



«Seremos como el Che»: Chilean elenos, Bolivia and the cause of latinoamericanismo, 1967-1970

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Abstract

This article examines Chilean involvement in the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) in Bolivia between 1967 and 1970. It asks why Chileans volunteered to take part in an internationalist insurgency and what this reveals about the power of Latin Americanism as a conceptual framework for revolutionary action at the end of the 1960s. In doing so, it pays particular attention to the decisive impact Ernesto «Che» Guevara's example had on recruits. It also analyses the role that Cuba's revolutionary leaders had in organizing the ELN's Bolivian insurgency after Che's death and why they turned away from the operation in mid-1969. The article argues that the ELN's insurgency in Bolivia was one of the most concrete manifestations of a particularly potent Cuban-inspired articulation of Latin Americanism. Ultimately, it also argues that this Latin Americanist project was deeply flawed and ill-fitted to the conditions elenos faced.

Keywords: revolution, Chile, Bolivia, Cuba

Resumen

Este artículo analiza la participación de voluntarios chilenos en las actividades llevadas a cabo por el Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) en Bolivia entre 1967 y 1970. Su propósito es explicar las razones que los inspiraron a tomar parte en esta iniciativa insurgente internacionalista, adelantando algunas hipótesis sobre el poder del latinoamericanismo como referencia para la acción revolucionaria a finales de la década de los sesenta. El artículo pone especial énfasis en la influencia decisiva que ejerció entre los voluntarios el ejemplo de Ernesto «Che» Guevara. También analiza el papel jugado por los líderes revolucionarios cubanos en la organización de la insurrección del ELN en Bolivia después de la muerte del Che y explica las razones que los condujeron a abandonar la operación a mediados de 1969. El artículo plantea que tal iniciativa revolucionaria fue una de las manifestaciones más concretas de una poderosa forma de latinoamericanismo inspirada por Cuba. También analiza los límites que, en última instancia, caracterizaban a este proyecto latinoamericanista y lo hacían inadecuado para las condiciones que enfrentaban los elenos.

Palabras clave: revolución, Chile, Bolivia, Cuba

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On 19 July 1970, 67 guerrillas stormed a small US-mining enclave in Teoponte, Bolivia, taking 2 hostages and sinking the company's dredger. Having failed to seize the gold the mine produced (it had been transferred to La Paz the previous day), they retreated into the mountains, dense with foliage and mosquitos. Their aim was to trek across Bolivia's northeast and establish a guerrilla camp in the Alto Beni region, mobilise support from the local population and from there, somehow, join up with un-specified guerrilla forces from neighbouring countries that would span out throughout Latin America. It was an astonishingly ambitious plan. Yet, for the insurgents, this was a logical continuation of Ernesto «Che» Guevara's revolutionary project in Bolivia, cut short when he had been killed in October 1967. Like Che's venture, the insurgency was nevertheless a disaster. Only 8 guerrillas survived, emerging from the jungle after being given an amnesty, tired and emaciated. It was a desperate end to almost three years of planning since Guevara's death. Preparations for the insurgency had also been mired in incompetence and tragedy that left many more dead or disillusioned.²

All of which begs the question as to why it is worth studying. This article argues that it is significant for two reasons. First, the history of the insurgency is an example of revolutionary internationalism during the guerrilla decade of the 1960s. It provides insight into the recruitment and logistical framework for such ventures: why people joined, how internationalist insurgencies were instigated, managed and executed. In this respect, the insurgency's trajectory and participants are indicative. Of the 67 guerrillas at Teoponte, 53 were Bolivians, 8 were Chileans and 2 came from Argentina. The remaining four were from Brazil, Peru, Colombia and the United States. Many more Chileans provided rear-guard support for the organisation. Although the Cubans withdrew support (and guerrillas) for the insurgency in mid-1969, they had also initially been the principal orchestrators of this revolutionary project and had provided extensive training, money and logistical support. Uruguay's Tupamaros had then offered essential funding, via Chile, in April 1970 after the Cubans had suspended their collaboration.³

Second, and perhaps more interestingly, the origins and goals of this insurgency make it one of the most concrete and conscious efforts during the late 20th century to instigate an explicitly «Latin American» revolution aiming to bring imperialism to its knees around the world. Reference points were historically and geographically far away rather than contemporary or local. And in this respect it epitomizes what Aldo Marchesi has called the «continentalization and globalization» of revolutionary projects in the late 1960s, encouraged by Cuba and fuelled by Guevara's guerrilla insurgency in Bolivia.⁴ Despite the guerrilla organisation's misleading name that Guevara had given it in March 1967 —the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN)— its goals were regional and global. As one Chilean who participated in the insurgency wrote to his parents before departing for the mountains, «Somos [...] parte de la gran familia Latinoamericana [...] Algún día alcanzaremos nuestros objetivos para así lograr una sola Patria. «La gran Patria Latinoamericana»».⁵

But what did this mean? What led individuals to pursue a transnational Latin Americanist goal? And with what consequences? Ultimately, this article argues that the Latin American revolution that ELN recruits fought and died for was ephemeral, simplistic and imagined. It was not

2 For a full account of the Teoponte insurgency, see: Rodríguez Ostría, Gustavo. *Sin tiempo para las palabras: Teoponte, la otra guerrilla guevarista en Bolivia* (Cochabamba, Bolivia: Grupo Editorial Kipus, 2006).

3 Interview with Félix Huerta, 20 April 2010, Santiago, Chile; *Ibid.*, 266–67, 617–67.

4 Marchesi, Alberto Aldo. «Geographies of Armed Protest: Transnational Cold War, Latin Americanism and the New Left in the Southern Cone (1964–1976)» (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 2013), 135–36, 172.

5 Montiel, Tirso. 17 June 1970, as quoted in Pérez, Cristián. «El ejército del Che y los chilenos que continuaron su lucha», *Estudios Públicos*, 89 (2003), 244.





a completely new idea; Latin Americanist projects in various guises have been popular at different moments for two centuries. But it was a potent articulation of it. Promoted by Cuba and embodied by Che Guevara, it became particularly powerful in the late 1960s, inspiring people to sacrifice their lives for its cause. In the case of the ELN in Bolivia, it also provided legitimacy and grandeur for what was otherwise precarious, ad-hoc and only vaguely linked to established parties. Indeed, transnational collaboration together with regional and global aspirations made the insurgency seem far more significant than it might otherwise have been. Although one eleno—as ELN recruits were known—acknowledged that in hindsight it was «una locura», the notion of Cuba's Revolution extending to the rest of Latin America seemed very real at the time; part of the «espíritu de la época».⁶

This epoch was relatively short. When the guerrillas launched their doomed insurgency at Teoponte, the ELN's star—and the idea of a *Latin American* revolution—was already fading. To some extent this had to do with disillusionment and defeats over the previous two years. But it also speaks to the brevity of the Latin Americanist project's heyday. True, the Junta de Coordinación Revolucionaria (JCR), which brought far Left groups from Argentina, Uruguay, Chile and Bolivia together from 1972 sustained the idea of a regional revolution. It also built on relationships and networks made precisely during the ELN years. Yet it was largely defensive, and unsupported by the people who had initially promulgated the idea: the Cubans.⁷ Indeed, from mid-1969 onwards, instead of promoting the idea of a Latin American revolution, Havana's leaders downgraded their emphasis on armed revolution and turned to different individual national projects, among them nationalist military governments in Panama, Peru and Bolivia and Chile's Unidad Popular. Specificity and peculiarity of different countries' experiences became significant.⁸ The history of the road to Teoponte is therefore an intriguing story of a project straddling the rise and fall of a regional, Latin Americanist revolutionary ideal.

It is impossible to provide a detailed account of the ELN, its makeup, trajectory and insurgency here. Instead, to grapple with its Latin Americanist character, this article focuses on Chilean elenos and examines how, when and why recruits signed up. It then moves on to examine the ELN's aims and conceptual framework. Finally, it looks at the unravelling of the ideas that underpinned the ELN's project, dealing specifically with the reasons why the Cubans turned away from the project, what this meant for the insurgency and why many of the Chileans involved also downgraded their commitment.

Entry Points

In January 1968, news reached Santiago that the three Cuban survivors of Che Guevara's guerrilla column—known by their pseudonyms as Pombo, Benigno and Urbano—were escaping across the Andes to Chile. Manuel Cabieses, the editor of the far Left magazine, *Punto Final*, was the first to be notified. As he later explained, his magazine was «una especie de consulado cubano» in the absence of formal diplomatic relations; «no tenía que ser muy astuto para sospechar

6 Interview with Sonia Daza Sepulveda, 18 March 2013, Mexico City.

7 Marchesi, A. «Geographies of Armed Protest», 239–43; Dinges, John. *The Condor Years: How Pinochet and His Allies Brought Terrorism to Three Continents* (New York: New Press, 2004), 56.

