“The duty of every revolutionary is to make the revolution. It is true that the revolution will triumph in the Americas and throughout the world, but it is not for revolutionaries to sit in the doorways of their houses waiting for the corpse of imperialism to pass by.” 1 This statement, issued by Fidel Castro before the more than one million member Second General Assembly of the Cuban People convened in Havana’s Plaza of the Revolution on February 4, 1962, exemplifies the fundamental political position of the Cuban revolutionary state during the 1960s. Although, in 1962, the Cuban theory of revolution was not yet fully systematized, its key principles—internationalism, anti-imperialism, Latin American continental liberation, and the primacy of revolutionary armed struggle—were already evident. Emerging unexpectedly, under distinctive circumstances and in a unique context from previous Marxist revolutions, the Cuban model offered a revolutionary guide to action that was self-consciously heterodox. Divergent from the political line of traditional Latin American Communist Parties and standing in juxtaposition to the “peaceful coexistence” policy of the Soviet Union, the Cuban example was intended to provide the Latin American path to socialism and national liberation.

Although the foundations of this model were present from the earliest days of the Cuban Revolution itself, the Cuban theory of revolution, as a complete formulation, emerged only gradually as its focus was expanded and radicalized during the 1960s. This is evident not only in the Revolution’s foundational theoretical writings, but also in practice in Bolivia. And, just as the Cuban theory of revolution came to be defined largely by its opposition to the official line of the Soviet Union and its allied Latin American parties, so too was the implementation of this theory manifest in its opposition to the wishes of the Soviet state and the Bolivian Communist

Party. Ultimately, the Bolivian campaign, culminating in the death of Che Guevara, marked the apogee of what had, by then, come to be known as Guevarism. It is through an examination of this phenomenon that the significance of the Cuban example in Latin America can be best understood. Far from serving as a mere accessory to the Soviet Union’s Cold War designs, the Cuban Revolution’s first decade was defined primarily by its development of an independent theory and practice extending beyond the parameters of any conventional Cold War binary.

**The Cuban Model: Revolutionary Roots**

The Cuban Revolutionary War—lasting from December 2, 1956 until January 1, 1959—was not a Marxist revolution in traditional terms. It followed neither the Bolshevik model of urban working class insurrection nor the Chinese example of “people’s war” orchestrated by a Marxist-Leninist party. In Cuba, there did not exist a cohesive, ideologically coherent party to lead the struggle. The 26th of July Movement—a loosely assembled organization named for the date of Fidel Castro’s failed attack on the Moncada Barracks in 1953—was a unified entity only insofar as its members were engaged in active opposition to Fulgencio Batista’s rule. To the extent that the 26th of July Movement did have a political platform, it did not include any Marxist conception of revolutionary class struggle, but only the democratic and progressive nationalist demands contained in Fidel Castro’s “History Will Absolve Me.” While the ideas expressed in this manifesto—including industrialization, land reform, profit sharing, the eradication of unemployment, increased emphasis on education and healthcare, and a return to the progressive 1940 Constitution—assured that the movement would be inclined towards Left politics, the mostly reformist notions articulated by a young Fidel appealed to a broad spectrum of the political landscape—from petty-bourgeois liberals and intellectuals to a handful of dedicated

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communists. As such, the movement did not resemble any traditional Leninist vanguard party. In fact, the Moscow-oriented communist party, the Cuban Popular Socialist Party (PSP), was so mystified by the 26th of July Movement’s revolutionary designs that it remained on the sidelines for much of the Revolution, only joining in open opposition to the Batista regime in late 1958. However, the PSP was not the only entity to falter in its initial appraisal of the Cuban revolutionary forces. Both eventual friends and foes of the Revolution proved unable to foresee the trajectory of its evolving politics. Although the United States government had long supported dictatorial and oligarchic rule in Cuba, supplying Batista’s regime with weapons and military training throughout the war, the ongoing Cuban Revolution generated mixed reactions in the ruling circles of the United States. Che Guevara, in 1961, acknowledged U.S. uncertainty as an exceptional factor contributing to the victory of the Cuban Revolution, describing “U.S. imperialism” as “disoriented”, seeking to “[play] with two decks” in an effort “to depose the now unserviceable little dictator and to replace him with the new ‘boys’ who would in turn serve the interests of imperialism.” While the U.S. government was itself incapable of swaying the Cuban rebels to serve its interests, this outcome was not the result of any Soviet intervention. In fact, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) proved far more intransigent in its position towards the Cuban revolutionaries than either its U.S. rivals (which soon recognized the radical nature of the Cuban Revolution following its triumph in 1959) or its politically cautious PSP allies. Far from pushing the incipient Cuban Revolution towards a more radical political line, the Soviet government remained largely uninvolved in Cuba until 1961.

To the extent that Soviet leaders did actively engage with the Cuban issue, they hoped for a more tempered outcome in which the Revolution might marginally lessen U.S. hegemony in the Western hemisphere, while remaining in its “bourgeois-democratic” and “national liberationist” phase. The Soviet press reflected the Party line, continuing to emphasize the importance of the national bourgeoisie in Cuba even as the Revolution became increasingly radicalized throughout 1959 and 1960. While the Cuban state had become an effective instrument of working class and peasant rule by 1960, the Soviet New Times continued to present an image of the Cuban Revolution as a broad multiclass alliance of national forces, heralding agrarian reform as a policy measure which would allow the national bourgeoisie to “become the dominant factor in the economy.” The official Soviet state and Party publications (Izvestia and Pravda) forwarded the same narrative. This stance reflected not only the ideological commitment of the CPSU to a rigid two-stage model of revolution, but also practical political and economic concerns. During this period, the Soviet Union insisted that Latin American communist parties should ally with their respective national bourgeoisies to carry out national democratic revolutions, bringing about industrialization and the requisite capital accumulation to facilitate the eventual transition to socialism—either through proletarian revolution or the gradual evolution of anti-imperialist bourgeois democracy towards non-capitalist development. In an ironic twist of fate, the CPSU had adopted the very position for which it had so vehemently condemned the Mensheviks in 1917, asserting that socialist revolution could only be pursued on

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8 In fact, following the prescriptions of the CPSU, the Cuban PSP had maintained an alliance with Batista during his first term in office from 1940-1944.
the basis of a developed capitalism. As such, Marxist revolution was nowhere on the agenda in Latin America at the time of the Cuban Revolution’s triumph.

