

CHÉ GUEVARA FORGOTTEN VICTIMS

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PREFACE

Cuba's Communist regime has committed egregious human rights violations for over half a century. Yet, the international community has generally treated it much more favorably than other dictatorships. This, in part, stems from a false legitimacy of social justice derived from one of the most successful propaganda campaigns of all times. Concealing the regime's worst crimes and cultivating the infatuated glorification of its leaders are among its chief pillars.

The standard-bearer of choice for the hyped-up Cuban Revolution is Ché Guevara. The pervasiveness and worldwide reach of a romanticized view of Ché, enshrined in iconic imagery, is a truly unique phenomenon of modern history. However, it lacks solid grounding in historical facts.

Cuba Archive's Truth and Memory Project seeks to foster a culture of respect for life and the rule of law by furthering an understanding of the cost of political violence stemming from the Cuban Revolution. This publication adds new testimonial and photographic material to the extensive bibliography on Ché Guevara that has been woefully lacking on his victims. A preliminary manuscript was posted on Cuba Archive's website in 2009. We are very grateful to those who supported this slightly edited version in book form.

It is impossible to adequately convey the enormity of human suffering and the depth of loss these pages might hint at. Lives were extinguished unjustly and prematurely, orphans grew up without their fathers, wives, parents and siblings lost a precious loved one forever in the cruelest of ways. This publication is dedicated to them, the forgotten souls — known to us or not — who lost their lives at the hands of Ché Guevara and those they left behind, their pain not only ignored, but aggravated by the fervent exaltation of the perpetrator. Their story too is part of history and it deserves to be told.

Maria C. Werlau
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CHE GUEVARA'S FORGOTTEN VICTIMS

Ernesto Ernesto Guevara, better known as “Ché,” is the ultimate poster boy of “revolutionary chic,” a quintessential icon of mass culture. Ironically, most devotees of the Ché cult know little, if anything, about him -what he stood for, what he did, and the consequences of his quest. Yet, there is an irreconcilable dark truth behind the carefully constructed myth of Ché Guevara. A cursory look at the extensive bibliography on Ché, including his writings, makes that patently clear.

That Ché’s face adorns t-shirts worn by opponents of capital punishment is a bizarre twist of fate. In fact, he exhibited an acute disregard for the sanctity of life. Signs of this pathology seem to have surfaced at an early age. His cousin, Alberto Benegas Lynch, relates in his book “My cousin Ché” that, as a boy, Ché took sadistic delight making animals suffer. Jaime Costa, part of the group of revolutionaries Ché had joined in Mexico to plan the armed uprising against Batista, related that while they had all refused to practice throat-slashing on dogs as training, Ché had –to his amazement– been eager to oblige. Miguel Sánchez, who trained the group, reveals that Ché would conduct cruel experiments on pregnant female cats he hunted down in the streets of Mexico city. –“I am convinced,” he concludes, “that people who are cruel to animals are also cruel to human beings.”

By the time he arrived in Cuba’s Sierra Maestra Mountains, Ché seems well primed to unleash his bloodthirsty disposition on fellow humans. Not long before, at age 25, he had written a long and passionate note of revolutionary awak-

“(…) I now knew. ...I will be with the people, ...howling like one possessed, I will assault the barricades and trenches, will bathe my weapon in blood and, mad with fury, will slit the throat of any enemy that falls into my hands. ...I feel my nostrils dilated, tasting the acrid smell of gunpowder and blood, of dead enemy; my body contorts, ready for the fight, and I prepare my being as if it were a sacred place so that in it the bestial howling of the triumphant proletariat can resonate with the new vibrations and hopes.”

–Ernesto Guevara, Travel Notes, circa 1951-52.

(Translated from Spanish by the author.)

ening on the margin of the “Travel Notes” from his motorcycle journey in the Americas; it is chillingly prophetic of the course he embarked on.

Biographer Jon Lee Anderson writes that at the Sierra, Ché spearheaded “the rebel army’s new policy of ‘swift revolutionary justice,’ simultaneously launching his reputation for fierceness and implacability.” Anderson well points to the “Calvinistic zeal evident in Ché’s persecution of those who had strayed from the ‘right path.’” What is most horrifying is that this attitude would lead him to end many lives –some by his own hand, hundreds, maybe thousands, by his direct order, and countless tens of thousands at his urging.

A harsh disciplinarian with his troops, Ché played a leading or supporting role in the summary execution of at least 21 persons in the Sierra Maestra; at least one shot by his own hand. (Anecdotal accounts of more executions exist, but cannot be adequately documented for lack of verifiable information.) The victims were usually local peasants accused of collaborating with the Batista army, generally as informants. Some were volunteers of the rebel army who decided to abandon the fight, which was being waged in terrible conditions, the troops often going hungry for days. Some were local peasants accused of crimes ranging from loitering and stealing food intended for the rebels to graver offenses such as rape or murder against the rural population. But, all were robbed of due process of law and essentially killed on the spot at Ché’s orders, at times almost casually. In his diary, Ché bears witness to this ruthlessness with many matter-of-fact accounts of the circumstances. His disposition was clear. In January of 1957, he wrote to his wife at the time, Hilda Gadea: *“Here, in the Cuban jungle, alive and thirsting for blood, I write to you these inflamed lines inspired by Martí.”*

Ché was merciless even when the offender was just a young foot soldier wearing the enemy uniform. One witness account has a 17 year-old Army soldier, captured and interrogated by Ché, begging for his life: *“I haven’t killed anyone. I just arrived here. My mother is a widow and I am an only child, I joined the Army for the salary, to send it to her monthly. Don’t kill me, don’t kill me.”* Reportedly, Ché replied: *“Why not?”* and had the boy tied in front of a newly dug grave and

executed. Curiously, he famously refused to apply his stern revolutionary justice, as the law of the Sierra called for, when it interfered with his interests. He rejected punishment for his highly dependable underling, Captain Lalo Sardiñas, who killed a young black member of the rebel army with a shot to the head simply for taking off his boots, which was against the rules.

