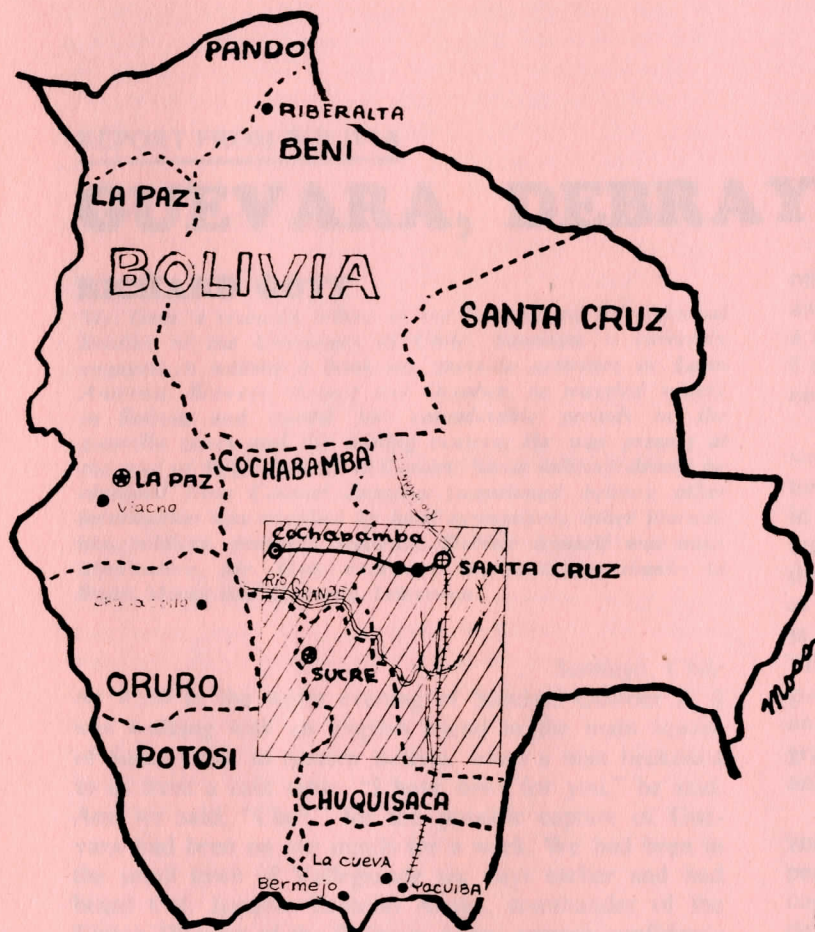


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## Report from Bolivia



**Richard Gott**

Richard Gott, a research fellow at the Institute of International Studies of the University of Chile, Santiago, is currently engaged in writing a book on guerrilla activities in Latin America. This article originally appeared in The Nation, November 20, 1967.

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## REPORT FROM BOLIVIA

# GUEVARA, DEBRAY and the CIA

### RICHARD GOTT

*Mr. Gott, a research fellow at the Institute of International Studies of the University of Chile, Santiago, is currently engaged in writing a book on guerrilla activities in Latin America. Between August and October, he traveled widely in Bolivia and visited for considerable periods in the guerrilla zones and the mining centers. He was present at the trial of Régis Debray in Camiri. Some military details he obtained from Colonel Zenteno (mentioned below); other information was supplied by local newspapers, other journalists, soldiers, peasants, students. Debray himself was most informative. Mr. Gott expresses his particular thanks to Brian Moser and Granada Television.*

*Santiago, Chile*

At 8:30 in the warm evening of Sunday, October 8, I was walking with an English friend in the main square of Santa Cruz, in eastern Bolivia, when a man beckoned to us from a café table. "I have news for you," he said. And we said, "Che?," for the possible capture of Guevara had been on our minds for a week. We had been in the small town of Vallegrande six days earlier and had heard Col. Joaquin Zenteno Anaya, commander of the Eighth Division of the Bolivian Army, express confidence that his troops would have Che in their power before the week was up. He explained that his troops had been reinforced by 600 "Rangers," fresh from the training camp run by United States Special Forces north of Santa Cruz. He told us how the guerrillas had been encircled. Escape was possible only on one side, and there the army had planted soldiers dressed as peasants to report at once if the guerrillas appeared. From the evidence of villagers whom the guerrillas had met at the end of September, and from that of captured guerrillas, there was no doubt that Che was the leader of this encircled band.

"Che has been captured," our café contact told us, "but he is severely wounded and may not last the night. The

other guerrillas are fighting desperately to get him back, and the company commander is appealing by radio for a helicopter so that they can fly him out." My friend and I hired a jeep and set off for Vallegrande at four o'clock on Monday morning.

We arrived five and a half hours later and drove straight to the airfield. Half the population of the small town seemed to be waiting there, the school children in white dresses and amateur photographers eager to secure pictures of dead guerrillas. Only two weeks before, the bodies of the Bolivian leader, "Coco" Peredo, and of the Cuban "Antonio" had been landed there. And in the cemetery close to the airfield lies the body of "Tania," the beautiful girl who died with nine other guerrillas on August 31, after being led treacherously into an ambush in the Rio Grande. The inhabitants of Vallegrande had by now become accustomed to the comings and goings of the military.

Suddenly the children began jumping up and down and pointing to the horizon. Within seconds, a speck appeared in the sky and it soon materialized into a helicopter, bearing on its landing rails the bodies of two dead soldiers. They were unstrapped and unceremoniously loaded into a lorry and carted into the town. But as the crowd melted away, we stayed behind and photographed the crates of napalm that lay around the periphery of the airfield. And with a telephoto lens we took photos of a man in olive-green uniform with no military insignia who had been identified to us as an agent from the CIA. (I shall so refer to him hereafter, for I am convinced that that is what he was.)

