



*“Today a New Stage Begins”:
Che Guevara in Bolivia*

by Robert W. Jones, Jr.

On 7 November 1966, Ernesto “Che” Guevara began his diary with the entry, “Today a new stage begins.”¹ Disguised as a bald man with large glasses, Che using the name Adolfo Mena González, an Organization of American States researcher, entered Bolivia to launch a revolution.² He had dreamed of bringing his version of revolution to the heartland of South America while he was fighting in the Sierra Maestras of Cuba a decade earlier:

*I’ve got a plan. If some day I have to carry the revolution to the continent [South America], I will set myself up in the selva [forest or jungle] at the frontier between Bolivia and Brazil. I know the spot pretty well because I was there as a doctor. From there it is possible to put pressure on three or four countries and, by taking advantage of the frontiers and the forests you can work things so as never to be caught.*³

Foco Theory in a Thumbnail

Based on the Cuban revolutionary experience Che Guevara’s *Foco* Theory had three major tenets:

- 1 - A small cadre of agile and dedicated fighters becomes a “vanguard” or *foco* raising popular discontent against a government.
- 2 - The *foco* can then increase and manipulate the discontent, leading to a general revolt against the government.
- 3 - The best place to begin the fight is from rural areas and then expand upon gaining strength.¹

Endnotes

- 1 Ernesto Guevara (introduction by Marc Becker), *Che Guevara on Guerrilla Warfare* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 8; Daniel James, *Che Guevara A Biography* (New York: Stein and Day, 1969), 129.

Cuba became the advocate of “wars of national liberation” when 400 delegates of the newly formed Organization of Solidarity of Asian, African, and Latin American Peoples (called the *Tricontinental*) met in Havana in January 1966. A central topic of discussion was Che Guevara’s revolutionary concept. Fidel Castro publicly committed himself to this new international revolutionary movement and subsequently created the Latin American Solidarity Organization (OLAS) to control and coordinate revolutionary activities in the Western Hemisphere, with Cuba in a leadership role.⁴

Within this new framework, Che Guevara was given a major role in coordinating a revolutionary act in South America. Following his failure in the Congo, Che needed time to recover. While abroad he had become an international Communist “boogey man,” mysteriously disappearing and reappearing. U.S. and allied intelligence agencies searched for him in the Dominican Republic, Venezuela, and Colombia.

Che firmly believed that the only way to break free of imperialist oppression was to involve the United States. Multiple simultaneous uprisings in Latin America

would lead to the final defeat of the ultimate enemy, the United States. “It is the road of Vietnam; it is the road that should be followed by the people; it is the road that will be followed in Our America. . . The Cuba Revolution will today have the job of. . . creating a Second or Third Vietnam of the world.”⁵ His dilemma was where to start.

Che considered several countries, particularly Peru and his native Argentina. However, Bolivia seemed to be the best candidate, based on Cuban intelligence reports and his personal experiences. As a young man traveling through Latin America, Che stopped in Bolivia in 1953, the year after the Bolivian Revolution and was impressed by the move toward radical social reforms. Since then he became convinced that politicians, generals, and the United States had corrupted the Bolivian Revolution. However, Che’s intelligence regarding Bolivian social conditions in 1967 was highly inaccurate.

Two Bolivian communists, Roberto “Coco” Peredo Liegue and Guido “Inti” Peredo Liegue, were his primary sources of misperception. They reinforced his earlier analysis during visits to Cuba in 1962 and again in 1965.⁶ They, like many other Bolivian communists, related stories of widespread dissent with the regime of President Rene Barrientos. They ignored the fact that Barrientos had won the election with more than 60% of the vote.⁷ Guevara accepted the popular consensus that the Bolivian military was one of the most poorly organized in Latin America.⁸ All of these elements convinced Che that Bolivia was the best candidate for a *foco*.



A copy of Che’s false Uruguayan passport identifying him as “Adolfo Mena González.”

Che’s revolution would begin in the *corazón*, the “heart” of South America – Bolivia.⁹ The Cuban revolutionary experience in the Sierra Maestras would be the template to spread insurgency throughout the South American continent. First, the *foco* would be established with Cuban leadership and military support. Second, after organizing his *foco*, building base camps and a logistical cache, and training guerrillas would begin. Then small groups of guerrillas, using “hit and run” tactics, would harass the Bolivian Army and police. As the guerrillas became more effective, the Bolivian army had to disperse to protect towns and infrastructure. This strategy made the Army even more vulnerable to attacks. As this Cuban-led revolutionary vanguard grew in strength it would gain more support from the *campesinos*, farmers, and miners.



Haydée Tamara Bunke Bider, AKA "Tania," the Argentine-East German Communist, became one of Guevara's main agents in Bolivia. (Above

counterclockwise, her Communist Party of Cuba membership card from the Ministry of Education; a photo in her Cuban revolutionary beret; and at the Nanchahuazú camp taking photographs.)

Victories would demonstrate their ability to defeat the army and improve their legitimacy.

Eventually, the *foco* would gain enough strength to strike three of Bolivia's major cities: Cochabamba, Santa Cruz, and Sucre. Once the guerrillas isolated or controlled these cities, they effectively split the country. Part of the strategy would be to sever the railroad line to Argentina and the major oil pipeline between Santa Cruz and Camiri, further isolating the country.¹⁰

As the guerrilla movement gained strength and momentum, Che was convinced that the United States would send military advisors as they did in the Republic of Vietnam. Conventional units would follow the advisors. Che hoped to increase U.S. military obligations in Latin America. As the second and third "Vietnam" erupted, the American army would rapidly exhaust itself in a vain attempt to support counterinsurgency efforts.¹¹ From Inti Peredo's perspective: "As they become incapable of defeating us, the U.S. Marines will intervene, and imperialism will unleash all its deadly power. Then our struggle will become identical with the one being waged by the Vietnamese people."¹² This was only a beginning to foster regional insurgencies.