In Santa Clara, in the Las Villas province of central Cuba, Ché led a short and victorious battle against the Batista Army immediately before the dictator fled the country on December 31st 1958. He stayed in the city just two and a half days, but his orders to kill were faithfully executed past his departure for Havana.

Numerous witness accounts coincide in that Ché and the Castro brothers —Fidel and Raúl— believed it was imperative to take lives in order to establish a hold on power. As a result, immediately after Batista and his cohorts left the country, prisoners were rounded up in Santa Clara, Santiago, Manzanillo, and all over the island and summarily executed in front of journalists, photographers, and television cameras. Batista's top military men and executioners had fled the country or were in hiding or under diplomatic protection at embassies. Many had committed crimes. But, the majority of those left behind were the rank and file of the Armed Forces and Police. Many, if not most, had merely served the duties of their uniform; the majority had seen no reason to hide or take safe refuge. Some were career members of the police or Armed Forces -often a tradition passed down for generations in the same family. Others came from poor families seeking to escape unemployment and scarcity. Regardless, a lesson had to be delivered loud and clear to the "enemies of the Revolution." Guevara knew from his experience in Guatemala during the Arbenz coup and from his Communist self-education that terror was a necessary component of establishing revolutionary order. He was ready to take on the task of executioner; in the Sierra Maestra he had hardened into a serial killer.

On January 3rd 1959, Fidel Castro appointed Ché Guevara Commandant of the imposing La Cabaña Fortress in Havana, built in the 18th century when Cuba was a Spanish colony. The fort also served as a prison and Ché was also appointed Chief Judge of the

Revolutionary Tribunals that were to get started there. Until then, there was no death penalty in Cuba, as Article 25 of the Constitution (of 1940) prohibited the death penalty except in cases of military treason. It had only been applied once to a German spy during the Second World War. But, on January 10th 1959 the new Revolutionary Council of Ministers modified the Constitution, ignoring constitutional amendment provisions, and on February 10th 1959 promulgated a new Fundamental Law. These maneuvers gave the death penalty a vise of legality and allowed for its retroactive application.

Soon, around eight hundred to one thousand men were being held at La Cabaña prison, housed in facilities for no more than three hundred. Kept in dire conditions, they had to take turns sleeping. Soon, the "Cleansing Commission" ("Comisión de Depuración") that was to subject them to trials began working around the clock. Ché appointed his aide, Orlando Borrego, as Presiding Judge of the Revolutionary Tribunals, although he was only 21 years old and an accountant with no legal or judicial training. The operational procedure was established; appointed judges and prosecutors would meet with Ché prior to the trial to review the cases, decide on the prosecuting strategy to be followed, and pre-determine the fate (sentences) of the accused prisoners.

At the trials, basic rules of jurisprudence were ignored and the prosecutor's accusations were considered irrefutable proof of guilt. Although Ché was head of the revolutionary tribunals, he did not attend the trials; that was an unnecessary use of his time. José Vilasuso, who was in charge of reviewing and preparing the dockets of the accused, recounts in a filmed interview how Ché used to tell him: *"The investigating officer is always right; he always has the truth."* Other subordinates in the tribunals have reported that he would admonish them: *"Do not delay the proceedings. This is a revolution. Do not use bourgeois legal methods; evidence is secondary. We must proceed to convict."* Several have testified that he would lecture them along these lines incessantly: *"There is no need for much inquiry to execute anyone. We only need to know if they should be executed -nothing else."*

Ché was head of the Appellate Court. He had the final word on capital punishment and presided over the appeal hearings (known as “revisión de causa”). These were usually very short proceedings, sometimes just a few minutes, and there are no known reports that he overturned a single death sentence. The hearings often ended with his orders for the swift execution of the defendant.

La Cabaña became an execution mill for the new revolutionary government. The prisoners awaited their fate while hearing the hammering of caskets being assembled prior to their trials. Rarely were they able to say goodbye to their families, who were then deprived of the body for a proper funeral.

The trials, appeal hearings, and executions were typically held late into the night, often at dawn, as Ché believed people were more subdued at night. Around the country, publicity was lavished on the trials and executions. In Havana and other cities, some trials were held at theaters or stadiums and bloodthirsty mobs were encouraged to attend. Some executions were televised and even moviegoers had to watch them as previews. The revolutionary leaders’ intention was to spread fear and submission —sheer terror— among the population.

