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The Truth About Che Guevara

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Che Guevara has the most effective public relations department on earth. The Argentine guerrilla and modern Cuba’s co-founding father has been fashioned into a hipster icon, a counter-cultural hero, an anti-establishment rebel, and a champion of the poor. As James Callaghan once put it, “A lie can be halfway round the world before the truth has got its boots on.”

The truth about Che now has its boots on. He helped free Cubans from the repressive Batista regime, only to enslave them in a totalitarian police state worse than the last. He was Fidel Castro’s chief executioner, a mass-murderer who in theory could have commanded any number of Latin American death squads, from Peru’s [Shining Path](#)^[1] on the political left to Guatemala’s [White Hand](#)^[2] on the right. “Just as Jacobin Paris had Louis Antoine de Saint-Just,” wrote French historian [Pascal Fontaine](#)^[3], “revolutionary Havana had Che Guevara, a Latin American version of Nechaev, the nineteenth century nihilist terrorist who inspired

Dostoevsky's *The Devils*^[4]. As Guevara wrote to a friend in 1957, 'My ideological training means that I am one of those people who believe that the solution to the world's problems is to be found behind the Iron Curtain.'...He was a great admirer of the Cultural Revolution [in China]. According to Regis Debray, 'It was he and not Fidel who in 1960 invented Cuba's first corrective work camp,' or what the Americans would call a slave labor camp and the Russians called the gulag."



He was killed in Bolivia by the army in 1967 when he tried to overthrow yet another government and replace it with a communist state.

I saw only a handful of posters of Fidel Castro in Cuba and none whatsoever of his younger brother, Raul, who is now Cuba's president, but I saw hundreds of portraits of Che, as *if he*, rather than one of the Castros, were the acting dictator today. The cult of personality revolves entirely around the dead guy. It's convenient and clever. He can't do anything new to discredit himself and it gives the Castro family a false air of modesty.

My tour of the Cuban countryside took me to Che's final resting place in a mausoleum behind an imposing monument on the outskirts of Santa Clara. Before I stepped off the bus I vowed to myself that I wouldn't argue with a single person, Cuban or foreign, at the memorial—not so much out of respect for the dead, but because I didn't want to be "that guy." Better to just zip it for an hour and tell the

truth about Che later in writing.

Not sixty seconds after I swore to keep quiet, an American tourist sitting next to me said something so naïve that I almost bled in my mouth. “It’s amazing, isn’t it? We don’t have anyone in American history who is loved like the Cubans love Che.” Cuba is a police state and Che was its co-founder. Cubans “love” him the same way Romanians “loved” Nicolae Ceausescu and East Germans “loved” Berlin Wall architect Erich Honecker.



You know what happens to Cubans who display open hatred of Che?
They get arrested.

When he was still alive, they were executed or herded into slave-labor camps. So yeah, everyone “loves” him. It’s required by law. Woe to those who disobey State Security.

The human spirit is a powerful force, though, and some Cubans can’t take it. A million and a half fled to the United States to escape the instruments of Che Guevara’s repression, many across the Florida Straits where the odds of survival are no better than two out of three. Others resisted at home, especially during the 1960s, the decade of global rebellion.

“They corrupt the morals of young girls!” Castro shouted^[5] against rebellious youth at the time, “*and destroy posters of Che!* What do they think? That this is a bourgeois liberal regime? NO! There is nothing liberal in us! We are collectivists! We are communists! There will be no Prague Spring here!”

Angel Ciutat advised Che about the construction of Cuba's secret police, which he learned from the most sinister secret police chief of all—Lavrenty Beria, head of Josef Stalin's NKVD. Nearly all Che's victims were Cuban. Would Americans love a foreign implant who murdered thousands, forced thousands more into slavery, and drove more than a million to exile?
Of course not.



