

A overview che guevara history essay



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The principal subject of historical debate surrounding Che Guevara is whether or not he succeeded as a revolutionary. The debate can become quite implausible as some regard him as a folk hero of mythical proportions. There is a sense of irony in that Guevara has become worldwide fascination as a commercial product, although Guevara's motive for the revolutionary uprising was to conquer capitalism. This thesis will argue the ways in which Guevara's legacy has been received and interpreted (listed below), as well as identifying the origins of his profound popularity.

Description of Preliminary Research and Research Intentions:

Main areas or issues you plan to discuss in your essay

The overall focus is the interpretation of Che Guevara and his legacy over time. With this, the main topics of the debate are:

The life of Che Guevara was one of controversy and thereby one must place emphasis into questioning the significance he holds in the pantheon of international revolutionary heroes and ideals. Herewith, the historian must evaluate Guevara's success from a political/empiricist perspective.

The complete commitment to the revolutionary struggle to create a “ new man” and a just/social order that continues to inspire those who struggle against social injustice. With this, one must investigate how these ideals impact on the post-Guevara population of modern-day society. To do this the historian must evaluate Guevara’s success from a social perspective.

Guevara has become a popular symbol while his image is too often dissociated from the legend that built it. With this, one must evaluate how and why his “ image” has become a dominant face of contemporary popular culture. In relation to this debate, Guevara has ironically become an important image for money-wielding capitalists. Therefore, the historian must evaluate Guevara’s success from a determinist/economic perspective.

Project Synopsis

The thesis explores specifically whether or not Che Guevara succeeded as a political revolutionary and a powerful icon in contemporary popular culture after his death. Guevara’s life provides a significant historical debate as Guevara has often been criticised as a murderer, a hypocrite and a failure. His attempt to unite several Latin-American nations under a communist rule was unsuccessful, although he is often regarded as a hero to many of the inhabitants of these countries.

The precise thesis question to be focused on is “ Evaluate the changing views on Ernesto “ Che” Guevara’s success and legacy following his death in 1967 to the present day”. This question was developed as an investigation into how and why Guevara obtained an iconic status in society, and whether or not he is regarded as being a success or a failure. Originally, this question

focused only on Guevara's failed attempt of uniting Latin-American nations and placed an inquiry into why Guevara became so popular. Through thorough research and academic critique, it was discovered that there were more sophisticated elements to the thesis question.

The life of Che Guevara was one of controversy and thereby one must place emphasis into questioning the significance he holds in the pantheon of international revolutionary heroes and ideals. Guevara made a complete commitment to the revolutionary struggle to create a "new man" and a just/social order that continues to inspire those who struggle against social injustice. Herewith, one must investigate how these ideals impact on the post-Guevara population of modern-day society. Guevara has also become a popular symbol while his image is too often dissociated from the legend that built it. With this, one must evaluate how and why his "image" has become a dominant face of contemporary popular culture, as well as the face of marketisation.

Different historians have produced varying answers to the specific question. In the thesis, the strength of these claims is explored in an attempt to resolve the issue of whether Guevara succeeded or not, but the sources themselves - their motivation, influences and perspective - are also explored to ensure that the different historical perspectives are not simply described, but evaluated. This focus question is resultantly a mix of history and historiography.

Project Essay

Ernesto ' Che' Guevara remains a potent iconic presence in society, with his life the subject of new biographies, his visage on T-shirts, and his highly-regarded influence in the political spectrum. The Argentinean-born guerilla leader who helped Fidel Castro seize power in Cuba in 1959 remains one of the few unsullied heroes available to the political left. His thoughts (as evidenced in his book, " Guerilla Warfare") on revolutionary strategy, bureaucracy, education, economics, the role of the party, internationalism, attitude to work and democratic centralism have been regarded as the force behind the Latin-American Revolutions. Guevara had an indomitable belief in the worth of education and was self-taught in economics and Marxism. Marx's concept that " it is not enough to interpret the world, it must be transformed" was at the heart of Guevara's life. Guevara strongly believed that key analytical concepts must be adapted and modified by practice.