In the short period Ché was in charge at La Cabaña (January 3rd to November 26th 1959, with several months of travel in between), Cuba Archive, a Truth and Memory documentation project, has reports of 79 executions presumed to have been ordered directly by Guevara. (See pages 27-29 Appendix and www.CubaArchive.org/database/.) From January to May, when he was unquestionably present, 55 executions are recorded. During his travels abroad, from June 4th to September 8th, 18 executions took place, but his involvement with the tribunals is unknown, although he remained in charge. 7 executions are documented from September 8th to November 26th, after he returned from his travels. After he went to serve as President of the Central Bank of Cuba, a witness was at a meeting there with Ché when he was interrupted with the list of executions for the following day, presumably at La Cabaña, which he signed off on. It, therefore, appears he ordered at least five additional executions documented until year-end 1959.

The executions at La Cabaña continued after Guevara left his command. 481 executions are documented to have occurred there from 1960 to 1965, while Ché was still in Cuba occupying high-ranking positions in the government. His direct responsibility over executions in La Cabaña, however, is not sufficiently well established after November 26, 1959.

Reports of the number of executions at La Cabaña in 1959 vary widely. Estimates by historians, biographers, and the U.S. Embassy in Cuba cite between 200 and 700. A former lawyer working at La Cabaña for Ché is cited as claiming that at least 600 executions had taken place by the end of June 1959. But, he may have been referring to executions all over Cuba. To date, Cuba Archive has documented 954 executions in 1959, of which 628 reportedly took place from January to June (58 at La Cabaña). This information cannot be properly scrutinized, as Cuba's official records are not public and fieldwork inside Cuba is not possible. Cuba Archive's record of documented cases has been assembled with the testimony of family members, witnesses, media reports, lists smuggled out of Cuba, and other secondary sources that recorded names and circumstances of death during the early days of the revolution. No matter the exact number, however, the fact that many executions were taking place all over the country, very prominently and deliberately, is not disputed.

Cuba Archive has documented to date 1,118 executions in the first two years of the revolutionary regime (1959 and 1960). Even if every single one of Batista's henchmen had been fodder for the firing squads, the extent of the ensuing carnage is at odds with the number of documented victims of the Batista dictatorship. To begin with, most of the killing and torture was committed by the same group of people -the notorious paramilitary group Masferrer Tigers and a few well-known and feared members of the military or police. Thanks in great part to the painstaking research conducted by the late Armando Lago, Ph.D., Cuba Archive has recorded 747 non-combat deaths attributed to the Batista regime from 1952 to 1959—687 extrajudicial killings or assassinations, 19 executions and 22 disappearances. Aside from widely inflated and discredited re-

ports in Cuban media sources in the early days of 1959, official and academic sources in Cuba have kept near absolute silence on this matter. The Cuban government has never published lists or reliable reports, probably with good reason; it appears that a victim-to-perpetrator ratio would prove illogical.

The intention of Cuba's new leaders was deviously clear. Carlos Franqui, editor of the official newspaper *Revolución*, has reported that in a speech of May 18, 1962 at State Security offices in Havana, Ché Guevara stated: *"It is logical that in times of excessive tension we cannot proceed weakly. We have imprisoned many people without knowing for sure if they were guilty. At the Sierra Maestra, we executed many people by firing squad without knowing if they were fully guilty. At times, the Revolution cannot stop to conduct much investigation; it has the obligation to triumph."*

Ché also spoke bluntly to the international community on the matter of the executions. At the United Nations in New York, where he delivered a speech on December 11th 1964, he responded to persistent questions by famously declaring: *"Executions? Yes, we have executed, we are executing, and we will continue to execute."* What is not as legendary, but even more chilling, is that during the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962, he had been in favor of unleashing nuclear war in order to "build a better world," presumably from ashes. A few weeks after the crisis, fuming about the Soviet betrayal in removing the missiles, he told a British journalist that if the missiles had been under Cuba's control, they (meaning the Cuban leadership) would have fired them. In fitting fashion, the cost in millions of lives – Americans and Cubans – was an expendable price to pay to achieve his greater goal.

Ché's body count will likely never be known. Many people were killed in guerrilla uprisings he led in the Congo and Bolivia while countless died in uprisings and violent actions he planned and facilitated in Latin America. The totalitarian system he helped design and impose in Cuba has, in the last five plus decades, cost thousands more lives. Finally, not by doing, but certainly with his endorsement, the Communist model of his devotion has led to a death toll in the 20th century calculated at over one hundred mil-

lion -from the Soviet Union, to Eastern Europe, China, Cambodia, and beyond.

Whatever led Ché to his beliefs and actions is open to discussion. He seems to have been genuinely inspired to alleviate poverty and social injustices. Yet his compassion was remarkably selective; he had none for anyone who interfered with his ideas or worldview. Ample testimonial evidence suggests that he was deliberately anchored in disdain and hatred for those who didn't fit his dogmatic conceptions. The priest assigned by the Catholic Church to La Cabaña, a young Spaniard by the name Javier Arzuaga, had many conversations with Ché and attended most of the appeal hearings he presided. He recalls that Ché would often explain: "*The revolution cannot be made without killing and, to kill, it is best to hate.*" In this he was consistent. Eight years later, this was still inspiring his vision of Communist revolution. In April of 1967 he wrote to the Tri-Continental conference, an anti-imperialist forum that had met in Havana in 1966 for the first time: "*...we shall follow the perennial example of the guerrilla, (...) hatred as an element of the struggle, a relentless hatred of the enemy, impelling us over and beyond the natural limitations that man is heir to and transforming him into an effective, violent, selective, and cold killing machine. Our soldiers must be thus; a people without hatred cannot vanquish a brutal enemy.*" The problem is not as much what he believed, but that he imposed it at all costs and with frightful consequences. The tragedy is that he became a worshiped celebrity nonetheless.

