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The Docile Peasantry: Che Guevara's Failure in Bolivia

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Abstract

"The skeleton of our freedom is formed."¹ Ernesto "Che" Guevara believed that freedom must be built through a deliberate process, and create a foundation, or "skeleton," upon which to build. As a guerrilla, Guevara went on to lead in three insurgencies: in Cuba, the Congo, and Bolivia. Among these, only the July 26th Movement succeeded, leading to the creation of his influential work *Guerrilla Warfare*. Guevara faced failure in the Congo and ultimately met his death in Bolivia in 1967, orchestrated by the Bolivian army with CIA support. Even after his death, Guevara's popularity soared beyond what it was during his lifetime, fueled by his ideology and anti-imperialist sentiment. Many attribute Che's downfall in Bolivia to United States intervention and his failure to gain peasant support in the region. However, does U.S. intervention alone explain the full story? One may only need to examine Che's own decisions to understand why his guerrilla warfare in Bolivia failed. During his early travels, Guevara failed to grasp the significance of the MNR movement. Additionally, he declined opportunities to collaborate with the peasant miners, missing a chance to engage with the revolutionary ideology surrounding him.² This oversight foreshadowed his failure to adapt his insurrection strategy to Bolivia's unique context. "Man must be changed first before society can be changed" is a simple, idealistic Marxist thought that should have led Guevara to work closely with Bolivia's peasantry. Instead, his lack of understanding of Bolivia's rural society, so different from Cuba's, proved to be his undoing.³ By failing to comprehend the local peasantry and their ideology, Che Guevara undermined his revolutionary efforts in Bolivia, ultimately leading to his downfall. His ignorance during early travels, ideological contrasts with the MNR and the July 26th Movement, and inability to adapt to Bolivian circumstances sealed his fate.

Keywords: Bolivia, Che Guevara, Cuba, July 26th Movement, Nationalistic Revolutionary Movement (NMR), Peasantry, Revolution, United States of America

¹ Michael Löwy, *The Marxism of Che Guevara: Philosophy, Economics, Revolutionary Warfare*. 2nd ed. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 34.

² Paulo Drinot, *Che's Travels: The Making of a Revolutionary in 1950s Latin America* (Durham [NC]: Duke University Press, 2010)

³ Löwy, *The Marxism of Che Guevara: Philosophy, Economics, Revolutionary Warfare*. 2nd ed, 59.

Historiography

One of the most historically significant aspects of Che Guevara's life lies in his ideological and political thought. Che was a critical thinker who consistently challenged capitalism and envisioned a future rooted in socialism. His ideology revolved around concepts such as "The New Man," labor, internationalism, and the building of socialism.⁴ To expand on these theories, Che authored *Guerrilla Warfare*, providing a practical guide to achieving revolution. Even today, his Marxist ideologies resonate globally, sparking debates and creating sharp divisions in how he is perceived.

In both life and death, Che polarized opinions. Supporters saw him as a symbol of resistance to Western hegemony, while critics viewed his legacy as misunderstood or contradictory. Ironically, Che has become one of the most prominent figures in capitalism, an outcome he would have vehemently opposed.

Che's most influential concept, the "New Man," reflected his belief that true socialism required the transformation of human nature across generations.⁵ At the time, this idea gained significant traction, and even today, it has evolved into the more inclusive notion of the "New Human." This concept envisions not physical evolution but psychological transformation into a society of radical egalitarians.⁶ Supporters of Che's ideology often claim, "Every time a just cause triumphs, Che Guevara's ideology is reborn."⁷

Despite his admiration, Guevara's legacy remains divisive. The FBI and CIA, with assistance from the Bolivian government, orchestrated his death in 1967, highlighting the threat his anti-American sentiments posed to Western interests. U.S. intelligence agencies, prohibited from such actions, nevertheless tracked and targeted Che as they feared his revolutionary fervor could spark another Vietnam-like conflict.⁸