Once the Bolivian guerrilla vanguard was firmly established, it would train and support other revolutionary movements (*focos*) in Peru, Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay. The Peruvian *foco* was scheduled for the end of 1967. Eventually Che predicted that the Bolivian *foco* would defeat the government and, like Cuba, establish a revolutionary government. The *focos* still needed support, and Bolivia would become a sanctuary for the various groups. Bolivia would be the first to fall, triggering subsequent collapses to create a South American "domino effect."

There were several elements in the organization of the Bolivian *foco*. The nucleus was the Cuban revolutionary fighters. The majority of the *foco* would be locals, drawn from the ranks of the Bolivian Communist Party (BCP). The combined element would be called the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional de Bolivia* (ELNB, or National Liberation Army of Bolivia). The ELNB had to plan and build a large support network. Cuba provided the monetary and weapons support for the ELNB. Behind the scenes was a network of agents collecting intelligence and providing logistics assistance, some of whom had been in place for years. The majority of the clandestine support apparatus was built around Cuban agents coordinating with the Bolivian Communist Party in La Paz. However, there were two key foreign players, Haydée Tamara Bunke Bider and Régis Debray who played significant roles as special agents for the Bolivian *foco*.

A young woman of dual Argentine-East German nationality, Haydée Tamara Bunke Bider was best known by her code-name, "Tania." After meeting Che Guevara in East Germany in 1960, she became enthralled with his revolutionary ideas. Tania subsequently traveled to Cuba where she became active in the Cuban revolutionary movement and was recruited and trained as an agent for the Bolivia mission.¹³ Tania went to Bolivia in 1964 under the alias Laura Gutiérrez Bauer to establish contacts among the Bolivian upper class. In her cover as a researcher of indigenous folk music and as a German tutor for wealthy children, she began collecting strategic and tactical information.¹⁴ Through her network of contacts and Communist "fellow travelers" Tania obtained Bolivian press credentials for Che Guevara, Régis Debray, and Ciro Roberto Bustos (a Cuban agent from Argentina).¹⁵ In La Paz she hosted a radio advice program for the lovelorn and used it to send coded messages to Cuban intelligence. Tania was a triple agent who also worked for the Soviet KGB and the East German secret police, the "Stasi."¹⁶ The importance of her role in the Bolivian *foco* has become almost as mythologized as that of Che Guevara. The second "agent provocateur" was a French intellectual.



Régis Debray, a French Marxist theorist and intellectual. While in Bolivia he soon tired of life as a revolutionary on the ground.

Régis Debray was a Marxist theorist and "wannabe" revolutionary in his mid twenties. The Debray family was wealthy and well connected and enjoyed a high position in French society. His father was a prominent lawyer and his mother served on the Paris city council. He had obtained a position as a professor of philosophy at the University

of Havana.¹⁷ While he was there he wrote, *Revolution Within a Revolution*, chronicling the Cuban Revolution as the harbinger of a new revolutionary model for Latin America and the world.¹⁸ Cuban intelligence sent him to Bolivia to write a geopolitical analysis and gather intelligence.

Debray traveled to Bolivia in September 1966 posing as a journalist and professor “whose mission is to make a geopolitical study of the chosen zone in the Beni.”¹⁹ His travels did not go unnoticed “he [Debray] had been sighted moving around the Bolivian countryside—in Cochabamba, in the Chapare and in the Alto Beni—all regions that had been under discussion by the Cubans as possible guerrilla sites.”²⁰ He collected maps and answered Che’s questions through intermediaries in Cuba.²¹ Simultaneously, other agents supporting the effort made arrangements for the *foco*.²²

Following the template for the Cuban Revolution, agents purchased a ranch/farm in Bolivia to serve as a *foco* base. In June 1966 the Peredo brothers bought a 3,000-acre farm for 30,000 Bolivian *pesos* (about \$2,500) near Ñancahuazú in the rugged southeastern region of Bolivia. It was dubbed the *casa calamina* (the “zinc house” or “tin house” for its shiny metal roof). Located fifty miles north of Camiri, the Ñancahuazú farm sat in a very rough environment in a sparsely populated area.²³

Recruitment of Bolivians for the *foco* began in the summer of 1966. Mario Monje Molina, head of the Bolivian Communist



Bolivia with the guerrilla “Red Zone” framed. One of the justifications for selecting the Ñancahuazú area was easy access to borders and population despite the fact that the terrain canalizes traffic to river valleys or the few roads. Map by D. Telles.



Moisés Guevara Rodríguez (right) was a mine labor leader who led a breakaway Maoist faction of Bolivian Communists. Orlando (“Antonio”) Pantoja Tamayo (left) was a veteran of the Sierra Maestras and the Chief of Cuba’s Border Guard. This photo was probably taken in camp in late March 1967. Notice Guevara’s fresh look compared to Antonio’s haggard appearance after the “Long March.”

Party, promised twenty men from his organization. Moisés Guevara Rodríguez, the Maoist mine labor leader, was another source of manpower.²⁴ While the Bolivians would form the bulk of the new insurgency, Che planned to use Cuban veterans to train and lead the local recruits until they could assume responsibility for liberating their country.²⁵ Recruiting was a constant problem for the Cuban-led organization.