Guevara felt that the struggle against capitalism and the construction of a new socialist society required a new type of human being who would be willing to make personal sacrifices for the well-being of others. Historian Richard Harris states, " His life as a revolutionary was a success as evidenced by the continuing significance he holds in the pantheon of international revolutionary heroes and ideals. The example he set of complete commitment to the revolutionary struggle to create a ' new man', freed from his alienation, educated and ready to struggle every day for his liberty and a just social/international order continues to inspire those who struggle against social injustice and oppression and seek to create a new social order based on the ideals of socialism. In this context, Che has in

death succeeded more than he ever could have imagined[1].” Historian Siles del Valle argues rather convincingly that Guevara’s views on the “ new man” motivated him, his comrades and the young Bolivian revolutionaries who followed in their footsteps a few years later to sacrifice their lives for a new society and a new kind of human being.

Many of the adherents of this theology of the “ new man” established close links with popular revolutionary movements throughout the region. In Bolivia, after the failure of Guerilla’s guerilla movement, and in other countries such as Chile, Brazil and Peru, the most progressive sectors of the church, influenced by the ideals of liberation theology, associated themselves with Marxist and neo-Marxist revolutionary movements. In Bolivia, this tendency resulted in the participation of certain younger members of the Christian Democratic Party in a revolutionary guerilla movement that attempted to establish a base of operations in 1970 around the mining town of Teoponte, north of the capital of La Paz[2].

Although the idea of guerilla warfare was no longer accepted as a viable form of resistance to the military regime at the time, important elements within the Bolivian people began to idealize and even venerate the guerillas. Historian Siles de Valle illustrates the importance of how Guevara’s death, his concept of the “ new man”, the ideals of liberation theology, and the political movements inspired by Guevara’s example have influenced Bolivian popular literature and politics right up to the present[3].

This influence is evident in that the first indigenous president of Bolivia, Evo Morales, is said to be re-launching Guevara’s project of a peasants’

revolution in the country. Morales stated that he admires Guevara because, “ he fought for equality and for justice. He did not just care for ordinary people; he made their struggle his own.[4]” The Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Western Hemisphere affairs, Roger Pardo-Maurer IV, states, “ You have a revolution going on in Bolivia, a revolution that potentially could have consequences as far-reaching as the Cuban revolution of 1959. What is going on in Bolivia today could have repercussions in Latin America and elsewhere that you could be dealing with for the rest of your lives. Che Guevara sought to ignite a war based on igniting a peasant revolution... This project is back[5]”. Herewith, Evo Morales could become the country’s first authentically politically leftist president.

In contrast, Historian Jay Mallin provides the argument that Guevara’s influence was ineffective in Bolivia. He states that, “ charisma is never enough when it comes to leftist movements. The fate of Che Guevara, who failed to foment a Latin American revolution and left no coherent societal model behind for his followers, should have taught us that already.[6]” Mallin also believes that Guevara had no purpose to be in Bolivia. Mallin affirms that, “ the peasants displayed little or no interest in aiding him [Guevara][7]. During the 1950s, Bolivia had undertaken agrarian reform, and most of the peasants now owned their own land. A high-ranking Bolivian official commented: “ What could Che offer them? Cabinet posts?” Mallin’s comment indicates that although Guevara was attempting to eradicate the alienation of the individuals on behalf of the population, the peasant majority perceived him as worthless as they had already been benefiting from the capitalist’s agrarian reform schemes.

Mallin considers Guevara to be a failure due to the fact that he was a leading theoretician and advocate of guerilla warfare, but he failed in an attempt to apply his own doctrines[8]. Since Castro came to power in 1959, he and Guevara had launched or encouraged more than a dozen guerilla operations throughout Latin America. Not one of these has succeeded in overthrowing a government; several have been wiped out completely; and some still splutter along[9].

Although much criticism of Guevara and his legacy emanates from the political center and right, there has also been criticism from other political groups such as anarchists and civil libertarians, Bolivian officials and right-wing conservatives, some of whom considered Guevara an authoritarian, anti-working-class Stalinist, whose goal was the creation of a more bureaucratic state-Stalinist regime.