Such temerity on the part of foreign journalists—we were the first to arrive in Vallegrande by twenty-four hours—was ill-received, and the CIA agent in the company of some Bolivian officers tried to have us thrown out of town. But we carried credentials to prove that we



were bona fide journalists, and after much argument we were allowed to stay. The one and only helicopter then set off again for the fighting zone, some 30 kilometers to the southwest, with Colonel Zenteno aboard. Shortly after one o'clock in the afternoon, it brought him back, triumphant and barely suppressing an enormous grin. Che was dead, he announced. He had seen the body, and there was no room for doubt. Colonel Zenteno is an honest man, not accustomed to revealing more than is absolutely necessary, and there seemed no reason to doubt him. We rushed to the tiny telegraph office and thrust our dispatches to the outside world into the hands of a startled clerk.

Four hours later, at exactly five o'clock, the helicopter was back once more, now carrying a single small body strapped to its rails. This time, instead of landing close to where we were standing, the machine came down in the middle of the airfield, and the onlookers were held back by a cordon of determined soldiers. The distant corpse was quickly loaded into a closed Chevrolet van which sped away. We leapt into our jeep and our enterprising driver followed close. After about a kilometer the Chevrolet turned sharply into the grounds of a tiny hospital, and we were close enough behind to prevent the gates from being closed against us.

The Chevrolet drove up a steep slope, and then reversed toward a small hut with a bamboo roof and one open side, normally used as a laundry. We hurried from the jeep and reached the rear doors of the van while they were still closed. When they were thrown open, the CIA agent leapt out, yelling in English, "All right, let's get the hell out of here." It seemed inappropriate, since he could hardly have been addressing the two British journalists who stood on either side of the door.

Inside the van, on a stretcher, lay the body of Che Guevara. I had seen him once before, four years ago in Havana, and he was not a person whom one would forget easily. Since then, my personal memory of him had doubtless become mingled with the frequent photographs in the press, and I must confess that I had forgotten the blackness of his scanty beard. He seemed smaller, too, and thinner than I had remembered. But months in the jungle had clearly taken their toll. I wanted to reject the evidence of my eyes, but when they carried the body out and propped it up on a makeshift table in the hut, doubt became impossible. The shape of the beard, the design of the face, and the rich flowing hair were unmistakable. He was wearing olive-green battle dress and a zippered jacket. On his feet were faded green socks and a pair of apparently homemade moccasins. Since he was fully dressed it was not possible to see all his wounds. There were two obvious holes at the bottom of his neck, and later when they were cleaning his body I saw another wound in his stomach. I do not doubt that he had wounds in his legs and near his heart, but I did not see them.

Two doctors were probing the wounds in his neck and my first thought was that they were searching for the bullet, but in fact I believe that they were preparing to put in a tube for the formalin that would preserve his body. One of the doctors began cleaning his hands which were covered with blood, but otherwise there was nothing re-

pellent about the body. Che looked astonishingly alive. His eyes were open and bright, and the doctors slipped one of his arms out of his jacket without difficulty. I do not believe that he had been dead for many hours, and at the time I did not believe that he had been killed after his capture. I assumed that he had died of his wounds and lack of medical attention sometime in the early hours of that Monday morning.

The living group around the body was more repellent than the dead: A nun who could not help smiling and sometimes laughed aloud; officers who came with their expensive cameras to record the scene. And, of course, the agent from the CIA. He seemed to be in charge and looked furious whenever anyone pointed a camera in his direction, "Where do you come from?" we asked him in English, jokingly adding, "from Cuba, from Puerto Rico?" But he was not amused, and curtly replied in English, "from nowhere." Later we asked him again, but this time he replied in Spanish, "*Que dice?*" and pretended not to understand. He was a short, stocky man in his middle 30s. He had sunken piggy eyes and almost no hair. It was difficult to tell whether he was a North American or a Cuban exile, for he spoke English and Spanish with equal facility and with no trace of accent.

Fortunately, I was not the only witness of this scene. A correspondent of the news agency, Reuters, was also there and mentioned the CIA agent in his cable. But when his story appeared in *The New York Times*, the crucial paragraphs were missing.

## Debray and the Guerrillas

Long before the death of Che Guevara, the capture and subsequent trial of the Marxist philosopher, Régis Debray, in the small southeastern Bolivian oil town of Camiri, had given publicity to the guerrillas operating in that region. As a result, we probably know more about them than about any other guerrilla band on the continent. Part of the general interest in the Bolivian situation arose, of course, from the reappearance of Che Guevara, but the Bolivian guerrilla effort was also important as the first "new front" to be opened since the major setbacks suffered by most of the Latin American guerrilla movements in the period between 1964 and 1966.

The first initiatives were taken in the middle of 1966 by the Bolivian brothers Roberto ("Coco") and Guido ("Inti") Peredo. Like many other revolutionary movements in Latin America, the Bolivian guerrillas appear to have begun as a family affair; the three Vasquez brothers in Colombia are another example, as of course are Fidel and Raul Castro. Coco Peredo, the effective leader, appears to have been born about 1937, and although he attended the university of San Andrés in La Paz for a short time, he did not finish the course. Subsequently he became a taxi driver. According to one account, the guerrillas were primarily made up of miners (about 30 per cent). The next largest group were taxi drivers—Coco's friends.

In July, 1966, Coco Peredo approached a farmer named **Ciro Algaranaz**, who owned a small holding called Pincal some miles north of Lagunillas in southeast Bo-



livia, and asked him if he was prepared to sell. Algaranaz wanted something more than \$8,000, too much for the Peredos. Instead, they bought for about \$1,500 some land a little further to the north at Nancahuazú near the river of that name, from a certain Remberto Villa. On it was a small two-room hut with a corrugated iron roof, called the Casa Calamina.