Aside from trampling on the right to life, Ché also advocated and inflicted repression of many more fundamental rights. His uncompromising approach required the subjugation of the Cuban population. Brutalizing and silencing opponents and dissenters were, in his view, key elements for success. In 1959 he told Cuban leftist journalist José Pardo Llada: "*We must eliminate all newspapers; we cannot make a revolution with free press. Newspapers are instruments of the oligarchy.*" In 1961 he founded Cuba's first forced labor camp in western Cuba, at Guanacahabibes, to "re-educate" people who had committed "crimes against revolutionary morals." The "delinquents" were confined for drinking, vagrancy, laziness, playing

loud music, practicing a religion, or disrespecting authorities. This later led to the establishment of hard labor concentration camps known by their acronym UMAP (Military Units to Assist Production) to hold homosexuals, Catholic priests, Jehova's Witnesses, practitioners of secret Afro-Cuban religions, and others considered "deviants" and "counter-revolutionaries."

Ché's ideal Communist "New Man" was to emerge through the eradication of individual freedoms and the concentration of power and resources in the hands of the Communist state apparatus. As head of Cuba's Central Bank, he oversaw the centralization of all economic activities and as director of the National Institute of Agrarian Reform, he led the confiscation of most land from its owners and started with the industries, which all ended in state hands. On June 26, 1961 he was emphatic on Cuban television: "*Cuban workers must get used to living in a collectivist regime and under no circumstances can go on strike.*" He led the way, together with the Castro brothers, to banish free press, independent labor groups, free enterprise, practically all private property, and all political organizations other than the Communist Party. This was the model he sought to replicate abroad by leading or promoting rural guerilla uprisings and exporting subversive violence.

Those who idolize Ché cannot even claim that he was a visionary of a better world, subsequently constructed by his inspiration. In fact, the debacle he left in his wake lasts to this day and has left Cuba in ruins, its people impoverished. From having the highest socio-economic indicators in Latin America in 1958, Cuba has steadily declined into one of the poorest countries in the world. Today, Cuba's GDP per capita is barely ahead of only Haiti in the Americas, and perhaps only because Cuba's methodology to calculate GDP ignores standard practice. A typical Ché t-shirt costs more than the entire monthly salary of a Cuban worker, which is an average of roughly US\$17.00. Absurdly, Ché t-shirts are sold in Cuba mostly to foreign tourists bearing hard currency from capitalist countries or Cuban citizens with access to hard currency remittances from exiled relatives ("gusanos" or worms, as those fleeing or dissenting were promptly labeled by revolutionary mil-

itants). Clothes as well as food remain rationed for Cuba's citizens since Ché had his hand on imposing rationing on March 12th 1962 (by Law No.1015).

In reality, Ché's revolution, paid for with the blood of its countless victims, has never amounted to more than a deluded project imposed by a political dynasty initially by deception and manipulation of the masses, then by sheer terror and repression. Its economic sustenance has only been possible through the enslavement of its people and massive aid from willing political allies and naïve capitalist creditors who never get paid back.

Ché's Message to the Tri-Continental Conference of the Organization of Solidarity of the Peoples of Africa, Asia and Latin America.

"While envisaging the destruction of imperialism, it is necessary to identify its head, which is no other than the United States of America. (...) We must carry the war into every corner the enemy happens to carry it: to his home, to his centers of entertainment; a total war. It is necessary to prevent him from having a moment of peace, a quiet moment outside his barracks or even inside; we must attack him wherever he may be, make him feel like a cornered beast wherever he may move. (...) This means a long war. And, once more, we repeat it, a cruel war. (...) Our every action is a battle cry against imperialism, and a battle hymn for the people's unity against the great enemy of mankind: the United States of America."

— Message "from somewhere in the world," made public in Havana April 16, 1967 by Prensa Latina news agency.

The distortion of Ché's legacy is not his doing. In the Sierra Maestra, thanks to his diary, we know he hid his beliefs and true intentions so the rebel movement could appear as moderate, to not hurt its chance for victory. More than a year after gaining power, on April 28, 1960, he went on Cuban television to deny the government's involvement in a guerrilla operation in Nicaragua and declared that he was not a Communist. But, once Fidel Castro came clean in April 1961 about his Marxist-Leninist plan for Cuba and had forged an open alliance with the Soviet Union, Ché proclaimed heartily that he was an avowed and staunch proponent of Communist totalitarianism and dedicated his travels to spreading the message and fortifying that mission with strategic and economic al-

liances. If there was still any doubt about Che's goal, his 1967 message to the Tri-Continental Conference, shortly before his death, passionately advocates the destruction of the United States.

