The Motorcycle Diaries

Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara

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Extract

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ernesto che guevara

One of *Time* magazine's "icons of the century," Ernesto Guevara de la Serna was born in Rosario, Argentina, on June 14, 1928. He made several trips around Latin America during and immediately after his studies at medical school in Buenos Aires, including his 1952 journey with Alberto Granado, on the unreliable Norton motorbike described in this travel diary.

He was already becoming involved in political activity and living in Guatemala when, in 1954, the elected government of Jacobo Arbenz was overthrown in a CIA-organized military operation. Ernesto escaped to Mexico, profoundly radicalized.

Following up on a contact made in Guatemala, Guevara sought out the group of exiled Cuban revolutionaries in Mexico City. In July 1955, he met Fidel Castro and immediately enlisted in the guerrilla expedition to overthrow Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista. The Cubans nicknamed him "Che," a popular form of address in Argentina.

On November 25, 1956, Guevara set sail for Cuba aboard the yacht *Granma* as the doctor to the guerrilla group that began the revolutionary armed struggle in Cuba's Sierra Maestra mountains. Within several months, he became the first Rebel Army commander, though he continued ministering medically to wounded guerrilla fighters and captured soldiers from Batista's army.

In September 1958, Guevara played a decisive role in the military defeat of Batista after he and Camilo Cienfuegos led separate guerrilla columns westward from the Sierra Maestra.

After Batista fled on January 1, 1959, Guevara became a key leader of the new revolutionary government, first as head of the

Industrial Department of the National Institute of Agrarian Reform; then as president of the National Bank. In February 1961 he became minister of industry. He was also a central leader of the political organization that in 1965 became the Communist Party of Cuba.

Apart from these responsibilities, Guevara represented the Cuban revolutionary government around the world, heading numerous delegations and speaking at the United Nations and other international forums in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the socialist bloc countries. He earned a reputation as a passionate and articulate spokesperson for Third World peoples, most famously at the conference at Punta del Este in Uruguay, where he denounced U.S. President Kennedy's Alliance for Progress.

As had been his intention since joining the Cuban revolutionary movement, Guevara left Cuba in April 1965, initially to lead a guerrilla mission to support the revolutionary struggle in the Congo. He returned to Cuba secretly in December 1965, to prepare another guerrilla force for Bolivia. Arriving in Bolivia in November 1966, Guevara's plan was to challenge that country's military dictatorship and eventually to instigate a revolutionary movement that would extend throughout the continent of Latin America. He was wounded and captured by U.S.-trained and run Bolivian counter-insurgency troops on October 8, 1967. The following day he was murdered and his body hidden.

Che Guevara's remains were finally discovered in 1997 and returned to Cuba. A memorial was built at Santa Clara in central Cuba, where he had won a major military battle during the revolutionary war.

brief chronology of ernesto che guevara

1928

Ernesto Guevara is born on June 14 in Rosario, Argentina. He is the first child of middle-class parents Ernesto Guevara Lynch and Celia de la Serna.

1932

The Guevara family moves from Buenos Aires to Alta Gracia, a spa town near Córdoba, on account of Ernesto's chronic asthma. His asthma also prevents him from regular attendance at school until he is nine years old.

1948

Altering his initial plan to study engineering, Ernesto enrolls in medical school at the University of Buenos Aires, while holding a series of part-time jobs, including in an allergy treatment clinic.

1950

Ernesto sets out on a 4,500 kilometer trip around the north of Argentina on a motorized bicycle.

1951–52

In October 1951, Ernesto and his friend Alberto Granado decide on a plan to ride Alberto's motorbike (La Poderosa II – The Mighty One) to North America. Granado is a biochemist who had specialized in leprology and whose younger brothers had been Ernesto's school friends. They leave Córdoba in December, heading first to farewell Ernesto's family in Buenos Aires. The adventures experienced on this trip, written up by Ernesto during and after the journey, comprise this book, published first as *Notas de Viaje* (*Travel Notes* or *The Motorcycle Diaries*).

1953

Ernesto graduates as a doctor and almost immediately embarks on another journey around Latin America which takes in Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Panama, Costa Rica and Guatemala, where he meets Antonio (Ñico) López, a young Cuban revolutionary. In Bolivia, he is witness to the Bolivian Revolution. The account of these travels was first published as *Otra Vez* (*Once Again* or *On the Road Again*).

1954

Ernesto's political views are profoundly radicalized when in Guatemala he sees the overthrow by U.S.-backed forces of the democratically elected government of Jacobo Árbenz. He escapes to Mexico where he contacts the group of Cuban revolutionary exiles. In Mexico, he marries Peruvian Hilda Gadea with whom he has a daughter, Hildita.

1955

After meeting Fidel Castro, he agrees to join the group that is being organized to wage guerrilla war against the Batista dictatorship. Now called "Che" by the Cubans — a common nickname for Argentines — he sails as the troop's doctor on the yacht *Granma* in November 1956.

1956–58

Che soon demonstrates outstanding military ability and is promoted to the rank of commander in July 1957. In December 1958, he leads the Rebel Army to a decisive victory over Batista's forces at Santa Clara in central Cuba.

1959

In February, Che is declared a Cuban citizen in recognition of his contribution to the island's liberation. He marries Aleida March, with whom he has four children. In October, he is appointed head of the Industrial Department of the Institute of Agrarian Reform (INRA) and in November becomes president of the National Bank of Cuba where, with a gesture of disdain, he signs the new banknotes simply as "Che."

1960

Representing the revolutionary government, Che undertakes an extensive trip to the Soviet Union, the German Democratic Republic, Czechoslovakia, China and North Korea, signing several key trade agreements.

1961

Che is appointed head of the newly established Ministry of Industry. In August, he heads Cuba's delegation to the Organization of American States (OAS) at Punta del Este, Uruguay, where he denounces U.S. President Kennedy's Alliance for Progress.

1962

A fusion of Cuban revolutionary organizations takes place and Che is elected to the National Directorate. Che visits the Soviet Union for the second time.

1963

Che travels to Algeria which has just won independence from France under the government of Ahmed Ben Bella.

1964

Before heading off for an extensive trip around Africa, Che addresses the UN General Assembly in December.

1965

Che leads an international mission to the Congo to support the liberation movement founded by Patrice Lumumba. Responding to mounting speculation about Che's whereabouts, Fidel Castro reads Che's farewell letter to the Central Committee of the newly founded Cuban Communist Party. In December, Che returns to Cuba to prepare in secret for a new mission to Bolivia.

1966

Che arrives in Bolivia in November, in disguise.

1967

In April, Che's "Message to the Tricontinental" is published, calling for the creation of "two, three, many Vietnams." The same month, part of his guerrilla group becomes separated from the main detachment. On October 8, the remaining 17 guerrillas are ambushed and Che is wounded and captured. The following day he is murdered by Bolivian forces acting under instructions from Washington. His remains are buried in an unmarked grave along with the bodies of several other guerrilla fighters. **October 8** is designated the Day of the Heroic Guerrilla in Cuba.

1997

Che's remains are finally located in Bolivia and returned to Cuba where they are placed in a memorial at Santa Clara.

map of
the motorcycle diaries