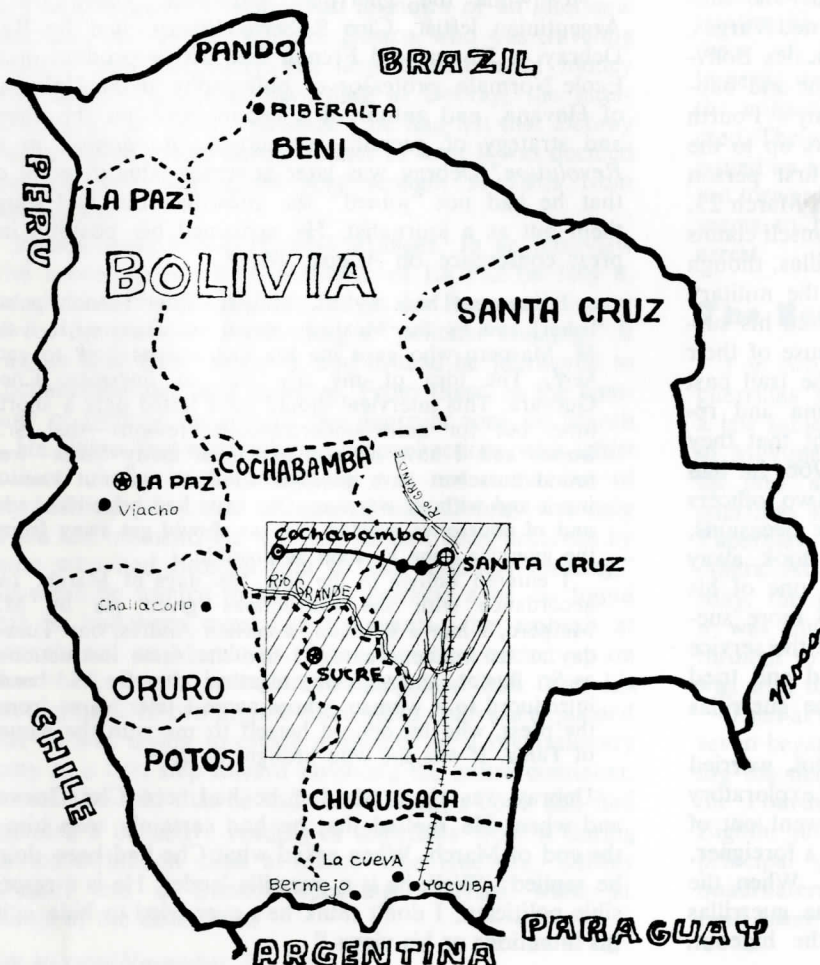
The area around Nancahuazú is characterized by hundreds of knife-edge hills bunched together and separated only by deep, impenetrable ravines filled with thick tropical vegetation. Lagunillas, the nearest settlement to Nancahuazú, consists of a central square with a few streets leading from it. The buildings, though quite impressive, are in various stages of decay. Boom time was in the twenties, when Lagunillas was the center of an important cattle-raising region. But that came to an end with the Chaco wars in the 1930s, and the town had been declining ever since—until the army arrived last April. An additional cause of the town's decay has been the growth of the oil industry based in Camiri, a drive of an hour and a half by jeep to the south. A thriving town of some 20,000 inhabitants, it has all the prosperity and vitality that Lagunillas lacks.

The Peredo brothers remained undisturbed on their land at Nancahuazú until March, 1967. During that period they constructed a guerrilla encampment on the further side of the river, laid in munitions and equipment,

and recruited men. The encampment is a march of about two hours from the Casa Calamina, up the winding gorges of the Nancahuazú. It is in a most cleverly chosen location and virtually impenetrable.

Exactly when Che Guevara became involved is not clear. According to what Régis Debray said in prison, the Bolivians asked him to be their leader. "Che did not come here by his own choice. He came because the Bolivians called him." In the early fifties he had been for a year or more a doctor in the Alto Beni, but he apparently spent most of 1966 traveling all over southeast Bolivia. This information was supplied by a guerrilla called "Camba," captured in late September. He also said that Guevara had spent 1965 in the Congo. (Che's diary comment was as follows: "Camba has been captured and since then seems to have been talking like a parrot.")

The Bolivian authorities tried to put over the notion that the guerrillas were a bunch of bandits from abroad, messing about in Bolivia's internal affairs. But in fact there seem to have been no more than seventeen Cubans with the guerrillas—who probably originally numbered about 200. Debray has said that approximately 10 per cent of the guerrillas were Cubans, and this figure looks substantially correct. "Who is more a foreigner in Bolivia," Debray replied, when asked about this in September, "the man born in Cordoba [Che Guevara was an Argentinian] or the man born in Missouri?"—a reference to





Gen. Robert Porter, the commanding officer of the United States forces in the Canal Zone, who just previously had paid a visit to Bolivia.

Coco and Inti Peredo both appear to have been members of the Bolivian Communist Party, though neither of them had very well thought-out ideological views. Inti was nearer to the Chinese position than Coco. (Their elder brother, Antonio, was closer to the Moscow line and did not join the guerrilla venture. He had been with the government radio at La Paz, but after the guerrilla outbreak found it difficult to get work. He left for Lima in the middle of 1967.)

Since the recent mysterious death of the pro-Peking miners' leader, Federico Escobar, the Chinese wing of the Communist movement in Bolivia has all but collapsed, and in fact neither of the two Communist parties now enjoys much support. Bolivians with leftist or Marxist views prefer the Partido Obrero Revolucionario (POR) led by the veteran Trotskyite, Guillermo Lora, or the Partido Revolucionario Izquierda Nacional (PRIN), with the miners' leader, Juan Lechín Oquendo, at its head. Another Marxist party, the Partido Izquierda Revolucionario (PIR) is cooperating with the government of General Barrientos. All these parties are small, weak and divided.

### Informers and Ambushes

There are a variety of conflicting accounts as to how the guerrillas at Nancahuazú were discovered. The simplest story is that one of their guides, a man named Vargas, employed by the Yacimientos Petroliferos Fiscales Bolivianos (YPFB) in Camiri, got drunk one night and babbled. Camiri is the headquarters of the army's Fourth Division. Subsequently, Vargas led the soldiers up to the encampment in Nancahuazú, and was the first person whom the guerrillas shot in the first ambush on March 23.

Ciro Algaranaz, owner of the Pincal farm, himself claims the honor of having first denounced the guerrillas, though this claim was made when he was held by the military authorities for suspected complicity. He had had his suspicions of them for some time, he said, because of their nocturnal activities. Loaded jeeps came up the trail past his farm on their way to the Casa Calamina and returned empty. At first Algaranaz had thought that they were cocaine smugglers and in December, 1966, he had denounced them as such to the military. Two officers inspected the Casa Calamina on two separate occasions, but found nothing suspicious. One of them took away Coco Peredo's revolver. Algaranaz then sent one of his employees to scout around, but this was no more successful, since the man, Tomás Rosales, was in the service of the guerrillas. Algaranaz was later arrested and tried alongside Debray, on charges of providing the guerrillas with food.

