand the flood of new works on Che is to view all books by and about Che Guevara as fundamentally books about the Cuban Revolution, in the same sense that contemporary books on race in Cuba or women in Cuba are all on some level books about the Cuban Revolution. The Che literature then falls into place within the sizable body of new books and articles seeking to explain the longevity of the socialist government of Cuba and the contradictory nature of Cuban economic and political life today. The Che books thus add to the historical dimension of the broader body of literature, much of which has been written by political scientists and journalists and tends to focus on the crisis in the Cuban economy since the cold war ended.

If the new Guevara books can be perceived as a dialogue on the Cuban Revolution, then it is fitting that Cubans on the island, including those who worked most closely with Che, should participate actively in the discussion. It seems clear that several years before the 1997 anniversary of Che's death, individuals at the highest level of the Cuban government decided to release previously classified material and to permit or encourage

1. Dariel Alarcón Ramírez, *Vie et mort de la révolution cubaine* (Paris: Fayard, 1996); Elsa Blaquier Ascaño, *Seguidores de un sueño* (Havana: Verde Olivo); Jean Cormier, *Mística y coraje: La vida del Che* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, ca. 1997); Pierre Kalfon, *Che, Ernesto Guevara: Une légende de siècle* (Paris: Seuil, ca. 1997); Alberto Korda, *Che: El álbum* (Buenos Aires: Perfil Libros, 1997); Gustavo Parada Vaca, *Los compañeros del Che Guevara* (Santa Cruz, Bolivia: Sirena, 1997); Michael Ratner and Michael Steven Smith, *Che Guevara and the FBI: The U.S. Political Police Dossier on the Latin American Revolutionary* (Melbourne and New York: Ocean Press, 1997); Henry Ryan, *The Fall of Che Guevara: A Tale of Soldiers, Spies, and Diplomats* (London: Oxford University Press, 1998); and David Sandison, *Che Guevara* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1997).

those who had fought alongside Che, including current military and party officials, to speak publicly about their experiences. In 1993 a secret Guevara manuscript on the 1965 Congo campaign was delivered to Mexican novelist Paco Ignacio Taibo and his two Cuban collaborators by "a figure in the Cuban state apparatus who prefers to remain anonymous" (*El año que estuvimos en ninguna parte*, p. 10). The manuscript was eventually shown to several other authors as well. Around the same time and apparently independently, Guevara's Cuban widow, Aleida March, decided to entrust biographer Jon Lee Anderson with her rich collection of unpublished writings. In the 1996 volume *Secretos de generales*, introduced by Cuban Army Chief Raúl Castro, forty-one generals in the Cuban Armed Forces spoke about their military experiences in Cuba and overseas, many for the first time.² Two of the generals interviewed, William Gálvez and Harry Villegas, have written current books about Che, and a half-dozen others fought under his command. Villegas's personal account of the Bolivia campaign, *Pombo: Un hombre de la guerrilla del Che*, was released with considerable fanfare in Havana to launch 1997 as "The Year of the Thirtieth Anniversary of the Death in Combat of the Heroic Guerrilla and His Comrades." Over the course of 1997, Manuel Piñero, the notorious "Red Beard" and longtime Cuban intelligence chief, gave two long interviews that were reproduced in succeeding issues of the Cuban magazine *Tricontinental*. In the first interview, he spoke publicly for the first time about preparations for the operations in the Congo and Bolivia.³ In the second, he contested some of the evidence and conclusions of the new biographies.

As the October 1997 anniversary approached, Guevara's buried remains were discovered under a Bolivian airstrip. Western journalists predicted a pro forma celebration in Cuba, with its leaders embarrassed by this reminder of their revolutionary past as they steered a course toward capitalism that went against everything Che stood for. The journalists were wrong about both the scale and the content of the commemorations inside Cuba. At the main rally on 17 October 1997, Fidel Castro thanked Che "for coming to reinforce us in this difficult struggle we are waging today to save the ideas you fought so hard for, to save the revolution, the homeland, and the conquests of socialism."⁴ Many of the speeches at conferences and rallies in Cuba drew out the implications of Che's writings for Cubans today. An international conference in September 1997 was entitled "Siglo XXI: Legado y Vigencia de la Obra del Che." The following month, at a Univer-

2. Luis Báez, *Secretos de generales—desclasificado* (Havana: Si-Mar, 1996).

3. "Mi modesto homenaje al Che: Entrevista exclusiva con el comandante Manuel Piñero Losada," *Tricontinental* 31, no. 137 (July 1997):14–23; and "Inmortalidad del Che: Un reencuentro tricontinental con el comandante Manuel Piñero Losada," *Tricontinental* 31, no. 138 (1997):41–49. In March 1998, Piñero was killed at the age of sixty-three in an automobile accident in Havana.