8 Harmer, Tanya. «Two, Three, Many Revolutions?: Cuba and the Prospects for Revolutionary Change in Latin America, 1967–1975», *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 45:1 (2013).





que había una relación». ⁹ Having heard the news, Cabieses contacted the journalist and Chilean Socialist, Elmo Catalán, who in turn communicated the news to Havana. ¹⁰

It is unclear when exactly Catalán began collaborating with Cuba but by 1967 he was regarded as «un hombre del aparato cubano», skilled in intelligence work and cryptography. He had probably first visited Cuba in 1962, where he received training, and had subsequently travelled to the island various times. There are also reports that he met Che Guevara in Prague and discussed how to help support his Bolivian operation from Chile. Whether true or not, he had certainly undertaken secret missions for the Cubans and in 1966-7 he recruited Chilean volunteers to support the insurgency, sending some of them to Havana for training. ¹¹

In 1967, as well as working for the Cubans, Catalán was an assistant to the Socialist Party Senator, Carlos Altamirano, and Director of *Cobre*, the Confederación de Trabajadores del Cobre's newspaper. Unlike many of the middle class students who would later try to emulate Che Guevara, he came from a poor family in the north of Chile and had worked in nitrate mines and the construction industry. As he would reflect, «Sufrió en carne propia [...] la pobreza y la explotación. El trabajo como peón en la pampa salitrera, en el cobre o en la construcción [...] me impactó y sensibilizó profundamente». ¹² In the 1950s he had been the first of his family attend university and had been a student leader at the University of Chile, graduating with a degree in journalism. Writing for the Communist Party's newspaper, *El Siglo*, and the Socialist Party's newspaper, *Las Noticias de Última Hora*, he had reported the massacre of workers at El Salvador mine in 1966. He had also been part of Salvador Allende's press team during the presidential election in 1964 and was one of many on the Left deeply frustrated when Allende lost. The propaganda campaign against the Left in 1964 and the El Salvador massacre had a profound impact on him, hardening his politics and leading him to reject constitutional possibilities for radical change. «Por mucho que hable de revolución, de liberación o de amor por el pueblo», he would write, «no pasará de ser esclavo consciente del sistema, cómplice de la opresión o, en muchos casos, gendarme de sus propios hermanos si no toma el único camino honesto que existe para independizar nuestros países: el de la lucha armada hasta las últimas consecuencias». ¹³

When it came to this conviction and his support for Guevara's Bolivia insurgency, Catalán does not seem to have used specific criteria to select recruits. Most were Socialists, like him, attracted to armed revolution but unconvinced of its prospects in Chile. Beyond this they came from across Chilean society and appear to have been chosen because he knew them through his work as a journalist or for the Socialist Party. It was not *what* recruits knew that was important, but *who* they knew and whether they could be trusted for clandestine work that was important. They were also not from the far Left party, the MIR, which embraced armed revolution but which

9 Interviews with Manuel Cabieses, 25 March 2010; and Luis Fernández Oña, 6 April 2010, Santiago, Chile. The fact that Punto Final's offices were in the same building as Prensa Latina added to its significance. See also: Martínez Pérez, Pedro in Suárez Salazar, Luis and Kruijt, Dirk (eds.). *La Revolución Cubana en Nuestra América: El internacionalismo anónimo* (Havana: Ruth Casa Editorial, 2015), 42, 2015

10 Bodes, José. *En la senda del Che: biografía de Elmo Catalán* (Havana: Prensa Latina, 2009), 56; Rodríguez Ostría, G. *Teoponte*, 45.

11 Interview with Luis Fernández Oña, 6 April 2010; off the record interview with ex-Eleno, 27 March 2010; Rodríguez Ostría, G. *Sin tiempo para las palabras*, 74-79; Bodes, J. *En la senda del Che*, 128; Huerta, Félix and Chávez, Jaime. *El trabajo es vivir. Conversaciones de Félix Huerta con Jaime Chávez* (Santiago, Chile: Ediciones Rubén Darío, 2011), 70.

12 «Carta de despedida de Elmo Catalán», 19 April 1970, in Bodes, J. *En la senda del Che*, 16, 113-14.

13 *Ibid.*, 114.





at the time focused on Chile's national context and had few contacts with the Cubans. As one eleno remembered, it was a very close-knit group made up of friends rather than a formal section of a political party.¹⁴

Félix Huerta, an active Socialist Party militant and fifth year medical student, who Catalán had come across during student protests, was approached by his psychiatry professor at the University of Chile in mid-1967. A few months before Guevara's death, he was asked simply if he wanted to go to Bolivia «a combatir» and train as a guerrilla. Having said yes, he was put in contact with Catalán.¹⁵ Catalán also recruited the Socialist militant brothers Fernando and Carlos Gómez, respectively an ex-military conscript and president of the miner's union at El Salvador.¹⁶ In 1966, Fernando was one of those sent to Cuba for guerrilla training.¹⁷ Around the same time, having heard Che Guevara was in Bolivia, Tirso Montiel, an ex-Carabinero and Socialist militant had also left for Cuba in an effort to join him.¹⁸ Meanwhile, Cabieses, who had previously received Cuban training in intelligence, offered Catalán's group informal advice on security.¹⁹ But, for the time being, the Chileans working with Catalán hoping to support Che Guevara in Bolivia did very little.²⁰

The Chilean support network led by Elmo Catalán was part of Havana's broader effort to establish a network of Latin American collaborators. The Cubans never considered Chile itself as suitable for guerrilla insurgency. Its geography (between the Andes and the Pacific) together with its strong constitutionalist Left undermined the potential for armed revolution. Instead, Cuba's contacts were with Chile's established left-wing parties, and in particular the Left's presidential candidate between 1952 and 1970: Salvador Allende. When Chileans volunteered to take part in armed revolution, the Cubans meanwhile pointed them elsewhere. As Fidel explained to a Chilean journalist attending the inaugural conference of the regional Organización Latinoamericana de Solidaridad (OLAS) in July–August 1967, «if you want to be involved in guerrilla warfare there are conflicts on your doorstep, there in Bolivia [...] When the conditions do not exist in one country, you must support those who have them».²¹ And, of course, the establishment of a Chilean support network was precisely for this purpose. As the CIA noted in early 1968, «Even in those countries where there is no significant insurgency under way, the Cubans have been developing a support mechanism while they wait for a suitable opportunity and adequate assets».²²

14 Interview with Celsa Parrau, 1 April 2010, Santiago, Chile.

15 Interview with Félix Huerta and Luis Fernández Oña, 23 March 2010; J. Bodes, *En la senda del Che*, 59.

16 Bodes, J. *En la senda del Che*, 88.

17 Rodríguez Ostria, G. *Teoponte*, 61.

18 *Ibid.*, 422.

19 Interview with Manuel Cabieses.

20 Interview with Félix Huerta and Luis Fernández Oña.

21 Marchesi, Aldo. «Revolution Beyond the Sierra Maestra: The Tupamaros and the Development of a Repertoire of Dissent in the Southern Cone», *The Americas*, 70:3 (2014).

22 CIA, Directorate of Intelligence, «Special Report. Cuban Subversive Activities in Latin America: 1959-1968» February 16, 1968, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/89801/doc_0000109057>. Establishing Chilean support for revolutionary activities in Bolivia was not the only network that the Cubans established. As the CIA noted with regards to Colombian support for Venezuelan guerrillas in 1966 «Cuba has been able to bring about limited international cooperation of national movements and parties in some areas. This has helped to create or strengthen infrastructures upon which future revolutionary activities may be built, by making it easier to channel funds, move agents and leaders, transmit communications, and obtain false documents».





The news that Cuban survivors of his column were escaping Bolivia after Che Guevara's death provided the opportunity to use these assets. Having alerted the Cubans, Catalán sent Félix Huerta to Bolivia to make contact with the guerrillas and get details of their escape plans. He then coordinated efforts with other Chilean left-wing leaders and with the Cubans to meet the guerrillas at their designated entry point and protect them from Chile's security services.²³

One of those who joined Elmo Catalán's team at this point was Beatriz Allende, Salvador Allende's daughter. An admirer of the Cuban Revolution, and a Socialist, she had been deeply impacted by the news of Che Guevara's death and by the figure of «Tania», the Argentine-East German revolutionary Haydée Tamara Bunke, who had fought and died in Bolivia with Che.²⁴ Arriving in Cuba with her father in late 1967, she had asked the Cubans for guerrilla training. The Cubans were reluctant to train her, fearing the implications this could have for her father's political standing in Chile. However, she was offered «tiros, disparos», at a firing range in Havana. This was rudimentary training, the Cuban intelligence official who coordinated it explained, but it helped temporarily satisfy her desire for armed revolution.²⁵

A month later, apparently by coincidence, this same official—Luis Fernández Oña or «Demid» as he was known—was clandestinely in Santiago when news of the Cuban survivors of Che's column reached Santiago. Knowing she was desperate to collaborate with Cuba's revolutionary ventures in Latin America, he introduced Beatriz to Elmo Catalán, who recruited her immediately. As Juan Carretero, a Cuban intelligence officer directing Bolivian operations remembered, she would go on to play «un papel muy destacado» in preparations for the ELN's subsequent insurgency and demonstrated «una lealtad al legado del Che».²⁶ «Era Latinoamericana, su formación, su pensamiento era “Nuestra Latinoamérica”», another Cuban intelligence officer remembered.²⁷ In addition to Beatriz, Catalán also recruited a young Socialist lawyer, Arnoldo Camú, and his wife, Celsa Parrau. Underscoring the importance of close personal connections between elenos is the fact that Beatriz had met them a couple of months before at the Bolshevik Revolution's 50th anniversary celebrations in Moscow. As Celsa remembered, conversations in the Soviet Union, «se centró fundamentalmente en lo que estaba pasando en Cuba» and how to follow in Che's footsteps.²⁸ Catalán and the Cuban survivors escape to Chile now provided the answer.