The practical basis of this Soviet interpretation of Marxist theory is apparent. In addition to the threat posed to its diplomatic “peaceful coexistence” line, the possibility of a burgeoning socialist revolution in the Western Hemisphere also threatened to impose a substantial financial burden on the Soviet state. Hesitant to provide the military assistance and investments necessary to both prevent the embarrassment of “another Guatemala” and facilitate the development of a socialist economy, the Soviet Union surely favored an outcome in which Cuba and the United States could maintain economic and political relations, thus preventing any U.S. military aggression, while allowing Cuba to attract capital from both the United States and the Soviet Union. Only through its independent radicalization did the Cuban Revolution garner Soviet support, presenting a fait accompli in which the Soviet Union was compelled to come to the aid of a revolution that had garnered the ire of its Cold War adversary. At the conclusion of a ten-day visit to Cuba in February 1960, Soviet Deputy Premier Anastas Mikoyan signed a trade and aid agreement with the Cuban government, solidifying the effective alliance between the Soviet Union and revolutionary Cuba. Nonetheless, the theoretical and ideological differences between the CPSU and the Cuban revolutionaries remained, as the Soviet Union proved incapable of reining in the continental revolutionary aspirations of their Cuban counterparts.


10 The USSR pledged to purchase 425,000 tons of Cuban sugar in 1960 and 1,000,000 tons at world prices each of the next four years. The agreement also included $100,000,000 in long-term credits and technical assistance. Gonzalez, “Castro’s Revolution, Cuban Communist Appeals, and the Soviet Response,” 66-67.
Cuban Revolutionary Theory: From Fidel to Debray

Cuban revolutionary theory, as a complete political and military tendency emerged gradually during the 1960s. Its immediate foundations were born of the Cuban experience itself and were originally captured in the speeches of Fidel Castro and in the early writings of Che Guevara, especially “Guerrilla Warfare.” However, Cuban revolutionary thought, as a systematized theory, is present in full only in Che’s later works, and in the writings of Régis Debray. As a consciously internationalist school of thought, it is, perhaps, fitting that the two seminal theoreticians of the Cuban theory of revolution were Argentine and French respectively. Still, it is impossible to analyze Cuban revolutionary thought without noting its roots in the Revolution’s preeminent leader, Fidel Castro. Although the Cuban model of armed struggle in Latin America would later come to be identified more closely with Che Guevara (its most recognizable theoretician and practitioner), its origins lie with Fidel.

During this time period, Fidel’s revolutionary ideas were articulated primarily in speeches providing broad, sweeping statements of principle rather than reflective, analytical treatises. As such, “Fidelism” can be identified as the overarching foundational basis upon which the systematized revolutionary theory known as “Guevarism” was to be built. This distinction reflects a difference in form rather than content. Manuel “Barbarroja” Piñeiro, former head of the Cuban Communist Party’s “America’s Department,” described the variant nature of Fidel and Che’s contributions in a 1997 interview with CNN:

“Rather than differ, they always complemented each other…. Fidel had the strategic task of uniting all the revolutionary forces and of educating our people about the revolution and its measures, of helping them to understand through his educational speeches and his very direct communication with the people…. he didn’t have enough time to systematize and elaborate on our experiences theoretically…. Che heard the speeches, ideas, and talks
that Fidel had with the people; understood the measures that the revolution took; and systematized them from a theoretical point of view.”

Consequently, it is necessary to view the contributions of both Fidel and Che as component parts of the same Cuban revolutionary school of thought, with “Fidelism” providing the conceptual framework around which Cuban revolutionary thought would be further expanded and systematized in the theoretical works of Che Guevara and Régis Debray. As such, Fidel’s speeches offer keen insight into the foundational aspects of Cuban revolutionary theory.

Fidel’s contributions are nowhere more evident than in the United States government’s preoccupation with “Castroist subversion” during this time period. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), dutifully concerned by the appeal of the Cuban example as a “symbol of revolutionary change and nationalist assertiveness in Latin America,” identified Fidel Castro in a 1968 report as a “compulsive revolutionary,” intent on becoming “another Simon Bolívar, destined to bring a new ‘freedom and unity’ to Latin America.” While the CIA’s cynical characterization of Fidel Castro as a leader desiring to become “another Simon Bolívar” suggests an insidious personal ambition to rule Latin America, the agency’s depiction of his general foreign policy is quite valid. The principal feature of Fidelist revolutionary theory was, from the earliest days of the triumphant Revolution, its emphasis on continental liberation, completing the task left unfulfilled by the independence struggles of the 19th century. In a July 26, 1960 address described as the “keynote for Cuban subversion” in a 16 February 1968 CIA report, Fidel

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affirmed the Cuban Revolution’s profound commitment to revolution on a continental scale, declaring: “We promise to continue making Cuba the example that can convert the cordillera of the Andes into the Sierra Maestra of the American continent.” ¹⁴ This parallel between the Cuban Sierra Maestra as the launching point of the Cuban Revolution and the Andes as the continental outpost of the future Latin American revolution was not only a metaphor, but a concrete policy proposal that would later materialize in the Bolivian campaign led by Che Guevara in 1967. As such, it is possible to trace not only the later systematization of Cuban revolutionary theory, but also its subsequent application to Fidel’s initial pronouncements.