The memorial is in a square the size of a shopping mall. There are no trees or shade. It's an enormous heat trap that absorbs and reflects back the blazing tropical sunshine. An imposing statue of Che—complete with a cast on his broken left arm—is placed atop a gigantic pedestal. Standing below, it's as if he's a god. The steps leading up to it are huge. I felt tiny and low by comparison. Thomas Jefferson's memorial this isn't. The whole scene intimidates by design. Up near the front is a billboard featuring the smiling face of the now-dead Hugo Chavez, Venezuela's wannabe communist-dictator, introduced to Cubans as "our best friend." At the far end of the square is a billboard with a quote by Fidel Castro: "I want you to be like Che."



I have to ask: Does Fidel want Cubans to be like the real Che or the fake Che?

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A whole shelf of books have been written about Che Guevara. Most are hagiographic.

Humberto Fontova's *Exposing the Real Che Guevara*^[5] is an exception. It's relentlessly critical, not only of the killer himself, but of his fans. He spends hundreds of pages debunking Castro's state mythology with footnoted sources and interviews with eye-witnesses, but Che's own words are enough to condemn him.

"A revolutionary must become a cold killing machine motivated by pure hate."

"We will bring the war to the imperialist enemies' very home, to his places of work and recreation. We must never give him a minute of peace or tranquility. This is a

total war to the death.”

“If the nuclear missiles had remained, we would have used them against the very heart of America, including New York City...We will march the path of victory even if it costs millions of atomic victims...We must keep our hatred alive and fan it to paroxysm.”

Here’s one more from Fontaine in France: “In his will, the graduate of the school of terror praised the ‘extremely useful hatred that turns men into effective, violent, merciless, and cold killing machines.’ He was dogmatic, cold, and intolerant, and there was almost nothing in him of the traditionally open and warm Cuban temperament.”

I could go on (and Fontova does for quite a long time) but you get the idea. Che’s comrades and associates were equally ruthless. Venezuelan-born Ilich Ramírez Sánchez, also known as Carlos the Jackal, was trained in one of Che’s guerrilla camps outside Havana. He emerged from his studies a monster and became the most wanted terrorist on earth. “Bin Laden has followed a trail I myself blazed,” he said following Al Qaeda’s assault on New York and Washington. “I followed news of the September 11 attacks on the United States nonstop from the beginning. I can’t describe that wonderful feeling of relief.”

He is serving a life sentence in the French penal system for murder.

And yet anti-establishment young people all over the world have Che’s face on their walls and their T-shirts. Most of them don’t know anything real about the man they admire. They have no idea he was one of the most violently illiberal establishment figures in the Western Hemisphere’s history. They admire the image, which is and always has been a fraud.

Fontova quotes a Cuban exile who goes by the moniker Charlie Bravo who says Che’s fans in the West need a kick in the ass by reality. “I’d loved to have seen those Sorbonne and Berkeley and Berlin student protesters with their ‘groovy’ Che posters try their ‘anti-authority’ grandstanding in Cuba at the time. I’d love to have seen Che and his goons get their hands on them. They’d have gotten a quick lesson about the ‘fascism’ they were constantly complaining about—and firsthand. They would have quickly found themselves sweating and gasping from forced labor in Castros and Che’s concentration camps, or jabbed in the butt by ‘groovy’ bayonets when they dared slow down and perhaps getting their teeth shattered by a ‘groovy’ machine-gun butt if they adopted the same attitude in front of Che’s militia as they adopted in front of those campus cops.”

I’m relying heavily on Fontova here because most of what has been written about Che is absolute horseshit. I spoke to him recently and asked him what’s up with that.

“Is your book on Che the only one that exposes him? I couldn’t find any others.”

“Yes, he said. “It’s the only book of that sort. Jon Lee Anderson’s book^[6] is considered the bible on Che, but it was written in cooperation with the Castro regime while Anderson was living in Cuba. When William Shirer wrote The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich^[7], he didn’t rely on Nazis for the information in his book, even though a lot of them were still around in 1957. He relied primarily on enemies and victims of the Nazis for his information. When Robert Conquest wrote The Great Terror^[8] about Stalinism, he didn’t rely on Nikita Khrushchev or any other Soviet communists. He relied on Russian and Ukrainian exiles. That’s the normal manner of writing books about totalitarian regimes. But when it comes to Cuba for some insane reason, you’re supposed to collaborate with the totalitarian regime to be considered scholarly.”

