

# Ernesto “Che” Guevara de la Serna: Argentinian Marxist Revolutionary

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While best known as a Marxist revolutionary and countercultural figure, Ernesto “Che” Guevara de la Serna was trained as a physician. He was born in Rosario, Argentina, on June 14, 1928, the oldest of five children. As a youth, despite troublesome asthma, Guevara was an excellent athlete. He was also a strong chess player and read widely, particularly poetry, philosophy, and the work of Latin American intellectuals.

In 1948, Guevara entered the University of Buenos Aires to study medicine, graduating in 1953. During his medical studies, Guevara took 2 long motorcycle journeys throughout South America — during the second trip, he was accompanied by a friend and fellow student, Alberto Granado Jiménez, who years later would found the University of Santiago Faculty of Medicine in Cuba. Guevara later described the critical influence of these journeys on his philosophy in a book, *The Motorcycle Diaries*. During his motorcycle trips, Guevara was exposed to extreme poverty and injustice, and he began to form ideas about social liberation as well as a strongly negative view of capitalism.

In late 1953, Guevara arrived in Guatemala where a democratically elected President, Jacobo Árbenz Guzmán, had begun a program of land reform that favored peasant farmers. Árbenz’s reforms irritated the United Fruit Company, an American firm that owned large tracts of land in Guatemala and other countries in Central and South America. US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) director Allen Dulles and his brother John were major United Fruit Company stockholders. In 1954, after Árbenz accepted a weapon shipment from Communist Czechoslovakia, he was overthrown in a CIA-orchestrated coup. Árbenz fled to Mexico City and urged his foreign supporters, including Guevara, to leave Guatemala.

The Guatemalan experience cemented Guevara’s view of the US as a corrupt imperialist power willing to defend private economic

interests with force. It was also during this time that Guevara acquired his nickname “Che”, because of his frequent use of the friendly Argentinian slang term “che” (roughly equivalent to the English language “bro” or “pal”), which sounded peculiar to Spanish speakers from other regions.

Guevara arrived in Mexico City in early September 1954, and worked in the allergy section of a general hospital. He considered a career as a doctor treating poor people in Africa. In September 1955, he married Peruvian economist Hilda Gadea after learning she was carrying his child. In the same year, Guevara met Cuban exile Raúl Castro, who introduced Guevara to his older brother Fidel, who was planning to overthrow the corrupt government of Fulgencio Batista in Havana. Guevara decided that Castro’s cause was one worth fighting for, and he began to train with the Cuban revolutionaries in Mexico. Although he had intended to work as a combat medic, his skills as a guerilla warrior were quickly recognized. Shortly after departing Mexico for Cuba in November 1956 and beginning an insurgency in the Sierra Madre mountains, Castro named Guevara his second-in-command.

During the years of guerilla warfare in Cuba, Guevara developed a reputation for both intelligence and brutality, including summary executions of deserters. In February 1958, Guevara helped form an underground radio station, *Radio Rebelde* (Rebel Radio), which spread the revolutionaries’ message to the whole island. After Batista fled Havana in January 1959 and went into exile overseas, Guevara was put in charge of exacting “revolutionary justice” on Batista supporters, which earned him lasting animosity from the Cuban expatriate community. Guevara married a fellow revolutionary, Aleida March, in 1959 after divorcing his first wife; together they had 4 children.

Castro put Guevara in charge of the Cuban economy and of large-scale national literacy and public health programs, and Guevara also played

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a leadership role in military training. He traveled widely internationally and forged trade partnerships with Soviet Bloc states, but he quickly grew distrustful of the Soviet Union, finding the Soviets insufficiently faithful to Marxist principles. A December 1964 visit to the United Nations provided an opportunity for Guevara to deliver speeches criticizing both South African apartheid policies and US treatment of African-Americans.

In early 1965, Guevara traveled to the Congo, hoping to foment a Marxist rebellion there against the dictator Mobutu Sese Seko, but he left after 7 months, sick with dysentery and frustrated by infighting among Congolese rebels. Clandestine CIA monitoring of the rebels' communications contributed to thwarting Guevara's efforts. In 1967, Guevara went to Bolivia and attempted to catalyze a revolution there, but was captured by Bolivian Special Forces and executed on October 9<sup>th</sup>. Castro declared 3

days of public mourning in Cuba and Guevara became a national hero. His body was brought back to Cuba in 1997.

In 1960, photographer Alberto Korda captured an iconic image of Guevara in a beret that has been named "*Guerillero Heroica*". Later use of a monochrome version of this image on T-shirts and other memorabilia ironically fed the capitalist system that Guevara campaigned against.

Five decades after his death, Guevara remains a polarizing and contradictory figure. He has been commemorated philatelically dozens of times by many countries, especially Cuba. One example is Scott #5178 (2010).

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