4. As reported in *Granma*, 18 Oct. 1997.

sity of Havana symposium entitled "Che, Hombre del Siglo XXI," National Assembly President Ricardo Alarcón argued that Guevara understood better than anyone the problems that would lead to crisis in the Soviet government and economy in the late 1980s. Alarcón also suggested that Cubans would not have been so traumatized by the collapse of the Soviet Union if they had been paying more attention to Che's writings on the subject.⁵

The authors and editors of the books under review here bring to their interpretations of Guevara's life diverse attitudes toward the Cuban Revolution. Mexican social scientist Jorge Castañeda's influential *Utopia Unarmed* (1993) argued that the Cuban Revolution was a disaster for Latin America, leading a whole generation down the deadly path of armed revolution and away from the kind of moderate electoral efforts that could have produced real social reform.⁶ An opposite view is presented by Harry Villegas, currently a brigadier general in the Cuban Armed Forces and director of political education of the Western Army, and by Mary-Alice Waters, a longtime champion of the Cuban Revolution and editor of a half-dozen books and collections of speeches by Guevara and Fidel Castro. The other two biographers fall somewhere in between. Jon Lee Anderson, author of a previous book on guerrilla movements around the world, presents a generally positive view of the Cuban Revolution of 1959, although his interpretation of the social forces involved differs somewhat from Guevara's own. But Anderson is deeply pessimistic about the state of the Cuban Revolution today.⁷ The *New York Review of Books* accurately captured this mood in a review of Anderson's book entitled "Goodbye to All That."⁸ Anderson calls Che "the solitary example of the New Man who once lived and dared others to follow" (p. 754). Castañeda, in contrast, insists that Che's New Man "has yet to see the light of day in Cuba, and never will" (p. 306). Mexican novelist Paco Ignacio Taibo is sympathetic to the revolution but does not identify with Cuban Communism in the same way that Villegas and Waters do. Taibo's collaborators on the Congo book are two pro-revolution Cuban journalists who have coauthored several earlier books about Che.

The most controversial questions addressed in the Che biographies concern the Cuban Revolution and its aftermath: the social character of the revolution against Fulgencio Batista, the process through which leaders of the July 26 Movement became Marxists, the question of extending socialist revolution to other countries and continents, the role of the Soviet Union,

5. Ricardo Alarcón, "Che Continues to Instill Fear in the Oppressors," *The Militant* 61, no. 36 (20 Oct. 1997):10.

6. Jorge G. Castañeda, *Utopia Unarmed: The Latin American Left after the Cold War* (New York: Knopf, 1993).

7. See Jon Lee Anderson, "Havana Journal: The Plague Years," *The New Yorker* 74, no. 4 (26 Jan. 1998):62–68.

8. Christopher Hitchens, "Goodbye to All That," *New York Review of Books* 44, no. 12 (17 July 1997):20–23.

the personal and political relationship between Fidel and Che, and responsibility for the disastrous Bolivia operation that ended in the death of Guevara and most of his Cuban and Bolivian guerrillas. Each biographer puts his own spin on Guevara's role and political ideas. Recent publication of popular editions of Guevara's out-of-print writings on the Cuban and Bolivian wars make it possible for interested readers to turn to what Che himself had to say on all these disputed questions.