The First and Second Declarations of Havana, delivered by Fidel Castro in front of assembled crowds of more than one million Cuban citizens, offer the most complete accounting of the Cuban Revolution’s official foreign policy stance during its earliest years in power. The “First Declaration of Havana,” issued on September 2, 1960, was crafted in response to the Organization of American States’ (OAS) “Declaration of San José” which condemned “the intervention…by an extra-continental power [i.e. the Soviet Union] in the affairs of the American republics,” declaring “all member states…under obligation to submit to the discipline of the inter-American system.” ¹⁵ Clearly aimed at the increasingly radicalized Cuban Revolution, this resolution was designed to politically and diplomatically isolate Cuba in the Western Hemisphere. Unwilling to submit to the discipline of an inter-American system presided over by the United States, the Cuban Revolution declared itself the first “Free Territory of the Americas,” condemning “in its entirety…a document dictated by U.S. imperialism that violates the sovereignty and dignity of other peoples of the continent and the right of each nation

¹⁴ Ibid., 2.
to self-determination.” 16 While the “First Declaration of Havana” did not provide any specific formula to overthrow U.S. rule in Latin America, it did clearly advocate a continental struggle to liberate “Our America—the America that Bolivar, Hidalgo, Juárez, San Martín, O’Higgins, Sucre, Tiradentes, and Martí sought to free.” 17 Identifying the Cuban Revolution as the heir to the 19th century independence movements and denouncing “the exploitation of man by man, and the exploitation of the underdeveloped countries by imperialist finance capital,” this declaration—despite being written and delivered more than a year before the official pronouncement of the socialist nature of the Revolution—contained a transparently anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist message aimed at sparking continental revolution. The profound impact of the “First Declaration of Havana” is distilled in the CIA’s appraisal of Fidel’s speech as a proclamation which “unmistakingly showed that he looked upon the Cuban revolution as the vanguard of a general Latin American political upheaval.” 18

The “Second Declaration of Havana,” issued on February 4, 1962, under similar circumstances, but in a fundamentally different context from the first, provided a far more comprehensive, theoretically based exposition of Cuban revolutionary policy. In the period between September 2, 1960 and February 4, 1962, the United States government had severed diplomatic relations with Cuba, sponsored and organized the Bay of Pigs invasion, and imposed a total trade embargo on the Cuban island. As an avowedly Marxist-Leninist state, having successfully repelled a military attack launched from the United States, the Cuban Revolution now occupied a qualitatively different position in the Cold War landscape. The “Second Declaration of Havana” was issued in this context, in response to the eighth foreign ministers

17 Ibid., 26.
meeting of the OAS held in Punta del Este, Uruguay on 21 January 1962, at which Cuba was officially ousted from the organization—condemned as the purveyor of a unified Sino-Soviet “communist offensive in America.” The resolution produced at this meeting made clear the OAS’ opposition to the Cuban Revolution’s socialist path, declaring: “the present government of Cuba…incompatible with the principles and objectives of the inter-American system.” 19 The “Second Declaration of Havana” likewise made clear its militant opposition to the prevailing socioeconomic and political order of the inter-American system. Although the Cuban response to the OAS foreign ministers’ denunciation was permeated by an orthodox Marxist historical materialist analysis of Latin American conditions, it also offered specific insight into an emergent, distinctly Cuban revolutionary theory.

The “Second Declaration of Havana” was, above all, a call to arms, an impassioned defense of revolutionary armed struggle in the Americas. It is from this speech that the clarion call of the Cuban example in Latin America was born: “The duty of every revolutionary is to make the revolution.” 20 In contrast to the Soviet line which stressed the importance of the national bourgeoisie in leading bourgeois democratic and nationalist revolutions, Fidel unequivocally rejected the significance of this class, stressing that “[i]n the current historical conditions of Latin America, the national bourgeoisie cannot lead the antifeudal and anti-imperialist struggle.” 21 According to this analysis, the Cuban Revolution had already provided a direct refutation of the Soviet thesis, proving that, instead of waiting patiently for the national bourgeoisie to set the stage for a future socialist revolution, “revolution is possible... there are no

21 Ibid., 70-71.
forces capable of halting the liberation movement of the people.” Additionally, Fidel emphasized the necessity of armed struggle, declaring that “the first and most important task is to understand that it is neither fair nor correct to beguile the peoples with the futile and conciliatory illusion of wresting power by legal means—means that do not and will not exist.” Instead, it would be necessary to employ guerrilla warfare to liberate a continent that had traded its Spanish colonial masters for the rule of U.S. capital.

Where Fidel Castro provided the general framework for a Cuban revolutionary policy of violent continental liberation, Che Guevara supplied the theoretical exposition of Cuban-style guerrilla warfare necessary to achieve this aim, outlining the overarching Cuban theory of armed struggle in three separate pieces: “Guerrilla Warfare” (1960), “Guerrilla Warfare: A Method” (1963), and “Message to the Tricontinental” (1967). In each work, Che’s formulation of armed struggle incorporated new elements—gradually moving from a rather narrow, historically based outline of the Cuban experience, to a broad, sweeping formula that could be applied throughout Latin America. Although key tenets of Che’s original guerrilla theory remained in all three works, a clear evolution in its scope and applicability can be traced throughout the texts. While “Guerrilla Warfare” outlined the specific formula applied by Cuban revolutionaries in their own war of liberation, “Guerrilla Warfare: A Method” and “Message to the Tricontinental” provided the broader political theory that would motivate Che’s Bolivian campaign.

In “Guerrilla Warfare,” Che sought to explicate the key features of the Cuban Revolution, outlining the three essential lessons that could be extrapolated from the Cuban experience: “1) Popular forces can win a war against the army. 2) It is not necessary to wait until all conditions for making revolution exist; the insurrection can create them. 3) In underdeveloped America the

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22 Ibid., 68.
23 Ibid., 72.
countryside is the basic area for armed fighting.” 24 In addition to these foundational tenets, Che presented as fundamental an aspect of the Cuban Revolution that would seem heretical to orthodox Marxist-Leninists. Although the notion of a committed revolutionary vanguard was apparent in Che’s conception of the guerrilla nucleus, his emphasis on the immediate initiation of armed struggle represented a break with traditional Leninist organizational methods. Instead of utilizing a vanguard party to organize the masses in preparation for an eventual revolutionary outbreak, the act of armed revolution itself was designed to bring about the requisite mobilization and organization of revolutionary forces. In this formulation, the guerrilla force would take the place of the vanguard party, while its patient mass organization would be replaced by the immediate onset of armed insurrection. Instead of constructing an extensive organizational base prior to the implementation of armed resistance, the guerrilla band would build popular support through the process of armed struggle itself. Only once violent conflict began could the populace be extensively mobilized to support the revolutionary effort.