In the era of mass consumption and mass media, Che's "cool" capitalist merchandise. But, in the age of suicide bombers blowing up civilians in pursuit of fanatical quests, it may be worthwhile to give Che his due. The anti-establishment 1968 generation that served as fertile ground for creating the Che myth is long gone. Back then, his call for many more Vietnams may have sounded romantic; it was certainly less threatening and farther from home. Today, the fact that he wanted us killed should elicit at minimum, awareness, and at best, some reflection. To his victims we owe, at the very least, an acknowledgement.

Ché's Victims

Whereas everyone recognizes Ché, or his famous image, his victims are mostly unknown. Generally, they were killed in the prime of their lives and left scores of orphans. The pain and grief Ché caused lives in the hearts of many anonymous souls who carry a heavy burden in traumatized silence — a son who lost his father, a mother who lost her son, a wife grieving for her life's companion and struggling to raise a family alone.

Curiously, Ché's best-selling biographers dedicate hundreds of pages to even the most inane minutia of his life, but pay almost no attention to his victims. In his 410-page biography of Ché (in hardcover), Jorge Castañeda dedicates exactly six lines to the executions in the Sierra Maestra and eleven lines to the executions at La Cabaña, mentioning none of the individuals killed by name. With respect to any detail, this is the best Castañeda offers (p. 143): *"Justifiable as these executions may have seemed at the time, they were carried without respect for due process. Estimates as to their exact number vary..."*

Jon Lee Anderson is much more generous with the Sierra Maestra executions, quoting extensively from Ché's diary. He mentions over twenty cases, often with clarifying details. But, while his 768-page biography devotes 27 pages to Ché's childhood and adolescence and another 8 pages to his first love, only 4 pages of

the entire book deal with the revolutionary tribunals and executions at La Cabaña. Four additional lines scattered in the volume make passing references to the executions. To his credit, Anderson writes that Ché “as supreme prosecutor, took to his task with a singular determination, and the old walls of the fort rang out nightly with the fusillades of the firing squads.” Plus, he exposes the lack of due process. Yet, he conveys, or at least never questions, the view that those who were executed were war criminals, torturers, and thugs of the Batista dictatorship. There is no reference to any of the human beings killed at La Cabaña, no mention of any attempt to examine any case tried there and no indication of the existence of any loved ones or any mention of and how these losses affected them.

Anderson mentions by name just two cases regarding the 1959 firing squads. One is that of Major Sosa Blanco, charged with, in Anderson’s words “multiple acts of murder and torture.” In fact, Fidel Castro had publicly promised that Sosa Blanco would pay with his life for the indiscriminate bombing of civilians in the Sierra Maestra. Sosa Blanco’s trial, with two others, was famously held in a Havana stadium and the proceedings were nationally televised. But, the “guajiros” (peasants) brought from the mountains to testify against him were so clueless in their testimony and the trial was such an obvious and pathetic sham that Fidel Castro called it off midway. Sosa Blanco claimed that the charges were ludicrous, because he was in command elsewhere, had been to the Sierra Maestra just a few days, and had never ordered any attacks against civilians. He insisted there was evidence in the military’s records to his favor. No matter, he was sent back to Ché at La Cabaña, promptly tried, and immediately executed. The affair was a national scandal that received ample coverage in the still existing Cuban media. It is recalled in many written accounts and was witnessed by many people alive today in exile who could talk without fear of reprisal. Anderson must have not made the slightest of efforts to look into it.

The other case mentioned in Anderson’s “Ché” is that of the two Necolardes brothers, executed in the city of Manzanillo, and

not by Ché. In fact, two of three brothers, whose last name is misspelled in the book, were part of the infamous paramilitary group Masferrer Tigers that committed most of the tortures and gory assassinations during Batista's rule. Their boss and cousin, Rolando Masferrer, had left with the dictator. What Anderson doesn't mention is that a third brother, a high school teacher who was not involved in any political or paramilitary activities, was also dragged to the firing squad, perhaps on mistaken identity or maybe just for sharing the name for the sake of swift revolutionary justice.

In essence, Ché's clothing, appearance, archeological interests, asthma, sexuality, or correspondence with family members, have commanded almost exclusive interest, while the multiple lives he took and the trail of pain he caused to their grief-stricken families has mostly gone ignored.

Following are selected profiles of Ché's victims. All sources substantiating each case are listed in each record, searchable by name, at www.CubaArchive.org/database/.

Eutimio Guerra

Executed February 17, 1958 at the Sierra Maestra mountains

Guerra, a peasant who had joined the Rebel Army and served as a guide, had apparently become a collaborator with Batista's Army. Guevara's authorized published diary discusses Guerra's treason and execution, but not that it was he who shot Guerra. But, the private uncensored diary that Ché's widow made available to biographer Jon Lee Anderson adds the macabre details. According to Anderson, Guevara wrote of shooting Guerra with a .32 caliber pistol in the right side of the brain to solve an "uncomfortable problem," because no one wanted to do it. Witnesses to the events report that Ché then took Guerra's watch and other possessions and declared 'they are now mine.' Rebel Army Commander Jaime Costa witnessed Guerra's brief summary trial and confirms that the case against Guerra was so weak that even the head of the Tribunal, Ramiro Valdés, did not want to shoot him. When Ché shoots Guerra, Costa hears him say for the first time a phrase he would come to famously coin: "*When in doubt, execute.*"

Domingo Álvarez Martínez

Age 39

Executed by firing squad on January 4, 1959 in Santa Clara

Member of the Armed Forces of Cuba working for the Military Intelligence Service (SIM). Ché signed his death sentence before leaving for Havana, for alleged war crimes. He was executed without a trial in the presence of his 17 year-old son. He left a wife and two sons, ages 17 and 21.