“How did that happen?” I said.

“I devoted my latest book^[9] to this issue. It’s about the mainstream media and Fidel Castro. Here is a quote from Fidel Castro in 1955 when he was in prison in Cuba. He said, ‘Propaganda is vital—the heart of our struggle. We can never abandon propaganda...Use a lot of sleight of hand and smiles with everybody. We must follow the same tactic we employed in our trial; defend our points of view without raising hackles. There will be plenty of time later to crush all the cockroaches.’

“And here’s Che Guevara from his own diaries in 1958. He said, ‘Much more valuable than rural recruits for our guerrilla force were American media recruits to export our propaganda.’ Castro and Guevara cultivated and schmoozed the foreign media. They made it a goal from day one. They needed to export their propaganda and make it not seem like propaganda.”

It worked too. Maybe because Cuban communism was seen, rightly or wrongly, as less severe than the Soviet version. Perhaps it’s because Che died at a young age, so the Cuban regime’s official state narrative was frozen in amber. Had he lived longer and committed yet more atrocities, perhaps the truth about him would be more obvious and well-known.

There’s no denying Che’s charisma, at least in his photographs. Not even a propaganda genius like Castro could convince young Europeans and Americans to lionize the likes of Pol Pot, Leonid Brezhnev, or Castro’s own brother Raul.

Whatever the reason for the success of their ludicrous narrative, it drives Cuban exiles in the West over the edge when they see their tormentor lionized by naifs. “If Cuban Americans strike you as too passionate, over the top, even a little crazy, there is a reason,” Fontova wrote in his Introduction. “Practically every day, we turn on our televisions or go out to the street only to see the image of the very man who trained the secret police to murder our relatives—thousands of men, women, and boys. This man committed many of these murders with his own

hands. And yet we see him celebrated everywhere as the quintessence of humanity, progress, and compassion.”

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Behind Che’s statue in Santa Clara is a factually-challenged museum celebrating his image. He’s portrayed as a doctor (though he had no medical degree), a kind soul who cared for the poor and the oppressed, and a brave guerrilla leader who helped liberate a long-suffering people from an oppressive tyrant. I’d think he was awesome if those things were true, or if I knew nothing about him except what I learned there.

That’s what Cubans are taught about him in school. Those who adore him are adoring a lie just like Westerners who emblazon his face on their t-shirts.

Most interesting about the museum is what's not there. I found no mention whatsoever that Che was Fidel’s chief executioner, nor any reference to his construction of slave labor camps. The Cuban regime knows that the real Che was a despicable human being and knows that civilized people find villains like him appalling. Otherwise, those salient facts about his life and “career” would have been included. The truth is a dirty secret that the regime wants to keep buried. There’d be no point in lying by omission if the truth about Che made him look like a hero.

Older Cubans—especially those who fled to the United States—know the real story, of course, but younger Cubans might not. I have no idea, really, what they think or know about him. I asked a handful and they were cagey about it. Almost everyone I met complained about the government, but not about Fidel personally, and especially not about Che.

One of the guides at the museum said something strange. “He invented a new kind of holiday,” she said. “He sacrificed everything for Cuba, so to honor him once a week we do extra work at our jobs for no pay.”

Extra work for no pay in Cuba? Cubans are hardly paid anyway. Most of them work for the state and earn a maximum wage of twenty dollars a month. Cuba’s maximum wage is less than one percent of America’s minimum wage. So they’re already working for free. What difference does a couple more hours make?

“It’s part of his philosophy of the New Man^[10],” she added.

Che’s selfless and collectivist New Man is a utopian fantasy. Humans will only work long and hard hours for no pay if they’re forced—hence Cuba’s repressive political system.

Che’s body was returned from Bolivia in 1997. He is entombed in a mausoleum behind the memorial.

“You can go inside but you can't talk,” a guide warned me. “It’s about respect. There are microphones inside and they are listening. You’ll be in big trouble if you

say anything.”