The Cuban veterans began infiltrating from Havana through various Eastern Bloc countries. They then continued their journey using new identities and false passports to enter different Latin America cities before slipping into Bolivia.²⁶ The incremental deployment of the Cubans lasted through 1966. Che Guevara entered Bolivia on 3 November 1966.²⁷

Che Guevara’s revolutionary dream was to liberate the Latin American people independent of Soviet influence. This supported the *Tricontinental* philosophy of an alliance of revolutionary

Some of the Key Guerrillas and Their Nicknames/Pseudonyms

One confusing aspect of Che's *Bolivian Diary* is the number of pseudonyms or nicknames used by the group members. Many had two or more nicknames. It is not known if this was a security move to disguise the names or to conceal the number of guerrillas.

Ernesto "Che" Guevara de la Serna =	Ramón, Mongo, Fernando, Fernández
Régis Debray =	Dantón, El Frances, Debre
Haydée Tamara Bunke-Bider =	Tania, María, Mary, Tamara, Laura
Juan Vitalio Acuña Nuñez =	Joaquín, Vilo
Ciro Roberto Bustos =	Carlos, Pelao, Mauricio
Juan Pablo Chang Navarro =	Chino, El Chino, Francisco, Emilio, Emiliano
Octavio de la Concepción de la Pedraja =	Moro, El Médico, Morogoro, Munganga, Mugambo, Tavito
Moisés Guevara Rodríguez =	Armando, Guevara, Moisés
José María Martínez Tamayo =	Papi, Ricardo, Chinchu, Mbili
Roberto Peredo Liegue =	Coco
Guido Alvaro Peredo Liegue =	Inti
Jorge Vázquez Machicado =	Bigotes, Loro, Jorge
Harry Villegas Tamayo =	Pombo, Carlos

A typical village in the Ñancahuazú area. In this area any stranger would be immediately noticed.

governments in the Western Hemisphere with Fidel Castro as the ideological leader.²⁸ As he waited in Cuba, Che was not alone in looking for the next revolutionary fight. Several of his compatriots from the Sierra Maestras volunteered. Of the seventeen Cubans who accompanied him on the Bolivian mission, five were "commandantes" in the Cuban army; seven others were officers of lesser rank, and one was the chief of the Border Police.²⁹ This nucleus of veterans formed the Bolivia *foco*.

Che Guevara thought the struggle in Bolivia could last "seven to ten years," and prepared for that eventuality. Construction of a permanent *foco* base began less than one kilometer from the farmhouse.³⁰ Che Guevara supervised the digging of underground caves and storage caches, and the building of an open-air classroom, a kitchen, and a dispensary.³¹ The guerrilla support organization smuggled supplies, ammunition, and weapons into the camp from La Paz, over 400 miles away. As the finishing touches were being applied to the *foco* base camp, Che directed that a second camp be built farther away from the farmhouse.³² Upon his arrival, Che realized that the farm was not as isolated as he had been led to believe. Their nearest neighbor, Ciro Algarañaz, made several unannounced visits, offering to sell pigs and chickens. He suspected that the group was building a cocaine factory because of the frequent day and night vehicular activity.³³ In the sparsely populated remote area the numerous visitors attracted unwanted attention. The farm was compromised, but the Cubans remained.

The guerrillas settled into a daily routine. Supplies were carried up from the farm. Che instituted a robust education program for the guerrillas that included history, political economy, mathematics, Spanish, French, and Quechua.³⁴ Only then did he realize that although Quechua was the dominant Indian language, it was spoken in the Bolivian highlands to the south and west. The local population in the Ñancahuazú region spoke Guaraní.³⁵ The men began to treat the *foco* base as their home. The veterans committed numerous security violations: photographs were taken; diaries were kept;

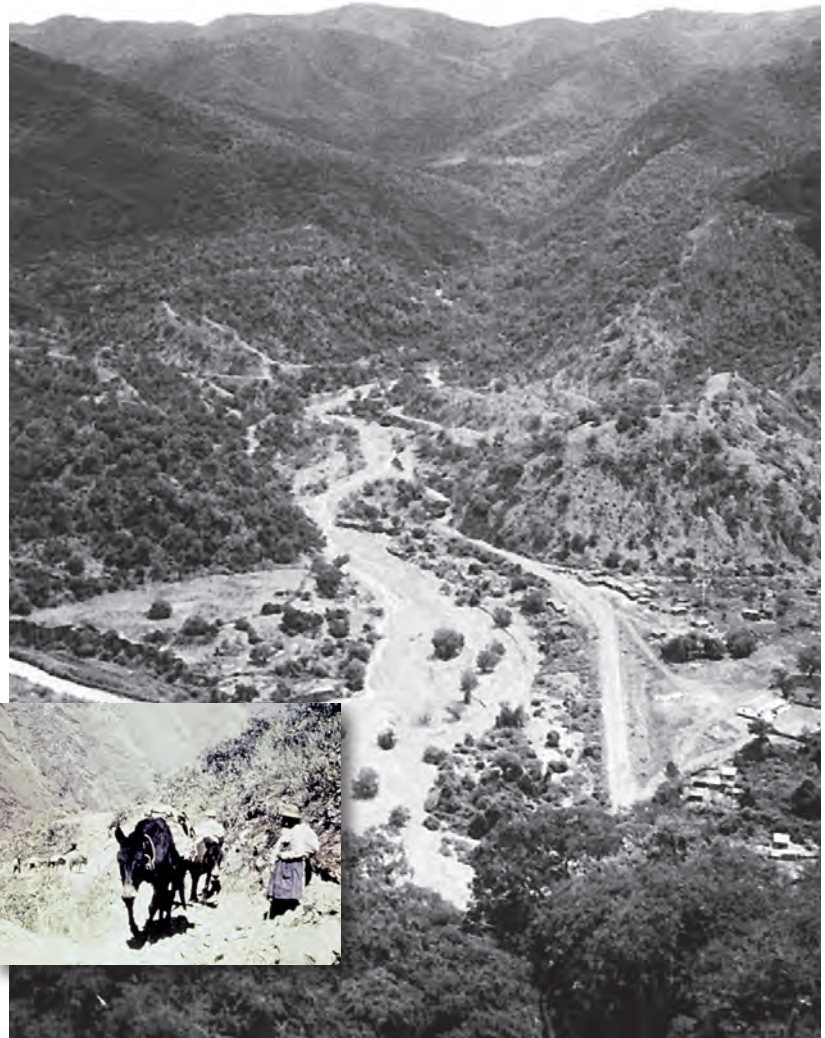


and radio messages were sent almost daily.³⁶ Visitors added to the complacency.