As it turned out, however, efforts launched by Catalán to meet the Cubans were a fiasco. Despite weeks of searching the Andes, his team—including Félix Huerta and Beatriz—failed to make contact and the Cubans were left with no choice but to hand themselves into the local police and ask for asylum. Thanks to Chilean left-wing mobilisation, together with Salvador Allende's role in securing their release, the Cuban survivors were nevertheless allowed to return to Cuba.²⁹ And yet their escape provided the catalyst—the entry point—for the establishment of a Chilean branch of the ELN, coordinated by Elmo Catalán, Beatriz Allende and Arnoldo Camú.

23 Interview with Luis Fernández Oña, 6 April 2010; Rodríguez Ostría, G. *Teoponte*, 46–53; Huerta, F. and Chávez, J. *El trabajo es vivir*, 200–201.

24 Interview with Huerta and Oña. Estrada, Ulises. *Tania: Undercover in Bolivia with Che Guevara* (Melbourne: Ocean Press, 2005).

25 Interview with Huerta and Oña; Interview with Oña, 6 April 2010.

26 Interview with Juan Carretero, 18 April 2011, Havana, Cuba.

27 Interview with Ulises Estrada, 19 April 2011, Havana, Cuba.

28 Interview with Parrau.

29 Interview with Oña, 6 April 2010; G. Rodríguez Ostría, *Teoponte*, 53.





The principal purpose of this ELN branch was to provide a rear-guard for a future guerrilla insurgency. Immediately after Che Guevara's death, the survivors of his column had pledged to fulfil his mission and had designated the Bolivian among them, Guido Álvaro «Inti» Peredo, to lead the operation. With their infrastructure in tatters, they had decided to retreat, regroup and recruit others before launching a new insurgency. In late 1967 and early 1968, Cuba's leaders had simultaneously begun helping. Surviving members of the ELN's urban underground were meanwhile arriving in Cuba to ask for assistance. Bolivians who had been trained and planning to join Che before he died were also stuck on the island and new volunteers arrived in Havana wanting to sign up for a new revolutionary campaign. Cuba's intelligence team responsible for Latin American operations —the Viceministerio Técnico at the Ministerio del Interior headed by Manuel Piñeiro— therefore began coordinating preparations.³⁰

First, they had to help surviving ELN members escape to Havana via Chile. And in this respect the Chilean elenos played an important role acquiring safe houses and recruiting an underground network for people and supplies transiting between Bolivia and Cuba.³¹ Meetings to coordinate such ventures were «ad hoc» and «muy informal», Celsa remembered. Mostly, they took place in each other's houses or in a safe house they acquired, looked after by «Dina», one of the Allende family maids Beatriz had recruited.³² As a lawyer for trade unions and the banking sector, Arnoldo Camú also had contacts that were instrumental in finding safe houses and cover stories.³³ Meanwhile, Beatriz Allende —a recent medical graduate— enlisted doctors and professors of medicine, who helped by donating their homes and money, even if they did not always know what for. Her former supervisor at the University of Chile, for example, would recall Beatriz asked for money for a «casa de huérfanos [...] en mala situación económica», only to discover later that the «huerfanitos he donated money to were elenos.³⁴

With this underground network growing, the elenos planned operations along the Chilean-Bolivian frontier to map out crossings to Bolivia. Then, in May 1968, while students were out on the streets in Paris carrying Che Guevara flags, the Chilean elenos launched their first major operation since the Cuban survivors had arrived in Chile to rescue Inti Peredo from Bolivia. It was a difficult operation, involving crossing the Andes by foot. Fernando Gómez, chosen by the Cubans and Catalán to guide Inti across the border, later had to have his frostbitten toes amputated.³⁵ And yet, by rescuing the ELN's leader, by offering him refuge in Chile before safe transit to Cuba, the elenos ensured preparations for a new guerrilla insurgency could begin in earnest. While in Chile, prior to departing for Havana to meet other recruits and begin training, Inti also published what became the ELN's new manifesto.³⁶ Although it is hard to know for certain, there is general consensus that Elmo Catalán wrote or at least helped draft it – itself,

30 Rodríguez Ostría, G. *Teoponte*, 23–25.

31 Interviews with Huerta, 23 March and 20 April 2010 and off the record interview with ex-Eleno, 27 March 2010; *Ibid.*, 80–82, 137–46.

32 Interviews with Parrau and Huerta. Beatriz's cousin, Ana María Bussi, lived in the Allende household during the late 1960s and remembers her having constant meetings in her room to the point that she worried about bumping into people in the house in the middle of the night. Interview with Ana María Bussi, 9 April 2010, Santiago, Chile.

33 Rodríguez Ostría, G. *Teoponte*, 80.

34 Email correspondence with Arturo Jirón Vargas, 30 April 2013; interview with Manuel Ipinza, 22 July 2013, Santiago, Chile.

35 Rodríguez Ostría, G. *Teoponte*, 61–85; interviews with Parrau, Huerta and Oña; off the record interview with ex-Eleno; correspondence with Arturo Jirón.

36 Bodes, J. *En la senda del Che*, 68–69.





further confirmation of the internationalist Chilean contribution to the new Bolivian insurgency.³⁷ «Volveremos a la montaña», as the manifesto was called, had a simple yet powerful message: Revolution had not ended with Che Guevara's death; it had only just begun.³⁸

«... los herederos del Che»

«Volveremos a la montaña» is revealing for what it tells us about the ELN's conceptual framework. Together with former elenos' testimonies, published documents pertaining to the organisation and reporting from the time it helps us piece together the ideas and motives that underpinned the insurgency. But to understand the ELN's ideas and language, they have to be read in context.

First, Che Guevara's Bolivian legacy is important. As Elmo Catalán would remember, «Me dolió profundamente no combatir al lado del Che en Bolivia». Looking back, he explained to his family, «busqué la oportunidad a veces hasta con desesperación» to go to Bolivia.³⁹ Or as another eleno put it, «la muerte del Ché fue un remezón a la conciencia boliviana y a la de Latinoamérica».⁴⁰ One Chilean internationalist who joined a guerrilla insurgency in Venezuela after Guevara's death similarly pointed to Che as an inspiration, arguing that all revolutionaries had to adopt his «actitud moral y ética».⁴¹ In the weeks after the Argentine revolutionary's death was announced, demonstrations and protests erupted in Chile to condemn his «asesinato». Students flew flags at half-mast, and the Chilean Senate held a two-hour vigil.⁴² The Chilean Socialist Party's Congress, meeting in Chillán in November 1967, also recognised armed struggle as inevitable and legitimate even if this had little concrete meaning for the party's operations in Chile.⁴³

The Cubans encouraged these sentiments. From Havana, ten days after Che was captured, Fidel Castro paid homage to Guevara. Enemies could say his death represented the end of his ideas and of revolution but they were wrong, Fidel insisted. The revolution had never been conceived as something that could be achieved quickly and Che Guevara had known this. Now he was dead, others would follow in his footsteps: «¡millones de manos, inspiradas en su ejemplo, se extenderán para empuñar las armas!» he proclaimed. Guevara's death was described as «heroica y gloriosa» and his example was celebrated. «Si queremos expresar cómo aspiramos que sean nuestros combatientes revolucionarios, nuestros militantes, nuestros hombres», Castro continued, «sin vacilación de ninguna índole: ¡Que sean como el Che!»⁴⁴ That Che had pre-empted

37 Rodríguez Ostría, G. *Teoponte*, 85, 166, 242, 318.

38 Peredo, Inti. «Volveremos a la montaña» (July 1968), online at: <<http://www.ruinasdigitales.com/cristianismoyrevolucion/cyrintiperedovolveremosalasmontaas99/>>.

39 «Carta de despedida de Elmo Catalán», 114.

40 Huerta, F. and Chávez, J. *El trabajo es vivir*, 221. On the importance of «la figura del Che», see: interview with Sonia Daza Sepulveda, 18 March 2013. Sonia Daza was a member of the ELN trained in Cuba in 1969 and due to go to Bolivia to work in the urban underground before she was pulled back from the operation. She is also a widow of one of the Chileans who died during the Teoponte insurgency.

41 «Guerrillero chileno afirma: "Llegó la hora de combatir"», *Punto Final*, 88 (30 September 1969).

42 «Salvador Allende vino a Cuba a ofrecer condolencias por la muerte del Chile: entrevista de 1967», online at: <<http://www.lafogata.org/chile/a13.htm>>.

43 Arrate, Jorge and Rojas, Eduardo. *Memoria de la izquierda chilena: Tomo I (1850-1970)* (Santiago, Chile: Ediciones B., 2003), 425.

44 «Discurso pronunciado por el Comandante Fidel Castro Ruz [...] en la velada solemne en memoria del Comandante Ernesto Che Guevara, en la Plaza de la Revolución, el 18 de octubre de 1967», online at: <<http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1967/esp/f181067e.html>>.





his own death in a widely publicised message to revolutionaries in Latin America, Asia and Africa, instructing his followers to continue his mission, added weight to Fidel's message. «En cualquier lugar que nos sorprenda la muerte», Guevara had written, «bienvenida sea, siempre que ése, nuestro grito de guerra, haya llegado a un oído receptivo y otra mano se tienda para empuñar nuestras armas».⁴⁵

In the weeks that followed, *Punto Final* took up Guevara's call.