Furthermore, the Cuban conception of socialist revolution was, unlike conventional Marxist theory, focused primarily on the rural population—predominately comprised of a heavily exploited peasantry. Although he did not ignore or deemphasize the role of the urban proletariat, Che viewed the peasantry as the driving force behind the Latin American revolution. Centered in highly concentrated populations, revolutionary working class movements would be unable to effectively challenge the armed machinery of the state. In contrast, according to Che: “The situation in the open country [was] not so difficult. There, in places beyond the reach of repressive forces, the inhabitants [could] be supported by the armed guerrillas.” 25 This was the touchstone of the Cuban revolutionary formulation. Although Maoist theory also envisioned the

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25 Ibid., 51.
peasantry as the backbone of a revolutionary armed force, the Cuban model differed significantly in its specific aspects. While the Chinese formula called for the formation of a Red Army as the armed wing of a Communist Party that would maintain preeminence over its military apparatus, Che saw no need for the discipline of an overarching party structure separate from its military organization, suggesting that the initial guerrilla nucleus only required thirty to fifty soldiers—a number that would be “sufficient to initiate an armed fight.”

In the Cuban conception, there was not—and nor should there be—any separation between the military and political. The guerrilla force would be the unified command of the revolutionary movement.

To begin the armed struggle, the guerrilla band would establish its forces in a secluded region, selecting mountainous, forested terrain in which the state’s troops would be vulnerable to repeated hit-and-run strikes from the guerrilla fighters. Instead of confronting the army head-on, the guerrilla force would seek to initiate confrontations on its chosen terrain, in areas in which the state’s superior weaponry and manpower could be neutralized, allowing the fundamental principle of guerrilla warfare to be fulfilled—“that no battle, combat, or skirmish is to be fought unless it will be won.” Accordingly, as the guerrilla army achieved a series of victories, its strength would naturally grow—both in firepower and soldiers. As successes mounted, the local population would be inevitably drawn to the revolutionary forces, supporting its struggle as their own. In order to achieve this end, Che placed great emphasis on the role of the guerrilla soldier as not only a fighter, but also as a “social reformer,” engaged in extensive public outreach, providing educational and health services, building networks of support, and explaining the rebels’ ideological stance to the population, while carrying out broad reforms.

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26 Ibid., 130.
27 Ibid., 54.
Most importantly, Che noted that the revolutionary force would take up agrarian reform as its foremost objective, striving to satisfy the “age-old hunger of the peasant for the land on which he works or wished to work.” The peasantry would thereby come to recognize the guerrilla force as the outlet through which it could transform society and contribute to the creation of a new social order. Ultimately, the initial guerrilla nucleus of thirty to fifty men would expand to encompass an entire region, eventually engulfing the whole country in revolutionary war as guerrilla attacks gave way to a wider, more conventional warfare in which swelling numbers of rebel forces could directly confront the enemy in an offensive campaign. No longer confined to remote rural outposts, the revolutionary army would rely on sabotage behind enemy lines and wide scale urban mobilization to increase the scope of its insurrection. The final blow to the regime would come in the form of a nation-wide general strike, an action Che described as “the most important factor in civil war.” With the general strike, a revolution that had begun with a small group of isolated guerrilla fighters would culminate in a unified national action to effectively cripple the economy, resulting in the collapse of the regime.

Che’s “Guerrilla Warfare” was, in essence, a recounting of the historical experience of the Cuban Revolution. Although he clearly desired to make the Cuban experience broadly relevant to revolutionaries throughout Latin America, Che was careful to avoid prescribing the Cuban model of guerrilla warfare as a universally applicable blueprint, insisting that “it is our Cuban experience which speaks through me; new experiences can vary and improve these concepts. We offer an outline, not a bible.” Initially, Che even confined the application of Cuban revolutionary theory to Caribbean style dictatorships (personalist regimes that lacked any façade of democratic underpinnings), warning that, “[w]here a government has come into power

28 Ibid., 72.
29 Ibid., 57.
30 Ibid., 111.
through some form of popular vote, fraudulent or not, and maintains at least an appearance of constitutional legality, the guerrilla outbreak cannot be promoted, since the possibilities of peaceful struggle have not yet been exhausted.”  

However, as Che’s political thought evolved, he came to view armed struggle as the only means through which imperialism could be defeated on a global scale—no matter the specific national form of government in each instance.

Unlike Che’s seminal work, “Guerrilla Warfare” (a very technical, specific handbook for waging an effective revolutionary war), “Guerrilla Warfare: A Method”, published in 1963, focused far more heavily on political theory, contributing an added dimension to Cuban revolutionary thought. In “Guerrilla Warfare: A Method”, Che insisted that, instead of waging guerrilla war as a last resort, it could instead be launched against any Latin American government, regardless of its particular form. Drawing from Lenin’s *State and Revolution*, Che concluded that, given the class character of the bourgeois state, it was necessarily authoritarian and built upon a foundation of irreconcilable class antagonisms. The duty of revolutionaries was, therefore, to unmask the violent, dictatorial nature of the bourgeois state—even where it was defined by formal democratic and constitutional legality.  

Che insisted that revolutionaries “must try to oblige the dictatorship to resort to violence,” an action that would succeed in “unmasking its true nature as the dictatorship of the reactionary social classes.” In this interpretation, open, violent struggle between the bourgeois state and popular forces was inevitable. It was simply the duty of revolutionaries to seize the initiative and define the terms under which this conflict would occur. As a consequence, Che concluded that the essential conditions necessary for armed struggle were present in all of Latin America.

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31 Ibid., 51.
32 As was the case in Bolivia in 1967.
In this work, Che also greatly expanded the parameters of his guerrilla strategy, affirming that the revolutionary outbreak would be a unified, protracted war on a hemispheric scale, costing “much blood and countless lives for a long period of time.” 34 Although the continental dimensions of Cuban revolutionary thought had long been apparent, such a vivid description of a wider Latin American war of attrition was nowhere present in Che’s 1960 work. “Guerrilla Warfare” seems to have been designed primarily as a guide that would allow revolutionary forces within a given country to achieve a relatively swift victory. However, in “Guerrilla Warfare: A Method”, Che conceded: “It does not matter in the final count that one or two movements were temporarily defeated because what is definite is the decision to struggle which matures every day, the consciousness of the need for revolutionary change, and the certainty that it is possible.” 35 This passage indicates a clear shift in the scope of Che’s strategic horizons from a primarily national to principally continental focus. Instead of remaining confined to countries in which an outright dictatorship similar to Batista’s existed, the Cuban model of revolution was now unequivocally expanded to encompass all of Latin America. In fact, as “Message to the Tricontinental” would make clear, Cuban revolutionary theory had become increasingly contingent upon its continental application.

