

1968: A Global Perspective

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Divided Vanguard: Che Guevara, Venezuela, and the Dialectic of Revolutionary Communism, 1966-1968

In November 1966 Che Guevara arrived in Bolivia to begin a guerrilla war and spark a wave of revolution throughout Latin America. For the first time in several years he was on the continent physically, yet his ideological presence had endured for nearly a decade. After defeating Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista in January 1959, Guevara and Fidel Castro called on Latin American revolutionaries to follow their example. Employing the foco strategy, a small band of dedicated fighters could defeat a conventional army and bring true democracy to a given nation. Engaged in a revolutionary movement that bore many similarities to that of Cuba, Venezuelan leftists eagerly embraced Guevara's ideas. Indeed, a Venezuelan cadre trained in Cuba and, in June 1966, returned to Venezuela as the vanguard for Guevara's decisive hemispheric campaign. The political environment in Latin America had changed much since 1959, however, and by 1968 Guevara himself was dead and many of his Venezuelan supporters had rejected his ideology as obsolete and unsuited to local conditions. This study explores Guevara's thought—as a response to the Russian and Chinese revolutions and as a prescription for revolution in Latin America—in relation to the 1960s guerrilla war in Venezuela. I argue that Guevara's approach to revolution failed by 1968 because it did not adapt to the ongoing dialectic among revolutionary communists and to the increasingly sophisticated response of counterrevolutionary actors.