Mallin's irrefutable argument is that Guevara was a man of considerable capabilities, but he chose to employ these talents in pursuit of violence as a means to a political end[10]. A doctor by profession, Guevara chose not to serve humanity selflessly, but rather to serve communism selflessly. And this indeed he did, relinquishing power and position in order to begin, literally, from scratch once again, to risk his life a new time in obedience to his tortured ideas. Therefore, Guevara can be considered a failure when evaluating his legacy within a political context. Although his attempt at unifying the Latin American nations provided him with an iconic status, the contemporary effort by politicians to follow in Guevara's footsteps has been deemed unsuccessful (except for Cuba as it still survives and was a critical reason for the Bay of Pigs Invasion in 1961[11]), especially with the Bolivian

president Evo Morales, who has little hope of fulfilling the expectations of his followers.

Called “ the most complete human being of our age” by the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, Guevara’s supporters believe he may yet prove to be the most important thinker and activist in Latin America since Simon Bolivar[12]. The most important factor of Guevara’s legacy after his death was his status as a popular icon, symbolizing revolution and left-wing political ideals among youngsters in Western and Middle Eastern Cultures. A dramatic photograph of Guevara taken by photographer Alberto Korda soon became one of the century’s most recognizable images, and the portrait was simplified and reproduced on a vast array of merchandise, such as T-shirts, posters, coffee mugs and baseball caps.

When Guevara died, millions mourned his passing. Poets and philosophers wrote impassioned eulogies to him, musicians composed tributes, and painters rendered his portrait in a myriad of heroic poses. Marxist guerillas in Asia, Africa and Latin America anxious to “ revolutionize” their societies held his banner aloft as they went into battle. And, as the youth in the United States and Western Europe rose up against the established order over the Vietnam War, racial prejudice, and social orthodoxy, Guevara’s defiant visage became the ultimate icon of their fervent protest on influencing government policies. Guevara’s body might have vanished, but his spirit has lived on; Guevara was nowhere and everywhere at once[13]. As Jorge Castaneda so aptly states in his evaluation of Guevara, “ Many of us today owe the few attractive and redeeming features of our daily existence to the

sixties, and Che Guevara personifies the era, if not the traits, better than anyone[14]“.

Latin-American Historians Castaneda, Anderson and Taibo examine the extent to which Guevara was committed to both fomenting socialist revolution on a truly international scale and personally putting into practice his thesis that it was possible for a small but committed guerrilla fighting force to ignite a full-scale popular revolution in Latin-American nations saddled by oppressive regimes and U. S. imperialism. His commitment to these beliefs was shared by most of his closest friends and comrades as well as many admirers and sympathizers around the world.

Guevara exemplified the principles of individual sacrifice, honesty, dedication to cause, and personal conviction in his beliefs. In fact, the example he created by the way he lived his life and met his death has transcended time and ideology to nurture and inspire new generations of fighters and dreamers[15]. Guevara’s “ defiant visage”, as Anderson believes, “ has become the ‘ ultimate icon’ of revolutionary spirit and commitment in the late twentieth century[16]“. Guevara was truly a man who died for his beliefs, and because of his almost mythical self-sacrifice for his revolutionary ideals he has been the single most important “ figure of veneration” for revolutionaries and guerilla fighters around the world.

Historian Castaneda links Guevara’s legacy to what he sees as the legacy of the international youth revolt that took place in the 1960s: “...This is the lasting legacy of that decade. It is also what made Guevara the perfect fit, the supreme emblem of that cultural revolt – a man whose politics were

conventional but whose attitude toward power and politics attained epic and unique dimensions...[17]" This component of Guevara's legacy can be evidenced through the increased involvement of the ' New Left' youth revolts during the 1960s. The New Left sought to modify, rather than overthrow capitalism. It sought to make capitalism more inclusive and better share the massive wealth the United States enjoyed in the postwar period - making the New Left relevant as this was a constituent of Guevara's ideologies.

Castaneda supports his argument by stating that " Che can be found...in the niches reserved for cultural icons, for symbols of social uprisings that filter down deep into the soil of society,[18]" but while there is truth in this assertion it is also clear that Guevara's legacy is greater than this. Bolivian literature, as exemplified by Harris, is testimony to the influence on Bolivian society of Che's guerilla mission and death[19].

