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In Her Father's Footsteps: an Interview With Che's Daughter, Aleida Guevara



Aleida Guevara.

It was 1967. In La Higuera, a small village in the Vallegrande region of the Santa Cruz Department in Bolivia, there was a man leading a small guerrilla group that had been fighting for months to transform the Bolivian state. He had arrived in Bolivia from Cuba in November 1966 under the pseudonym “Fernando.” Initially, some members of the Bolivian Communist Party supported him, but the support was insufficient. At that time, General René Barrientos, a staunch anti-communist, was Bolivia’s de facto leader following a military coup that ousted President Víctor Paz Estenssoro in 1964. Barrientos was then elected president in a disputed election in 1966. The United States, determined to stop the spread of communism across Latin America, supported Barrientos. The harsh reality of the situation sealed the fate of the revolutionist who had come to Bolivia under the name Fernando. Ernesto “Che” Guevara, as the world knows him, took his last breath there.

On 8 October 1967, Che and his group hid in a deep ravine near La Higuera, known as “El Yuro Ravine,” to avoid capture by the military. However, a battle broke out shortly after. During the firefight, Che was wounded in the leg and captured by Bolivian soldiers.

Afterwards, Che was taken to a small schoolhouse in La Higuera, where he spent the night. The next day, 9 October 1967, Bolivian authorities, with the assistance of CIA agents, decided to execute him. Mario Terán, a Bolivian army sergeant, was assigned as Che’s executioner. Their plan was to shoot him and then claim that Che had died in combat, as executing a prisoner without trial is a war crime. According to reports, Che faced his executioner without fear and said in his final moments, “I know you are here to kill me. Shoot, coward, you are only going to kill a man.” While some accounts suggest that Mario Terán suffered severe mental distress afterwards and committed suicide in 1974, others claim he lived a quiet life until his death around the year 2000.

For years, the location of Che’s remains was a closely guarded state secret. In 1997, after decades of silence, a team of Cuban and Bolivian forensic scientists discovered a mass grave in Vallegrande that contained his remains and those of several comrades. His remains were later brought back to Cuba and buried in a mausoleum in Santa Clara, the city where he won a decisive battle during the Cuban Revolution.

This year marks 57 years since Che was killed. The mahogany plant he planted at Yahala Kele Rubber Estate, later renamed Che Park, in the Moragahahena area of Horana during his visit to Sri Lanka in 1959 has since grown into a towering tree. Che’s admirers honour his memory by tending to the tree every year. As in many countries around the world, some in this country also attempt to co-opt figures like Che to serve the interests of certain social groups. In some cases, this “blind adoration” prevents a critical examination of the deep socio-political ideas that Che sought to convey, leading to subtle distortions of his thoughts.

This special conversation with Aleida Guevara March, Che’s daughter, is significant in this context. The eldest of four children born to Ernesto “Che” Guevara and his second wife, Aleida Guevara is a Cuban physician. She has worked as a doctor in Angola, Ecuador, and Nicaragua, and is currently practising at the William Soler Children’s Hospital in Havana.

I first asked her: Aleida, how did your father’s revolutionary ideals shape your personal values and outlook on life? What specific moments from your childhood reflect his influence on you?

“Unfortunately, I lived with my father for a very short time, and I only have a handful of memories,” she began. Reflecting further on those memories, she added: “But those times were very beautiful. My father woke me up early in the morning. I was always surprised by

how early he rose. He would take me with him to do voluntary work. I remember going with him to work alongside sugarcane workers. Even before entering the plantation, I can still recall how he interacted with those people. I remember how he used to cut sugarcane and give me a piece to eat. They talked about many things. I had a lot of fun at that time.”

“I participated in voluntary services from a young age, but it was my mother who put me in a position to be a working woman in today’s society. Without her, we would not have been able to receive an education like any other Cuban child. Children often lose their fathers, especially a world-famous guerrilla. It is impossible to fill that gap, and many people try to address it from a material point of view. However, my mother stood up like an extraordinary fortress and ensured we had everything that other Cuban children did.”

“We lived in such an environment. We were educated and brought up as ordinary women and men, with our feet on the ground. Today, we have become socially useful citizens because of that deep social understanding and education instilled by our parents,” she stated.

One of the main things that emerge from examining Che’s writings is that he was not only interested in overthrowing governments but also in building a new kind of socialist society. He believed that revolution should create a “new man” (*hombre nuevo*), enriched not by material incentives but by moral values. In his view, socialist citizens are people working for the collective good, guided by deep moral principles of solidarity, self-sacrifice, and revolution. This idea, he emphasised, was in stark contrast to the Soviet model, which relied too heavily on material rewards and failed to cultivate true socialist consciousness.

In this context, Aleida was next asked how, in her view, her father’s legacy has evolved over the decades since his death. She was also asked, “Do you believe that modern interpretations of his life and works are consistent with his original intentions, or have they changed significantly?”

In response, she noted, “Some people try to distort my father’s work and life. They devote their lives to it. But they rarely succeed. Che is a coherent example.”