Ante la muerte del heroico Comandante Ernesto Ché Guevara, las palabras están como de más. Ellas brotan a borbotones, atropellándose por describir los sentimientos que agitan al movimiento revolucionario latinoamericano, o se niegan a trazar el homenaje retórico adecuado. El Ché no forjó su personalidad revolucionaria [...] para que se le lllore. El homenaje que merece ese gran capitán de América Latina es la imitación multiplicada de su ejemplo.⁴⁶

For the elenos in 1968 seeking to imitate Che by continuing his insurgency in Bolivia, Bolivia itself —the country, its socio-economic context, its history and its people— was only vaguely important. The idea of «National Liberation» had far more to do with the common nomenclature that Cuban-inspired revolutionary groups adopted of the time, understood in terms of liberating countries from global imperialism and monopolistic capitalism by means of irregular warfare and socialist revolution.⁴⁷ As the Bolivian historian Gustavo Rodríguez Ostría has argued, elenos tended to treat Bolivia itself as a «escenario vacío» and its population as passive recipients of a future insurgency. In the ELN's communiqués and internal documents, Bolivia's 1952 revolution, workers' militias, central trade union —the Central Obrera Boliviana (COB)— were generally ignored. True, the ELN's members spoke of fighting for Bolivia's «libertad», against «gorilas», and for socialism, conceived as freedom from capitalist exploitation and for a planned economy, industrialisation and free education. During Che Guevara's campaign in Bolivia, the ELN's «Comunicado n.º 1 al Pueblo Boliviano» had also referred to the need to «rescatar un país vendido en tajadas a los monopolios yanquis y elevar el nivel de vida de nuestro pueblo, cada día más hambreado».⁴⁸ «Volveremos a la montaña» meanwhile pointed to «la miseria, el hambre, la muerte» of the Bolivian people and the country's miners who lived in «campamentos de concentración».⁴⁹ But the ELN had scarce connection to Bolivian mass organisations, and its goals were never articulated in terms of seizing power in Bolivia.⁵⁰ Speaking about the ELN in an interview with a Chilean journalist, Inti had even explicitly acknowledged «no es una organización

45 Guevara, Ernesto Che. «Crear dos, tres... muchos Vietnam: Mensaje a los pueblos del mundo a través de la Tricontinental» (16 April 1967), online at: <https://www.marxists.org/espanol/guevara/04_67.htm>.

46 Editorial, *Punto Final*, 40 (24 October 1967).

47 Other groups that adopted this label in the 1960s included the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) in Nicaragua, the Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional (FALN) in Venezuela, the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional-Tupamaros (MLN-T) in Uruguay and the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) in Colombia and the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) in Peru. The difference between these and the Bolivian ELN is that they were far more nationally framed, even if they embraced internationalist solidarity and Latin Americanism in the context of the Tricontinental and OLAS conferences in Havana. For examples of the turn towards, and embrace of, «continentalization» after these conferences, see: Marchesi, A. «Geographies of Armed Protest», 143; on the definition of national liberation in a Latin American context, see: Moran, Daniel. *Wars of National Liberation* (London: Cassel, 2002), 20–23, 154.

48 «Comunicado n.º 1 al Pueblo Boliviano» (27 March 1967), in Guevara, Che. *América Latina: despertar de un continente* (Melbourne: Ocean Press, 2002), 395.

49 Peredo, Inti. «Volveremos a la montaña».

50 Rodríguez Ostría, G. *Teoponte*, 166–69.





hecha para Bolivia. Esta es la época de la revolución continental». ⁵¹ Chilean elites meanwhile had few personal Bolivian connections. Even if some of them had visited the country prior to joining the ELN, most had never been.

Indeed, as Inti indicated, Bolivia was instead considered a key piece in a much larger Latin American and global project; part of a continental revolution that —together with Vietnam— would bring «el imperialismo yanqui» to its knees. Although Che Guevara came to embody this idea, the Cubans had promoted it since 1959. As Manuel Piñero recalled, «ever since he wrote “History Will Absolve Me” in 1953, Fidel [...] made clear that [the Cuban] revolution was seeking the liberation and integration of Latin America». ⁵² Citing José Martí’s concept of «Nuestra América», Havana’s leaders insisted that Latin America was united by its encounter with Spanish and US imperialism; that patterns of foreign exploitation had imbued the region with similar economic, political, cultural and linguistic characteristics. ⁵³ These shared traits and experiences, Cuba’s revolutionary leaders argued, in turn demanded a unified response. «¿Podría concebirse esta nueva etapa de la emancipación de América como el cotejo de dos fuerzas locales luchando por el poder en un territorio dado?» Che Guevara mused in an article he wrote in the early 1960s that was printed in Cuba and Chile after his death:

Evidentemente no, la lucha será a muerte entre todas las fuerzas populares con todas las armas de destrucción a su alcance; no dejarán consolidarse al poder revolucionario y, si alguno llegara a hacerlo, volverán a atacar, no lo reconocerán, tratarán de dividir las fuerzas revolucionarias, introducirán saboteadores de todo tipo, intentarán ahogar económicamente al nuevo Estado, aniquilarlo, en una palabra. Dado este panorama Americano, consideramos difícil que la victoria se logre en un país aislado. A la unión de las fuerzas represivas debe contestarse con la unión de las fuerzas populares. ⁵⁴

In fact, Che Guevara made his support for regional revolution extensively throughout the 1960s. For those like Beatriz Allende who attended the Primer Congreso Latinoamericano de juventudes in July 1960, for example, the message was loud and clear: «¡que la libertad sea conquistada en cada rincón de América!» Che had proclaimed. ⁵⁵ This appeal to Latin Americanism on the part by Cuba’s revolutionary leaders was at least partly defensive. As one Soviet bloc ambassador in Havana observed, «According to the Cuban perspective, the Cuban Revolution will be exposed to the risk of being invaded by imperialism, unless the revolution is triumphant on the whole continent. Even when there are no prospects for a successful end to the armed struggle, the latter still deprives the USA of its opportunities to attack and invade Cuba». ⁵⁶

51 Olivares B., Augusto. «La única entrevista que concedió “Inti”», *Punto Final*, 88, 30 September 1969.

52 Suárez Salazar, Luis (editor). *Manuel Piñero: Che Guevara and the Latin American Revolutionary Movements* (Melbourne: Ocean Press, 2001), 15.

53 See: «Discurso pronunciado por el Comandante Fidel Castro Ruz... en la magna asamblea popular celebrada por el pueblo de Cuba en la Plaza de la República, el 2 de septiembre de 1960», online at: <<http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1960/esp/f020960e.html>> [Hereafter First Declaration of Havana]; Fidel Castro, Speech to the United Nations General Assembly, September 1960, online at: <<http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/castro/db/1960/19600926.html>>; Raúl Castro, Speech at Casa de las Américas, Havana, 11 September 1959, online at: <<http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/castro/db/1959/19590914.html>>.

54 Guevara, Ernesto Che. «Táctica y estrategia de la Revolución Latinoamericana», *América Latina*, 301; «Documentos», *Punto Final*, suplemento a la edición 66 (22 October 1968).

55 Guevara, Ernesto Che. «Al Primer Congreso Latinoamericano de Juventudes» (28 July 1960).

56 «Information from Bulgarian Ambassador in Havana Stefan Petrov to Bulgarian Leader Todor Zhikov on the Domestic and Foreign Policy of Cuba» (15 August 1968), online at: <<http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116418>>.





When imagining what a «continental» revolution would look like, the Cubans had summoned celebrated narratives of Latin America's nineteenth century struggle for independence. In September 1960, in what became known as the First Declaration of Havana, Castro had responded to a meeting of the Organisation of American States (OAS) condemning Cuba by appealing to the island's «familia latinoamericana». Citing Latin America's liberation heroes including Bolívar, San Martín, O'Higgins, Sucre and José Martí, he called for unified Latin American resistance to US exploitation.⁵⁷ Two years later, in 1962, he had responded to the expulsion of Cuba from the OAS by expanding on this message:

Con lo grande que fue la epopeya de la independencia de América Latina [...] a la generación de latinoamericanos de hoy les ha tocado una epopeya mayor y más decisiva todavía para la humanidad. Porque aquella lucha fue para librarse del poder colonial español, de una España decadente, invadida por los ejércitos de Napoleón. Hoy les toca la lucha de liberación frente a la metrópoli imperial más poderosa del mundo, frente a la fuerza más importante del sistema imperialista mundial, y para prestarle a la humanidad un servicio todavía más grande del que le prestaron nuestros antepasados [...] El deber de todo revolucionario es hacer la revolución [...].⁵⁸

Che Guevara would call the Second Declaration the «expresión y concreción» of Latin America's revolutionary potential. «América hoy es un volcán; no está en erupción, pero está conmovida por inmensos ruidos subterráneos», he added, describing Castro's declaration as the words to these subterranean sounds.⁵⁹