Miguel Ares Polo

Age 27

Executed by firing squad at La Cabaña Fortress Prison on February 6, 1959

“Miguelito” was a member of the National Police Force. He had been a policeman for just two to three months before the triumph of the revolution. His family insists he had nothing to do with politics and did not commit any atrocities. While he did not belong to any political group, he had helped friends in the resistance who sold bonds to support the Rebel Army and had assisted a close friend in hiding arms. The latter, however, turned him in to the new revolutionary government. On January 8th he was detained and taken to La Cabaña Fortress Prison. When he arrived, the men who had to process him did not even know how to write. He sat at the typewriter and filled out his own record.



Miguel was sentenced to death on what he consistently insisted were fabricated charges; he reported never having even seen the witnesses. One of his sisters was allowed to attend the appeal, presided by Ché Guevara, in the early morning hours. When his sentence was confirmed, she shook Ché by the shoulders and told him: *“My brother is innocent and he is no traitor. You communists, you are the traitors.”* Ché’s eyes widened and his bodyguard put his rifle over her shoulders, to make her back off. Miguel was immediately led to his execution. He refused a blindfold.

Father Arzuaga, the priest at La Cabaña was with Miguel until the end. They had become close, as Miguel had attended Catholic school and would help the father deliver communion to the prisoners. Miguel had forgiven his accusers. Before he died, he passed under the door of his cell for delivery to his sister a small book he had kept on the life of Christ. On the front pages, he had written words of forgiveness for those who had falsely accused him, writing that he prayed for his friend who betrayed him and begged mercy for the prosecutor at his trial. He added this message: *"A coward dies each new day, the brave die just once."*

The morning of his appeal hearing, February 5th 1959, one of Miguel's sisters went to La Cabaña and stood out front, by the entrance where the rebel soldiers came and went. She was there for a long time and it was cold. A soldier came over, offered her a blanket and asked if she had a family member there. When she told him about her brother, he reported to her that he had been selected for his firing squad, but had refused because he would not shoot an innocent and unarmed person. After the execution, one of Miguel's sisters went to a Havana newspaper to denounce the injustice. She was told that, although Miguel might have been innocent, "the Revolution could not be attacked."

In October 1961, Miguel's family was getting ready to leave Cuba for exile when his sister heard a loud shattering sound. A print of the Sacred Heart had crashed down; Miguel had brought it home from school when he was young and his mother had framed and hung it on a wall. The glass was in pieces, so she rolled up the print and decided to take it with her, hiding it under her clothes in her suitcase. The government only allowed people to take a certain list of essential personal belongings, so she was afraid it would be confiscated. But, when the bag was searched at the airport, the guards missed the print. Today, the Sacred Heart hangs on the wall at her home in Miami.

For nearly 50 years, the Ares family had not spoken publicly about these traumatic events. Invited to give their testimony, they shared their painful memories with a sense of duty to tell the truth.

José de Jesús Castaño Quevedo

Age 44

Executed by firing squad at La Cabaña Fortress Prison on March 7, 1959



Castaño, a First Lieutenant of the Army, spoke several languages and was a renowned international expert in criminology and Communism. His father had also been in the military.

Castaño had forged a military career, rising from Assistant Director of Military Intelligence (SIM - Servicio de Inteligencia Militar) to Deputy Chief of the Bureau of Repression of Communist Activities (BRAC), which traced Communist activities in Cuba and in Central and South America. He was only in charge of research and investigations, but the BRAC had become a feared agency during the Batista regime. As the revolutionary war heated up, its agents tracked members of the resistance, some of whom ended up tortured and killed.

After Batista fled the country, Castaño presented himself to the High Command who took over the Armed Forces. He was told there should be no problem with him and sent home. But, he was soon arrested and sent to La Cabaña. A revolutionary tribunal there sentenced him to death after a summary trial. Castaño's wife and daughter, the only family members allowed to attend the trial, and others who were present report that no evidence of specific crimes attributed to him had been presented. Nonetheless, he was charged with "murder, abuses, torture, rape and theft." The family reports that seven or eight members of the opposition movement 26th of July tried to give testimony of how Castaño had helped them, but were turned away. They saw how the witnesses presenting fabricated charges were being instructed to lie.

At his trial, Castaño reportedly stated: *"I did not serve the Batista dictatorship; I only worked against the Soviet infiltration of my country."* The news of his death sentence provoked a loud public outcry and protests by influential public figures, the Catholic Church, the U.S. embassy, and others. But, after a brief appeal hearing, Guevara gave orders to execute him at once. He rejected an offer of the U.S.

government to exchange him for three top Batista officials who had fled and were well known to have committed crimes. As the firing squad waited, the head of La Cabaña's tribunals, Duque Estrada, asked the priest at La Cabaña to accompany him to see Fidel Castro. He requested that the case be tried again on grounds of insufficient evidence. Fidel was giving a speech and signaled his agreement. Castaño was told he would not be executed that night. When Fidel finished his long speech, in the middle of the night, he called Duque Estrada for more details. When he heard that Ché wanted Castaño killed, he ordered the execution to proceed. Castaño was immediately executed, at around 3:00AM.