A third story is that a Cuban named Marcos, worried for the safety of Guevara, who had gone on an exploratory expedition to the north of the Rio Grande, went out of the camp at Nancahuazú and, because he was a foreigner, aroused suspicion in the neighboring villages. When the army came to investigate, a student with the guerrillas fired off a shot in fright, thus revealing the hideout.

According to Debray's evidence, Guevara got back on March 20, three days before the first ambush.

In any case, word would eventually have got out; indeed, considering the scale of their operations, it is surprising that the guerrillas managed to survive undetected for so long. By early March, tales were flying round La Paz to the effect that something strange was going on in the southeastern corner of the country. A member of the government told the Catholic newspaper, *Presencia*, that armed bands were forming in the Santa Cruz region (250 miles to the north of Lagunillas) organized by POR, PRIN and the pro-Chinese Communist Party. This news was subsequently denied by the government, but after two weeks of rumors about guerrillas and unusual troop movements, *Presencia* announced on March 21 that Castro-Communist guerrillas were operating in the country.

Two days later, troops investigating a reach of the Nancahuazú, upstream from the Casa Calamina, ran into a well-prepared ambush. In the narrow gorges, the army had little chance against the hidden guerrillas. Seven soldiers were killed and seven more captured, including a major and a captain. Two weeks later, on April 4, the military crossed the river from south to north and came upon the guerrillas' encampment—now deserted. On April 11, they ran into the second ambush at Iripiti, some miles downstream, where eleven soldiers were killed and nineteen under the command of Maj. Ruben Sanchez were captured. All prisoners were subsequently released.

Meanwhile the guerrillas had been joined by an Argentinian leftist, Ciro Roberto Bustos, and by Régis Debray, a 26-year-old French Marxist, a product of the Ecole Normale, professor of philosophy at the University of Havana, and author of a recent book on the theory and strategy of guerrilla movement, *Revolution in the Revolution?* Debray was later at some pains to point out that he had not "joined" the guerrillas but had sought them out as a journalist. He explained his position in a press conference on August 14:

I was sent here by M. Maspero [the French publisher] and by the Mexican magazine, *Sucesos*. It was M. Maspero who gave me the instructions how to get here. The idea of my trip was to interview Che Guevara. This interview should have lasted only a short time, but for quite understandable reasons—that Sr. Bustos and I have already explained many times—we found ourselves in a guerrilla situation without knowing it and without warning. Our exits had been blocked, and of course we insisted that we should get away from the guerrilla zone as soon as possible.

I entered Bolivia in the first few days of March. In accordance with the instructions given me by M. Maspero, I met a Bolivian, a certain Andrés, one Tuesday at six in the evening. I had the same instructions as Sr. Bustos, and we came together after we had been introduced to a woman, whose name I later learnt from the press, who introduced herself to me with the name of Tania. It was she who brought us here.

Debray was then asked if he had seen Che Guevara and when, He replied that he had certainly seen him at the end of March. When asked what Che had been doing, he replied: "Well, he is a guerrilla leader. He is a responsible politician. I don't think he's ever tried to hide either his intentions or his views."



"Was he organizing the guerrillas?" asked a persistent journalist. Debray replied that Guevara had been consulted and chosen by the Bolivians who had elected him freely. Guevara had accepted their offer.

Debray and Bustos left the guerrilla-controlled area of Ayango in the early hours of April 20, together with George Andrew Roth—a free-lance Anglo-Chilean photographer who had arrived the previous day. They were picked up by agents of the DIC (the Criminal Investigation Department) as they were walking down the main street of Muyupampa. A few moments after their capture, Debray was recognized by a certain Salustio "Choque Choque"—a former miner, soldier and recent deserter from the guerrillas. He claimed that he had seen Debray in the camp at Nancahuazú, and he denounced him as a guerrilla to the army. The three men were then handed over by the DIC to the military authorities. Choque Choque was one of the Bolivians who gave evidence against Debray at his trial.

Fortunately for the three men, a journalist from *Presencia* was in the town and took photographs of them. Otherwise they might have disappeared without trace. They were subsequently beaten up, dumped in various prisons, and held incommunicado until the beginning of July. It seems fairly clear that the army had actually received an order to kill Debray and that this was rescinded only after the arrival in Bolivia of his mother, Mme. Janine Debray, on May 6.

What exactly were Debray and Bustos doing? When they were captured, Debray had no notes of an interview with Che, and no photographs. Bustos, who was traveling under an assumed name, had large quantities of money sewn inside his jacket. According to Debray, the interview was in his head, and since Che had felt that Debray was bound to be questioned sooner or later it was decided that the films should be sent straight to Paris from Nancahuazú.

Bustos' story is a good deal stranger. In an interview with a correspondent of *El Diario* of La Paz on July 8, he admitted that he had arrived in La Paz on February 28 for the purpose of attending a "political meeting." It was not held there, however, and instead he journeyed to Cochabamba and then to Sucre. From there, in the company of Debray, he entered the guerrilla zone on March 6. He claims that although he had connections with leftist political circles in Argentina, he was not a member of any political party, and discovered who Debray was only at the last moment. He felt that he had been deceived by those who had brought him to the "political meeting," but when he wanted to leave the guerrilla zone, he found that he had been overtaken by events—the ambush at Nancahuazú on March 23. When Guevara turned up on March 20, Bustos immediately recognized him from his photographs. In two private discussions Guevara explained that he was trying to create a nucleus of a revolutionary army as a first step toward involving the entire continent. Bustos also said that he had read Debray's book and had attended a collective reading of selections from it during an indoctrination class at which Che Guevara, Debray himself, and a Quechua-speaking Bolivian were in charge of the discussion.