The new accessibility of some of Guevara's key writings is a significant counter to the journalistic tendency to misquote Che or caricature his emphasis on revolutionary will and the role of human agency in socialist transformation. A review of the Anderson and Castañeda biographies in *The New York Times*, for example, contains only one quotation that purports to be from Che, the nonsensical "Revolution can be made at any given moment anywhere in the world."⁹ Although the reviewer cites no source for the sentence that he puts in quotation marks and attributes to Che, the context suggests it might be part of Guevara's 1966 "Message to the Tricontinental." Its theme is that for historical reasons outlined in detail, the potential for revolution is not the same in Asia and Africa as it is in Latin America. The sentence that comes closest to the one quoted reads, "Almost all the countries of this continent [Latin America] are ripe for a struggle of the kind that, to be triumphant, cannot settle for anything less than the establishment of a government of a socialist nature" (*Bolivian Diary*, p. 28). Some of the journalistic misquoting of Guevara is blatantly political, as in the statement that Che "went so far as to point out that of all the battles in the Sierra Maestra, Fidel Castro participated in only one and it was a complete failure."¹⁰ Guevara actually wrote that the clash on 5 December 1956 was the "first battle, the only one Fidel participated in that went against our forces." Che's *Episodes of the Cuban Revolutionary War* chronicles many successful battles led by Castro.

Three Massive New Biographies

When Anderson's *Che: A Revolutionary Life* was published in early 1997, little remained in print about the legendary guerrilla. More than a dozen books, some hagiographic and others demonizing, had appeared in the years immediately after Che's death, followed by a hiatus of almost a quarter-century.¹¹ Anderson consulted sources not available to the earlier

9. Larry Rohter, "Recalling Che the Man But Not His Revolution," *New York Times Week in Review*, 12 Oct. 1997, p. 4.

10. Thomas H. Lipscomb, "The Revised Che Guevara," *New York Times Week in Review*, 26 Nov. 1995, p. 3.

11. One of the few books of a scholarly nature to appear between the early 1970s and the mid-1990s was Carlos Tablada Pérez, *El pensamiento económico de Ernesto Che Guevara* (Havana: Casa de las Americas, 1987).

generation of writers. In addition to the unpublished diaries, letters, and other writings to which Aleida March gave him exclusive access, Anderson tracked down and interviewed dozens of allies and enemies of Che in Argentina, Moscow, Mexico, Bolivia, and the United States. After meeting with initial resistance from Cuban government and Communist Party sources, he was eventually able to interview many of those who had known Che, including Manuel Piñeiro (none of the biographers managed to interview Fidel or Raúl Castro). The longest and best-researched of the 1997 biographies, Anderson's *Che* has justly received the most attention.

Paco Ignacio Taibo II calls Che "the second narrator" of *Guevara, Also Known as Che* and allows his subject to tell his own story to an unusual extent. Quotes from Guevara's diaries, speeches, and other writings are set in bold type and often make up half of a given page of text. Both the first and the second narrators of *Guevara* are skillful writers, and together they bring to life the drama of Che's philosophical and military battles. Taibo rarely maintains much distance from his subject. He is most critical in describing Guevara's treatment of the Revolutionary Directorate, the July 26 Movement's student allies in the war in 1958. Taibo's criticism seems misplaced. Although Guevara agreed with giving priority to the July 26 Movement over the Revolutionary Directorate and to the Sierra Maestra over the *llano* (plains), the strategy belonged to Fidel Castro. Although Taibo's biography is sparing in its criticism, it is nevertheless a serious work of historical scholarship. In addition to the contacts that Taibo developed while writing the Congo book, he interviewed for his biography some two dozen informants, most of them Che's supporters. *Guevara, Also Known as Che* features the most complete bibliography of the three new biographies.

Compañero: The Life and Death of Che Guevara is the most argument-driven of the three biographies, the most interpretive, and the most hostile to Guevara and the Cuban Revolution. Che is repeatedly charged with personal responsibility for the deaths of thousands of young Latin American rebels who "cheerfully marched off to be massacred" in the course of the 1960s and 1970s (p. 192). Jorge Castañeda relies heavily on Che's political enemies as primary sources, and except for the Congo manuscript, he consulted only writings by Guevara that had already been published elsewhere. Castañeda's single most important source is Carlos Franqui, self-exiled from Cuba since 1968. Castañeda alleges that Castro was planning to expel Che from Cuba in 1959, a conclusion based solely on a report by an agent of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to the U.S. State Department (p. 158). Castañeda also states that the "best summary" of a 1965 rift between Castro and Che (and his only cited source for its existence) was a CIA memorandum (p. 303). According to Castañeda, Che had given up on the idea of revolution in Latin America by February 1965, an inference based solely on the evidence of a British Foreign Office secret memorandum, in turn based on a U.S. State Department report (p. 294). Castañeda bases his

reconstruction of the events leading up to Che's death on information provided by two sources: by Mario Monje, the head of the Partido Comunista Boliviano (PCB), who according to all accounts set Che up for defeat; and by Dariel Alarcón ("Benigno"), a survivor of the Bolivia operation who defected from Cuba in the 1990s and published a book in Paris highly critical of the Cuban Revolution. Evaluating Castañeda's use of his sources is made more difficult by the strange use of both footnotes and endnotes throughout the text and the absence of any bibliography.