Castaño left a wife, a daughter, age 16, and two sons, ages 18 and 19. Ché is said to have taken possession of all the BRAC's files; there were rumors that he had them burnt. Javier Arzuaga, the priest for La Cabaña, remains convinced that Castaño was an honorable and duty-bound man innocent of any crimes. He was familiar with the charges, attended the trial and appeal hearing, had long conversations with Castaño, and was with him at his execution. He believes Ché Guevara and the Cuban Communist Party wanted Castaño killed at all costs.

Philip Agee, the former CIA agent who retired in Cuba, is said to have revealed that Castaño had been the BRAC liaison with the CIA station at the U.S. Embassy. The CIA Chief of Station, on learning of Castaño's death sentence, sent a journalist collaborator who had interviewed Ché in the Sierra Maestra to plead for Castaño's life. Ché asked him to tell the CIA chief that Castaño was going to die, if not because he was an executioner of Batista, then because he was an agent of the CIA. Upon hearing this, Agee relates that the CIA Chief of Station, declared : "*This is a declaration of war.*"

Raúl Clausell Gato

Age 33

Executed by firing squad at La Cabaña Fortress Prison on March 15, 1959

Clausell was a Sergeant in the National Police Force. He came from a long line of ca-



reer police officers going back a generation and was serving as a policeman prior to Batista's takeover. His brother and several cousins were also policemen. Divorced, he had a nine year-old son. In mid February, soon after the new government took power, Raúl was arrested and taken to La Cabaña prison.

His sister and former wife attended his trial and the appeal. They witnessed how a group of men was kept in a separate room and given instructions on what they had to testify. When the designated witness was brought forth and asked "Who is Clausell?" he pointed to someone else. He was still sentenced to death. The appeal was the following day and he was executed immediately after the hearing.

The family was devastated by Raúl's unjust death. His young son was traumatized. His parents' lives were, in their daughter's words, "*destroyed.*" One of his sisters shared her pain: "*I always think that my tears don't matter, because I was young and better able to overcome this horror. But I can never forgive my parents' tears.*" She adds: "*I could relate so many things we endured, it seems almost endless.*" Among those awful things, their cousins Angel and Demetrio, who were also policemen, were executed as well.

The family did have one very lucky break. Raúl's brother, also a policeman, was being held at El Morro prison. The prosecutor was calling for the death penalty for him. But, his trial was delayed and he was transferred to Boniato prison in Santiago. Surprisingly, he was tried by a civilian court, which absolved him. He was released after having served one and a half years of prison.

Angel Maria Clausell García

Age 35

**Executed by firing squad at La Cabaña Fortress Prison
on April 29, 1959**

A Sergeant in the National Police, he had been sentenced to 30 years in prison for what the family claims were false charges. The night before his scheduled transfer to Isla de Pinos prison, he was taken from his cell and executed without explanation.

Demetrio Clausell González

Age 21

**Executed by firing squad at La Cabaña Fortress Prison
on February 1, 1959**

A guard in the National Police, he was executed on charges of having gunned down a member of the 26th of July movement.

Fidel Díaz Merquíás

Around 50 years old

**Executed by firing squad at La Cabaña For-
tress Prison on April 9, 1959**

Díaz was a career member of the military working as an Assistant in the Military Intelligence Service (SIM) for the area of Bauta, province of Havana. Several members of his family were also in the military, including a brother who had retired long before the triumph of the revolution.



When the revolution rose to power, Díaz told his family he saw no need to hide or leave the country, since he had committed no crimes. But, he was soon arrested and accused of murdering a resistance member whose body had been found near Mariel, where his family was from. At first held in Mariel, he was confident he would be released once the investigation proved his innocence. Instead, he was sent to La Cabaña prison, tried, and sentenced to 25 years. When his younger sister visited, she would return home traumatized by the insults and harassment by the guards.

Unexpectedly, the family received news one day that Díaz had been executed. One of his brothers, Cosme, who had also been in the military, had been arrested at his post in Camaguey. Later sent to Isla de Pinos prison, he did not have a trial for three years and was released when his case was reviewed.

Díaz left a widow and a son and five more children from other mothers. Five decades later, the extended Díaz family reports still living with a huge sorrow and sense of loss.

Ariel Lima Lago

Age 19

Executed at La Cabaña on February 18, 1959

When Ariel was only 17 years old, he joined the resistance against Batista as part of the 26th of July movement. In mid-1958, he was captured by forces serving under the infamous Chief of Police, Esteban Ventura.



Allegedly, Ariel had been forced to inform on his co-conspirators after they told him they would rape his mother. His sister reports, however, that when Ariel was shown evidence of communist infiltration in the 26th of July movement, he started to collaborate with police willingly.

As soon as the new revolutionary government took over, it ordered Ariel's arrest. They captured him in Pinar del Río, where he was trying to find a boat to flee the island. Sent to La Cabaña prison, a revolutionary tribunal sentenced him to death. The priest at La Cabaña pled on his behalf with Ché Guevara, citing his young age. But, at the appeal hearing, Ché ratified the sentence. Ariel's mother threw herself on the floor and begged Ché for her son's life. Mockingly, he told her to talk to the priest, who "was a master at consoling people."