It must be emphasized that Bustos is not a wholly reliable witness. He has told a number of conflicting stories, and in the weeks immediately preceding the trial refused to see the press, which by this time was seeking clarifications. In addition, nobody knows whether, and if so to what extent, he has been collaborating with the military authorities. The main charge against him on this score is that he drew some ten or twenty sketches from memory of leading guerrillas, which are now in the hands of the army. They are astonishingly accurate. It is also often said that he received better treatment than the other prisoners. Lending color to these stories is a belief that his two infant daughters may be in the hands of the Argentine police. Bearing all these rumors in mind, one has to take anything Bustos says with a good deal more than a grain of salt.

One other figure in the story deserves mention. Jorge Vásquez Viana was a university student and a son of one of Bolivia's most distinguished historians. It may have been he who fired the frightened random shot in March and alerted the soldiers. He is said to have been shot by a farmer in May while trying to collect food. He was captured by the army, taken to hospital and fed through a tube for fifteen days at the end of which time he underwent a ten-hour operation. One story alleges that he was then interviewed by United States intelligence in the person of a Puerto Rican, who was so clever that he persuaded Vásquez to believe him an emissary from Fidel. Vásquez thus felt free to discuss the presence of Che in Nancahuazú. He was reported to be extremely defiant, treating his captors with the utmost contempt and accusing them of having "sold" themselves to United States imperialism. Later, he was taken from the hospital by the military and, it is said, beaten so severely that he died. The army gave out the story that he had escaped, and issued an appeal to him to give himself up. His name was put forward for trial with Debray and the others. But there seems to be little doubt that he was killed while under arrest.

## The Band on the Run

For two months, from March 23 until June 4, the guerrillas remained in the area of Nancahuazú, making a few sallies to the east, to the railway, and to the south, to Muyupampa and Monteagudo. They must have split up into small groups, for by the middle of April, guerrillas had been reported in the zones of Yacunday, Taperillas, Caripote, Ticucha, El Meson, Iti, Itimiri and others. At all these places there were minor clashes. In May, the guerrillas appeared in still other regions and it was about this time that word began to percolate through to official circles in La Paz that Che Guevara was with them.

Then at the beginning of June, a group of about twenty-seven began moving northward up the railway line, reaching the neighborhood of Abapo—out of the clutches of the Fourth Division of the army into the area of the Eighth, just north of the Rio Grande. Since then, the principal group has been operating within a rough quadrilateral, bordered on the north by the asphalted road from Santa Cruz to Cochabamba; on the west by





the bad but passable road from Mataral through Vallegrande to Pucara; to the south by the Rio Grande, and to the east by the Santa Cruz-Yacuiba railway. The area has two important rivers, both of which flow into the Rio Grande; the Masicuri flowing south and the Moroco west. The whole region is mountainous, covered in jungle, and broken up by deep ravines. There are virtually no roads; only paths and occasional beaten trails. Very few people live there.

On July 3, a *campesino* told the military unit at Bermejo that the guerrillas were in this very difficult country. However, Col. Reque Teran, since May the commander of the Fourth Division based in Camiri, believed that there were still some twenty guerrillas left in the zone of Nanchahuazú, and so the beginning of July saw "Operation Cynthia"—named after his daughter—which was designed to mop up this group that had been left behind.

The main party in Reque Teran's area consisted of about ten guerrillas led by the Cuban "Joaquin," and included the girl Tania. They appear to have been extremely hard pressed during July and August. Tania was believed to be very ill, having nightmares, and may well have been on the verge of a nervous breakdown. One story concerning their adventures is worth repeating. The guerrillas had gone to a small farm and bought some food from the peasant who lived there. They tried to win him over to their cause. "When the National Liberation Army triumphs," they said, "you will have tractors, schools, and even a university."

"What's a university?" asked the peasant.

The spokesman for the guerrillas replied that it was a place where high school students went to study.

"And who are high school students?"

"Those who have finished secondary school."

"And where are they going to come from?"

"They will have to come from you, yourselves."

And the guerrillas went on their way. Che was not a member of this group, but at some stage during those months he wrote in his diary that the peasants were like rocks. "When you look into their eyes you can see that they don't believe."

On July 6, at ten o'clock in the evening, the northernmost group of guerrillas moved into Las Cuevas, on the Santa Cruz-Cochabamba road. The authorities in Santa Cruz became aware of this and telephoned the military unit in Samaipata to move along the road to Las Cuevas. The guerrillas, however, listened in on the telephone conversation and were aware of the troop movements. They commandeered a bus—full, apparently, of students from the university of Oruro—and just after midnight arrived in Samaipata. The officer in charge there was at that moment issuing ammunition to his troops. He heard the sound of a motor and, without picking up his rifle, went out to investigate. Apparently in the subsequent scuffle a rifle went off. A soldier was killed and Guevara was nicked, narrowly escaping serious injury. The guerrillas stopped at the telegraph office on the main road, tore down the wires and inquired where they could find drugs. They wanted something for asthma (from which Che suffered), and antibiotics.

### Trapped in the River

Meanwhile, the group of ten, which included Tania and Joaquin, had been moving north, out of the encircling net cast by Col. Reque Teran. They reappeared on August 29 in Puesto Mauricio, on the east bank of the Masicuri just where it flows into the Rio Grande some way upstream from the Nanchahuazú. At six o'clock in the evening the dogs began to bark in the little farm, and three or four guerrillas appeared. They found three peasants there eating their evening meal. The guerrillas bought a few things from the peasants, meanwhile holding them prisoner. What they did not know was that these peasants were soldiers in disguise.

One of them managed to escape and walked through the night barefoot to La Laja. The troops there hurried back to Puesto Mauricio, where the ranch owner said that he had agreed to show the guerrillas where to cross the river the following day. So the officer placed six men on one side of the river and twenty-three on the other, and they waited from six in the morning till five at night. Then one guerrilla, "Braulio," appeared. He crossed the river and looked to see if all was well. Then he waved to the others to follow—ten in all. When they were all in the river, the shooting began. They tried to throw off their rucksacks to fire back, but it was impossible in the breast-high water. The last two, Tania and Joaquin, were able to fire back, but only momentarily.

The death of Tania and Joaquin was the first really serious blow that the guerrillas had suffered in five months of fighting. Joaquin was a veteran from the Sierra Maestra; on hearing of Tania's death, Che wrote in his diary that he felt as though he had lost a child. Tania carried an Argentine passport, but one story says she came from Sucre. In the early stages of the guerrilla preparations, she ran a "Miss Lonelyhearts" radio show



in Camiri, using it as a means of communication to the guerrillas.