Mario Monje, the Bolivian Communist chief, visited the camp for a strategy meeting on 31 December. An ideological and strategic clash between Guevara and Monje erupted over command and control of the *foco*. The exasperated Monje issued an ultimatum to Che: "The conversation with Monje began with generalities, but he quickly came down to his fundamental premise, stated in three basic conditions: 1) He would resign as party leader but would obtain its neutrality, and cadres would be brought for the struggle; 2) He would be the political and military leader of the struggle as long as it was taking place in Bolivia; 3) He would handle relations with other South American parties, trying to persuade them to support liberation



Mario Monje Molina (left) and Che Guevara (right) conduct a strategy meeting on 31 December 1966. The results would have a negative effect on the foco.



Two views of the typical terrain in the guerrilla area of operations.

movements."³⁷ Che agreed to the first and third points, but he immediately dismissed Monje's second proposal, replying that: "I was to be the military chief and I was not going to accept ambiguities on this matter. Here the discussion ended stalled in a vicious circle."³⁸ Monje then took his case to the Bolivian guerrillas and issued them an ultimatum: Stay and be purged from the party; or leave with him. "Everyone stayed, and this seemed to be a blow to him," wrote Che.³⁹ Monje hastily left for La Paz the next day, disappointed at the turn of events, but promised to return.⁴⁰ The breach with the Bolivian Communist Party was irrevocable and effective January 1967. It refused to actively support the ELNB.⁴¹ The lack of recruits would haunt Che throughout his entire campaign.

As training, classes, and supplies were stockpiled in January 1967, the guerrilla band experienced further problems. Several became ill because of the new field diet and the hostile environment. The area was plagued with biting pests. "The insects we have seen, up to now, are *yaguasas* [a gnat like insect], gnats, *mariguís* [a yellow winged biting insect], *mosquitoes*, and ticks," wrote Che.⁴² The Cubans gave the Bolivian recruits menial tasks and resentment soon developed. However, Che settled the

issues and the group slowly began to coalesce. Suddenly, more trouble arrived at their doorstep.

On 19 January 1967, the local police showed up unexpectedly at the farmhouse. A four-man Bolivian police unit in civilian clothes arrived in an unmarked truck to investigate *Ciro Algañaz's* claim that the farm was a cocaine factory. The police found nothing suspicious, but confiscated a pistol. The police lieutenant solicited a bribe and then left with an invitation to come to the police station to retrieve the pistol.⁴³ Apparently satisfied, no more police were heard from for almost two months. Despite all of the interest, Che persevered with his plans and continued the train-up program.

The Long March – 1 February – 20 March 1967

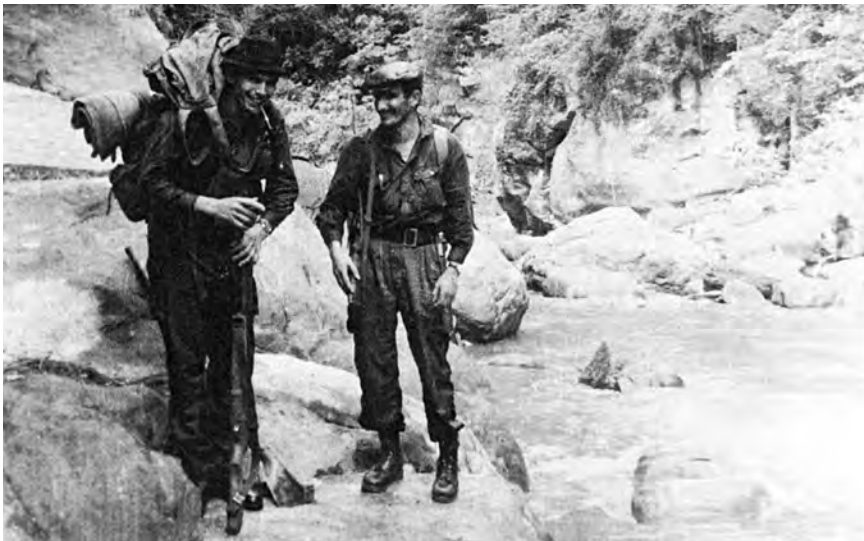
Guevara quickly realized that no one was familiar with the local terrain and the maps provided by Debray were inaccurate. He decided that a conditioning march was needed to accomplish his three goals: "to harden them, teach them how to adapt themselves to the rigors of guerrilla life such as hunger and thirst; to get to know the peasantry, and start winning them over, to establish a base of popular support in the region; and finally, to explore the

terrain in order to familiarize themselves with it and try to broaden their territorial base.⁴⁴

With the two camps complete by the end of January, they could start the march. Che organized the *foco* of 24-men (sixteen Cubans, one Argentine, and only seven Bolivians) into two equal fighting groups. He further organized for the march designating a vanguard, center, and a rear-guard element. *Comandante* Juan Vitalio Acuña Nuñez (Joaquín) was appointed the second-in-command of the *foco*.⁴⁵ Because of their inexperience, the Bolivians were not given leadership positions. Che emphasized that over time their status would change with experience and ultimately they would become the leaders of the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional de Bolivia*.⁴⁶