Both Anderson and Castañeda portray the radicalization of the Cuban Revolution in 1959 and 1960 as the product of debate and maneuvering in proverbial smoke-filled rooms among the Moscow-leaning Che, the sometimes-Washington-leaning Fidel, the Soviet ambassador, and a handful of other key players. The United States played only a bit part in this drama, and the Cuban people none at all. The focus of the biographers is understandably on Guevara's role—they are not interested in "history from below." Even so, to ignore completely the land and factory occupations, the pro-nationalization demonstrations, the enormous popular mobilizations against each economic and military attack from the United States is to present a skewed and ultimately incomprehensible account of this crucial period. Anderson underestimates the role of the United States in the Congo and Bolivia as well as in Cuba itself, and he provides no sense of the extent to which Che and his followers lived in a world dominated by the war in Vietnam. Che's hatred for U.S. imperialism, arguably the single most important ideological force of his adult life, comes across as nonpolitical anti-Americanism.

Anderson also shares with Castañeda (and with Taibo to a lesser extent) the view that Guevara's critique of Soviet-style Marxism was a relatively late development. Regarding the crucial years of the Cuban revolutionary war and the radicalization of the state and economy (1958 to 1961), they portray Guevara as all but a formal member of the pro-Moscow Communist Party of Cuba, the Partido Socialista Popular (PSP). Castañeda insists that Che's only reasons for not becoming a dues-paying member of the PSP in 1958 or earlier were "tactical" and "personal," namely Che's "views on guerrilla warfare." Once this tactical problem was "resolved" by the victory on 1 January 1959, "nothing separated them any longer" (pp. 126–27). Both Anderson and the two Mexican biographers assume that the PSP was a bona fide Marxist party that represented the extreme Left of the Cuban political spectrum. It seems natural to them that Guevara, the most Marxist of the guerrillas, would gravitate toward the PSP and trust its most sympathetic leader, Carlos Rafael Rodríguez.

But these biographers ignore the entire history of the PSP in the years before Che arrived in Cuba in late 1956, a history that Che learned quickly and added to his own frustrating experiences with the Communist party of Guatemala in 1954. Rodríguez, already a leader of the PSP, served

in the cabinet of Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista, and the PSP opposed Fidel Castro's July 26 Movement from the Right—not the Left—from the time it was launched in an unsuccessful raid on the Moncada Barracks in 1953. The biographers cite the fact that several of Guevara's closest aides in the Sierra Maestra came from the PSP as evidence of the party's influence over him. But the aides themselves have made it clear in their behavior and comments then and since that their loyalty was 100 percent to Che and zero to the PSP. By underestimating or outright denying any continuity between Che's earlier stances and his sharp criticisms of Soviet-style Communism after 1962, the biographers leave readers bewildered when "the scion of the Soviet Union" (the title of a Castañeda chapter) suddenly metamorphoses into the archenemy of Carlos Rafael Rodríguez in the economic sphere and the *bête noire* of the Kremlin and Communist parties throughout Latin America.

The Narratives on the Congo and Bolivia

The two books on the 1965 Congo campaign add significantly to the existing Guevara bibliography in describing a period of Che's life about which only rumors had circulated. From April to November 1965, Che led a hundred black Cuban volunteers fighting alongside the Congolese Liberation Army (CLA) against Congolese government troops backed by the United States, Belgium, and mercenaries from South Africa. The CLA campaign was a disaster from start to finish. Its Congolese leaders, followers of slain Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba, refused to leave the safety and comfort of Dar es Salaam and Cairo. In his diary, Guevara criticized the "freedom fighters" he met in Dar es Salaam in 1965 as "living well, ensconced in hotels, having made of their situation a real career, a business sometimes lucrative and nearly always comfortable" (*El año que estuvimos en ninguna parte*, p. 14). Lacking any direction except that provided by the foreign Cubans, the Congolese Liberation Army rapidly disintegrated. Guevara led a disorderly and reluctant retreat in mid-November 1965 and then spent almost two months in hiding in the Cuban Embassy in Dar es Salaam, turning his handwritten diary into an analysis of the campaign and its lessons. Taibo and his collaborators had already begun research for a book on the Congo campaign when they received a copy of this typescript manuscript, entitled "Pasajes de la guerra revolucionaria (El Congo)." They then interwove extracts with the recollections of Cuban and African participants to produce a fast-moving, lightly narrated collective testimonio.