Che’s “Message to the Tricontinental”—published in April 1967 at the onset of the Bolivian guerrilla struggle—36 reflects yet another expansion of Cuban revolutionary thought. Likewise, it provides valuable insight into the overarching motivations guiding Che’s Bolivian mission. In this work, Che outlined a clear strategy designed to produce a unified revolutionary upsurge encompassing all of Latin America. Cognizant of the profound global implications of

34 Ibid., 160.
35 Ibid., 161-162.
36 Although its exact origins are unknown, this work was probably written prior to Che’s departure for Bolivia in November 1966. See Piñeiro, "My Modest Homage to Che," Che Guevara and the Latin American Revolution, 59.
the Vietnam War, Che sought to induce a similar situation in South America, engulfing the continent in a revolutionary upsurge that would necessarily provoke U.S. intervention. This was to be a “total war,” carried out by a united Latin American force against its “common foreign master”—the United States. 37 Che foresaw a future for Latin America following the “road of Vietnam,” in which national revolutionary movements would gradually expand to take on a global significance. 38 As U.S. commercial and geopolitical interests came under threat in the region, increasing military assistance and training would be granted. And, as the war escalated, U.S. military advisors would give way to regular troops, setting the stage for “two, three, or many Vietnams” in the heart of the South American continent. 39 40 This idea, plainly explicated in Che’s work, provided the central strategic and theoretical tenet guiding the Bolivian mission. Seen in this light, “Message to the Tricontinental” was not only a rallying cry to continental and world revolution, but also reflected a concrete strategy to defeat U.S. imperialism once and for all—a task that Che himself would seek to lead from the mountains of southeast Bolivia.

Finally, in exploring Cuban revolutionary theory, it is necessary to examine the works of French intellectual and guerrilla theoretician, Régis Debray. Although Debray was not a participant in the Cuban Revolution, his writings represent the most complete exposition of the mature, systematized Cuban theory of revolutionary armed struggle, including both its political and military aspects. In their foreword to the 1967 Monthly Review publication of Debray’s seminal work, Revolution in the Revolution?, Leo Huberman and Paul M. Sweezy aptly characterized the significance of Debray’s contributions, describing his writings as the first

38 Ibid., 172.
39 Ibid., 176.
40 Che’s “many Vietnams” formula was clearly more than rhetoric. In an April 13, 1967 diary entry, he noted the arrival of U.S. advisors in Bolivia, speculating: “Perhaps we are witnessing the first episode of a new Vietnam.” Che Guevara, The Bolivian Diary, (New York: Ocean Press, 2006), 130
“comprehensive and authoritative presentation of the revolutionary thought of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara.” 41 Benefiting from a privileged insight into the history of the Cuban Revolution, including a series of extensive interviews with revolutionary leaders (Fidel Castro included) and a careful study of unpublished documents from the Cuban Revolutionary War, Debray was able to produce a text effectively consolidating Cuban revolutionary thought. The extent to which Debray’s Revolution in the Revolution? captured the fundamental political position of the Cuban Revolution’s foremost leaders is evidenced by the mass circulation of its first edition, published in Havana in January, 1967. 42 It was this work that led the U.S. Department of State to label Debray “Castro’s principal theoretical apologist.” 43 However, Debray was not only a staunch advocate of Fidel and Che’s revolutionary thought, but also directly contributed to the development of Cuban theory, clearly differentiating the Cuban model from its contemporary rivals in the Latin American political arena. In fact, although Debray began as a student of the Cuban school of revolution, his work would soon become instructive in its own right, serving as a textbook of sorts for Che’s Bolivian guerrilla force. 44

In both “Latin America: The Long March” (published in 1965) and Revolution in the Revolution? (first published in 1966) Debray framed the Cuban example as the model of revolution for the contemporary Latin American epoch. In Debray’s analysis, the Cuban Revolution represented a profound break in the political consciousness of the Latin American Left, providing a new model of revolutionary struggle—a revolution in the revolution. In the opening pages of his later work, Debray was even so bold as to declare that the conventional

42 200,000 copies were printed, to be distributed both within Cuba and abroad. Ibid.
44 In an April 12, 1967 diary entry, Che noted: “I began a little course on Debray’s book.” Guevara, The Bolivian Diary, 129.
insurrectionary formulas developed by “Lenin and later Stalin…have nothing to do with the present situation.” 45 However, far from divorcing the Cuban model from the Leninist tradition, Debray identified “Fidelism” as “Leninism rediscovered and integrated with the historical conditions of a continent of which Lenin was ignorant.” 46 In this sense, Debray was not attempting to cast Cuban revolutionary theory 47 as an entirely new ideology unto itself, but instead as the rightful heir to the Leninist tradition in Latin America. Such a claim required not only an outline of guerrilla theory, but also an extensive political argument situating the Cuban model in juxtaposition to traditional Latin American interpretations of Marxist-Leninist theory.

In this pursuit, Debray effectively systematized Cuban guerrilla theory, seeking to develop a “scientific” model of Latin American revolution. Although peasant uprisings had a long tradition throughout the continent, Debray identified the Cuban example of armed struggle as something qualitatively different, declaring: “Guerrilla warfare [i.e. the Cuban model of guerrilla warfare] is to peasant uprising what Marx is to Sorel.” Just as there had been workers’ insurrections prior to the “advent of scientific socialism,” so too had there been “peasant wars before there were revolutionary guerrilla wars.” 48 It was Debray’s hope that, with the introduction of a Cuban theory of revolution, traditionally scattered, ineffectual campaigns could be transformed into a viable threat to state power throughout the continent. The form of this revolutionary campaign, however, despite being guided by a fundamentally Marxist-Leninist ideology, would not resemble the traditional party-led revolutions envisioned by orthodox Leninists. Instead, Fidelism, as the Latin American manifestation of Leninism, rejected the need

45 Debray, Revolution in the Revolution?, 19.
47 Debray referred to Cuban theory as “Fidelism” in “Latin America: The Long March,” but later introduced the term foco theory to describe this phenomenon in Revolution in the Revolution?
for a vanguard party altogether, replacing it with the vanguard of the guerrilla *foco*. Under these circumstances, the party would not lead the revolution, but would, instead, emerge only out of the revolutionary struggle itself.