About this time, the northern group, led by Che and Coco Peredo, reappeared near La Laja. It moved toward Citanas and, finally on September 24, entered the small hamlet of Alto Seco. At five o'clock in the morning, when the first villagers emerged, they found that their whole village had been taken over by the guerrillas. The first thing the strangers did was to inquire for the telephone, which was in the house of the magistrate. They entered the house and cut the line, although in fact the telephone had not been working for some weeks. About an hour later the guerrilla "chief" arrived. The local peasants said that he came on a mule. He was of medium height, with long hair. It seemed that he was ill, as they had to help him dismount.

The guerrillas bought food and clothing and then set up camp about 200 meters from the village in an abandoned and half-destroyed house. There were between twenty-five and thirty of them and they spent the day resting. That evening at 8:30 they organized a meeting in the school, presided over by Coco Peredo and Che Guevara. Coco spoke first:

You must think that we're mad to fight like this. They say that we are bandits, but in fact we are fighting for you, for the working class, for the workers who earn little, while the soldiers get large wages. You are only working for them. What have they ever done for you? Why, only just now we cut the telephone, thinking that it worked. Now it appears that it didn't even work. Here you don't have water; you don't have electric light. You have been abandoned like all Bolivians. That's why we're fighting.

Coco finished by appealing to his listeners to join up with the guerrillas until "the final overthrow of Barrientos." But Guevara interrupted him: "We want you to come of your own free will, not by force. We never use force, but anyone who wants to come will be well received."

Then Che began his speech. He said that the bodies of Tania and Joaquin and the other guerrillas killed in the ambush at the end of August and exhibited by the army in Vallegrande were false. "The army says that it has killed Joaquin and others of our comrades. But this is a lie; it's only army propaganda. The corpses they showed in Vallegrande were brought from the cemeteries. They didn't kill guerrillas. This I can assure you because only a couple of days ago I was in communication with Joaquin."

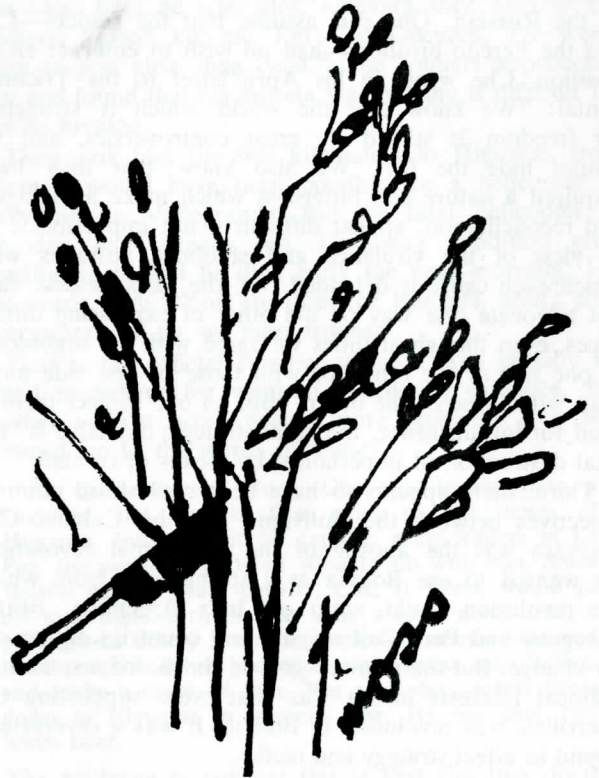
After talking for half an hour, Che wound up his speech: "In every country we shall continue fighting to liberate it from American oppression. You have heard of Santo Domingo. It is a country like Bolivia. There, the Americans went in and killed many peasants who were only asking for a better life. The same will happen here. That's why we're fighting."

Later in the evening, one of the peasants approached a young beardless guerrilla and asked whether he could join. "Don't be crazy," came the reply, "can't you see that we've had it? Why, we don't even know how to get out of here." The following day the band sallied forth in the direction of Higuera, but there on September 26

they ran into the Bolivian army. Coco and two others (one of them the Cuban Antonio) were killed.

Things were indeed very difficult for the guerrillas at this stage, owing to the fact that Colonel Zenteno, the commander of the Eighth Division and former foreign minister, had thrown into the fight 600 fresh Bolivian "Ranger" troops, who had just completed their training with United States Special Forces. And in September, also, the guerrillas suffered perhaps their most disastrous blow—the discovery of the urban network that had financed and supported them.

Ever since March, the army had had remarkable luck in turning up guerrilla caches hidden in the jungle. In August, they were led to another by an informer or guerrilla renegade called Hugo Choque Silva. In this they found among a number of photographs one of an exceptionally attractive girl, taken at the camp at Nancahuazú where she sits between Coco and Inti Peredo. The photograph was handed over to the DIC, and they identified her as Loyola Guzman, a philosophy student at the University of San Andrés in La Paz. They seized her and held her for twenty days before making her whereabouts known. In the meantime, not knowing that she had been captured, the guerrillas continued to send her messages. The authorities were finally forced to announce that they had caught her after she had tried to commit suicide by jumping out of a third-floor window. She had been the treasurer of the guerrilla movement and, apart from Tania, was the only girl who had gone out to the guerrillas with money and messages. On one occasion she walked for four or five days into the jungle to find them. Many other people were arrested with her. Thus by the time of the two clashes near Higuera—one on September 26 when Coco died and the other on October 8 when





Che was wounded—the guerrillas were already dead as an effective political force.

## Security, Tactics and Ideology

What went wrong? First, the guerrillas seem to have had extremely slipshod security arrangements. Much of the urban network appears to have been run by university students who were not accustomed to keeping their mouths shut. Altogether too much photography went on in the camp at Nancahuazú. Doubtless they all wished to register the fact of their presence with the guerrillas for posterity, and obviously they assumed that they were going to win. Nevertheless, a zeal for snapshots does seem to have been a major tactical error. In addition, one story suggests that the Cubans left the burying of the documents to unreliable elements among the Bolivians, who told the army where the things were hidden.

