

terdisciplinarios, donde, como en este caso, los aportes de la historia y de la antropología pueden unirse en aras de una mayor aproximación comprensiva al estudio de lo social.

**Susana Bandieri**

*CONICET / Universidad Nacional del Comahue*

PAUL J. DOSAL: *Comandante Che: Guerrilla Soldier, Commander, and Strategist, 1956-1967*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003.

Che, more than anyone, including Fidel, guided the transformation of the rag-tag band that survived the Granma landing at Playa las Coloradas and the subsequent massacre at Alegría del Pío in late November 1956, into “the most accomplished guerrilla army in 20<sup>th</sup> century Latin America.” It was Che who led the guerrillas’ victorious two-year campaign against 40,000 U.S.-equipped troops supported by formidable air and naval power.

How could such a man meet his death eight years later at the head of an isolated and fragmented guerrilla force of fewer than 50 fighters in the barren lands of southeastern Bolivia? That is the climactic, and contentious, question addressed in this thoughtful assessment of Che’s guerrilla career – in Cuba, the Congo, and Bolivia.

Fidel and his comrades, including Che, had been trained in Mexico in guerrilla warfare by Alberto Bayo, an anti-fascist former general of the Spanish Republic, but they saw themselves as the vanguard of a broad-based insurrectionary movement. They believed that conventional attacks on army garrisons and police stations by themselves and M-26-7 cadres, coordinated with general strikes, seizures of radio stations, and sabotage in the major cities, would spark a nationwide rebellion. But with the quick failure of this strategy – marked by the abortive uprisings in Santiago, Holguín, and Guantanamo and the terrible rout at Alegría del Pío – and the consequent surviving remnant’s ascent into the Sierra Maestra, the guerrilla army that emerged unexpectedly, and at Che’s urging, became the strategic core of the insurrection.

Fidel headed the rebel’s political struggle as a whole and won recognition as the leader of the national anti-Batista movement, but it was Che – Bayo’s star pupil – who became “the principal military architect of the Cuban Revolution.” Under Che’s leadership, the guerrillas – joined over time by other urban youth and peasant recruits (and even a few U.S. volunteers), and sustained by a network of M-26-7 cadres and supporters in the cities and by the local *guajiros* of the compact and lush Sierra Maestra – grew into the formidable “rebel army.”

Time and again, the guerrillas commanded by Che – though out-manned and out-gunned – held their defensive positions and repelled almost every army incursion into their “liberated territory.” During Batista’s major military offensive in the summer of 1958, Che’s ambushes virtually saved the Rebel Army from destruction. And it was he, not Fidel, Camilo, or Raul, who led it in what proved to be the insurrectionary war’s decisive, victorious battle. Che marched his 120-man “Column 8” across terrain he did not know while being pursued relentlessly by the Army and strafed by F-47 fighters, and succeeded in cutting the island in two, thus demoralizing Batista’s officers and inspiring the populace. In a classic battle of fixed positions, Che – a “master chess player” and military strategist – then led some one thousand irregulars in a siege of the city of Santa Clara. And when it fell, “all of Cuba fell” into the rebels’ hands.

Once the rebels took power, Che took charge of the purge of the old Army and the training of the new revolutionary army; and – having personally witnessed, in his youthful wanderings, first, armed miners in Bolivia defeat the military and bring the reformist MNR government to power in 1952 and then, just two years later, a pack of CIA-sponsored insurgents topple Arbenz’s left-wing government in Guatemala because the army refused to fight – he also organized and trained the popular militia which, together with the new army, would defend the revolution against American intervention.

None of this history, told well and in detail by Dosal, is controversial. Unexceptionable also is his narrative of the tragicomic events of the brief “secret war” in the Congo during 1965. There, Che and his company of 112 black Cubans had come to support the “rebels” aligned under the banner of the martyred Lumumba, against a regime whose army of South African mercenaries and anti-Communist Cuban exiles had been bought and paid for by the U.S. and Belgium, the Congo’s former colonial master. Alas, Che and his comrades soon discovered that the rebel troops were, at best, as venal, undisciplined, and incompetent as their leaders (e.g., Laurent Kabila). This adventure thus proved to be both a near-death experience for Che and a fiasco.