According to Debray, the Cuban Revolution’s “decisive contribution to international revolutionary experience and to Marxism-Leninism” was its introduction of the guerrilla army as “the party in embryo.” ⁴⁹ In concert with Che, Debray noted that there could be no separation of political and military leadership in the revolutionary upsurge—the rebel army would fulfill both tasks. In fact, the military success of the guerrilla force was directly contingent on its ability to become a political vanguard, “recognized by the masses as their only interpreter and guide.” ⁵⁰ Despite their similarities in form, this feature represented a profound difference between *foco* theory and Maoist people’s war, contradicting Mao’s fundamental principle that “the Party commands the gun, and the gun must never be allowed to control the Party.” ⁵¹ Debray recognized no such distinction, as the guerrilla force, through its use of “the gun” would itself become the eventual Party, in no need of the command of any existing political force. As such, the outside direction of a party separate from the guerrillas could only undermine their objectives.

Additionally, Debray insisted that urban cadres, no matter how well intentioned, would be incapable of leading any revolutionary struggle in Latin America. This was due not only to the security concerns detailed in Che’s work, but also reflected a class-based position. According to Debray, Latin American cities served as “lukewarm incubators,” fostering an “infantile and bourgeois” psychology effectively divorcing revolutionaries from the oppressed

masses. In contrast to the “academic talk-fests” and “caste of permanent globe-trotters” spawned by these bourgeois incubators, the harsh life of the guerrilla force produced a “proletarian morality,” allowing revolutionaries of petty-bourgeois origin to “commit suicide as a class,” achieving “resurrection” as members of the proletariat. In this process, the requisite worker-peasant alliance would be successfully forged not through the political persuasion of a vanguard party, but through the action of revolution itself. During the course of the revolutionary war, guerrilla soldiers would receive an education in socialist life, becoming transformed into the embodiment of the worker-peasant alliance which would lead the forthcoming revolutionary state. As such, not only would guerrilla warfare forge the vanguard party, but also the future society. Consequently, armed struggle became a necessary condition for achieving socialist revolution in Latin America.

**The Continental Revolution: Cuban Theory in Practice**

The Bolivian revolutionary campaign, lasting in earnest only from March to October 1967, signifies the ultimate application of Cuban guerrilla theory as it had evolved from 1959 onwards. In a grand attempt at launching the continental revolution long desired by the Cuban Revolution’s principal political and theoretical leaders, the Cuban mission in Bolivia was intended to serve as a training ground for Latin American revolutionary cadres, providing a massive guerrilla *foco* that would spread to surrounding countries, eventually encompassing all of South America in a coordinated, irrepressible deluge. This revolutionary upsurge would be guided by the Cuban theory of revolution, incorporating the military strategy and tactics outlined by Che Guevara and Régis Debray, and reflecting the broader political strategy expounded in Che’s later works—especially “Message to the Tricontinental”—and in Debray’s *Revolution in*
The implications of Cuban revolutionary theory in Bolivia can be most readily observed in the complicated and, eventually, antagonistic relationship between Che’s guerrilla forces and the Soviet-aligned Bolivian Communist Party (PCB). Ultimately, the Bolivian experience, despite (and, in part, due to) its failure, provides the foremost example of Cuban revolutionary theory in practice. Although Cuban-sponsored and inspired armed struggle would not die out with the failure in Bolivia, never again would guerrilla actions so closely follow the precise theoretical model laid out by Fidel, Che, and Régis Debray.

The Bolivian campaign marked the culmination of not only an evolving Cuban theory of revolution, but also a series of policy decisions spanning from the Triumph of the Revolution in 1959 until the onset of combat in Bolivia in March 1967. From its earliest years, the Cuban Revolution had pledged support to liberation movements throughout the continent, offering guerrilla training to more than 2,500 Latin American revolutionaries between 1961 and 1967, according to CIA estimates. The earliest instances of Cuban-backed armed struggle in Latin America date back to the first year of the Revolution in power, as guerrilla contingents were sent from Cuba to Panama, Haiti, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic in 1959. Furthermore, Che had expressed a personal desire to spread revolution throughout Latin America even before arriving in the Sierra Maestra, informing Fidel that he wished to be free to participate in revolutionary struggles elsewhere as soon as his responsibilities in Cuba were fulfilled. In fact, Che even indicated an interest in joining Nicaraguan guerrillas as early as 1959. Still, there was no uninterrupted trajectory of Cuban internationalist efforts leading to Bolivia. Instead, Cuban leaders were, for much of this period, forced to negotiate their role vis-à-vis the existing Latin American communist parties allied with the Soviet Union. Although there was never any

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open break between the Soviet Union and Cuba (a state of affairs Cuban leaders were careful to maintain), the CPSU attempted, on many occasions, to reign in the Cuban Revolution’s continental aspirations. This was due in part to theoretical and practical differences in revolutionary strategy, but also reflected a Soviet desire to maintain hegemony among, and through, its allies in the Latin American communist parties.

The first major step taken by the Soviet government in this respect occurred in November 1964, in response to increased Cuban support for guerrilla forces in Venezuela, Peru, and Argentina. At a Soviet-arranged meeting of Latin American communist parties held in Havana, Cuban leaders were compelled to arrive at a compromise, agreeing to cease open polemics against other Latin American communist parties and limit their support for insurgencies to select countries in which guerrilla struggles were already underway—primarily Venezuela, Guatemala, and Colombia. Furthermore, the Cuban revolutionary leadership, accused of undue meddling, was obliged to increasingly coordinate its efforts with local parties, while forswearing support for “fractionalist” and noncommunist groups. However, Cuban adherence to this agreement was only short-lived, as Fidel would effectively eschew the 1964 compromise at the closing session of the Cuban-organized Tricontinental Conference held in January 1966. In his concluding address to representatives from Latin America, Africa, and Asia, Fidel exuberantly promoted armed struggle as the means to liberation, declaring: “for the Cuban revolutionaries the field of battle against imperialism takes in the whole world…. Cuban fighters can be counted on

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by the revolutionary movement in any corner of the earth.” 58 By 1967, the Cuban leadership’s total rejection of the 1964 agreement was clear, as evidenced by Fidel’s March 14 address. As Che listened on from the jungles of southeast Bolivia, 59 Fidel declared: “If, in any nation, those who call themselves Communists do not know how to fulfill their duty, we will support those who—even though they do not call themselves Communists—behave like real Communists in the struggle.” 60 This statement, in clear defiance of the Cuban pledge to cease support for “fractionalist” and noncommunist groups (and in direct violation of the prohibition on open polemics), illustrates an increased militancy in Cuban policy, coinciding with the expansion and systematization of Cuban revolutionary theory and the onset of guerrilla war in Bolivia.