I went inside feeling slightly nervous about the warning to keep quiet. Inside is peaceful and candlelit. It looks and feels like a shrine. Photography is strictly forbidden. The walls are made of stone. They're soundproof. I heard no noise whatsoever from outside. The air is cool and dry. The ambience itself inspires silence. I'd feel like an oaf if I opened my mouth.

A policewoman sat on a chair in the back. She looked severe, as if she'd punch me if I misbehaved.

She stood up and marched toward me and belted out a shattering sound.

“Aqui!” she said, Here.

What? *She's talking? Why is she talking in here?*

She pointed at the wall in the center of the room where Che is entombed. I was taking in the whole scene, but she wanted me to look there and not anywhere else, as if I were insulting Che's legacy by paying attention to anything else.

I nodded a silent thanks, looked at Che's name carved into stone, and found it hard to believe that the remains of such an infamous person was mere inches in front of me.

I didn't stay long. The policewoman made me uncomfortable, especially for yelling at me after I was told to shut up. So I left and returned to the hot and humid world outside that almost never cools off during the day.



Down the road a ways from the memorial is a little park built around a derailed train. During the revolution, Che and his men supposedly forced it off the tracks

by placing a bulldozer in its path. Across the street from the park is a large painted sign on a wall that says, “Our Socialism is Irrevocable!”

Who are they trying to convince? Tourists? The locals? Capitalist running dogs like myself?

All of the above, more likely than not. Either way, the regime’s defensiveness shows. You don’t see the governments of the United States, Canada, Belgium, or Switzerland shouting “Our Democracy is Irrevocable!” for the rather obvious reason that not even crazy people think it’s revocable.



La Cabaña is the old Spanish military fortress above the east side of Havana’s harbor that Che turned into a prison. Fontova calls it the Caribbean Lubyanka. Thousands of men and boys were executed against its walls with firing squads. “To send men to the firing squad, judicial proof is unnecessary,” Che famously said. “These procedures are an archaic bourgeois detail.”

Contrary to conventional firing squads, where all rifles but one are loaded with blanks, Che ensured every executioner in the squad fired live ammunition.

“As soon as [Castro and Guevara] seized power,” writes Fontaine^[3], “they began to conduct mass executions inside the two main prisons, La Cabaña and Santa Clara...In the words of Jeannine Verdes-Laroux, ‘The form of the trials, and the procedures by which they were conducted, were highly significant. The totalitarian nature of the regime was inscribed there from the very beginning.’”

The body count is hard to pin down with accuracy, but Che himself admitted to ordering thousands of executions at La Cabaña during the first year alone. Those