But critical aspects of Dosal’s otherwise cogent assessment of the “modern tragedy” of Che’s death in Bolivia are questionable. Dosal correctly argues that Che’s long-term strategic objective was to foment an integrated and unified continental (and eventually “tri-continental”) guerrilla war against imperialism. Che never saw the initial guerrilla nucleus, Dosal points out, as the establishment of “a minor military front in an isolated region of one country.” In fact, Bolivia had figured in Che’s plans for continental war four years earlier than his fateful arrival there in 1966. After the military in Argentina overthrew reformist president Arturo Frondizi in March 1962 and broke relations with Cuba, followed a year later by an abortive naval uprising, Che oversaw the establishment of a

rearguard base in Bolivia for eventual launching of guerrilla operations under his command, in his own homeland. But that fledgling guerrilla band was easily liquidated in April 1964 by Argentina's secret police. Again, until mid-1966, Che's plans were predicated upon Bolivia becoming only the point of departure, or rearguard, for Peru, where he hoped to join three already existing guerrilla nuclei. But this plan too was aborted by the death in combat of guerrilla leaders Luis de la Puente and then Guillermo Lobaton, in late 1965, and the capture and imprisonment of Hector Bejar. As a result, Bolivia unexpectedly became the base of operations. When Che arrived in La Paz on November 3, 1966 (in the guise of Uruguayan businessman Adolfo Mena, whose photo that day shows him, according to Jon Anderson, to be "a pudgy-looking man with a balding pate"), he'd already been training guerrillas and organizing guerrilla fronts for the past few years in nearly every country of Latin America. This was a vital task, Che and Fidel agreed, for *the survival of the revolution in Cuba* – as a way of breaking Cuba's isolation and endangerment, diverting American pressure away from Cuba, and making Washington pay a high price to try to contain what they hoped would be spreading insurrectionary wars.

Dosal mentions this American threat only in passing. He essentially ignores the effect on the Cuban leaders of the relentless U.S. covert action against the Revolution, which became overt, first, in the CIA-organized, armed, and equipped counterrevolutionary invasion at Playa Giron, in which Cuba suffered perhaps 1,700 dead and 2,000 wounded, and then, in the so-called Missile Crisis of October 1962, and then continuing again covertly long afterwards. Fidel's and Che's acceptance of the emplacement of Soviet nuclear weapons in Cuba can only be explained by their knowledge of the continuing American campaign to subvert and overthrow their government – and genuine fear of an imminent U.S. invasion. According to the former Soviet ambassador, interviewed by Anderson, Che told Khrushchev's representatives in Cuba in May 1962, "Anything that can stop the Americans is worthwhile." So while Dosal repeatedly emphasizes what appears to be Che's intransigence *vis à vis* the U.S., the real source of Che's resolve to foment and fight a continent-wide anti-imperialist war is obscured.

Further, Dosal does not mention that Che made a peace overture at Punta del Este in August 1961, barely four months after the "Bay of Pigs," which was rebuffed by President Kennedy and met, not with peace but a sword. Under the code-name Operation Mongoose, the U.S. launched, in Stephen C. Rabe's words, "a massive campaign of terrorism and sabotage" against Cuba, halted momentarily only when the missile emplacements were discovered. On June 19, 1963, Kennedy approved a new sabotage campaign against Cuba and he approved still more sabotage operations again in November, just days before he was assassinated. In June, 1961, Kennedy had also ordered the American mili-

tary to organize and train another exile brigade. By the spring of 1965, nearly 3,000 exiles had entered and 2,659 had completed their training – and not until November of that year, with the escalation of the U.S. war against Vietnam, was the program phased out by President Johnson. No wonder, then, that Che became intransigent. As Fidel told Soviet representatives, according to Rabe, “The United States will not be able to hurt us if all of Latin America is in flames.”