The Cuban Revolution’s unilateral rejection of the 1964 agreement would not be without consequence in Bolivia, as the Soviet Union and its allies in the Bolivian Communist Party would do far more to hamper than aid the Cuban-sponsored guerrilla war. In the fall of 1966, Fidel informed Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev of Che’s dispatch to Bolivia, only to be met with a strong rebuke from the Soviet leader who identified the mission as “harmful to the true interests of the communist cause,” questioning “what right” the Cubans had to “foment revolution in Latin America without appropriate coordination with the other socialist countries.” 61 In response to Brezhnev’s reproach, in June 1967, Fidel informed visiting Soviet Premier Aleksey Kosygin that it was the “right of every Latin American to contribute to the liberation of his country and the entire continent of Latin America,” concluding that Cuba would

59 In a March 14 diary entry, Che remarks that he “heard parts of Fidel’s speech” over the radio, noting his harsh attacks against the “position of the Soviet Union on Latin American puppets.” Guevara, The Bolivian Diary, 102.
continue to support any revolutionary movement which facilitated the achievement of this goal, even if it meant acting in contravention of official Soviet policy. As such, the Bolivian mission went ahead, without Soviet assistance and against the expressed wishes of the Soviet state. This act of defiance placed the Cuban campaign in Bolivia at odds not only with the Soviet government, but also with the Bolivian Communist Party.

In historical accounts and analyses of the Bolivian Revolution, ranging from those of Fidel Castro and Régis Debray to Bolivian Army General Gary Prado Salmón (commander of the unit that captured Che Guevara), the inability of the Cuban-sponsored guerrilla band to garner sufficient support from the Bolivian Communist Party is uniformly acknowledged as a key factor contributing to the mission’s failure. This disconnect between the guerrillas and the Soviet-aligned PCB reflected a fundamental difference in political line. In Che’s conception, Bolivia would serve as the launching point for the continental revolution, providing a base from which revolutionaries throughout the region could branch off, extending the armed struggle to surrounding countries in a strategy which followed quite precisely the “progression from smaller to larger” laid out in Debray’s Revolution in the Revolution?:

“The concentration of resources and men in a single foco permits the elaboration of a single military doctrine, in the heat of the combats in which the men receive their training…. Thus, little by little, officers are formed in a certain moral, political, and military school, officers in whom the high command, when the day comes, can confidently place the strategic leadership of a zone or front, without the need to control their actions. They are all trained together, in the same school, which inculcates in them a common spirit, tactical rules, and a step-by-step political and military plan of action.”

In this instance, the future officers trained in the “moral, political, and military school” of the Bolivian armed struggle would be Peruvians, Argentines, Chileans, Paraguayans, and Brazilians who would expand the guerrilla foco outwards from its Bolivian origins, allowing for a unified,

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62 Ibid.
61 Debray, Revolution in the Revolution?, 81-82.
yet flexible campaign in which individual national struggles would be allowed autonomy, while at once participating in a militarily and politically unified continental struggle.\textsuperscript{64}

Additionally, the Cuban-sponsored campaign in Bolivia signified the supersession of Che’s earlier, more provincial notions of armed struggle by his later work emphasizing the necessity of continental revolution. While the fundamental tenets of guerrilla warfare laid out in his 1960 treatise continued to provide the basis upon which armed struggle in Bolivia was effected, its wider objectives reflected the geopolitical strategy described by Che in “Message to the Tricontinental.” Instead of targeting the conquest of power in La Paz as its foremost goal, the Bolivian guerrilla campaign was meant, by design, to be a protracted struggle. In his appraisal of the failed Bolivian mission, Debray identified as Che’s “radical innovation” this shift in focus from the seizure of political power—which “came second both in time and in importance”—to the “establishment of a popular power.”\textsuperscript{65} In fact, the choice of Bolivia as the base of the continental revolution nearly assured that the international dimension of the struggle would take precedence over the strictly national. As a landlocked country in the heart of South America, any successful socialist revolution in Bolivia would likely enjoy only a brief lifespan, as an economic blockade similar to the one imposed on Cuba could effectively cripple its national economy. Additionally, invading forces from surrounding countries could easily penetrate Bolivia’s porous borders, swiftly overthrowing any nascent socialist regime. Che was

\textsuperscript{64} Che informed the first Bolivian recruits of the purpose of this grand mission, indicating that Cuban leadership would be only a temporary measure, put in place “in order to begin training the Bolivians and the future cadres in general who will lead the fight for the liberation of the continent.” Out of this struggle would emerge not only future guerrilla commanders, but also the eventual leaders of a socialist Latin America—“officers and officials…future economists, administrators, etc.” Harry Villegas, \textit{Pombo: A Man of Che's Guerrilla}, (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1997), 128, 130. Eventually, once a sufficient number of Bolivian cadres had been trained in the revolutionary school of guerrilla warfare, Che hoped to move on, continuing the struggle in his Argentine patria. Piñeiro, “Che and Bolivia,” \textit{Che Guevara and the Latin American Revolution}, 97.

poignantly aware of this fact, noting upon arrival in Bolivia that, “we cannot afford the luxury of
dreaming about a revolution in Bolivia alone, without at least a revolution in a country on the
coast, if not in all of Latin America. If that does not happen, this revolution will be crushed.” 66
As such, Che left no way out—it would be a continental revolution or none at all.