Guevara's death and its aftermath cemented his status as a martyr, but it also led to the commercialization of his image.⁹ Critics argue that his legacy has been reduced to a marketable symbol, detached from the revolutionary ideals he espoused.¹⁰ Others contend that Che's struggles in Bolivia reflected deeper flaws in his guerilla tactics and suggest that his successes in Cuba might not have prevailed against more competent opposition.¹¹

The contrasting narratives surrounding Che's death and U.S. involvement reveal two dominant perspectives: one viewing him as an international hero, the other as a misguided revolutionary. As time passes and more information surfaces, the debate over his legacy remains unresolved.¹² Che Guevara's death was a pivotal moment in history, but equally significant was the enduring power of his ideology.

⁴ Löwy, *The Marxism of Che Guevara: Philosophy, Economics, Revolutionary Warfare*. 2nd ed.

⁵ Löwy, *The Marxism of Che Guevara: Philosophy, Economics, Revolutionary Warfare*. 2nd ed, 17.

⁶ Llorente, *The Political Theory of Che Guevara*, 9.

⁷ Translated by Content Engine, L. L. C. *Every Time a just Cause Triumphs, Che Guevara's Ideology is Reborn*, (CE Noticias Financieras, Oct 08, 2022.)

⁸ Ryan, *The Fall of Che Guevara: A Story of Soldiers, Spies, and Diplomats*, 162.

⁹ Jane Franklin, "Guerrilla Heroica." *Nation* 264, no. 19 (May 19, 1997): 27–28.

¹⁰ Alejandro Ruess, "The Che Marketing Moment," *Dollars & Sense*, July 1997.

¹¹ McCormick, Gordon H., and Mark T. Berger. "Ernesto (Che) Guevara: The Last 'Heroic' Guerrilla" *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42, no. 4 (April 3, 2019), 336.

¹² McCormick, Gordon H., and Mark T. Berger. *Ernesto (Che) Guevara: The Last 'Heroic' Guerrilla*.

MNR Confront Peasant Grievance

One of the major underlying themes in the failure of Che Guevara was the Nationalistic Revolutionary Movement's (MNR) revolution in 1952. Before Che's arrival in Bolivia, the country had already undergone a significant and distinct form of revolution. The MNR, formed in 1942, emerged as a political party designed to combat the elite and foreign powers controlling Bolivia.¹³ Prior to 1952, Bolivian society largely operated under remnants of Spanish colonial institutions, which persisted long after Bolivia became an independent nation.¹⁴ The MNR revolution was pivotal in dismantling these outdated systems. Although the MNR initially excluded the peasantry from its plans, they quickly became a central focus after the swift three-day revolution in April 1952, which led to sweeping societal changes.

The revolution itself was unconventional by historical standards. Described as a "lightning urban Coup D'état," it shifted the balance of power to the lower and middle classes with minimal violence.¹⁵ As one observer noted: "The revolution did not follow the rules. There was no class struggle. There was little loss of life. There was little fighting outside La Paz. There was no accession of the extremists, no reign of terror, no Thermidor."¹⁶ The possession of La Paz marked a decisive turning point, allowing the MNR to take control and usher in significant reforms. While the peasantry had not been involved in the revolution's initial success, they would go on to play a critical role in shaping the country's future through integration into the new political system and the benefits of MNR policies.¹⁷

One of the most transformative changes introduced by the MNR was the expansion of suffrage. Following their ascent to power, the MNR extended the electorate from just 200,000 voters to 1.6 million, a move that revolutionized Bolivian society.¹⁸ This reform was aimed at transforming indigenous populations from regional identities into a cohesive national entity, helping to modernize Bolivia. The MNR's vision of modernization also embraced *indigenismo*, a cultural synthesis of Hispanic and indigenous traditions, which sought to unite the diverse populations of Bolivia under a shared identity.¹⁹