Their equipment had come from Cuba or been bought in Bolivia. A high-powered short wave radio, packed on a mule was the communications link with Havana via coded messages. Their weapons consisted of a mix of civilian rifles, US-made M-1 rifles and carbines, Bolivian Mausers, and Czech ZB-30 light machineguns. The eclectic mix would match the hodgepodge of Bolivian Army weapons which, according to Che's plan, would be captured once fighting began.⁴⁷

The guerrillas began their planned 25-day conditioning march on 1 February. It lasted a grueling 48 days, a harbinger for the coming campaign.⁴⁸ The group was attacked by insects and bad weather. Four of the Cubans suffered from bouts of malaria, including the doctor. It quickly became apparent that no one was physically ready for the rigors of guerrilla combat, including their leader. The physical stamina of the 38-year-old asthmatic revolutionary had diminished considerably since his days in the Sierra Maestras ten years earlier.⁴⁹ Three weeks into the march Che wrote: "A bad day for me. I was exhausted and made it through will-power alone."⁵⁰ The tough terrain beat down the entire group.



"Miguel," Cuban Manuel Hernández Osorio, a Sierra Maestra veteran (left), and "Inti," Bolivian Guido Peredo Leigue (right), pause after a river crossing during the "Long March." Notice the rocky river valley (or canyon) terrain the guerrillas moved over.

Their maps proved very inaccurate. The rugged terrain exhausted Che and his men. The group regularly became separated and radio communications failed in the canyons. Disaster struck while crossing rain swollen rivers. Two men drowned, and valuable supplies and weapons were lost.⁵¹ The lack of food added to their misery and weakened them further. Scavenging for edible plants and hunting animals for food became a daily routine as they slowly wandered through the area. Everything from small birds, monkeys, sparrow hawks, and finally their own horses made the menu. Rather than unify them, the hardships of the march increased stress and caused dissension and daily arguments between guerrillas.⁵²

In their few brief encounters with locals, Che's *foco* only became more frustrated. The *foco* failed to gain any support from the local population. The few Bolivian guerrillas from the *altiplano* had difficulty understanding the Guaraní dialect. The *campesinos* were curious, but they did not respond to the revolutionary fervor of the strange band of foreigners. Many of the peasants were there because government land reforms had given ten-hectare homesteads (about 25 acres) to 16,000 families.⁵³

After being lost most of the march, the demoralized and exhausted guerrilla force stumbled into the base camp on 20 March. The coded messages from Radio Havana had been tape-recorded to maintain contact with Cuba.⁵⁴ Che recorded a disturbing omen in his diary: "a small plane was circling overhead."⁵⁵ Their "conditioning march" had not gone unnoticed, and reports had reached Bolivian authorities. There would be no time to rest.

The Guerrilla Offensive 23 March – 20 April 1967

The "Long March" was over and the action was about to begin. Reports of a strange group of armed men roaming the countryside had trickled into Camiri, Santa Cruz, and eventually to La Paz. This made the local police and army more suspicious of the Ñancahuazú farm.

While the exhausted guerrillas were recuperating, they received more visitors. Moisés Guevara arrived with several Bolivian recruits; most were unemployed miners looking for a change and a paycheck. However, Pastor "Daniel" Barrera Quintana and Vincent "Orlando" Rocabado Terrazas quickly became disenchanted with the primitive living conditions and camp discipline. Leaving to hunt game on 11 March 1967, they simply deserted. Arrested by the police when they tried to sell their rifles in Camiri, they revealed the Ñancahuazú guerrilla camp location and other details under interrogation. The police went to the Fourth Army Division headquarters in Camiri with their information. At first the division commander, Colonel Humberto Rocha



The Peruvian Communist leader Juan Pablo Chang Navarro (known as "Chino") and Che in camp. The Mao look-a-like had come to Bolivia to gain support for his foco.



Che talks with Bustos, Debray, and several others at Camp #1 at Ñancahuazú.

doubted them, "Guerrillas in Ñancahuazú, with Che Guevara as their leader? Impossible!"⁵⁶ However later that same day an oil worker (Epifano Vargas) arrived to report an encounter with strange speaking men in green clothing carrying automatic weapons and claiming to be geologists. With a second report, Colonel Rocha ordered aerial observation of the Ñancahuazú site (the plane Che had seen) and sent a patrol to verify the information. On 17 March, the patrol reached the farmhouse and discovered various documents, including the diary of Israel Reyes Zayas' (Braulio), various photos, and drawings. The soldiers captured another Bolivian, Saulstio Choque, apparently trying to desert with a mule. The would-be guerrilla and the intelligence items from the farm were brought back to the 4th Division headquarters at Camiri.⁵⁷ Now the government had hard evidence on the guerrillas who were still three days march from the *foco* base.

Unbeknownst to Che, the guerrilla logistics and intelligence networks were compromised and completely broken by the Bolivian intelligence services. Tania had escorted Régis Debray and Ciro Roberto Bustos (Che's "coordinator" for Argentina and a journalist and artist) to the camp. Taking separate routes the trio rendezvoused in Camiri. From there Coco Peredo drove them to the Ñancahuazú camp. However, Tania left her jeep parked on a deserted street in the town. The vehicle, with La Paz license plates, attracted police attention. They searched it and discovered a wealth of information about Che's *foco*, including four of Tania's notebooks listing the entire Bolivian network of urban contacts, friendly Communists outside of Bolivia, and secret money accounts.⁵⁸ Within the week, Communist safe houses throughout Bolivia were raided and many of the contacts arrested. Whether by design or stupidity, Tania, the experienced operative with East German, Soviet, and Cuban agent training, had compromised the operation through her actions.⁵⁹

Greatly disturbed by the Army's discovery of the base camp, Che assessed the situation. After learning that Tania's jeep and its contents had been discovered, Che was infuriated: "Everything appears to indicate that Tania is spotted, whereby two years of good and patient work is lost."⁶⁰ With her cover destroyed he had no choice but to keep Tania with the *foco*. Outside support was effectively cut off, except for radio messages from Cuba. Civilian transistor radios were now their only link to the outside world.

