

1968: A Global Perspective

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The Martyr of '68: The CIA, the Special Forces, and the Death of Che Guevara

When students took to the streets of Mexico City and Paris in 1968 and students and workers wrested control of Córdoba from the Argentina military government in January of 1969, the leftist protestors marched and resisted under the banners depicting the image of Ernesto "Che" Guevara. Che had died in October of 1967 in a remote hamlet of Bolivia. But leftists throughout the Western World soon learned of the prominent role of the CIA and US Special Forces in his capture and execution. Therefore, in their struggles with conservative regimes within their own countries, militants equated their national rulers as tools of US imperialism.

This paper tests the perceptions of the protagonists of 1968 and 1969. It traces the origins of the guerrilla revolutionary campaign of Che Guevara in Bolivia and the role that the CIA agents and the Special Forces trainers played in his capture and execution. First of all, the paper will examine the revolutionary theory of Che and its application to Bolivia, a country that had experienced a worker and peasant revolution from 1952 through 1964. It will explain why this experienced guerrilla commander misread the 1964 military coup in Bolivia and the rise of General Rene Barrientos to the presidency in 1966. Research for this paper derives from declassified CIA documents found in the LBJ library, Che's Bolivian diary, and memoirs of the few surviving guerrillas as well as of Bolivian army officers.

The paper will also debunk the decisiveness of US intervention in Bolivia once Che's guerrilla band was revealed. The CIA did indeed send two Cuban American agents to Bolivia and a squad of Special Forces soldiers to train a Bolivian anti-insurgency force. The US government was keen to claim credit for capturing Che and the Cuban American CIA agents, wanting to avenge for the Cuban Revolution, foolishly stayed within camera range of Che's body for several days. It was sufficient for anti-American publications throughout the world to exaggerate the role the US government in Che's death. The truth was quite different. Che had misread the Bolivia revolution, the elections of 1966, and the prospects of an anti-imperialist campaign in Bolivia. Even before the US-trained Bolivian rangers entered the battle, Che's band had deteriorated greatly. After nearly one year in the field, he had been unsuccessful in recruiting even one Bolivian peasant to his cause. President Barrientos ultimately ordered Che's execution against US advice.

Nonetheless, the death of Che Guevara inspired (though it may not have caused) waves of anti-imperialist rebellions throughout the Western World – even within the United States itself.