Though he is seen by many as a hero, opponents of Guevara, including Cuban exiles, think of him as a killer and terrorist. They point to what they see as the less savoury aspects of Guevara's life, taking the viewpoint that he was enthusiastic about executing opponents of the Cuban Revolution. Some of Guevara's writing is cited as evidence of this tendency, as quoted in an article by Alvaro Vargas Llosa. In his " Message to the Tricontinental", Llosa writes of " hatred as an element of struggle; unbending hatred for the enemy, which pushes a human being beyond his natural limitations, making him into an effective, violent, selective, and cold-blooded killing machine". [20]

Critics in the United States assert that Che Guevara was responsible for the torture and execution of hundreds of people in Cuban prisons, and the

murder of many more peasants in the regions controlled or visited by his guerilla forces. Contrary to Guevara supporters, these critics also argue that Guevara was a blundering tactician with no recorded combat victories. While supporters point to the Battle of Santa Clara as a major victory of Guevara, historian Alvaro Vargas Llosa writes, “ his greatest military achievement in the fight against Batista - taking the city of Santa Clara after ambushing a train with heavy reinforcements - is seriously disputed. Numerous testimonies indicate that the commander of the train surrendered in advance, perhaps after taking bribes”. They believe that Guevara murdered individuals on dubious grounds and took their property, seized private manors for himself, and distributed property among communist bureaucrats rather than the peasants. The critics also state that he helped institute forced labour camps when communist volunteerism had failed. Herewith, his social legacy has proven to be notorious as early followers of Guevara have had to transcend hate in order to be attain freedom.

A corresponding element of Guevara’s legacy is his success and veneration within an economic context. Guevara believed that the revolutionary regime needed to promote the development among Cuba’s working class of a new communist consciousness based on moral rather than material incentives. He also believed strongly that the regime needed to adopt a centralised budgetary system for the equitable allocation of resources between different sectors of the economy in order to build socialism in Cuba’s corrupt and underdeveloped economy[21]. He was vehemently opposed to what has today become the market strategy in the remaining few socialist countries - marketisation, material incentives, and enterprise financial self-

management. Anderson believes that Guevara's image is lionised by commercial profiteers around the world[22]. Entrepreneurs have used and abused Guevara's visage in a variety of ways including ice-cream flavours, "revolutionary" tacos and is even the public face of Cuba in relation to tourism.

Although Guevara's Marxist and economic ideologies were systematic and meticulous, he failed at managing the Cuban economy, as he oversaw the near-collapse of sugar production, the failure of industrialisation, and the introduction of rationing. In a broader sense, some critics, such as Che-Mart (author unknown), have merchandised their dislike of Guevara by marketing burlesque T-shirts at both Guevara and his supporters, casting aspersions, for example, on what they perceive as an irony. The irony can be evidenced in that Guevara was a motivated communist who lived the last years of his life as a revolutionary figure, in order to abolish American capitalism throughout Latin America, but is now one of capitalism's hottest selling images. The creator of Che-mart. com has written, " Che has marketed his brand name brilliantly over the years, selling to specific niche in the market: young people who have no clue what Che has done or what he stands for. The cash continues to flow as most college dorms world-wide are being adorned with his face". This comment eradicates Guevara's initial purpose and ideals of a world free of capitalism. Herewith, Guevara's legacy in an economic context is an ironic one, as what he fought against for so many years has allowed market oligopolies to take advantage and use his well-known visage to achieve what entrepreneurs love most: large profit margins from effective market capitalism.

The complex facets of Che Guevara's revolutionary movement have created a mixture of interpretations through the passage of time, causing a distortion in the "Guevara legend". He is singled out from other revolutionaries by many young people in the West because he rejected a comfortable bourgeois background to fight for those who were deprived of political power and economic stability. However, as evidenced in the thesis, Guevara was unsuccessful in his fight against peasant exploitation and Western capitalism. It is for this reason that Guevara's legacy is considered as rather disproportionate and can be regarded as a failure, when evaluating his political and economic success as a revolutionary. Paradoxically, Guevara can be considered a success as he has become a popular symbol while his image is too often dissociated from the philosophy that built it. It is the vulnerability of Guevara's spirit that makes him a contemporary hero - although he might have failed as a revolutionary, he has somehow retained a powerful hold on the popular imagination, seeming to transcend time and place; his legacy continues to influence not only those who were inspired by him then but also those who are discovering him today.