Other reinforcements had come to the camp. Juan Pablo "El Chino" Chang Navarro and two other Peruvians arrived to offer twenty men for training in Bolivia.⁶¹ Che promised to support his Peruvian *foco* with weapons, radio transmitters, and "\$5,000 a month for ten months."⁶² The strategy meeting with El Chino was cut short when "Loro appeared and announced that he had killed a soldier."⁶³ The revolution was beginning ahead of schedule.

With his *foco* base discovered, support denied by the Bolivian Communist Party, and his supply network compromised, Che Guevara chose to take the offensive. Major Hernán Plata led a sixty-man patrol to the base camp on 23 March 1967. En route the guerrillas ambushed the force. They killed seven soldiers, captured fourteen (including four wounded), while the rest fled southward. More importantly they captured 16 Mausers with 2,000 bullets, three 60mm mortars and 64 rounds, three Uzi submachine guns with twenty-four magazines, two "bazookas" (rocket launchers), and a .30 caliber machinegun with two belts of ammunition.⁶⁴ The prisoners were interrogated and endured a political speech. Stripped of their clothes, they were freed a day later.⁶⁵ The guerrillas' baptism by fire was a success.

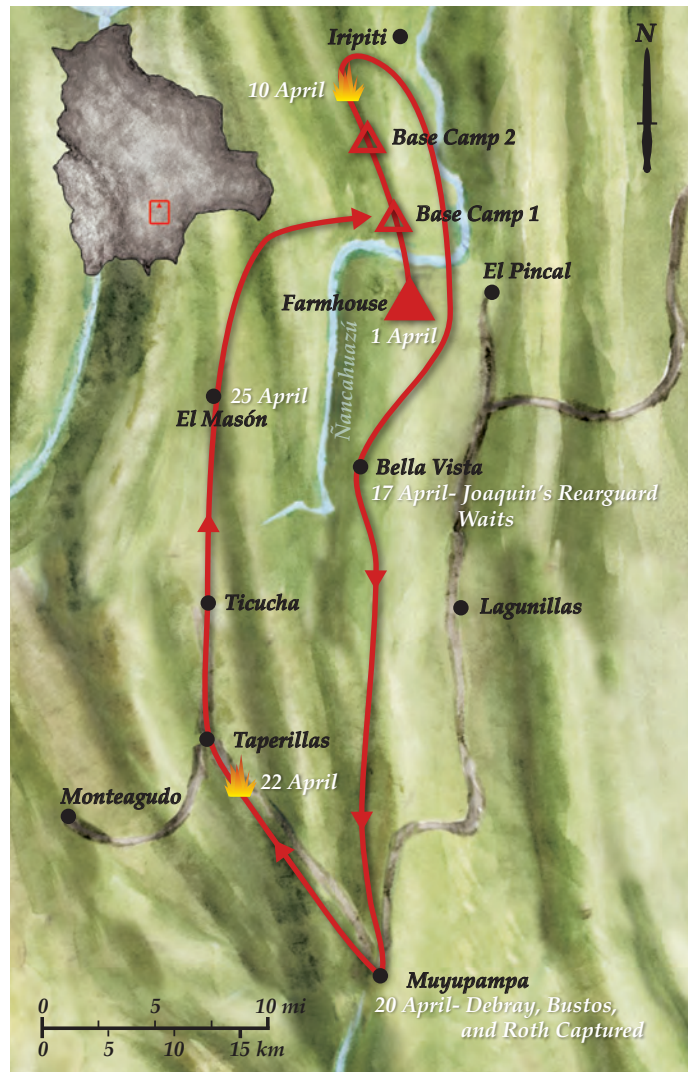
Instead of immediately abandoning the *foco* base Che had his guerrillas regroup at the camp and joyfully listened to transistor radio broadcasts of their victory. The remaining days of March were spent consolidating the force and

preparing for further operations. The *foco* had reached its maximum strength of 45 combatants, (16 Cubans, 24 Bolivians, 2 Argentines, and the 3 Peruvians).⁶⁶ Not all of the Bolivians on the “Long March” impressed Che. On 25 March he “announced the ‘discharge’ of Paco, Pepe, Chingolo, and Eusebio. They were told that they will not eat if they do not work. I suspended their tobacco ration, and redistributed their personal things and gear among other, needier comrades.”⁶⁷ The “discharges” for these “quitters, slackers, and dregs” was a technicality; the hapless Bolivians had to stay with the *foco* and continue to work. The “visitors,” Tania, Debray, and Bustos, remained with the guerrillas as “non-combatants,” although they were armed. “The famous author of *Revolution in the Revolution*, known to us as Danton [Régis Debray], wanted to demonstrate that he was not simply a theoretician but also a man of action,” said Inti Peredo.⁶⁸