Young Chileans inclined towards armed struggle were increasingly captivated by this conceptual framework and by news of guerrilla insurgencies from abroad. It didn't seem to matter how big or successful armed insurgencies were. As one eleno recalled, even the smallest had «un impacto». «Leíamos mucho de todo lo que llegaba de afuera», he reflected, «éramos como esponjas, absorbíamos todo».⁶⁰ Cuba promoted and celebrated armed revolution through its news agency, Prensa Latina, and through publications instructing guerrilla hopefuls how to launch their own insurgency. From Che Guevara's *Guerra de guerrillas*, first published in Havana in 1960, and re-issued with an introduction on «methods» that captured young Chilean militants' attention in 1963, to Régis Debray's *Revolution in the Revolution?* published by Cuba's Casa de las Américas in January 1967, Havana argued that a rural foco could ignite revolution across Latin America.⁶¹

This call for revolution on a regional scale had become increasingly powerful in the second half of the 1960s as a result of two major conferences in Cuba. In January 1966, the Organización de Solidaridad con los Pueblos de Asia, África y América Latina (OSPAAAL)—or Tricontinental—held its inaugural conference in Havana. It was an enormous public undertaking celebrating revolutionary violence as a necessary and desirable response to US imperialism. Delegates proclaimed solidarity with «revolutionary movements of Colombia, Venezuela, Peru, Panama,

57 First Declaration of Havana.

58 «Discurso pronunciado por el Comandante Fidel Castro Ruz, primer secretario de la Dirección Nacional de las ORI y primer ministro del gobierno revolucionario, en la segunda asamblea nacional del pueblo de Cuba, celebrada en la Plaza de la República, el 4 de febrero de 1962», <<http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1962/esp/f040262e.html>>.

59 Guevara, E. «Táctica y estrategia».

60 Interview with Huerta, 23 March 2010; Huerta, F. and Chávez, J. *El trabajo es vivir*, 65.

61 On the significance of the 1963 edition of *Guerra de guerrillas*, see: Palieraki, Eugenia. *¡La Revolución ya viene! el mir chileno en los años sesenta* (Santiago, Chile: LOM Ediciones, 2014), 117–18.





Ecuador, and other countries of the Caribbean area and the southern part of the hemisphere». ⁶² Salvador Allende, a delegate to the conference also proposed the establishment of special Latin American solidarity organisation, OLAS, which met the following year at another conference in Havana. The new organisation gave concrete meaning to the idea of a Latin Americanist revolution, defining «solidarity» as support for «guerrilla warfare and revolutionary struggle in all the countries of Latin America». ⁶³

By the late-1960s, global events also attracted Latin American revolutionaries' attention and added weight to this internationalist ideal. The United States' war in Vietnam, in particular, dominated the Cuban revolution's discourse. Indeed, Asian and African twentieth century battles against colonialism increasingly joined Latin America's nineteenth century struggle for independence as frames of reference. The Tricontinental conference and its publications resonated with expressions of solidarity with Vietnam and promises to emulate its example. Already, in 1964, Fidel Castro had labelled Colombia and Venezuela —both of which had revolutionary insurgencies at the time— as «the nucleus of a vast Vietnam» in Latin America. At the Tricontinental Conference, Cuba's President, Osvaldo Dorticos, underscored revolutionaries' «fundamental obligation to express solidarity with, and pledge the most resolute support for, the valiant people of Vietnam». ⁶⁴

In keeping with this idea, in April 1967, the Tricontinental published Che Guevara's message to revolutionaries to create «two, three, many Vietnams» as a means of bringing imperialism to its knees; a message which reverberated loudly in the Southern Cone. ⁶⁵ «No se trata de desear éxitos al agredido», Che insisted, bemoaning Latin Americans lackluster support for the Vietnamese from afar, «sino de correr su misma suerte; acompañarlo a la muerte o la victoria». As Guevara insisted, the road ahead would be long and costly, but it would triumph as long as there were enough people committed to its success and ready to take up arms.

Crucially, Che also argued that Latin America had a specific role to play in supporting Vietnam in this way. As he explained —vaguely, as others had before him— shared language (he considered Spanish and Portuguese to be close enough for mutual comprehension), customs, religion, «amo común», and the same exploitation meant revolutions in the region would automatically have «dimensiones continentales». On a global level, this continental revolution would then play a pivotal role in the battle against imperialism: «América, continente olvidado por las últimas luchas políticas de liberación», he argued, «tendrá una tarea de mucho mayor relieve: la de la creación del segundo o tercer Vietnam o del segundo y tercer Vietnam del mundo». ⁶⁶ Equating Latin American revolutionary struggles with larger global anti-colonial liberation movements gave them a broader, immediate global relevance. By evoking the need for the liberation of Latin America, which was obviously independent long before most of Asia and Africa, Che Guevara and his followers also spoke directly to movements across the globe they wanted to emulate and draw strength from.

62 Staff Report, «The Tricontinental Conference of African, Asian, and Latin American Peoples: A Staff Survey Prepared for the Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security Laws of the Committee on the Judiciary United States Senate» (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1966), online at: <<http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/tricontinental.htm>>.

63 Marchesi, A. «Geographies of Armed Protest», 137–38; «Revolutionary Struggle: The Fundamental Line of the Revolution in Latin America», *Tricontinental Bulletin*, 18 (September 1967), 16.

64 Staff Report, «Tricontinental Conference».

65 Marchesi, A. «Geographies of Armed Protest», 142–43.

66 Guevara, E. «Crear dos, tres... muchos Vietnam».





These ideas formed the basis of Che Guevara's decision to establish the ELN in Bolivia. After his death, his survivors then explicitly tried to translate them into reality. Tellingly, «Volveremos a la montaña» mentioned Vietnam as many times (10) as Bolivia. As it stated, because Vietnamese people were fighting «por nosotros [...] nosotros debemos pelear por ellos». And when it came to the definition of «nosotros», the ELN switched between a nominal Bolivian label and a transnational, regional identity. Indeed, to elenos, «Bolivia» represented Latin America. In the same language Che had used, its revolutionary venture would have «dimensiones continentales». The ELN's stated purpose —its «mota única y final»— was the «liberación de América Latina» in keeping with «el sueño bolivariano y del Che de unir Latinoamérica política y geológicamente». Rather than any reference to the Cuban —or Bolshevik— Revolution, the roots of this project were imagined as being nineteenth century wars of independence, with Che Guevara posthumously proclaimed the «nuevo Bolívar de América Latina». ⁶⁷ As Inti would state in a message published in Bolivia in September 1969, this insurgency was the «sublevación de los ideales libertarios [...] la continuación de la lucha bolivariana». ⁶⁸ «Esta es ya la época de la revolución continental», the ELN's manifesto underlined, pointing to the Cubans, Peruvians, Argentinians and Bolivians that had died fighting with Che Guevara in Bolivia. ⁶⁹ Inti Peredo repeated this argument later in interview for *Punto Final*. «Hay quienes desean congelar dentro de las fronteras nacionales a los movimientos que luchan por la liberación continental», he added, «Es absurdo. La lucha es de todos [...] La lucha contra el imperialismo es una sola». ⁷⁰

There were various reasons why Bolivia was chosen as the place to initiate this kind of regional Latin Americanist revolution. Like those who were trying to stop revolution in Latin America during the 1960s through reformist programmes and counterinsurgency efforts, ELN members assumed that Bolivia's poverty would automatically trigger revolution. Bolivia's central location in the middle of South America was also considered strategically important, offering supply lines from other countries and the possibility of extending a guerrilla insurgency outwards across its five borders. In the mid-1960s, it had become important not as the object of Cuba's revolutionary operations but as a rear-guard —a «zona de tránsito»— ⁷¹ for those destined for guerrilla operations in Peru and Argentina. ⁷² However, once these had failed, it had become the focus of revolutionary planning itself, albeit with the aim of creating a «mother column» that would then span out to neighbouring countries. ⁷³

Mainly, however, those who now signed up to a new revolutionary venture in Bolivia in 1968 did so because Che Guevara had chosen the country to make his ultimate sacrifice —the place he had selected to create the Latin American Vietnam he had called for—. No one questioned whether his choice had been right. To the contrary, ironically, as a result of his death, it was sanctified, glorified and indisputable. Now, ELN recruits not only hoped to follow in Che's footsteps

67 Peredo, Inti. «Volveremos a la montaña».

68 Peredo, Inti. «Mensaje» (5 September 1969), in Rodríguez Ostría, G. *Teoponte*, 166. On the ELN's continuation of a longer struggle for emancipation «durante casi un siglo y medio», see: «Último mensaje de Inti Peredo», *Punto Final*, 88 (30 September 1969), and Peredo Leigue, Antonio. «Y ahora... ¿qué?», *Punto Final*, 89 (13 October 1969).

69 Peredo, Inti. «Volveremos a la montaña».

70 Olivares, A. «La única entrevista que concedió "Inti"».

71 G. Rodríguez Ostría, *Teoponte*, 256.

72 Jan Lust, «The Role of the Peruvian Guerrilla in Che Guevara's Continental Guerrilla Project», *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 35:2 (2016).