A key element of the MNR's reforms was the nationalization of Bolivia's tin mines. Before the revolution, the mining industry was dominated by the "Tin Barons," such as Carlos Victor Aramayo, who controlled the industry and exploited workers under brutal conditions. The mines dictated the country's politics, culture, and economy, and the workers, primarily indigenous, were subjected to poor wages and unsafe environments. Media campaigns against the mine owners highlighted their abuses, portraying them as symbols of elite oppression. The MNR's nationalization of the mines on October 31, 1952, marked a critical victory for the

¹³ Cole Blasier, "Studies of Social Revolution: Origins in Mexico, Bolivia, and Cuba," *Latin American Research Review* 2, no. 3 (1967): 41.

¹⁴ Richard W. Patch, "Bolivia: The Restrained Revolution," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 334, no. 1 (March 1961): 124.

¹⁵ Blasier, "Studies of Social Revolution: Origins in Mexico, Bolivia, and Cuba," 41.

¹⁶ Patch, "Bolivia: The Restrained Revolution," 127.

¹⁷ James V Kohl, "Peasant and Revolution in Bolivia, April 9, 1952-August 2, 1953," *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 58, no. 2 (1978): 258.

¹⁸ Charles H. Weston, "An Ideology of Modernization: The Case of the Bolivian MNR," *Journal of Inter-American Studies* 10, no. 1 (1968): 85.

¹⁹ Weston, "An Ideology of Modernization: The Case of the Bolivian MNR," 99.

working class.²⁰ It allowed for greater diversification of the Bolivian economy and elevated the role of labor unions.²¹ The Miners Union became the largest and most influential labor organization in the country.²² These changes significantly improved conditions for workers, increased wages, and gave miners a voice in national politics.

The Agrarian Reform of 1953 was another critical aspect of the MNR revolution. Before this reform, the peasantry lived in near-feudal conditions, bound to large estates as serfs and only allowed minimal land for personal use.²³ Land ownership was deeply unequal, with just 4.5% of the population controlling over 70% of arable land. Food accounted for 35-40% of the country's imports, highlighting the inefficiency of the system.²⁴ After the revolution, the MNR created the Ministry of Peasant and Indian Affairs, which played a pivotal role in facilitating the revolts in the northern Altiplano.²⁵ These revolts forced the government to expedite land redistribution.²⁶ By 1962, over 10 million acres of land had been redistributed from 5,515 large estates to 126,000 families.²⁷

This reform marked a decisive turning point, as land was central to the lives of Bolivia's rural population—"for a campesino, land is everything."²⁸ The MNR's agrarian policies helped integrate indigenous populations into Bolivian society, creating opportunities for political participation and laying the groundwork for a more equitable future.²⁹ The creation of organizations like the Bolivian Workers Confederation (COB) further strengthened the movement by advocating for worker rights, improved conditions, and support for agrarian reforms.³⁰

The MNR's revolution was a multifaceted transformation that tackled the entrenched inequalities faced by Bolivia's peasantry and working class. By expanding suffrage, nationalizing the mines, and redistributing land, the MNR not only dismantled the colonial-era structures that had oppressed the majority of Bolivians but also forged a path toward modernization and integration. These policies gained the support of the peasantry and working class, ensuring the MNR's revolutionary success.

Che and the Peasantry in 1953

What was the most significant part of Che Guevara's early travel through Latin America? Che's interactions with different groups of people. His travels throughout the region cemented a path to becoming one of the most notable figures in all of Latin America. The focus here is on

²⁰ Marc Becker, *Twentieth-Century Latin American Revolutions* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 96.

²¹ Kevin A. Young, *Blood of the Earth: Resource Nationalism, Revolution, and Empire in Bolivia*. First edition (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017), 43-44.

²² Christopher Mitchell, *The Legacy of Populism in Bolivia: From the MNR to Military Rule* (New York: Praeger, 1977), 44.

²³ Knudson, *Bolivia, Press and Revolution, 1932-1964*, 263.