The leadership of the Bolivian Communist Party shared neither the continental focus nor
the commitment to guerrilla warfare exhibited by Che. However, this was—to the extreme
detriment of the guerrilla force—well concealed until late in the preparatory stage. In fact, Che
ultimately selected Bolivia as his continental base in large part due to the seeming commitment
of the PCB. 67 Having relied extensively upon party cadres in assisting previous guerrilla
struggles in Argentina and Peru, Cuban leaders believed that an insurgency in Bolivia would be
able to draw upon a trusted network of supporters. 68 However, this apparent dedication to
armed struggle only masked a pragmatic political maneuver to divert the energy of the party’s
most militant sectors (primarily its Young Communists) towards revolutionary struggles beyond
Bolivia’s borders. Likewise, this action allowed the PCB to gain the confidence and support of
the Cuban Revolution without altering its own Soviet-aligned political stance. 69

In the critical preparatory months preceding and immediately following Che’s November
1966 arrival in Bolivia, the PCB’s espoused position towards the guerrilla campaign vacillated
dramatically, resulting in a split between the party and the Che’s guerrilla force on December 31,
1966. The underlying difference between these two political actors rested primarily on a
divergent revolutionary strategy. While Che foresaw a long struggle, lasting “ten years or

67 Piñero, Che Guevara and the Latin American Revolution, 50.
68 Debray, Che’s Guerrilla War, 33.
69 Ibid., 31.
more,” PCB General Secretary Mario Monje advocated a “lightening blow” uprising in urban centers, seeking to bring about the precipitous fall of the central government. In this view, the guerrilla action would be only secondary, coming on the heels of a failed uprising in the cities. While the PCB’s position reflected the urban insurrectionary tradition manifested most clearly in the Bolivian Revolution of 1952, it was, like the party’s policies of the early 1960s, most likely only a cover for a political line that was fundamentally opposed to revolution as such. In reality, by August 1966, the PCB’s Central Committee had already become increasingly unwilling to support armed struggle in light of the party’s recent electoral success (garnering 32,000 votes in the August 6 elections). In September, PCB leaders finally admitted that “nothing had been done” to organize an urban uprising. By late October, Cuban guerrilla leader Harry “Pombo” Villegas had concluded: “Our greatest error has been trusting [Monje] and keeping him informed about everything.”

The PCB’s abandonment of armed struggle in Bolivia had severe consequences for the guerrilla force. While Monje had originally promised to provide twenty of the party’s “best men,” only four were ultimately assigned. Despite increasing signs of party disapproval in the second half of 1966, the effective split between the PCB and the guerrillas was finally brought about only on December 31, as Che rejected Monje’s demand to “head the political-military struggle for as long as the revolution is taking place in Bolivian territory.” If it was to be a continental foco, there could be no leaders except those forged within the guerrilla band itself. Upon leaving the guerrilla encampment, Monje delivered members of the Bolivian Communist

70 Villegas, A Man of Che’s Guerrilla, 128.
71 Ibid., 82.
72 Ibid., 107.
73 Ibid., 120.
74 Ibid., 86.
75 Guevara, Bolivian Diary, 58-59.
Party an ultimatum—“either stay or support the party.” 76 Although none chose to leave the guerrilla force at this stage, the PCB would—despite its public stance in support of the rebels during the height of their campaign—seek to undermine the guerrillas’ actions in other ways, preventing Bolivian trainees in Cuba from joining the rebel army and even expelling the members of its youth organization who had become active guerrillas. 77 These actions not only undercut the functioning of the guerrilla force, but also crippled its urban support network. 78 In April 1967, Che was finally left to bitterly conclude: “The Bolivian Communist Party is our Enemy Number One.” 79 In this way, the wider political and theoretical differences between the Soviet Union and the Cuban Revolution became manifest in Bolivia with fatal results, as the isolated guerillas were able to sustain combat for little more than six months, ultimately succumbing to the encirclement of the Green Beret-trained Eighth Bolivian Army Division on October 8, 1967.

While the conflict between the Bolivian Communist Party and Che’s guerrilla force was only one of many factors leading to the ultimate defeat of the Cuban-sponsored Bolivian campaign, it is through an examination of this troubled relationship that the practical implications of the Cuban theory of revolution become apparent. In 1966, Fidel Castro, self-consciously aware of the bold heterodoxy of Cuban revolutionary theory, mockingly decried his orthodox communist inquisitors, noting:

“I am accused of heresy. It is said that I am a heretic within the camp of Marxism-Leninism. Hmm! It is amusing that so-called Marxist organizations, which fight like cats and dogs in their dispute over possession of revolutionary truth, accuse us of wanting to apply the Cuban formula mechanically. They reproach us with a lack of understanding of the Party’s role; they reproach us as heretics within the camp of Marxism-Leninism.” 80

76 Ibid., 59.
77 Villegas, A Man of Che’s Guerrilla, 153.
79 Debray, Che’s Guerrilla War, 105.
80 Debray, Revolution in the Revolution?, 98.
Undeterred by such denunciations, Fidel and Che confidently applied the heretical Cuban revolutionary formula in Bolivia, attempting to spark a wider Latin American revolution even against the dictates of the Soviet Union and the wishes of the Bolivian Communist Party. While this audacious campaign was ultimately defeated, failing to become another Vietnam, it nonetheless reflected the Cuban Revolution’s fundamental emphasis on revolutionary action in opposition to the “academic talk-fests” of the traditional communist parties. While the guerrilla war raged on in Bolivia in August 1967, Fidel addressed the newly convened Organization of Latin American Solidarity (OLAS), boldly pronouncing: “We prefer…to make mistakes trying to make revolution without the right conditions than to…make the mistake of never making revolution.” 81 This was the fundamental heresy of the Cuban Revolution, pursued to its logical conclusion in Bolivia. Although the continental revolution envisioned by Fidel and Che ultimately failed to materialize, the Bolivian mission exemplified the Cuban conception of revolution poignantly articulated by Che in his 1965 farewell letter to Fidel—“in a revolution, one wins or dies (if it is a real one).” 82 Che lived and died the substance of those words, executed in a small schoolhouse in the mountains of southeast Bolivia on October 9, 1967, becoming memorialized in Cuba as the embodiment of the Revolution.

82 Che Guevara, “Farewell letter from Che to Fidel Castro” (April 1, 1965), http://www.marxists.org/archive/guevara/1965/04/01.htm