73 Suárez Salazar, L. (editor). *Manuel Piñero*, 16.





but to resurrect him from Bolivian soil. In the words of a hymn sung by future ELN recruits, «Nosotros somos, Che comandante | aquel Viet Nam con que tú soñaste [...] aquella sangre que derramaste | como ave fénix resurgirá».⁷⁴ Or as Elmo Catalán would explain to his family:

Bolivia está en pleno corazón del cono sur, es el que más ha sentido la explotación y el hambre, y su pueblo tiene una tradición de lucha que lo convierte en uno de los más aguerridos del continente. Es también, por derecho propio y por la semilla que sembró el Che, el escenario histórico natural e indiscutido [...].⁷⁵

Beyond this broad framework, the ELN's definition of revolution and its ideological foundation are difficult to pin down. Except for the movement's manifesto, no written ideological framework for the organisation was drawn up until early 1969, when a document called the «Ideario político del Ejército de Liberación Nacional» —again, most probably written by Elmo Catalán— was distributed among recruits in Cuba.⁷⁶ To some extent, disagreements between diverse, heterogeneous members explain this. However, the lack of a coherent ideological framework also owed much to the preference for armed struggle over theory; the idea —popularised by the Cuban Revolution and Guevara— that actions spoke louder than words. «La revolución no se hace con declaraciones en conferencias», Inti Peredo proclaimed in a message published early in September 1969, «La revolución se hace luchando, respondiendo a la violencia brutal del enemigo con la violencia revolucionaria».⁷⁷ Recruits carried books by Regis Debray and Guevara with them in training but few read even these works very closely. As Debray reflected in an interview for *Punto Final* after Guevara's death, «lo importante del Ché no eran sus ideas, sino una manera de ponerlas en práctica, de vivirlas hasta el último compromiso».⁷⁸ This message resonated among those who wanted to emulate Guevara and presumably accounts for the lack of in-depth theorizing or planning when it came to how a Latin Americanist Revolution would work in practice. As one ELN member remembered, «Algunos de nosotros blabuceábamos el marxismo o creíamos saber algo del marxismo, pero apenas habíamos tirado una leída y no entendíamos mucho. Intentábamos resumir todo el cuerpo ideológico en el accionar más que en las palabras».⁷⁹

Tragically, Guevara's experience —and the way it was reported— also led elenos to embrace the violent consequences of armed struggle rather than question them. Death was romanticised and Che was defined in the ELN's manifesto as «romántico, visionario y heroico». Those who had died with him in Bolivia were explicitly named, celebrated and accorded «honor y gloria».⁸⁰ In his homage to Guevara back in October 1967, Fidel Castro had celebrated the blood he had spilt on Bolivian soil: «¡Esa sangre se derramó por todos los explotados, por todos los oprimidos...!»⁸¹ As the head of Chile's Prensa Latina office put it, in an article for *Punto Final*, Guevara's death had proved he was «un revolucionario verdadero», the implication being that if his followers wanted to acquire the same status they also had to embrace death.⁸² The Chilean magazine also published a poem dedicated to Guevara by the Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén, which circulated

74 Rodríguez Ostría, G. *Teoponte*, 115.

75 «Carta de despedida de Elmo Catalán», 115–17.

76 Rodríguez Ostría, G. *Teoponte*, 166.

77 «Último mensaje de Inti Peredo».

78 «Debray: "Muchos tomarán la bandera del Ché"», *Punto Final*, 41 (6 November 1967).

79 Rodríguez Ostría, G. *Teoponte*, 120, 176.

80 «Volveremos a la montaña».

81 Castro, «Velada solemne en memoria del Comandante Ernesto Che Guevara».

82 Jorquera Tolosa, Carlos. «¿Hubo solidaridad con Ché Guevara?», *Punto Final*, 41 (6 November 1967).





widely throughout Latin America after October 1967 and encouraged revolutionary hopefuls to follow Che to the grave:

Espéranos. Partiremos contigo. Queremos
morir para vivir como tú has muerto,
para vivir como tú vives,
Ché Comandante,
amigo.⁸³

Now, ELN recruits voluntarily pledged to uphold his ideals «hasta morir» in what they were informed would be a «lucha [...] sangrienta y cruel».⁸⁴ For these revolutionaries whose cause went beyond Bolivia and encompassed Latin America as a whole, their motto would not be Cuba's «patria o muerte», but rather «victoria o muerte».⁸⁵ Indeed, death as a means of furthering this particularly potent articulation of a Latin Americanist vision —a Bolivarian Vietnam— was held up something to aspire to. As one ELN recruit remembered «Éramos muy jóvenes y vivíamos una apasionante aventura, sin preocupaciones y embriagados por el romántico orgullo de ser los herederos del Che».⁸⁶

Unravelling

Almost as soon as the first ELN recruits arrived back in Bolivia after training in Cuba, the organisation's project began to unravel. In July 1969, security services located and killed key members of the urban underground, rendering safe houses inoperative and seizing weapons, ammunition and supplies. In September 1969, Inti Peredo was also killed. While his brother, Osvaldo «Chato» Peredo, assumed his place, this was only after a bitter leadership battle. Unlike Inti, he had never been part of Guevara's original insurgency and therefore did not command the same respect or legitimacy. The political context in Bolivia had also changed when General René Barrientos was killed in a plane crash on 27 April 1969 and his successor —Luis Adolfo Siles Salinas— was then overthrown by the nationalist military leader Alfredo Ovando Candía on 26 September 1969. When Ovando nationalised the US-owned Gulf Oil Company, eased repressive restrictions on trade unions, adopted an anti-imperialist discourse, re-established relations with the Soviet Union and even suggested he might renew diplomatic relations with Cuba, this called into question the ELN's purpose. Although some elenos left the organisation, the majority, whose primary focus was on Latin America, Vietnam and fulfilling Che Guevara's legacy, stayed.

The combined fragility of the ELN in Bolivia and the new political context nevertheless caused the Cubans to withdraw their support. Already, in early 1969, they had hesitated before facilitating the transfer of ELN recruits to Bolivia stationed in Cuba. Then, in late July or beginning of August, even before Inti's death, they recalled the two Cubans —Benigno and Pombo— who were due return to Bolivia to fight under Inti's command. Benigno, in Rome, on route to Chile for transit across the border was simply barred from onward travel by the Cuban embassy. Although the Cubans sent a final instalment of money to the ELN immediately after Inti's death via a Chilean emissary, this spelt the end of significant Cuban involvement.⁸⁷

83 Guillén, Nicolás. «Che Comandante», *Punto Final*, 41(6 November 1967).

84 Peredo, Inti. «Volveremos a la montaña».

85 Rodríguez Ostría, G. *Teoponte*, 115.

86 Ibid., 118.

87 Ibid., 216–18, 220–21, 248; Alarcón Ramírez, Dariel. «Benigno». *Memorias de un soldado cubano: vida y muerte de la revolución* (Barcelona: Tusquets Editores, 2003), 210; interview with Huerta, 20 April 2010.





To understand the sudden withdrawal of Cuban support it is important to grasp the broader regional and global context in addition to the ELN's desperate situation in Bolivia. In 1968, when Cuba had committed to a new Bolivian insurgency, rural focos had already failed or were under severe pressure across Latin America. Immediately prior to the deterioration of the ELN's position in Bolivia in 1969, the Cubans had suffered severe defeats in Venezuela and Guatemala, where they had been supporting a guerrilla insurgency since the early 1960s. A string of rural guerrilla insurgencies had also been defeated by the military regime Brazil and an attempt to establish a guerrilla foco in Tucumán, Argentina, had failed in its initial phase.⁸⁸

These guerrilla defeats substantially weakened the Cubans' position when it came to their relationship with the Soviet Union. Having disagreed on revolutionary strategy in Latin America throughout the 1960s, Cuban-Soviet relations deteriorated even further in 1967-8 as a result of Che Guevara's foray into Bolivia. For the Soviet Union, Cuba's position in Latin America was dangerous and provocative; being dragged into an open confrontation with the United States in Latin America by the Cubans had to be avoided. Cuba's unorthodox economic planning, Castro's decision to purge a pro-Soviet group and the Soviet decision to withhold previously promised oil supplies strained the relationship further. With their revolutionary gambles in Latin America having failed, no prospects of achieving a 10 million ton sugar harvest at home that Cuba's leaders had proclaimed and the need for defensive support against the United States, Castro had no real alternative other than to pull away from the brink. In August 1968, he signalled his readiness to work with the Soviets when he did not condemn the invasion of Czechoslovakia. In the context of growing moves towards superpower détente within the context of the global Cold War and Soviet insistence on peaceful-coexistence, the Cubans therefore decided to change strategy.⁸⁹

Primarily, Havana's leaders reoriented Cuba's relations with Latin America by downgrading support for guerrillas and the idea of a unified Latin Americanist revolution.⁹⁰ In the second half of 1969 and early 1970, intelligence operations and international alignments were also restructured. The Viceministerio Técnico at the Ministerio del Interior now split into two sections: the DGI (responsible for political intelligence) and the DGLN (responsible for solidarity work with Latin America's left-wing parties and movements). Although many of its original personnel now went to the DGLN, headed by Manuel Piñeiro, the organisation's priorities were to support nationalist military governments that had come to power in Panama and Peru in 1968. As one DGLN official remembered, «hubo un reajuste en el concepto de la solidaridad de la Revolución Cubana con América Latina». Downgrading support for revolutionary insurgencies was strongly encouraged by the Soviet bloc. In December 1969, as if to confirm this, Cuban intelligence chiefs went on a three-month tour of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. For those who had spent the best part of a decade supporting guerrilla movements in Latin America it must have been jarring. As one Cuban intelligence official remembered, «Con respecto a la lucha de liberación nacional en América Latina, teníamos una valoración completamente diferente a la de todos ellos». Another recalled that «había un gran rechazo al pensamiento del Che».⁹¹ Even so, by the early 1970s, Havana's leaders had distanced themselves from Guevara's ideas. Even us intelligence analysts, famed for their fears of Cuban subversion in Latin America, had concluded Castro

88 Wright, Thomas C. *Latin America in the Era of the Cuban Revolution* (Westport: Praeger, 2001), 77–78, 103–4.

89 Michael Erisman, H. *Cuba's Foreign Relations in a Post-Soviet World* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 73–77; Blight, James G. and Brenner, Philip. *Sad and Luminous Days: Cuba's Struggle with the Superpowers after the Missile Crisis* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002).