²⁴ James M Malloy, *Beyond the Revolution: Bolivia Since 1952* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1971), 238.

²⁵ Kohl, "Peasant and Revolution in Bolivia, April 9, 1952-August 2, 1953," 246.

²⁶ Kohl, "Peasant and Revolution in Bolivia, April 9, 1952-August 2, 1953," 243.

²⁷ Weston, "An Ideology of Modernization: The Case of the Bolivian MNR," 85.

²⁸ Kohl, *From the Mines to the Streets: A Bolivian Activist's Life*, 29.

²⁹ Benjamin Kohl, *From the Mines to the Streets: A Bolivian Activist's Life* (University of Texas Press, 2012), 11.

³⁰ Becker, *Twentieth-Century Latin American Revolutions*, 97.

his travels to Bolivia in 1953. During this time, Che encountered the MNR and learned about their Agrarian Reform and system of mines. However, he was unimpressed by the MNR and became a strong opponent of their policies.³¹ Instead of engaging with the indigenous population or the peasantry, Guevara chose to interact primarily with the Argentine community within Bolivia. This detachment prevented him from understanding the dynamics around him, which later contributed to his failure during the 1966 insurgency.

Guevara's failure to grasp the complexities of Bolivia during his early travels played a significant role in his eventual struggles in the country. He generalized about the MNR and the peasantry, failed to build relationships with local communities, and misunderstood the socio-political context. This lack of insight stood in stark contrast to other travelers at the time, who managed to engage deeply with the people and the issues of the region.

Although Che Guevara is known for his later advocacy of the peasantry, his early travels reveal contradictions in his perspective. Prior to Bolivia in 1953, Guevara made several racist and stereotypical remarks about indigenous groups in his diaries.³² For example, he described the indigenous people in a dehumanizing manner, criticizing their hygiene:

The somewhat animal-like concept the indigenous people have of modesty and hygiene means that irrespective of gender or age they do their business by the roadside, the women cleaning themselves with their skirts, the men not bothering at all, and then carry on as before. The underskirts of Indian women who have kids are literally warehouses of excrement, a consequence of the way they wipe the rascals every time one of them passes wind.³³

He also perpetuated defamatory legends, such as claiming indigenous men engaged in acts of bestiality with river dolphins.³⁴ Such statements reveal a troubling mindset during his early years, even as he expressed empathy for the peasantry in other parts of his writings.

In Bolivia, Che continued to hold problematic views. He asserted that the indigenous population should feel ashamed of their heritage, as they shared blood with Asians.³⁵ Similarly, during his trip through Peru in 1952, he described the Aymara people as a shell of the proud people that revolted against the Incas but now are a defeated race.³⁶ These comments demonstrate a lack of understanding of the region's complex history and politics.

Che's actions in Bolivia in 1953 foreshadowed his eventual failure in the country. Guevara failed to establish relationships with the peasantry or other Bolivians, spending most of his time with fellow Argentinians who reinforced his critical views of the MNR regime. Despite expressing interest in working in the mines, he declined the opportunity when he learned it required a three-month minimum commitment, stating: "I was thinking of getting work in a mine but didn't want to stay more than a month; they offered me a minimum of

³¹ Paulo Drinot, *Che's Travels: The Making of a Revolutionary in 1950s Latin America* (Durham [NC]: Duke University Press, 2010), 127.

³² Drinot, *Che's Travels: The Making of a Revolutionary in 1950s Latin America*, 102.

³³ Che Guevara and Aleida Guevara, *The Motorcycle Diaries: Notes on a Latin American Journey*, 127-128.

³⁴ Che Guevara and Aleida Guevara, *The Motorcycle Diaries: Notes on a Latin American Journey* (New York: Ocean Press, 2003), 145.

³⁵ Che Guevara, *Latin America Diaries: Otra Vez or a Second Look at Latin America* (Melbourne: Ocean Press, 2011), 69.