William Gálvez's *El sueño africano de Che* adds little to *El año que estuvimos en ninguna parte: La guerrilla africana de Ernesto Ché Guevara*, except more substantial extracts from the Guevara manuscript. Gálvez's selections are interspersed with testimony from many of the same individuals inter-

viewed by Taibo, Escobar, and Guerra. Neither book has been translated into English, although Anderson, Castañeda, and Taibo all had access to some version of "Pasajes de la guerra revolucionaria (El Congo)," and their books cover the Congo campaign in some detail. The Guevara manuscript itself has not yet been published and would be a welcome addition to the historiography. A translation into English or French would make it accessible to a wider audience, especially in Africa.

The title of Taibo's book on the Congo translates "The Year We Were Nowhere." It refers to the colorful rumors that circulated about Guevara's whereabouts during 1965: that Fidel had killed Che in a fit of rage, that Che was locked up in a mental hospital in Havana, that contract hit men had murdered Che and buried his body in Las Vegas, or that Che had sold Cuban state secrets to Washington for ten million dollars. Some of these rumors were eventually traced to the CIA. Speculations about rifts between Fidel Castro and Che Guevara continued to circulate, even after Che's death, but among the new biographers, only Castañeda gives them much credence. Castañeda's blames Castro along with Guevara himself for Che's death in Bolivia. The author's "hypothetical but plausible version of events" is that differences with Fidel made it impossible for Che to remain in Cuba after 1966; that Castro selected Bolivia as a target and deceived Guevara about the problems of mounting a guerrilla war there; and that in mid-1967, Fidel could have saved Che by increasing military support or mounting a rescue operation (p. 381). According to Castañeda, Castro refused to do so because "Moscow was not willing, and it was now calling the shots" (p. 380) and because from Fidel's point of view, it was better to have Che martyred in Bolivia than "frustrated and discouraged in Havana" (p. 386).

Although all the biographers describe tactical disagreements and occasional personal tensions between Castro and Guevara during the dozen intense years they worked together, the evidence for a fundamental conflict of the sort that Castañeda postulates is not persuasive. His cited sources consist almost exclusively of U.S. State Department or CIA reports and third- or fourth-hand personal accounts. No hint of such conflict can be found in the writings and speeches of Guevara and Castro, both of whom had a great deal to say about each other and their relationship.

The new edition of *The Bolivian Diary of Ernesto Che Guevara* and its companion piece, *Pombo, a Man of Che's Guerrilla*, present first-hand accounts of the disastrous guerrilla campaign in 1967. Pombo is the nom de guerre of Harry Villegas, a black Cuban who joined Guevara's column in the Sierra Maestra at the age of seventeen. Pombo was Che's friend and bodyguard in Cuba and fought in the Congo and Bolivia guerrilla campaigns. His diary, which he reconstructed years later in Cuba, parallels and expands on Che's own diary. It adds descriptions of Guevara's classes and talks to his troops, more details on the crucial antagonistic meeting be-

tween Che and Mario Monje, leader of the Bolivian PCB, and the story of the harrowing escape of five Bolivian and Cuban combatants after Che and the rest of the unit were killed. The Pathfinder editions of *Pombo* and Guevara's Bolivia and Cuba war diaries are models of testimonio literature, buttressed by extensive notes, maps, photographs, glossaries, and supplemental material. Guevara's *Bolivian Diary* and *Episodes of the Cuban Revolutionary War (1956–58)* were newly translated and annotated with the help of Cuban scholars. Many errors and omissions found in previous editions were corrected. A review in the *Hispanic American Historical Review* recommended this pair of volumes as "now the best original source for English-language scholars."¹² Certainly, they are accessible for college undergraduates and nonspecialist readers as well. The length and cost of the Che biographies would seem to preclude their adoption for undergraduate courses. But a stimulating graduate seminar could be built around this whole body of literature. It consists of dramatic and readable primary sources as well as secondary sources offering a variety of interpretative frameworks. This material can be examined from the perspective of revolutionary theory, historical method, or even literature and cultural studies.