She further mentioned, “He said what he thought and did what he said. He never asked anyone to do what he couldn’t do. His revolutionary ethics set an example for those around him. Respect for people is very important. Unfortunately, we have not achieved everything we want, and not all his works have been studied in depth.”

“But his enemies could not crush him or make him disappear. He was such a complete person that anyone who learns about him is drawn to him. My father was a boundary breaker.”

“Che is in faraway places and different cultures. We need to study him and master his ideas more. He is still a symbol of an extraordinary life. Our goal is to use his life as a tool to learn and create a more just world for everyone.”

It is well known that as a young medical student, Che took a motorcycle trip across the South American continent with his friend Alberto Granado. In 1952, he travelled with his companion for eight months, visiting various countries, including Argentina, Chile, Peru, and Venezuela, covering more than eight thousand kilometres.

The visit gave him a deeper understanding of the true nature of the social inequalities, exploitation, and poverty afflicting the region. It was in Guatemala that Che began to solidify his Marxist ideology in 1954, which coincided with the overthrow of the progressive government of Jacobo Arbenz in a CIA-backed coup in an operation code-named Operation PBSuccess. Witnessing the violence of imperialist intervention firsthand, Che determined that the only way to bring about real change in Latin America was through armed revolution with socialist consciousness.

Accordingly, Che Guevara played a crucial role in various revolutionary movements throughout Latin America. I asked Aleida, “What do you see as the most notable impact of his efforts in these regions? Are there specific countries or events that exemplify his contribution to the fight for social justice?”

In response, she said, “Che broke boundaries. He wasn’t just in Latin America; he still lives on in Africa, Asia, and Old Europe. Che was guided by ideals. Consider, for example, what is happening in Palestine today.

“My father went to Palestine in 1959. When he arrived, the Palestinian leaders explained the situation. Many people mistakenly think that this is a new problem. In fact, the Palestinians had already been expelled from their lands. They were forced to migrate from their territories. Most of the Gaza Strip was full of people.”

“Dad didn’t want to see this suffering. He wanted to know where people were preparing to resist that abuse and where they were building weapons to support it. Today, the Palestinian people are fighting for the right to have their own land and culture. Che is relevant today. That’s right. Don’t you think so too?”

Decades after Che’s death, we are experiencing a different world. The world is more fragmented than ever before. The Western military alliance, led by NATO, is expanding, via proxies, into Asia, Africa, and Latin America. At a time when nearly nine hundred American military bases are located around the world, many aspiring nations are rallying for an alternative. I next asked her: Given the complex political context in Latin America today,

what are the biggest challenges to the ideals your father presented? How should current and future generations work to achieve his vision of equality and social justice?

In response, she said, “As you mentioned, the political landscape in Latin America is complex, but it’s even more intricate in Asia, the Middle East, and especially Africa. Che’s influence is not limited to one region; as I said before, he transcended borders.”

“New generations should study him more. They should learn how to use his ideas as tools for life. Reading Che fosters unity among social movements seeking a better world. We must never lose respect for the people, for freedom and sovereignty. We must always affirm the necessity of these inviolable principles.”

“Che taught us something else. Anyone who calls themselves a leftist, anyone who aspires to a better world, must have a strong revolutionary ethos. It’s not just about talking or urging people to act; it’s about walking in Che’s footsteps and leading by example. This is especially important today, when many claim that these long-held principles will be lost on future generations.”

“But the real question is: how do we educate them (this younger generation)? How do we instil in them respect for other people and for nature, for cooperation and love? They can help create the changes needed for a fairer world for everyone. How actively involved they will be depending on how we educate the new generations.”

Another important point to note is that Che often emphasised the significance of women in revolutionary movements. I finally asked Aleida: As the daughter of an influential figure like Che, how do you see the role of women in your father’s work and in the broader context of the Latin American Revolution? What lessons can be learned from their contributions and struggles?

In response, she said, “Before Che, the apostle of the Cuban Revolution, José Martí, highlighted the role of women in revolutions. He stated that even women who send their children to the battlefields to fight for freedom and sovereignty should be involved in a true revolution.”

“Martí said something very beautiful: Motherly love for the motherland is not the absurd love of the earth or the grass under our feet. It is the invincible hatred of those who oppress us and the eternal resentment towards those who attack us. My father studied Martí, respected him, admired him, and followed his ideas.”

“There are very beautiful things that are repeated among great men. Respect for women, the right of all women to be considered equal to our comrades, is very important. He always said that a true revolutionary defends their ideas to the last consequence. But a woman defends her

ideals. Not only does she defend a province or a nation; in her configuration, there should be 50% women. They understood that the participation of women in the whole process is essential; the tenderness that comes from a woman is important to fill it with energy. Therefore, I think we have to work a lot more on that side.”

Finally, she said, “There are many parts of the world that are still referred to as so-called first-world societies where women are not respected or allowed to have equal rights to education. The social acceptance we need is not yet established. We need to work on this. A culture that treats women as inferior even to cattle has existed for centuries. It makes it difficult to change the social injustice that we all aspire to. Che’s real struggle was based on this need.”

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