³⁶ Drinot, *Che's Travels: The Making of a Revolutionary in 1950s Latin America*, 192.

three, so I didn't stick to that plan."³⁷ This missed opportunity might have allowed him to better understand the struggles of Bolivian workers and peasants. Unlike Che, other travelers of the time, such as Lilo Linke and Alicia Ortiz, successfully connected with the people and documented their experiences.

Lilo Linke, a German woman, spent time in the Ministry of Peasant Affairs, listening to petitions and interacting with mine workers. Her detailed observations provided valuable insight into the harsh living conditions of miners and the broader impact of the MNR's policies.³⁸ Similarly, Alicia Ortiz, an Argentinian woman, engaged directly with the agricultural sector, discussing land reform and the challenges faced by the peasantry. Both women's accounts highlight the depth of understanding that Che lacked during his time in Bolivia.

Interactions with the peasantry later defined Che Guevara's role in the Cuban Revolution and his writings, such as *Guerrilla Warfare*. However, his 1953 travels in Bolivia showcased his inability to connect with the local people or grasp the socio-political environment. The MNR succeeded in promoting land reform and nationalizing the mines, aligning themselves with the interests of the peasantry. In contrast, Che's failure to engage with the people of Bolivia and his reliance on generalizations ultimately contributed to his lack of popular support during his later insurgency in 1966-67.

The Cuban Revolution

The major revolution that would forever shape the life of Che Guevara was the July 26th Movement. This revolution freed Cuba from the Batista-led government and established a Castro-led regime. Many key figures, including Guevara, spearheaded the movement. What began as the Moncada Barracks revolt in 1952 evolved into a guerrilla insurrection that profoundly influenced Che's lifestyle and writings. Popularized by Fidel Castro's "History Will Absolve Me" speech, the movement was formally created in 1955 and culminated years later in the Cuban Revolution.³⁹

Rather than being a swift insurrection, the revolution took from November 25, 1956, to January 8th, 1959, to achieve its goals after the July 26th Movement landed in Cuba.⁴⁰ The movement aimed to be the antithesis of the Bolivian MNR revolution, as it focused on social rather than economic change. Ironically, while seeking to create a peasant revolution, much of the group's leadership came from the middle class until 1958. Furthermore, the revolution gained support from some wealthy factions opposed to Batista. Unlike other Latin American revolutions, including Bolivia's, the was a rebellion against the military clique rather than the traditional upper class.⁴¹

The July 26th Movement profoundly influenced Che's later efforts in Bolivia. The distinctions between this movement and the MNR Revolution, the revolution's impact on Che's

³⁷ Che Guevara, *Latin America Diaries: Otra Vez or a Second Look at Latin America*, 34.

³⁸ Lilo Linke, *Andean Adventure: A Social and Political Study of Colombia, Ecuador and Bolivia* (Hutchinson & Co., Ltd, 1945)

³⁹ Andres Suarez, "The Cuban Revolution: The Road to Power." *Latin American Research Review* 7, no. 3 (1972): 6.

⁴⁰ Becker, *Twentieth-Century Latin American Revolutions*, 107.

⁴¹ Blasier, "Studies of Social Revolution: Origins in Mexico, Bolivia, and Cuba," 45.

book *Guerrilla Warfare*, and the reasons behind its success, which Guevara overlooked, were pivotal in shaping his approach.