The guerrillas departed Ñancahuazú on 1 April 1967 and proceeded to raise havoc with the Bolivian army. During April as the group moved, it twice encountered army patrols southwest of Ñancahuazú between El Meson and Muyupampa. On 10 April near Iripiti (only 12 miles north of the original camp) the *foco* conducted two ambushes on the same day, killing eight, wounding eight, and taking 28 prisoners. They captured 21 M-1 Garand rifles, 12 M-1 carbines, 9 Mausers, 4 M-3 submachineguns, another mortar, and one Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR). They now had more weapons than they needed.⁶⁹ A Cuban, Jesús Suárez Gayol (“Rubio”), one of Che’s best officers, was killed, but the *foco* had successfully foiled the Bolivian army.⁷⁰

The guerrilla force then turned south. En route to Muyupampa, Che divided his small force. On 17 April north of that town (roughly 30 kilometers), he detached the rearguard under the command of “Joaquín” (Juan Vitalio Acuña Nuñez). Inti Peredo noted, “We knew that Joaquín’s group did not have combat strength, with 4 “rejects,” 3 ailing comrades receiving care [Tania, Moisés Guevara, and a third guerrilla], and only 10 others who had to carry the load of the entire operations.” (Note: there is doubt concerning the numbers in Joaquín’s rearguard – numbers vary from ten to seventeen).⁷¹ Staying at the village of Bella Vista for two or three days, the rearguard was to rest and wait for the return of Che’s vanguard from the south.

As the vanguard moved through the countryside, the guerrilla’s presence became well known to the locals. Helped by some curious children, George Andrew Roth, an Anglo-Chilean freelance journalist, wandered into the guerrilla bivouac on 19 April.⁷² Debray and Bustos quickly concocted a plan to leave the group with Roth. Debray was anxious to leave after experiencing the realities of revolutionary life. His three-week indoctrination to guerrilla field operations convinced Debray that his best contribution was writing theory. After they left, Che wrote: “The Frenchman stated too vehemently how useful he could be on the outside.”⁷³ As the three set out for Muyupampa, the rest of the vanguard moved away. Little did Che know how significant the events surrounding 20 March would become to the *foco*.



The *foco* left its camp on 1 April first heading north and then turning south toward Muyupampa. The decisions of the first month, shown above, would have disastrous consequences. Map by D. Telles.

Realizing the significance of the guerrilla movement, President Rene Barrientos had requested U.S. assistance to combat the insurgency. The advanced element of a mobile training team was already in La Paz coordinating with the government. The Bolivian army designated a large area surrounding the Ñancahuazú as “the Red Zone” and sent additional army units to find the guerrillas. The growing insurgent threat prompted action from U.S. Southern Command and the Panama Canal Zone based 8th Special Forces Group. ↑

Robert W. Jones, Jr. is an historian assigned to the USASOC History Office and is a Lieutenant Colonel in the U.S. Army. A graduate of the University of Washington, he earned his MA from Duke University and his MS from Troy State University. Current research interests include Special Forces in Vietnam 1960–1966, military government and civil affairs, special operations in World War II, Operation JUST CAUSE, and Operation ENDURING FREEDOM.

