

**Che Guevara, Guerrilla Warfare. 3rd ed. Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 1997.**

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Che Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*. 3rd ed. Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 1997.

Ernesto 'Che' Guevara holds a unique place in the minds of activists and academics as an icon of the ideal revolutionary and as a symbol of rebellious youth. Indeed, his stylized portrait is easily recognized; somewhat ironically, this "mark" has become the object of copyright disputes and has been used most recently, in a slightly altered form, to sell the idea of a "revolutionary" Jesus Christ to draw a younger membership into the Christian faith. A number of monographs that range from the ghoulish<sup>1</sup> to the insightful<sup>2</sup> have been published recently, as have a number of scholarly journal articles. There is something about Che's writings and life that continues to fascinate researchers and readers alike, whether it is his youthful motorcycle diaries, his idealistic concepts regarding guerrilla warfare or the marketability of his name and image. This third edition of *Guerrilla Warfare*, a revised and updated version of the 1985 University of Nebraska release (and not to be confused with the recent Nebraska offprint edition of *Guerrilla Warfare*), will almost certainly benefit from a resurgence of interest in revolutionary and irregular warfare generally and in Che Guevara specifically.

*Guerrilla Warfare* is divided into four main sections: an introductory essay; a modest collection of Che's writings; seven Latin American case studies of guerrilla movements; and, a brief concluding chapter suggestively titled "Guerrilla Warfare in the 1990s." The introductory essay is an excellent primer for those for whom this subject matter is new. It places Che's ideas in a broader historical context, surveying for example the conceptualizations of guerrilla warfare developed by V.I. Lenin, T.E. Lawrence, Mao Zedong and Vo Nguyen Giap. Reference is also made to the thoughts on "popular" warfare articulated by Carl von Clausewitz, who is often mistakenly criticized as having neglected the subject. From these concepts, the authors discuss how Che's notions deviated from those of his predecessors, their application in Latin American contexts, the development of the American "Alliance for Progress" program and an assessment of his legacy.

Three of Che's seminal writings on insurgency are included in this work: *Guerrilla Warfare* (1960); "Guerrilla Warfare: A Method" (1963); and, "Message to the Tricontinental," which was published in the year of death (1967). Through these three items, the reader can observe the subtle but significant shift in Guevara's theory of guerrilla warfare. Initially, Che conceived of guerrilla warfare as a last resort once all other non-violent means for change had failed in a non-democratic system. In addition, it was applicable only in certain geographic locations in Latin America but was accelerated by a critical core of insurgents, the *foco*. In his later writings, the *foco* becomes *the* solution, overcoming all political, economic and social obstacles the revolution faces throughout the entirety of Latin America and eventually the world, bringing the revolution into an eventual and potentially (and prophetically) self-destructive struggle with the United States. The *foco* becomes Che's hubris, a blindness which leads to the failure of his revolutionary efforts in Bolivia and ends in his capture and execution.

Brian E. Loveman and Thomas M. Davies, Jr., the contributors to this revised and expanded edition, devote most of the rest of the volume to a discussion of Che's impact on the insurgent movements in Guatemala, Venezuela, Columbia, Peru, Bolivia, Nicaragua and El Salvador. Both contributors are well-suited to the task at hand and have a strong interest and academic record in Latin American issues; Davies, a Peruvian specialist, is currently the Chair of the Latin American Studies Center at San Diego State University and his colleague at the University, Loveman, is a Chilean specialist and former chair of the Center. Their case studies provide a practical frame of reference and place Che's theories into context. One theme running throughout the case studies and explored in the concluding chapter is the eventual ideological "corruption" of the insurgent movements. Che's notions represent the ideal toward which insurgents strive, but decades of conflict and repressive (or effective, depending on your political stance) measures sapped the guerrillas of much of their earlier ideological enthusiasm. In its place has arisen commercial opportunism in the narcotics trade or acceptance of either the Vietnamese or Maoist styles of revolution.

As useful as it is, this edition of *Guerrilla Warfare* is not without its weaknesses, all of which stem from the contributors' assessment of Guevara's impact. For example, in the introductory essay the contributors assert that "the guerrillas had failed; power remained in the hands of political parties, business groups, the Church, the military -- in short of the enemies that Che Guevara sought to overcome" while on the next page they declare "[t]he guerrillas failed to take power . . . to defeat capitalism . . . to forge the new socialist man . . . [t]his failure, and that of guerrilla warfare as Che conceived it, did not destroy the myth, the legend and the totemic symbol of the "heroic guerrilla." [With his image exploited in the US, Europe and Latin America] . . . He became a commercial success." The contradiction, and ultimately the irony of this statement is that those who are benefitting commercially from his image and mystique consist almost exclusively of those "enemies" against whom he fought so hard.

Ultimately, the question regarding Che Guevara's legacy remains unanswered in this edition of *Guerrilla Warfare*. The authors perhaps unwittingly suggest that by the mid-1970s, Che's influence among other Latin American insurgent movements was nominal at best. One reason they give for this is the effectiveness, albeit harshly implemented, of US counterinsurgency support to countries in the region. More important to the question at hand, however, is that while some of the insurgent leaders may have found inspiration in his legend, by and large they rejected the *foquismo* method. In its place guerrilla commanders chose either the Vietnamese model of proselytizing and insurrection leading to a general uprising, a rejection of violence in exchange for political representation, or found other sources of inspiration. The authors seem to suggest that Che has been validated by either the persistence of guerrilla warfare or the sporadic return to it in most of the seven countries used as case studies. That Che identified the conditions for revolution in Latin America specifically is undeniable. The inability of some of those countries to address the social, economic and political grievances of its citizens, however, is not proof that "Guevara's living legacy" is undeniable.

Its flaws notwithstanding, this reprint of *Guerrilla Warfare* is useful and will no doubt be used as required text in courses on political violence, insurgency and Latin American studies. The case studies and survey provide much food for thought. Paired with Che's most important essays on the subject, this accessible and convenient volume will stimulate debate on the continuing influence of this icon of the twentieth century.

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### **Endnotes**

1. The account of Gustavo Villoldo, who allegedly "hunted Che Guevara for the CIA" and "hid the bones of Castro's famous revolutionary," is advertised as having details of where he insists the remains were interred. For more information, see <http://www.el-che-endmyth.com/>.
2. Jorge Caste-eda, *Compa-ero: The Life and Death of Che Guevara* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997).