One key difference between Cuba and Bolivia was the nature of their revolutions. The July 26th Movement sought a social revolution to liberate the peasantry from Batista's regime, whereas the MNR revolution focused on economic reform. MNR leaders emphasized that their goal was an "economic revolution, not a social revolution."⁴² Additionally, while the Cubans pursued a peasant revolution through guerrilla warfare, the MNR comprised a coalition of classes that adopted a multiclass populist strategy.⁴³ Guevara envisioned a small cadre of guerrillas backed by the peasantry, but the MNR succeeded by uniting various social classes. Unlike the July 26th Movement's insurrectionary approach, the MNR initially gained power through elections, though they eventually had to fight to assert their legitimacy.⁴⁴

Another critical difference lay in their post-revolutionary economic systems. Cuba adopted a communist model, while Bolivia remained capitalist. Bolivia's agrarian reform, enacted not for social reasons but as a measure against parasitic monopolies, demonstrated this distinction. Bolivian Ambassador Víctor Andrade stated, "Nationalization of private property is not the policy of Bolivia."⁴⁵ While both revolutions opposed Western influence and U.S. hegemony, they took different approaches. The July 26th Movement raised fears of communism in the Western Hemisphere, while the MNR was initially perceived as a potential fascist movement akin to Nazism.⁴⁶

One major reason for Che's failure in Bolivia was his lack of understanding of how Bolivian peasants viewed revolution compared to Cuban peasants. The Bolivian peasantry ultimately refused to support Che's attempts to "liberate" them.

The July 26th Movement significantly influenced Che Guevara's *Guerrilla Warfare* and his revolutionary strategies. The Cuban Revolution, driven by guerrilla warfare, inspired many of Che's writings and served as a blueprint for his subsequent endeavors. Three main lessons from the revolution shaped his ideology. The first was that the guerrilla fighters were agrarian revolutionaries. Che emphasized that guerrilla warfare is "a war of the people." This belief was reflected in the movement's recruitment of peasants and the popularization of its cause. Secondly was the importance of a central base. Che stressed the need for a strong operational base to create and sustain guerrilla bands. This principle was exemplified by the July 26th Movement's base in the Sierra Maestra mountains. Lastly, was the proximity to security zones. Guevara cautioned against operating beyond a safe retreat distance, stating, "It will not be possible to operate more than five or six hours away from a point of maximum security." Despite these strategies, Che failed to account for several factors behind the Cuban Revolution's success.

One overlooked factor was the role of urban resistance. While the guerrillas waged war in the countryside, urban resistance groups, comprising non-peasant actors were critical to the revolution.⁴⁷ Additionally, Fidel Castro's psychological impact was a decisive element. His

⁴² Young, *Blood of the Earth: Resource Nationalism, Revolution, and Empire in Bolivia*. First edition, 48.

⁴³ Mitchell, *The Legacy of Populism in Bolivia: From the MNR to Military Rule*, 6.

⁴⁴ Becker, *Twentieth-Century Latin American Revolutions*, 94.

⁴⁵ Young, *Blood of the Earth: Resource Nationalism, Revolution, and Empire in Bolivia*. First edition, 49.

⁴⁶ Knudson, *Bolivia, Press and Revolution, 1932-1964*, 101.

⁴⁷ Blasier, "Studies of Social Revolution: Origins in Mexico, Bolivia, and Cuba," 43.

charisma and strategic use of propaganda, including the “History Will Absolve Me” speech, rallied widespread support.⁴⁸ Some critics argue that the revolution might have succeeded without significant peasant involvement, as middle-class actors and urban movements played essential roles.⁴⁹ Finally, Cuba’s position as “one of the weakest links in the world system of capitalism” contributed to the revolution’s success, a point Guevara failed to fully integrate into his ideology.⁵⁰

The July 26th Movement profoundly shaped Che Guevara’s revolutionary beliefs and strategies, serving as the foundation for his *Guerrilla Warfare*. However, Che’s failure to consider the broader dynamics of the Cuban Revolution ultimately contributed to his unsuccessful campaign in Bolivia. The distinctions between the July 26th Movement and the MNR Revolution, and the factors he overlooked highlight the complexities of revolutionary success.

