
Cuban Revolution: The Legacy Of Che Guevara

Intro

Che Guevara, the Cuban revolutionary, has one of the strongest and endearing legacies seen in today's world. Representing freedom of individual expression and epitomising the power of revolutionary struggle, Che Guevara symbolises many different ideals and ideas to many different peoples and cultures. Che's image however has come to represent differentiating ideals and roles for various cultures around the globe. His differing legacies have separate impacts for different people and affects them in different ways. His legacy has been adapted and changed so that his persona has come to mean different things than the ideals that he originally stood for in life. Even the famous image of him wearing his beret has been adapted from the original photograph and now has diverse effects on separate people and societies. So in what way has his legacy survived and how has it been changed and adapted for different meaning among contrasting peoples.

Che Guevara played a critical role in the Cuban revolution which succeeded in overthrowing Fulgencio Batista's military junta that occupied the Cuban government. Che was instrumental, together with Fidel Castro, in initiating a successful guerilla war campaign that capitalised and overcame an unorganised but brutal government regime. Che was widely known and respected in Cuba for giving up a secure and reliable lifestyle as an Argentinian doctor to come and fight for the Cuban people. After the successful Cuban revolution Che travelled to the Congo and Bolivia to initiate revolutionary uprisings there. However the conditions in both the countries were not as ideal as Cuba and as such both the uprisings failed to gain enough support and quickly died out. Che was captured in Bolivia and executed by the Bolivian police working in tandem with the CIA. This Christ-like execution quickly generated a martyrdom of Che. Over the next three decades he would be held up repeatedly as a model of fortitude, self-denial and heroism all of which were exemplified by the courage with which he faced his executioners. Che was incredibly influential in life but his influence and power increased dramatically after his death in Bolivia.

A practical way that Che's legacy has survived and a way that clearly represents what he stood for in life is his nature of guerilla warfare. Before he died Che had initiated a training program for revolutionary aspirants from elsewhere in the hemisphere so they could learn from the Cuban experience and return to their countries of origin to begin revolutions of their own. Within the next several years, this effort would send forth revolutionary hopefuls to Nicaragua, Guatemala, Venezuela, Argentina, Colombia, and Peru, all thought to satisfy the conditions for a successful revolutionary takeover. This program and the publication of his work "Guerilla warfare," which was published in over 40 languages, helped extend and spread his revolutionary tactics and ideas around the globe. All Guerilla strategy in Latin America over the next ten years was founded on Guevara's contention that "a nucleus of thirty to fifty men... is sufficient to initiate an armed struggle in any country of the Americas with their conditions of favourable territory for operations.

Over the course of the next 30 years, even when they have chosen to revise his model of insurrection, guerillas from Chile to Chiapas have sought to "be like Che." They have attempted

to look like him, to live like him and to carry on his torch.

Fidel Castro said at the Che Guevara memorial service after he died that the people who had killed him were mistaken if they thought that his death “meant the end of his ideas, the end of his tactics, the end of his guerilla concepts.”

In Cuba Che is ingrained into the culture and daily life of the people. Che's premature death at the age of 39 was a great shock to the people of Cuba and succeeded in immortalising him as a martyr against Capitalism in the west and strengthened his ideal for fighting for what you believe in. In Cuba he increasingly represents the memory of what might have been, how things had changed and what can still be. He is remembered for not only his work during the revolution in which he played one of the key roles, but also his work in government office that benefited the people of Cuba which had so long been the bottom of society but were now treated as equals. Che was primarily known for his guerilla strategy of warfare and for his roles in government office under Fidel Castro. Under Fidel Castro Che was a great ambassador for literacy in Cuba and succeeded in getting the nation wide literacy level to an incredible 96%, one of the highest in the world at that time. He also was widely popular for redistributing land from American corporations back to the Cuban population for cultivation. Throughout Latin America Che personifies the spirit of national liberation and struggle against mainstream society. Che Guevara was an inspiration to insurgents all over Latin America. His romantic portrait of the guerilla fighter as a social reformer represented an attempt to elaborate upon Lenin's concept of the professional revolutionary. Che demonstrated that a revolutionary struggle without the ideal conditions experienced by Lenin could succeed and that the power of the individual and the support of the people could create the conditions suitable for a revolution. In Cuba the legacy of Che has been so heavily celebrated and recognised that at the start of each school day in Cuba the children chant “We are the pioneers for communism, we will be like Che.” This chant of Che serves in immortalising Che and bringing up the next generation of Cubans in recognising and honouring Che's legacy as a revolutionary and for doing what's right for the society and for the people despite the cost or inconvenience to oneself. In Cuba we see Che Guevara immortalised and a new generation being brought up in the values and memories that Che symbolises for the Cuban people.

In the West, Che has long been a romantic symbol of personal rebellion and of the power of individual expression. Che's image has been recycled and reused in Western culture and is now an imagery that is being successfully packaged and sold around the globe. His legacy is now a key symbol in pop culture and his image has been heavily commercialised. This heavy commercialisation is shown through his image in advertising and prominent pop culture figures such as Andy Warhol. Taco Bell launched an ad campaign featuring a chihuahua wearing Che's recognisable beret and there was a series of paintings launched in the Andy Warhol style that he later claimed ownership of. Yet, it is by no means clear that Che Guevara has been de-politicized in the face of commercialism.

The year 1968 was a watershed for popular protest around the world and Che Guevara, now a martyr, became a condensing symbol for a geographically diverse array of leftist social movements. Riding the global wave of protest, Che's visibility in the international media peaked in the late 1960s. At the height of this wave, the New York Times repeatedly connected Che to Marxist social movements in Europe and the Americas. However, in recent decades Che's image has been revitalised in social movement events around the globe.

Movements and groups that continue to use the revolutionary symbol of Che include The Zapatistas of Mexico which have had images of Che on clothes, banners, flags, and posters since 1994. French protestors carried Che Guevara flags in 2000 at the trial of French farmer and anti neoliberalism activist, Jose ? Bove, who destroyed a McDonald's restaurant in protest. Che's image appeared at social movement events of landless workers in Brazil (1997), striking university students in Mexico City (1999), and peace activists in Italy (2002). Late in 2005, Che's image was prominently displayed at an antineoliberal global- isation rally in Argentina, where the Bolivian presidential candidate Evo morales spoke. Wherever there is a struggle, where there are individuals going up against a government or a regime, The image of Che is often shown up, whether it be on T shirts or pictures or murals on the walls che is often linked to and shown in signs of class struggle. Professor Selbin, a professor of political science and university scholar at Southwestern University states it well "He shows up almost anywhere there's a struggle," Selbin said. "In places like Tahrir Square, and in Tunisia, and in Bahrain and Yemen, in all those places at various points, either as posters or t-shirts, or stenciled on walls, there were figures of Che Guevara."

These examples of where Che has been used in periods of class or group struggle establish that Che has long been seen as a romantic symbol of personal rebellion and the power of individual expression.

In Conclusion

For these frustrated people, Guevara represents the power to influence history, an ideal that fuels their revolutionary efforts. "Instead of ... this sense of people as passive consumers of their own lives, what Che Guevara represented...was the idea that you could be an agent of history," Selbin said.