Endnotes

- 1 Ernesto Che Guevara, edited by Mary-Alice Waters, *The Bolivian Diary of Ernesto Che Guevara* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1994), 77.
- 2 Daniel James, *Che Guevara* (New York: Stein and Day, 1969), 191-192; Richard Harris, *Death of a Revolutionary, Che Guevara's Last Mission* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1970), 73-74.
- 3 Jean Lartéguy (translated by Stanley Hochman), *The Guerrillas* (New York: Signet Publishing, 1972), 27.
- 4 Harris, *Che Guevara's Last Mission*, 64; Robert D. Hagan, "Che Guevara: An epilogue," (Unpublished Thesis, Naval War College, Newport, Rhode Island, 1969), 55.
- 5 Andrew Sinclair, *Che Guevara* (New York: Viking Press 1970), 93.
- 6 James, *Che Guevara*, 288-289; Harris, *Che Guevara's Last Mission*, 66-67; **Guido "Inti" Alvaro Peredo and his brother Roberto "Coco" Peredo, will be referred to by their nicknames throughout this article.**
- 7 Ernesto Guevara, edited by Daniel James, *The Complete Bolivian Diaries of Che Guevara and Other captured Documents* (New York: Stein and Day, 1968), 71.
- 8 Harris, *Che Guevara's Last Mission*, 64-66.
- 9 Waters, *The Bolivian Diary of Ernesto Che Guevara*, 327.
- 10 James, *Che Guevara*, 212.
- 11 Harris, *Che Guevara's Last Mission*, 68-69.
- 12 Inti Peredo, "My Campaign with Che," in Ernesto Che Guevara, edited by Mary-Alice Waters, *The Bolivian Diary of Ernesto Che Guevara* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1994), 239.
- 13 Marta Rojas and Moita Rodriguez Calderon, eds., *TANIA, The Unforgettable Guerrilla*, (Random House, 1971, New York), 39 and 111-112; Harris, *Che Guevara's Last Mission*, 73-74; James, *Che Guevara*, 197-198; Jon Lee Anderson, *Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life* (New York: Grove Press, 1997), 491-492 and 688.
- 14 Rojas and Rodriguez, *TANIA*, 146 and 187; James, *Che Guevara*, 199-202.
- 15 James, *Che Guevara*, 204; Harris, *Che Guevara's Last Mission*, 77; Anderson, *Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life*, 688.
- 16 James, *Che Guevara*, 200-204.
- 17 Georgie Anne Geyer, "Why Che Guevara Failed. An Interview with Régis Debray," *Saturday Review*, 24 August 1968, 16.
- 18 Régis Debray (translated by Bobbye Ortiz), *Revolution Within a Revolution?* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1967); Paco Ignacio Taibo II, translated by Martin Michael Roberts, *Guevara, Also Known as Che* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 464.
- 19 James, *Che Guevara*, 212-213.
- 20 Anderson, *Che Guevara, A Revolutionary Life*, 694-695; Ignacio, *Guevara, Also Known as Che*, 465 and 469; James, *Che Guevara*, 212-213.
- 21 James, *Che Guevara*, 213; Ignacio, *Guevara, Also Known as Che*, 488.
- 22 James, *Che Guevara*, 204; Harris, *Che Guevara's Last Mission*, 77.
- 23 Harris, *Che Guevara's Last Mission*, 72-77; Richard Gott, *Guerrilla Movements in Latin America* (New York: Seagull Books, 2008), 406; James, *Che Guevara*, 209; **Guevara did just as Fidel Castro had done with the 26th of July Movement ten years earlier. On a small farm in Mexico he had started training for their invasion of Cuba. In Bolivia, the isolated farm would be the birthplace of the new foco.**
- 24 James, *Diaries*, 71; James, *Che Guevara*, 289.
- 25 James, *Diaries*, 193.
- 26 James, *Che Guevara*, 193.
- 27 Harris, *Che Guevara's Last Mission*, 75.
- 28 Harris, *Che Guevara's Last Mission*, 65; Gott, *Guerrilla Movements in Latin America*, 402.
- 29 James, *Che Guevara*, 217-219; Harris, *Che Guevara's Last Mission*, 75; John D. Waghelstein, "A Theory of Revolutionary Warfare and its Application to the Bolivian Adventure of Che Guevara", Masters Thesis, Cornell University, 1973, 54.
- 30 James, *Che Guevara*, 216; Harris, *Che Guevara's Last Mission*, 78.
- 31 James, *Che Guevara*, 216-217; Thomas E. Weil, *Area Handbook for Bolivia. DA Pamphlet 550-66, 2nd ed.* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1974), 348.
- 32 James, *Guevara*, 216; Harris, *Che Guevara's Last Mission*, 78.
- 33 Harris, *Che Guevara's Last Mission*, 79; James, *Guevara*, 220-221.
- 34 James, *Guevara*, 223-224.
- 35 Harris, *Che Guevara's Last Mission*, 78.
- 36 Martin Ebon, *CHE: The Making of a Legend* (New York: Universal Books, 1969), 95.
- 37 James, *Diaries*, 95.
- 38 James, *Diaries*, 96.
- 39 James, *Diaries*, 96.
- 40 James, *Che Guevara*, 223-225.
- 41 Ebon, *Legend*, 99-100; Harris, *Che Guevara's Last Mission*, 75, 152-154; James, *Diaries*, 108.
- 42 Waters, *The Bolivian Diary of Ernesto Che Guevara*, 78.
- 43 Waters, *The Bolivian Diary of Ernesto Che Guevara*, 113; James, *Diaries*, 73.
- 44 James, *Che Guevara*, 225-226; James, *Diaries*, 291-292.
- 45 **Comandante Juan Vitalio Acuña Nuñez (Joaquín) was also a member of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party, had operated a guerrilla school in Matanzas, Cuba, and served nine months in Vietnam;** James, *Che Guevara*, 217.
- 46 James, *Che Guevara*, 222-227.
- 47 Waters, *The Bolivian Diary of Ernesto Che Guevara*, 54-55.
- 48 James, *Diaries*, 291-292.
- 49 James, *Che Guevara*, 227.
- 50 James, *Diaries*, 116; Waters, *The Bolivian Diary of Ernesto Che Guevara*, 132.
- 51 Waters, *The Bolivian Diary of Ernesto Che Guevara*, 146-147.
- 52 Weil, *Area Handbook*, 349.
- 53 James, *Che Guevara*, 275; Ernesto Guevara (with an introduction and case studies by Brian Lovemen and Thomas M. Davies, Jr.), *Che Guevara on Guerrilla Warfare* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 343; **Ten hectares is about 25 acres.**
- 54 James, *Che Guevara*, 224-233.
- 55 James, *Diaries*, 126; Waters, *The Bolivian Diary of Ernesto Che Guevara*, 148.
- 56 Harris, *Che Guevara's Last Mission*, 89; James, *Diaries*, 239.
- 57 Harris, *Che Guevara's Last Mission*, 87-89; James, *Guevara*, 243.
- 58 James, *Che Guevara*, 238; Anderson, *Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life*, 713.
- 59 James, *Che Guevara*, 237-239.
- 60 James, *Diaries*, 131.
- 61 James, *Che Guevara*, 218; James, *Diaries*, 86-87.
- 62 James, *Diaries*, 127.
- 63 James, *Diaries*, 127.
- 64 James, *Diaries*, 129-130; Harris, *Che Guevara's Last Mission*, 85-87.
- 65 James, *Diaries*, 129-130; Harris, *Che Guevara's Last Mission*, 86-87.
- 66 James, *Che Guevara*, 248-249.
- 67 James, *Diaries*, 131; **The four Bolivians "discharged" by Che were: Paco (José Castillo Chávez), Pepe (Julio Velasco Montana), Chingolo (Hugo Choque Silva), and Eusebio (Eusebio Tapia Aruni).**
- 68 Inti Peredo, "My Campaign with Che," in Waters, *The Bolivian Diary of Ernesto Che Guevara*, 364.
- 69 James, *Diaries*, 138-139 and 248-249; James, *Guevara*, 250-251.
- 70 James, *Diaries*, 74-75 and 138-139.
- 71 Inti Peredo, "My Campaign with Che," in Waters, *The Bolivian Diary of Ernesto Che Guevara*, 367.
- 72 James, *Diaries*, 144; James, *Che Guevara*, 254-255.
- 73 James, *Che Guevara*, 132; Ignacio, *Guevara, Also Known as Che*, 72.