Second, there were serious differences among the guerrillas. Debray has stated that he had some disagreement with them about the strategy outlined in his book, particularly with regard to military tactics. He is on record as preferring a mobile strategy with no fixed bases, whereas the Bolivians preferred the idea of setting up "liberated areas" as the Vietcong have done, and as the Colombian guerrillas did some years ago. The first is somewhat negative, since it would thus seem that the guerrillas' only task is to survive. The second is more dangerous because it enables the army to concentrate its force against a single area. The guerrilla must then choose between fighting and losing or abandoning the peasants whom he has recruited to the brunt of the army's attack.

A more serious difference appears to have arisen between the guerrillas and the Communists. And the Chinese faction seems to have been as much to blame as the Russian. One can assume that the leaders—Che and the Peredo brothers—had no wish to embrace either position. Che wrote in his April letter to the Tricontinental: "We know that the world which is struggling for freedom is stirred by great controversies, and we cannot hide the fact. We also know that they have acquired a nature and bitterness which make a dialogue, and reconciliation, appear difficult if not impossible. . . . In view of the virulence and stubborn attitudes with which each cause is defended, we, the dispossessed, cannot advocate one way or the other of expressing differences, even though at times we agree with the arguments of one side or the other, or with those of one side more than with those of the other." But on one subject there is need for intransigence, the great strategic objective is "the total destruction of imperialism by means of combat."

Third, there appears to have been a clash on ultimate objectives between the Bolivians and the Cubans. Che Guevara was the apostle of the continental revolution. He wanted to use Bolivia as a springboard from which the revolution could jump off into Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Peru—all neighboring countries crying out for change. But the primary goal of the Bolivians, and the political interests in La Paz that were supporting the guerrillas, was revolution in Bolivia. It was a divergence, bound to affect strategy and tactics.

All this might not have mattered if Bolivia had been a country in a more revolutionary situation. But one may question just how revolutionary Bolivia is at the present moment. If it is so inclined, its situation is unique among revolutionary countries in that it went through a revolution that was real enough only fifteen years ago.

At that time, the upper classes fled; the army was disbanded; and by means of enfranchisement and agrarian reform large numbers of Indians—the predominant element in the population—were brought into the framework of a modern society. But the direction of the revolu-



Bolivian miner

tion was at best uncertain, and the leaders soon fell out among themselves. The Movimiento Nacional Revolucionario, the great party that had pioneered these changes, splintered under the corrupting pressures of power. Its leaders are now in exile.

The developing effect of the agrarian reform, and the attitude of the peasants toward it today, is the more important because the miners, the other potentially radical element in Bolivian society, are temporarily out of the struggle. Until recently, the miners appeared to be solidly behind the guerrillas. Propaganda in favor of the armed struggle poured out from the radio stations in the mines. Within the great tin mine at Siglo Veinte there was a shooting range at which miners trained for guerrilla warfare. At union meetings, miners were urged to give money to the guerrilla cause.

But last June President Barrientos clamped down. The radio transmitters were silenced, and dozens of uninvolved people were shot along with miners. Apart from those who have been driven by unemployment to join the



guerrillas, support by the miners is now more tacit than active, although a large proportion of the army is needed to keep them neutralized.

The peasants are more an unknown quantity, for it is almost impossible to assess the impact of the agrarian reform initiated by the 1952 revolution. It reached certain regions successfully, but in others was abortive, and in some places never penetrated at all. It would be surprising if the picture were different: problems of subsistence agriculture cannot be solved simply by passing a law.

But more serious than simple backwardness and procrastinations is the fact that since 1964, when Barrientos drove his former leader, Victor Paz Estenssoro, from the country, the old landowners have in some places been creeping back, from Argentina and elsewhere, to reclaim their land and their hold over the peasantry. There are indications that in some areas administration of the post-revolutionary laws now benefits the landlord more than the peasant, and in many cases peasants are having to buy their land, instead of acquiring it by right. Unobtrusively, radical leaders of peasant unions have been replaced by more pliable men.

All this, if it is taking place on a large scale, could eventually produce a critical disaffection in the population, but one must conclude that at present much of the peasantry is too cynical, if not actually demoralized by unkept promises, to be an effectively radical political force. The rest are probably happy with the gains already made, and content for the moment to support Barrientos, who can never openly oppose the achievements of the 1952 revolution, which he helped to make, however much he may be bringing back the pre-1952 men to bolster his own rather shaky political position. In some regions, Barrientos can actually rally armed peasants to demonstrate against the guerrillas.

The fact that the agrarian reforms in some circumstances operate against the peasant is an obvious parallel with the situation in South Vietnam in the 1950s when land reform, by reinforcing the power of the landlords, actually increased the alienation of rural population from the Diem regime. And like Vietnam, Bolivia has been propped up, both financially and militarily, by the United States. Its economy has been in the hands of Americans ever since 1952: military assistance began in 1958, under President Siles Zuazo, just at the time when the miners were being deprived of their weapons and the People's Militias—set up by Paz Estenssoro—were being dissolved.

In 1965 anti-guerrilla training began. Then it was called "counterinsurgency"; now it is "internal defense and development." The Americans trained two regiments at Viacho (La Paz) to look after the capital. Then one alpine battalion was trained and based at Challacollo (Oruro) to watch the mines. A Ranger battalion was placed in Cochabamba to control the peasants, and a group schooled in river tactics was set down in the far north at Riberalta, the Americans having been led to believe that this was the area where guerrillas were coming in from Peru. Finally, this year, another Ranger battalion was trained at La Esperanza outside Santa Cruz.

In the middle of September, before the death of Coco

Peredo and Che, when the outlook of the guerrillas still looked reasonably rosy, I asked a Catholic priest whether Bolivia might be developing into a new Vietnam. He laughed and said, No, this wasn't really necessary. The Americans did not have to send in arms and troops. They needed only to supply intelligence agents.

I am sure this is the key to the course of events in Bolivia. It is most unlikely that the urban network was discovered by the unaided efforts of Bolivian military intelligence. It seems improbable that the Bolivians thought up the idea of sowing the guerrilla zone with soldiers dressed up as peasants. And the evidence that Guevara was in Bolivia, which the Bolivian Foreign Minister presented at a recent OAS conference, was almost certainly obtained by men who were not Bolivians. On the day Guevara died, and the week before as well, the CIA was well represented in Vallegrande.