Why did Che fail in Bolivia? Dosal’s answer consists of three closely related claims:

1. “Che consistently mismanaged politics and diplomacy,” first with the Congolese rebel leaders and then, and fatally, with the Bolivian Communist Party and its head, Mario Monje.

2. Che’s experience in the Sierra Maestra left him in “total ignorance” of what had to be done to establish and run an urban underground, and he expected others to do it for him; but he lacked the political skills and temperament to convince the Bolivian party leadership – which adamantly opposed “armed struggle” – to do so.

3. “By the time Che arrived in Bolivia, even he was captivated by his own mystique.” He expected the party, when confronted with the *fait accompli* of his presence and intention to launch the guerrilla war there, to simply defer to him.

4. As a result, tactical errors on the battlefield which, if the support network had been in place, would likely have resulted in only minor setbacks, now became deadly.

Yet Dosal knows that Fidel – who was not at all ignorant about how to establish and run an urban support network – was fully involved for several years in planning the guerrilla campaign in Bolivia. He also trusted the highly experienced Cuban comrades sent there months ahead of Che including Manuel Piñero, the head of Cuba’s secret “Liberation Department” – to be able, together with allies recruited among dissident young Communists, to establish and run that network. And Dosal knows also, but ignores, that Fidel, who surely had exceptional “political skills,” had met repeatedly with Monje in Cuba, in December 1965 and again in January 1966; but he too, like Che, could not convince Monje to support the projected guerrilla front. In fact, Monje was often if not regularly duplicitous in his dealings with Fidel and Che, allowing them to believe he would go along with their plan while he was actually undermining it, and even expelling young Communists from the party who were trying to establish and run an urban network to support Che’s front – or who had joined his guerrilla band. Indeed, according to notes found by Anderson in the diary of Comandante Harry Villegas (who fought alongside Che in Bolivia, escaped the Bolivian ranger’s encirclement, and eventually made his way back to Cuba), Fidel himself

persuaded Che to go to Bolivia, based on his own analysis of the situation and, Villegas wrote, on “the *agreements reached with Estanislao [Monje] to launch the armed struggle*” (my emphasis).

So, despite Dosal’s explicit attempt to absolve Fidel of any blame for Che’s defeat in Bolivia, the real cardinal political error, Fidel’s as much as it was Che’s, was to trust and rely on Monje and his Communist Party – a party, moreover, which was at best a minor force among factory workers in La Paz and Oruro’s tin miners, but not at all among peasants. Why Fidel and Che chose to rely on Monje and his party, given their antagonistic relations with their own “old Communists,” before and during the revolution, is hard to fathom.

Finally, Fidel and Che compounded this original political error by their overestimation of the revolutionary potential of the Bolivian peasants – the importance of which Dosal, in focusing only on the lack of a viable urban support group, ignores. The peasants had been conspicuous by their absence in the making of the 1953 revolution, but became the beneficiaries of the MNR government’s annihilation of the hacienda regime and distribution of land, and – having had their land hunger sated – remained politically dormant. Worse, based on detailed reports by his agents, Che had intended to establish his base in the densely populated Alto Beni, northwest of and close to La Paz, not far from where several Bolivians in his company had been born and raised. But Monje refused to go along and convinced or virtually compelled a reluctant Che to establish his base in the under-populated southeast, near the Ancahuasú river, where none of the Bolivians knew the land or its benighted, scattered and isolated small-holding inhabitants – who, rather than coming to the support of the guerrillas, assisted the army to hunt them down and kill them.

**Maurice Zeitlin**

*University of California, Los Angeles*

**PIERO GLEIJESES: *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959-1976***. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.

Piero Gleijeses’s work is a convincing account of Cuban policy in Africa from 1959 to 1976 and of its escalating conflict with U.S. policy on the continent. His work utilizes the archives of six countries, including unprecedented access to previously unstudied Cuban archives. This is particularly impressive since many documents from that time have yet to be fully declassified. Among the Cuban archives researched by Gleijeses are those of the Communist Party Central Committee, the Armed Forces and the Foreign Ministry. Classified Cuban documents used in the book include: minutes of meetings with Fidel