90 Rodríguez Ostría, G. *Teoponte*, 221.

91 Suárez Salazar, L. and Kruijt, D. *Internacionalismo anónimo*, 56–58, 124, 125.





had moved toward «selectivity in his support» for revolutionary insurgencies and insistence on «self-sufficiency» for armed revolutionary groups.⁹²

These changes in Cuba obviously had serious implications for the ELN in Bolivia, which had to sustain itself without Havana's sponsorship. The Cubans never explained their withdrawal or provided solutions. The radio Beatriz was operating from Chile to communicate with the Cubans simply went quiet. Inti Peredo was meanwhile furious.⁹³ In an interview conducted in June 1969, he appealed for help from journalists to help spread news of the organisation's cause: «pidan solidaridad para la lucha del ELN que es la misma del Che y por lo tanto de toda América latina», he asked, «Necesitamos recursos financieros. Las armas cuestan caras».⁹⁴

His appeal is revealing. Previously, the Cubans had absorbed all costs of the ELN, providing enough arms and bullets for extensive training and preparations inside Bolivia. The new phase of the ELN, which began after Guevara's death, could simply not have taken off Cuba. As one of the Tropas Especiales who trained recruits in Cuba recalled, planning for a second guerrilla insurgency in Bolivia in 1968-9 was bigger, far more careful and institutionally supported than Che Guevara's initial mission.⁹⁵ Through its network of collaborators in Chile, the supply of funds, training and conceptual Latin Americanist framework, Cuba's leaders had been the architects of the ELN's venture.

Now, the ELN continued, abandoned by the Cubans to its fate but retaining some of the legitimacy of being associated with Che Guevara's internationalist project. To be self-sufficient, its members resorted to botched bank robberies in Valparaiso and Cochabamba in the latter half of 1969, although these led to yet more internal divisions and attention from security services.⁹⁶ On the run with its forces depleted, the ELN nevertheless continued full-steam ahead. What is hard to understand is that in doing so it was able to recruit more volunteers in Bolivia and Chile. And, in this respect, again, Che Guevara's death was important. It certainly continued to be romanticised and celebrated on the pages of *Punto Final*, which republished a serialised Cuban account of his final combat.⁹⁷

In particular, middle class Catholic students in Bolivia and Chile, influenced by shifts in religious theology throughout Latin America in the late-1960s snow proved receptive to Che's message. To be sure, Liberation Theology, as became known after 1968, attracted a range of different religious groups, not all of who sanctioned armed struggle. To the far left, however, it provided a framework that allowed and inspired Catholics —such as the Chilean student and eleno, Julio Olivares Romero, or «Cristián»— to join revolutionary movements.⁹⁸ The death of Camilo Torres, a Colombian priest who joined the country's own ELN in 1966, was influential in this regard in mobilising Bolivian students known as «Camilistas». Fusing theology and revolution in their reading of the world around them, Catholic students also came to regard Che

92 Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Washington, 25 January 1971, doc. 33, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Vol. E-10: Documents on American Republics, 1969-1972* online at: <<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve10/d33>>.

93 Rodríguez Ostría, G. *Teoponte*, 218, 219. On the lack of any explanation, see: interview with Félix Huerta, 20 April 2010 and off-record interview with ex-Eleno, 27 March 2010.

94 Olivares, A. «La única entrevista que concedió "Inti"».

95 Interview with Patricia de la Guardia, 21 April 2011, Havana, Cuba.

96 Rodríguez Ostría, G. *Teoponte*, 248-50.

97 «El combate de Yuro», *Punto Final*, 89 (14 October 1969 and 28 October 1969).

98 Rodríguez Ostría, G. *Teoponte*, 274, 620.





Guevara as «Cristo en las montañas» and vowed to follow in his footsteps. Indeed, by 1969, the idea of Che as Christ and Christ's revolutionary relevance was encouraged in far-left publications. A year after his death, for example, *Punto Final* published averse written by the Spanish poet, León Felipe, but misleadingly attributed it to Che himself:

Cristo, te amo,
No porque bajaste de una estrella
sino porque me revelaste que el hombre tiene sangre,
lágrimas,
congojas,
llaves para abrir las puertas cerradas de la luz.
Sí... tú nos enseñaste que el hombre es Dios,
Un pobre Dios crucificado como tú.⁹⁹

For the ELN, in dire need of recruiting new members, these associations proved useful. Catholic student organisations and their members' new enthusiasm for revolutionary action provided powerful mobilising tool. Logistically, at least one Jesuit priest in Cochabamba also provided refuge and a place for elenos to meet Christians in his convent.¹⁰⁰

As Rodríguez Ostría notes, new ELN student recruits who joined the organisation were also highly influenced by scholars of Dependency Theory working in Chile at the time.¹⁰¹ Increasingly popular in Latin America at the end of the 1960s thanks to publications like André Gunder Frank's *Development of Underdevelopment*, first published in the United States in 1966 and re-published in Cuba's *Pensamiento Crítico* in August 1967, it offered Latin Americans a means of understanding the world in regional terms.¹⁰² As Marchesi argues, Gunder Frank's conclusions were striking for their «ahistoricidad», generalising Latin America's experience over centuries and space.¹⁰³ Yet his conclusions that the region as a whole suffered from underdevelopment due to its unequal relationship with global capitalism that exploited its resources served as the justification for revolutionary systemic change on a regional scale.¹⁰⁴ For those inclined toward revolutionary change, it was «la base económica y social que completa las conclusiones políticas de Regis Debray», as one editor of the book argued.¹⁰⁵ Writing to Luis Fernández Oña, who had introduced her to the ELN and who she was now romantically involved with, Beatriz Allende praised Gunder Frank's «bueno y conocido» *Development of Underdevelopment*, suggesting he should read it if he had not already.¹⁰⁶

The Chileans heavily committed to the ELN since early 1968 mostly continued supporting the insurgency despite its weaknesses, working hard to recruit new members and incorporate

99 Guevara, Che. «Una revolución que comienza», *Punto Final*, 89 (14 October 1969). Although a false attribution, Guevara had written the verse out in one of the notebooks he took to Bolivia. See: Pérez Guillén, Daily. «Ernesto Che Guevara y León Felipe: Una amistad entrañable», *Juventud Rebelde* (November 28, 2015) online at: <<http://www.juventudrebelde.cu/cuba/2015-11-28/ernesto-che-guevara-y-leon-felipe-una-amistad-entratable/>>.

100 Rodríguez Ostría, G. *Teoponte*, 281–306, 308.

101 Ibid., 303.

102 Gunder Frank, Andre. «El desarrollo del subdesarrollo», *Pensamiento Crítico*, 7 (August 1967).

103 Marchesi, Aldo. «Imaginación política del antiimperialismo: intelectuales y política en el cono sur a fines de los sesenta», *Estudios Interdisciplinarios de América Latina y el Caribe*, 17:1 (2006), 142.

104 Gunder Frank, A. «El desarrollo del subdesarrollo», 160.

105 Marchesi, A. «Imaginación política del antiimperialismo», 145.

106 Letter, Tati [Beatriz Allende] to Papote Querido [Luis Fernández Oña], 22 February 1969, Archivo Beatriz Allende, Private Collection, Havana, Cuba [Hereafter ABA].





them after Inti's death. Certainly, with Cuban support withdrawn, these core Chilean elenos, such as Arnoldo Camú and Beatriz, continued playing a vital role in facilitating transit of supplies and people or acting as intermediaries between the Bolivians and the Tupamaros.¹⁰⁷ To some extent, this probably had a lot to do with their loyalty to Elmo Catalán, now a leading figure in the ELN's high command inside Bolivia. It also had a lot to do with momentum that had built up over the previous year and the structures that were in place throughout Chile to help support a Bolivian insurgency. Even so, some of the first wave of Chilean recruits who had joined the ELN just before and after Che died were disheartened. Fernando Gómez left the ELN in September 1969 just after Inti's death in the midst of recriminations and leadership struggles. Writing to Oñain January 1970, Beatriz also indicated her disillusionment: «Aquí estamos empezando este año que tenía esperanzas que se iniciara bien, casi una necesidad de que así sea pero el comienzo no ha sido de lo mejor... la salud de mis parientes de Valdivia [her code for the ELN] es precaria [...] Tú imaginarás que esto me ha afectado muchísimo [...] me siento más vieja y más seria». Beatriz also appears to have had a new urge to study ideology, writing asking Oña to send her «obras de LENIN [...] debo reconocer demasiada ignorancia [...] y debo superarlo ya que nunca me había propuesto estudiar a los clásicos Marxistas y ahora estoy haciéndolo».¹⁰⁸

Preparations for the ELN's Latin Americanist insurgency meanwhile stumbled ahead. What had begun a carefully planned, Cuban-orchestrated Latin American venture now took a more limited character. Of the original 60-70 recruits trained in Cuba at the end of 1968, only 20-25 remained by the time the insurgency began.¹⁰⁹ When an ELN recruit murdered Elmo Catalán and his new Bolivian girlfriend—a student leader in Cochabamba recruited to the ELN in 1969 and pregnant with Catalán's child—just before the insurgency was launched, this provided another blow to the internationalist organisation. The murder itself was a sordid affair, fuelling conspiracy theories and yet more division within the ELN. While some tried to paint it as a CIA-operation, others explained it away as a love affair gone wrong and, although no one said it openly, there were also insinuations Chato Peredo orchestrated it to secure his leadership of the insurgency.¹¹⁰ Whatever the cause—unclear to this day—the discovery of the two bodies under a bridge on the outskirts of Cochabamba was a sorry end to Catalán's dreams of following in Che's footsteps. Pointless and remote, his death also stood diametrically opposed in scale to the continental revolutionary ideas that had brought him to Bolivia in the first place.