The Bolivian Campaign

What led to the failure and death of Che Guevara? In 1966, he launched a guerrilla insurgency in Bolivia, a country where he had previously witnessed the MNR revolution just 14 years earlier. His time in Bolivia was marked by challenges, and by 1967, Bolivian forces apprehended and executed Guevara. What went wrong? The failure of his insurgency can be attributed to several factors, but some major themes stand out. First Che’s repeated misconceptions about the peasantry, stemming from his earlier travels, played a critical role. Second, his inability to adapt his tactics and differentiate his campaign from the principles outlined in *Guerrilla Warfare* hampered his efforts. Finally, Che’s failure to establish a meaningful relationship with the peasantry—the group he identified as central to revolutionary success in his writings—sealed his fate. Guevara’s failure in Bolivia stemmed from his misunderstandings and misconceptions about the peasantry, his inability to adapt his tactics, and his lack of success in mobilizing the very group he identified as the focal point of an insurgency.

From Che’s first travels in Bolivia to his final days, his inability to understand the peasantry was a defining factor in his failure. During his initial visit, he failed to build any meaningful relationships with workers or peasants. The only peasant he interacted with was one he nicknamed “Túpac Amaru,” a label that mocked the individual rather than respected him.⁵¹ Although he gained some understanding of the miners’ struggles, Che never directly worked with the peasantry, a shortcoming that foreshadowed his later failures.⁵²

In his insurgency, Che relied heavily on Cuban leaders, which hindered the spread of revolutionary ideology among Bolivians.⁵³ This issue persisted throughout the campaign, as reflected in Che’s diaries, where he lamented being cut off from the peasantry and the lack of

⁴⁸ Blasier, “Studies of Social Revolution: Origins in Mexico, Bolivia, and Cuba,” 44.

⁴⁹ Blasier, “Studies of Social Revolution: Origins in Mexico, Bolivia, and Cuba,” 46.

⁵⁰ Michael Löwy, *The Marxism of Che Guevara: Philosophy, Economics, Revolutionary Warfare*. 2nd ed. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 82.

⁵¹ Che Guevara, *Latin America Diaries: Otra Vez or a Second Look at Latin America*, 33.

⁵² Che Guevara, *Latin America Diaries: Otra Vez or a Second Look at Latin America*, 34.

⁵³ Che Guevara, *The Bolivian Diary* (Ocean Press, 2005), 60.

support his group received.⁵⁴ His inability to recruit local leaders or connect with the people contributed to his isolation.⁵⁵ Furthermore, cultural missteps, such as failing to embrace the local tradition of sharing coca leaves—an important gesture of solidarity among Bolivian peasants—demonstrated his ignorance of their customs and further alienated potential supporters.⁵⁶

Guevara's failure was also tied to his rigid adherence to his Cuban experiences and an unwillingness to adapt to the unique conditions in Bolivia. The MNR revolution, which succeeded 14 years earlier, offered a blueprint for change that Che ignored. Unlike Che's rural-focused strategy, the MNR revolution was an urban and multiclass uprising that gained momentum quickly.⁵⁷ Che failed to incorporate similar urban or middle-class elements into his campaign.

Che also overlooked lessons of the Cuban Revolution, where urban movements played a significant role alongside guerrilla warfare in the Sierra Maestra.⁵⁸ Additionally, the MNR revolution enticed the peasantry through concrete policies, such as the Agrarian Reform of 1953 and the nationalization of mines. In contrast, Che did not present clear policies or incentives, assuming that the systemic oppression faced by the peasantry would naturally align them with his cause.⁵⁹ His inability to adapt his tactics to Bolivia's specific socio-political landscape ultimately contributed to his defeat.

Guevara's inability to gain the trust and support of the peasantry was perhaps his greatest failure. In *Guerrilla Warfare*, he emphasized that "The guerrilla fighter needs full help from the people of the area. This is an indispensable condition."⁶⁰ However, he was unable to achieve this in Bolivia. Despite his writings advocating for peasant-based revolutions, Che viewed the Bolivian peasantry with disdain, once describing them as "true to type – unable to help us, but incapable of seeing the harm he can cause us."⁶¹

Che's lack of genuine connection with the Bolivian people hindered his efforts to build a support network.⁶² By the time his insurgency was underway, the peasantry had largely sided with the military, often acting as informers against his group.⁶³ His failure to humanize and rally the peasants left him isolated, and the lack of local support ultimately led to his capture and execution.