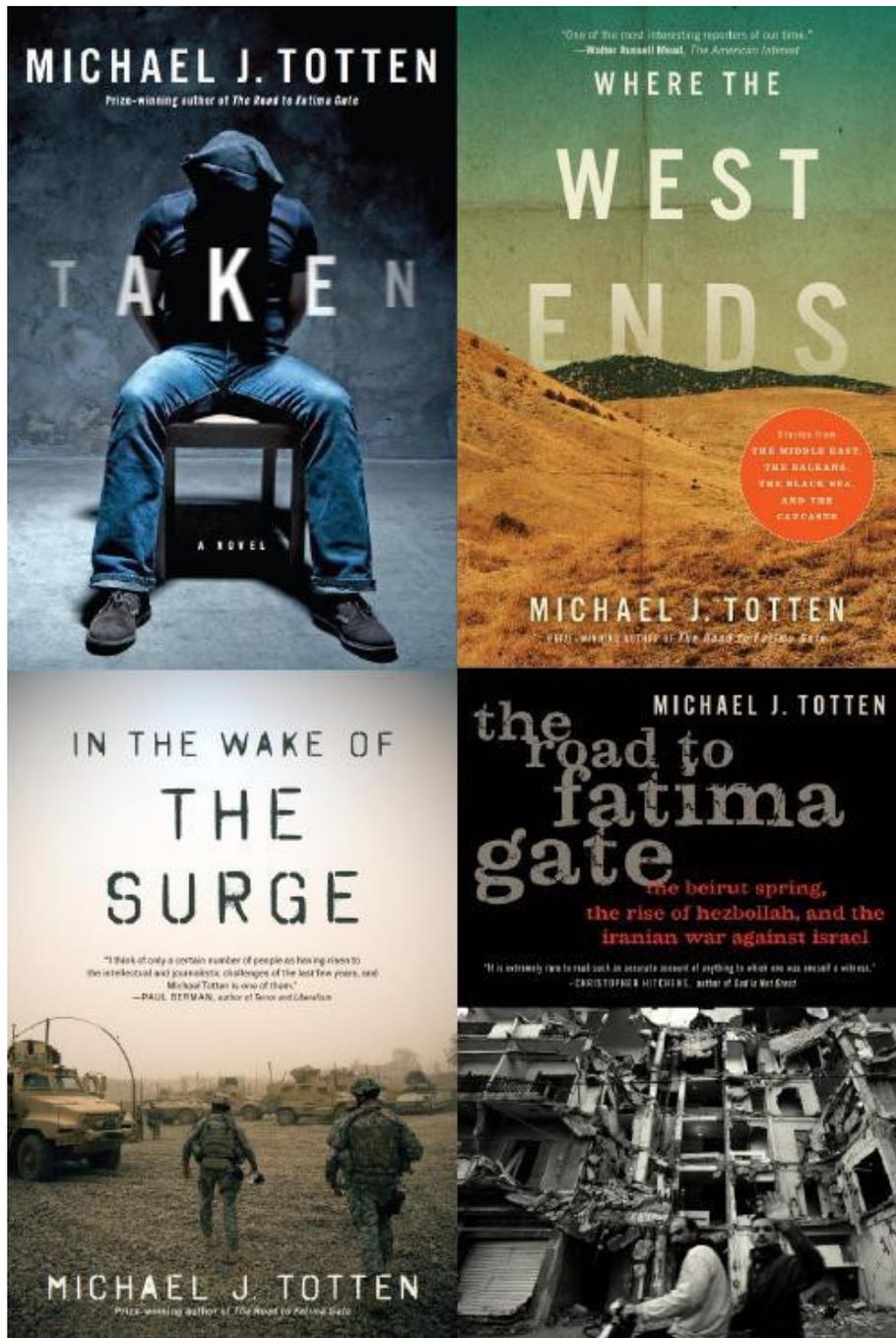
them mercilessly.”

And he writes about the prison system’s crushing of his colleague in letters Heberto Padilla. “[He] was locked up in a cell, intimidated, and beaten. Thirty days later he emerged from that cell a human wreck. The night [he] made his confession was unforgettable. That vital man, who had written beautiful poetry, apologized for everything he had done, his entire previous work, throwing the blame upon himself, branding himself a despicable coward and traitor. He said that during his detention at State Security he had come to understand the beauty of the Revolution... Padilla not only retracted all he had said in his previous work but publicly denounced his friends and even his wife.”

Today La Cabaña is a tourist attraction. You can see the skyline of restored Old Havana across the harbor. The fort itself is well-preserved and aesthetically pleasing. Yet it lies by omission just like the museum at Che’s memorial.

I saw and heard no mention there about the thousands of people the regime killed even though so many were killed on one of its walls. I couldn’t even figure out which wall. It’s unmarked. The blood and gore are long gone.

One day—perhaps not soon, but someday—that is going to change. The myth of the kind and benevolent and compassionate Che will eventually slide into oblivion because a democratic government in Havana will not lie, by either omission or commission, about the man who co-founded Cuba’s final dictatorship. When that day arrives, tourists who visit will finally learn something real.



[13]

OG Image:



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[5] http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1595230521/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1595230521&linkCode=as2&tag=michajtottesm-20

[6] http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/080214411X/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=080214411X&linkCode=as2&tag=michajtottesm-20

[7] http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1451651686/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1451651686&linkCode=as2&tag=michajtottesm-20

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[9] http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1451651686/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1451651686&linkCode=as2&tag=michajtottesm-20

[10] http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/080214411X/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=080214411X&linkCode=as2&tag=michajtottesm-20

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[10] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Soviet_man

[11] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=55O18SYG9nQ>

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