It was at this point that two more Chileans, Carlos Gómez and Félix Vargas, also left Bolivia and returned to Chile.¹¹¹ While 8 Chileans and six other non-Bolivians still took part in the insurgency, its Latin Americanist character, cemented in the early months of 1968 when survivors of Che's guerrilla column escaped Bolivia, diminished. Rather than spending six months training intensively in Cuba as original elenos had done, new student recruits also now had to make do with quick ad-hoc hiking and firing practice either in Chile or Bolivia. As Félix Huerta lamented decades later, «era muy difícil poder sacar la pata del acelerador».¹¹²

107 Rodríguez Ostría, G. *Teoponte*, 248, 266–67, 273.

108 Letter, Tati to Papote Querido, 10 January 1970, ABA.

109 Rodríguez Ostría, G. *Teoponte*, 353. Debates exist about how many originally trained in Cuba. Although Rodríguez Ostría refutes Benigno's account, the latter counted 2 Cubans, nearly 100 Bolivians, 26 Chileans, 23 or 24 Argentinians, 1 Brazilian, 1 Peruvian, 1 Uruguayan, 1 Venezuelan, 1 Guatemalan and 1 Honduran. Alarcón Ramírez, D. *Memorias*, 201.

110 Rodríguez Ostría, G. *Teoponte*, 312–13, 326–36; off the record interview with ex-Eleno.

111 Rodríguez Ostría, G. *Teoponte*, 333–37.

112 Huerta, F. and Chávez, J. *El trabajo es vivir*, 215–16, 220.





It was unsurprising, then, that the guerrilla insurgency ran into difficulties as soon as it started. Aspirations inherited from Che Guevara and Cuba's promotion of Latin Americanist revolution had blinded elenos to their immediate context and environment. The guerrillas set off into an area none of them knew, many of them unequipped to withstand the rivers and the climate, and with only vague expectations of acquiring food and support from the local population. In their desperate efforts to be like Che, it seems that they also replicated many of his faults and mistakes. The guerrilla column even divided and lost half of its members by accident as Che Guevara's had done three years earlier. Tirso Montiel, the Chilean eleno who had written to his family of fighting for «La gran Patria Latinoamericana» died when he went in search of bananas and chickens to feed members of the guerrilla column. When ambushed by the Bolivian army and wounded, he reportedly used a tree trunk to prop himself up and shout insults against imperialism.¹¹³ His death, on a farm in the remote Bolivian altiplano, in many ways captured the inglorious, localised and isolated fate of a utopian vision on such a grand scale.

Back in Santiago, Chilean elenos who made up the rear-guard never stopped supporting the insurgency but their involvement obviously decreased as events on the ground took over. Their last major operation was to help Teoponte survivors cross the border into Chile and seek asylum. Meanwhile, their attention had increasingly been diverted to other concerns, namely the candidacy and then presidency of Salvador Allende and the possibility that he could initiate a peaceful, democratic road to socialism. Never considered as a viable location for armed revolution and therefore disregarded by Chilean elenos in search of guerrilla warfare, Chile now came back into view. As Luis Fernández Oña told Arnoldo Camú when he talked about going to Bolivia to share the insurgent's fate, Chile was now more important.¹¹⁴ Beatriz agreed. «Creo que Chilito se está poniendo interesante», she had written to Oñain March 1970.¹¹⁵ Even so, the elenos did not give up their Cuban training that they had learnt for the Bolivian insurgency, either in security or intelligence. Instead, they now deployed it to help Allende. Coordinated by Beatriz, and led by Fernando Gómez, they formed the core of a new personal bodyguard in the latter phase of his presidential campaign.¹¹⁶ They also remained in contact with survivors from Teoponte and other regional armed revolutionary groups that sought sanctuary and support in Chile during the years Allende was in power. Their priority was now nevertheless to assist and support the revolutionary process in Chile. When the JCR began operating 1972, therefore, the MIR coordinated it rather than the Socialists.

Conclusions

The ELN's experience after Che Guevara's death was obviously only one example of armed revolution in Latin America. Its trajectory and conceptual framework is nevertheless interesting for anyone concerned with understanding the pull of Latin Americanism. Its direct link to Che Guevara made it a potent embodiment of the regional project espoused. Although his death should have been a moment of reflection and pause, romanticised and celebrated, it mobilised young Latin Americans to take up arms.

Two aspects of the ELN's experience associated with this project are worth underling. The first relates to who signed up to it and why. As we have seen, the Chileans who joined the ELN were

113 Rodríguez Ostría, G. *Teoponte*, 419–20.

114 Interview with Huerta and Oña.

115 Letter, Tati to Papote Querido, 11 March 1970, ABA.

116 Quiroga Zamora, Patricio. *Compañeros: el gap, la escolta de Allende* (Santiago: Aguilar, 2001); Pérez, C. «El ejército del Che».





diverse and seemingly ad-hoc. Individual contacts and friendships mattered more than institutionalised party structures, and in the latter phase of the ELN, religious and intellectual causes fused with Che's example to draw recruits to the organisation. Initially, however, the Cubans were the primary instigators of contacts. As far as we know, although Chilean elenos tended to be Socialists, their commitment was not approved or discussed by the party or its leadership. Instead, they were militants on the side-lines, drawn to armed revolution but unconvinced by its relevance for Chile. This had a lot to do with Chile's particular circumstances. While the Cubans continued to court and support established left-wing parties in Chile —pinning their hopes and loyalty on Salvador Allende— the improvised nature of their collaborators in guerrilla operations was inevitable. It also related to the nature of the work involved, which was explicitly clandestine, relying on personal loyalty rather than institutions. In this respect, it is important to note that the Cubans kept different revolutionary operations separate from each other in the name of «compartmentalisation».¹¹⁷ While this «compartmentalisation» was designed to protect revolutionary ventures, it also undercut the potential for broader transnational cooperation. Within a compartmentalised and clandestine world, the coordination of these individual volunteers required state-level sponsorship and resources. Internationalism, in other words, was highly dependent on some kind of centralised control —at least initially—. Had the Cubans not been involved in establishing the Chilean ELN network, it is doubtful whether it would have existed or at least whether it would have played the significant role it did when it came to rescuing Inti Peredo and providing safe transit for elenos between Cuba and Bolivia. And, presumably, a Bolivarian-style victory on a continental regional scale would have subsumed Latin America under Cuba's leadership. Yet there is no evidence to suggest the Cubans or elenos ever fleshed out details of what a Gran Patria would look like, who would be in charge or how it would work.

The second point worth underlining is the power that a regional and global framework offered ELN recruits. By imagining their guerrilla insurgency as the continuation of Latin America's struggle for independence, elenos made their operation historically relevant when it had few concrete links to Bolivia's contemporary political and social context. By tying revolutionary movements in the Americas to Vietnam, the Cubans, Guevara and their followers also made them globally significant. These were impressive mobilisational frameworks. Even if a total 200 or 300 participated in the ELN's effort to launch a new insurgency in Bolivia between 1968 and 1970, they hardly made up the same fighting force that South Vietnam's National Liberation Front, which numbered at least 46,000 by 1966.¹¹⁸ By equating what they were doing to nineteenth century independence battles and the Vietnamese struggle, however, ELN guerrillas —weak, divided and on the run inside Bolivia— could claim they had the strength and power to transform the world. The framework they were using was only vaguely conceptualised in speeches, repeated communiqués and manifestos. Yet, captivated by Che Guevara's international standing and his ambitious dream of setting the world alight with «two, three, many Vietnams» —paradoxically vindicated as a result of his death— ELN recruits aspired to something that they never challenged, studied or questioned in detail. Instead, through imagined association with forces far bigger and historically significant than their own, they could reason that their personal sacrifices in the isolated, unpopulated mountains of Bolivia would be important, that in death they would attain Che's glory and help launch Latin America's second independence.

117 Interviews with Oña, Estrada and Carretero.

118 Schulzinger Robert, D. *A Time for War: The United States and Vietnam, 1941-1975* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 197.





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Recibido 15/04/16 - Aceptado 22/07/16