Che's personal ideology, shaped by the Cuban Revolution and the July 26th Movement, also contributed to his failure in Bolivia. He believed that guerrilla warfare should be "a war of the masses, a war of the people."⁶⁴ However, in Bolivia, he struggled to mobilize local support, leading him to acknowledge his group as nothing more than a bandit faction.

⁵⁴ Guevara, *The Bolivian Diary*, 143-144.

⁵⁵ Guevara, *The Bolivian Diary*, 182-183.

⁵⁶ Kohl, *From the Mines to the Streets: A Bolivian Activist's Life*, 13.

⁵⁷ Blasier, "Studies of Social Revolution: Origins in Mexico, Bolivia, and Cuba," 41.

⁵⁸ Blasier, "Studies of Social Revolution: Origins in Mexico, Bolivia, and Cuba," 43.

⁵⁹ Guevara, *The Bolivian Diary*, 144.

⁶⁰ Ernesto Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, 3.

⁶¹ Guevara, *The Bolivian Diary*, 83.

⁶² Guevara, *The Bolivian Diary*, 143.

⁶³ Guevara, *The Bolivian Diary*, 248.

⁶⁴ Ernesto Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, 3.

The Cuban Revolution's relative success misled Che into believing that similar tactics could be applied universally across Latin America. Cuba's unique position as one of the weakest links in the global capitalist system allowed for a different revolutionary trajectory than what Bolivia, a nation with a recently completed capitalistic revolution, could support.⁶⁵ Che's inability to reconcile these differences with his ideology resulted in a campaign that was ill-suited to Bolivia's socio-political environment.

Che Guevara's failure in Bolivia was due to a combination of factors: his misconceptions about the peasantry, his inability to adapt his tactics, and his failure to build local support. His rigid adherence to lessons from the Cuban Revolution and his misreading of Bolivia's unique circumstances sealed his fate. Che's defeat marked him as a martyr in Latin American history and anti-western sentiment, but it also highlighted the limitations of his revolutionary methods. His failure would ultimately fall on himself, as his method of insurrection would fail for the second time.

Conclusion

What is the concept of freedom? For Che Guevara, freedom symbolized the July 26th movement, events that would profoundly influence his future writings and travels. Following these events, Che authored works such as *Guerrilla Warfare* and *Bolivian Diaries*. However, these writings might have gained greater historical significance if he had paid more attention to Bolivia's historical context.

Having visited Bolivia during its National Revolution in 1952, he had a unique opportunity to observe a revolution firsthand. This experience could have served as a foundation for his later aspirations to liberate Latin America. Yet, why did this potential remain unrealized? Simply put, Che failed to capitalize on the situation. This oversight led to ideological differences between him and the Bolivian peasantry, whom he sought to mobilize in 1966.

His documented interactions with the Bolivian peasants reveal a lack of rapport; in fact, Guevara's views were often perceived as dehumanizing. The July 26th Movement and the MNR Revolution were fundamentally different, which likely contributed to his eventual failure. Historical and contextual differences are crucial in any revolutionary struggle. Che's attempt to spark an insurgency in Bolivia revealed a profound misunderstanding of Bolivia's political dynamics, the needs of its peasantry, and the broader international communist movement.

Ultimately, Che Guevara's failure to foster a revolution in Bolivia stemmed from his lack of insight during his early travels, his ideological divergence from the MNR and the July 26th Movement, and his inability to adapt his revolutionary methods to Bolivia's unique circumstances.

⁶⁵ Löwy, *The Marxism of Che Guevara: Philosophy, Economics, Revolutionary Warfare*. 2nd ed, 82.

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