Che the Man and His Legacy

Although this review has focused on the political content of the new Che books, the 1997 biographies give at least equal weight to the human side, to Che the man and Che the myth. They detail his asthma-plagued childhood in Argentina, youthful travels around Latin America following graduation from medical school, and life in Guatemala during the U.S.-sponsored overthrow of the Jacobo Arbenz government in 1954. Taibo's and Anderson's biographies cite Guevara's family letters and personal diaries extensively. Together with the published war diaries, they give readers a sense of Guevara's personality: his acerbic wit, hatred of pomp and red tape, affection and loyalty toward family and comrades, workaholicism, and his literateness and intellectual curiosity (Fidel Castro once said that talking to Che was like talking to a classicist). *Episodes of the Cuban Revolutionary War* traces the personal transformation that Che underwent in the course of the Cuban war, from a revolutionary-minded youth and self-described Quixote to a committed political and military leader.

The theme of Casteñeda's *Compañero* is that the impact of Che Guevara and the decade he symbolized has been cultural rather than political or ideological. Casteñeda goes to considerable lengths to debunk the idea

12. Review by Russell W. Ramsey, *Hispanic American Historical Review* 76, no. 4 (Nov. 1996):826–28.

that Che's political and military strategies could ever provide a model for action. In doing so, Casteñeda adopts a tone that is patronizing and sometimes offensive, especially in describing the women in Che's life. Casteñeda portrays Che in Mexico in 1954–1955 as "essentially a tramp," despite the fact that he was working two jobs (p. 76). Che is portrayed as always sexually drawn to the exotic, especially to "beautiful mulatto girls" (p. 113). Aleida March was a "watered-down version" of Che's high-school sweetheart, and his departure on a world tour soon after their marriage is attributed to "the fact that Aleida soon lost her good looks" (p. 132). In reality, Casteñeda's vicious treatment of March may be connected to the fact that she chose to share Guevara's papers with another biographer. Casteñeda complains about her "feminine possessiveness which survived her husband and extended to his children, his records, and his memory" (pp. 132–33). Casteñeda dismisses Tamara Burke, "Tania" the German-Argentine rebel who was killed in combat in Bolivia, as "simply a revolutionary groupie" (p. 364). *Compañero* also contains various assertions that those from tropical countries are by nature hot-blooded, undisciplined, and corrupt. For example, Che is said to have been needed in the Sierra Maestra because "his Argentine and European sense of order, his punctuality and formality, his respect for the rules, his insistence on honoring promises and commitments were not Caribbean virtues by any means" (p. 120). Casteñeda also refers offhandedly to "the erotic temptations of power in the tropics" (p. 265). All these comments seem like a strange throwback to nineteenth-century environmental determinism, and at a time when the world capital most associated in the popular mind with the "erotic temptations of power" is Washington, D.C.

One of the most controversial questions to emerge from the new body of Guevariana concerns the relevance of Che's life and ideas today. Casteñeda states emphatically, "Che's ideas, his life and opus, even his example, belong to the past. As such, they will never be current again" (p. xvi). His confidence that Cuban socialism will not be the model for future struggles represents mainstream thought among Latin American and North American intellectuals and social scientists. The opposite view is put forward by the University of Havana academics who named their 1997 symposium "Che, Hombre del Siglo XXI" and by Mary-Alice Waters, who dedicates *Episodes of the Cuban Revolutionary War* to "a new generation of fighters around the world for whom the example of the Cuban revolution and the line of march of its victorious Rebel Army still show the way" (p. 39). Three decades after Che's death, a revival of interest in his life and writings seems to be occurring in southern Mexico, Argentina, Western Europe, the United States, and Cuba itself. Old Che posters from the 1960s have been reprinted with slogans like "The duty of every revolutionary is to make the revolution," and "At the risk of seeming ridiculous, let me say that the true revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love." But it is one

thing to put up a wall poster or raise a banner bearing Che's famous portrait. It is quite another to adopt Guevara's communist ideology and attempt to follow his example. Whether that happens anyplace outside Cuba remains an open question—one that will be answered by a generation not even born when Che was killed in the mountains of Bolivia.