

Book Review

El diario del Che en Bolivia

by Ernesto Che Guevara. Adys Cupull and Froilan Gonzalez, eds. Havana, Cuba: Editora Política, 2006. Price N/A, paper. ISBN 959-01-0714-1. Pages 1–428.

*Reviewed by Gabrielle Etcheverry¹
Carleton University*

The diary of Che in Bolivia was written by Ernesto “Che” Guevara during his 1966–67 revolutionary campaign in that country. Although it is most likely that Guevara did not intend for his diary to be widely read, it was soon published and circulated in the United States and Cuba after its discovery following his death. This recent Spanish-language edition of the Bolivian diary provides new materials, such as photos, maps and paratexts as a means to further understand the conditions Che encountered, thus expanding on the information available in previous editions. It is also dedicated by Fidel Castro to graduating university students in Cuba with the hope that this “moving book” will aid in their continuing formation as “citizens inspired by Che’s example” (my translation), indicating that Che’s diary has become a crucial text inside and outside of that country.

Being the first press to publish the complete diary in any language in 1987² (the first editions published in Cuba and the United States in 1968 lacked thirteen entries), Editora Política has here provided additional information such as a farewell letter from Che to Fidel in which he renounces his political posts in Cuba to undertake the mission in Bolivia (p.xxix). Also provided are photos of the fake Uruguayan passport that Che used to enter Bolivia disguised as Adolfo Mena González, fake immunization records, and his letters of reference from Bolivian officials introducing him as a special envoy from the Organization of American States in Bolivia to research social and economic relations in the countryside (p.xxxi–xxxvi). Maps of the routes taken by Che from La Paz to Lagunillas and Ñacahuasú, and the shorter routes he and the other *guerrilleros* took during the time-span recorded in the diary have

- 1 Gabrielle Etcheverry is a PhD candidate at the Department of Canadian Studies, Carleton University.
- 2 Walters, Mary-Alice, ed. 1994. “Introduction” in *The Bolivarian Diary of Ernesto Che Guevara by Ernesto Che Guevara*. New York: Pathfinder. p.44

also been added. Photos of local roads, scenery, flora and fauna, such as tapirs, llamas, turkeys, and the kinds of fish Che describes catching for dinner in one of his entries are included throughout along with photos of some of the key towns and surrounding areas his group would have crossed on their journey.

Like other editions of the diary, the book begins with Fidel Castro's "Una introducción necesaria" [A necessary introduction], here titled "Nota al lector" [Note to the reader], which provides a context for the political and military challenges faced by Che and his cadre in the period covered by the diary (November 7, 1966 to October 7, 1967). Some of this context includes difficulties Guevara had with "pseudo revolutionary" (p.xvii) leaders such as Mario Monje Molina of the Communist Party of Bolivia (PCB) and Che's vision of the revolution in Bolivia extending to the rest of Latin America (p.xviii). According to Castro, he saw the greater project of international socialism spreading from Latin America to Africa, South East Asia and even the United States (p.xix) – information largely confirmed in Che's farewell letter. The editors have also included a transcript of the speech Fidel gave at Guevara's wake, here titled "Un modelo de revolucionario" [A model revolutionary] after the final entry in the diary. The diary entries have been extended by inserting text from Castro's introduction in the dates that Che was captured by the Bolivian military and then executed (October 7 to 9). While this helps mark the days between these two events, the addition of this text seems out of place as "entries" in a personal diary.

Guevara's generally short notes provide small glimpses of the physical and psychological conditions he and the other forty or so rotating *guerrilleros* encountered. The main activity in the early days included making camp and digging tunnels for hiding food and "compromising" materials while they waited for more of his trusted reinforcements to arrive from Cuba. As more of his men arrived and Bolivian nationals began to join the group, Che also noted which members of the group seemed more tired, lackluster, committed or efficient; which locals could be trusted and which could not, as well as how the men perceived (and interacted with) each other. Guevara also noted the physical discomfort they experienced, such as the numbers and types of insect bites they suffered, the scarcity of food and water in the final days of their campaign, and his own failing health. As can be imagined, some of the more riveting diary entries describe details of their battles with the Bolivian military in the deep countryside and the tense moments between ambushes.

Some of the more interesting moments Guevara recorded were how the group coalesced and changed throughout the eleven months covered in the diary. This edition provides the reader with some useful background information such as photos and brief biographical sketches (p.405–425) of many of the people who worked with him in his last campaign, including Juan Vitalio Acuña Núñez (Joaquin) from Cuba, Che's second in command, and Guido Alvaro Peredo Leigue (Inti), a Bolivian *guerrillero* trained in Cuba and member of the PCB who stayed with Che after Monje withdrew his support. Of the forty people from Cuba, Bolivia and Peru listed at the end of the book, only three survived, lending a dose of sobriety to the call of *¡Hasta la victoria, siempre!*

Some of the photos provided in this edition may seem banal at first glance, particularly for readers who may already be familiar with the Bolivian countryside. Nevertheless, it is these commonplace details that help ground the reader in the real drama recounted in his daily entries – the day-to-day survival in difficult conditions and the (sometimes flagging) will and discipline required by all the members of his group. The photos and biographical information on the fighters who joined him are a particularly welcome addition to the diary after so many years. Whether one reads the diary as a manual for guerrilla subterfuge and warfare, as a historical document or a testament to the final days of a (glorious or misbegotten) revolutionary struggle, these everyday details help readers to distinguish the man from the myth and provide a valuable addition to what we already know of his final days.