## The Death of Che

Only two points remain: The mystery surrounding the actual circumstance of Guevara's death, and the effect that the Bolivian failure will have on the future theory and practical development of the armed struggle. The battle which ended in Che Guevara's death began at about 1:30 in the afternoon of Sunday, October 8. About seventeen guerrillas, led by Che, were in a narrow valley about 2 kilometers from Higuera and 30 from Vallegrande. A group of Rangers spotted them and opened fire. Che was hit in the legs and his rifle knocked from his hand. Willy, an ex-miner, managed to get Guevara onto a mule, and while his comrades gave covering fire, escaped with him from the valley. But when they paused to rest, other soldiers appeared. Willy reached for his gun—too late; he was shot. Guevara then said to the soldiers: "Don't kill me. I'm Che Guevara. I'm worth more to you alive than dead." The soldiers approached him and found that his asthma was making it difficult for him to breathe.

They took him the few kilometers to Higuera, from where it would have been possible for a helicopter to carry him to Vallegrande. But the final helicopter of the day had already left. Guevara's condition grew steadily worse and he died early the next morning. His last words were, "You are from the Rangers, aren't you? Everywhere we go, we meet troops."

That is the official version, which I was initially inclined to believe for want of conflicting evidence. But another version now appears more probable. It is best summed up in the words of *Time*:

At Quebrada del Yuro, Che was loaded onto a stretcher and carried five miles to the town of Higuera. Informed of his capture, army leaders in La Paz, the capital, wondered what to do with him. Since Bolivia has no death penalty, Che, at worst, would go off to prison—perhaps only after a long, noisy trial, a propaganda outcry from the whole Communist bloc and the threat that other guerrillas might streak into Bolivia and make a cause of him. The next day, orders came down to Higuera to execute Che. He was shot two hours later.

The evidence to support this is that the two doctors



who examined his body on the Monday said there was a bullet through his heart that would have killed him almost instantaneously. Therefore there could have been no question of his having died of his untended wounds. The doctors later withdrew these remarks, probably under pressure from the military. Additional evidence was provided by the correspondent in La Paz of the Chilean Communist daily paper, *El Siglo*:

The assassination of Che Guevara, at the order of the Bolivian military leaders, was effected with the direct participation of the CIA. A CIA agent, of Cuban origin, who had once fought in the Sierra Maestra, where he had known Che, had the task of identifying Guevara before the order to kill him had been fulfilled. The CIA agent was taken to where Che was, in a little hut in Higuera guarded by six Bolivian officers, and it was he who informed Che of the decision to kill him.

"Then, tell them to aim straight," replied Che.

The CIA man left the hut with one of the officers and told them officially of his conclusion: "It's Che." The officer returned and gave the order. Guevara was shot, standing upright, with a serene and defiant attitude, and with his right hand holding his pipe in his mouth.

When I was in Vallegrande, we were led to understand that two CIA men were in the town. The one that we saw was called Ramos. He, however, spent the morning in Vallegrande, and presumably was not present at the death of Che. Circumstantial evidence—a hotel register in La Paz—suggests that he carried a United States passport, but was accompanied by a man who was a Cuban.

## The Future of Resistance

It is easy to conclude that with the death of Guevara and the virtual annihilation of the Bolivian guerrillas the strategy of the armed struggle is over. But this would be to overestimate the effect of setbacks on the minds of Latin America's would-be guerrillas. The prospect for violent revolution has never looked particularly rosy anywhere on the continent. Before March, when the Bolivian guerrillas first became news, guerrilla movements were in a state of re-reat. In Peru they had been wiped out. In Venezuela, Colombia and Guatemala they were on the defensive, facing internal dissensions, as well as the external enemy. And yet in spite of these discouragements many people were prepared to support the armed struggle. The outbreak in Bolivia and the foundation of the Organization for Latin American Solidarity (OLAS) encouraged them, and the failure of the first and the im-

potence of the second are unlikely to deter those with revolutionary fire in their bellies. For such people, the death of Guevara will be an inspiration and a challenge, rather than proof that the strategy is wrong.

Some have already begun to argue that Guevara was mistaken to choose Bolivia, where the peasants are essentially conservative and eager to hold onto such gains as the 1952 revolution gave them. But this is to miss the point: the armed struggle seeks to "create the conditions" for a successful revolution. According to the thesis of Debray, the guerrillas must not be afraid to venture into areas where they cannot really move around "like fish in the water." In eastern Bolivia, in any case, there is very little "water." The guerrilla zone was notable for its lack of population. Certainly some of the peasants whom the guerrillas encountered were hostile, but no more so than those in Cuba during the first six months in the Sierra Maestra. The initial stages of a guerrilla operation are invariably the most difficult—in Argentina one such was destroyed in Salta even before it had emerged from the secret stage. The Bolivian guerrillas were unlucky not to have survived longer, for although Bolivia is not a typical military dictatorship, and President Barrientos is not cast in the same "gorilla" mold as Onganía and Costa de Silva—the Presidents of Argentina and Brazil—the country is still in a potentially revolutionary situation.

The gains of the *campesinos* as a result of the land reform are by no means secure. Today, they may be indifferent, but tomorrow they will have to fight if they are to retain their rights. The present government, whatever its outward appearance, is fundamentally hostile to the interests of peasants and miners. The situation in the mines is almost a textbook case of capitalist oppression: the army has moved in, wages have been halved, the trade unions have been destroyed. Discontent is widespread, but lacks an effective outlet.

In these circumstances, the guerrillas' analysis of Bolivia's revolutionary potential was not so wide of the mark. Their mistake, perhaps, was to fail to consider how the spark from their center was to set the country ablaze. They chose for their effort to "create the conditions" for revolution an area of peasant indifference, and that made their lives in the jungle exceptionally hazardous. Even Che Guevara, the most important exponent of guerrilla warfare since Mao and Giap, the most romantic revolutionary figure since Leon Trotsky, and the greatest Latin American since Bolívar, found the task beyond him.