As Ariel awaited his execution, Guevara told his mother that his life would be spared. That evening she went home elated to celebrate the news with the family. Early the next morning, the family was stunned that the newspaper prominently reported Ariel's execution together with that of Major Jesús Sosa Blanco on charges of war crimes. The family was later told that Raúl Castro had visited La Cabaña and demanded that Ariel and Sosa Blanco be executed immediately. But, the matter is marred in speculation. The traumatized family insisted on retrieving Ariel's body for burial, but was not allowed to hold a funeral and had to bury him immediately.

Aside from his parents, Ariel left a sister, age 17, and two brothers, ages 15 and 11. Tragically, two years later, Ariel's younger brother, José Antonio -only 17 at the time- was accused of counter-revolutionary activities and sentenced to 12 years of prison.

Rafael García Muñiz

Age 23

Executed by firing squad at La Cabaña Fortress prison on March 18, 1959

García Muñiz, newly married, was part of the National Police Force. He had been a policeman in the radio patrol car division for just six months when the revolutionary government came to power. His family insists he had committed no crimes and had performed his duty faithfully. Finding no need to go into hiding, he reported for duty to the new revolutionary authorities immediately after Batista fled the country. But, he was arrested on the spot and sent to La Cabaña Fortress Prison.



Accused of murdering three members of the 26 of July movement, his family claims the charges were fabricated. His brother Sergio went to see Ché to plead for his life, accompanied by a family friend who knew Ché from their time together in the Rebel Army. They explained that Rafael was innocent and that killing him would be a mistake. Guevara responded that no one would be forgiven and that he would have to die “for having worn Batista’s blue uniform” (traditional police force uniform of the Republic of Cuba).

At his trial, Rafael was absolved for lack of evidence, but quickly presented for a second summary trial with a prosecutor eager to prove his guilt at all costs. Sentenced to death, Guevara presided the appeal hearing and promptly ratified the sentence, having him immediately executed without saying farewells to his family. The body was not released to the family for burial and a death certificate was never provided.

Cornelio Rojas Fernández

Age 59

Executed by firing squad in Santa Clara on January 7, 1959

Rojas was Lieutenant Colonel and Chief of Police of Santa Clara. He came from a line of



distinguished generals of the independence wars against Spain. His father, grandfather, and other members of his family were part of the police force or the military. He had attended the Military Academy and risen through the officer ranks well before Batista came to power. Among his previous assignments, he had served as Inspector General of Cuba's National Police.

On January 1, 1959, when the revolutionary forces rose to power, Rojas was Chief of Police for Santa Clara. He was immediately arrested. The family knew he had disappeared, but did not know his whereabouts.

On January 7th, 1959, armed revolutionary forces surrounded their home and burned a family car. His wife and daughter were watching television when unexpectedly the programming was interrupted to transmit his execution. It was the first of many that would be televised to the nation. In horror, his daughter went into labor prematurely. Not allowed to leave the house to go to a hospital, she delivered her son on her father's bed.

Ché Guevara had ordered Rojas' death before leaving Santa Clara to take command of La Cabaña in Havana. There had not been a trial and his family has never known of any specific charges against Rojas. At his execution, he behaved with great dignity in front of the firing squad, refusing a blindfold and declaring in a firm

voice: *"Viva Cuba. 'Muchachos,' you now have the revolution. It stays with you; don't lose it. I am now at your command."* Then he gave the order to fire.

He left a wife, a daughter (married to a policeman), and four sons, who were in the military. The featured collage appeared in a widely circulated magazine in Cuba. Many members of the media had been invited to witness the execution.



Lists of documented victims of Ché Guevara in Cuba in 1959 Work in Progress (Updated May 6, 2011).

Guevara was in command of Santa Clara from January 1st until the afternoon of January 3rd. Before leaving, he reportedly ordered the death penalty of those listed below but executed afterwards. He was then in command at La Cabaña until November 26, 1959, although he traveled overseas from June 4th to September 8th. Reportedly, he signed execution orders carried out afterwards.

Cuba Archive stands by its best efforts to collect credible information and report its findings with the highest standards of objectivity and transparency. The accuracy of each case record, however, only reflects the precision of the sources from which the information was obtained. The following list includes cases documented with primary and/or secondary sources, therefore, the accuracy of the information varies amongst cases. All cases listed, however, are considered to have sufficient grounds for reporting. The lists that follow are not believed to represent a complete record of actual cases; they merely reflect the cases for which information has been obtained and processed as sufficiently credible. For details, including all sources used to document each case, see: www.CubaArchive.org/database/.

22 executions by the Rebel Army in the mountains Documented to date (work in progress)

3 executed for deserting the Rebel Army

- **René Cuervo**. August 1957.
- **Aristidio**. October 1957.
- **Pedro Guerra**. June 26, 1958.

8 executed for collaborating with the Batista Army

- **"Chicho" Osorio**, local peasant. 1/17/1957.
- **"El Negro" Nápoles**, local peasant member of the Rebel Army. 2/18/1957.
- **Eutimio Guerra**, local peasant member of the Rebel Army. 2/17/1957.
- **Two unidentified peasants**, April 1957.
- **Filiberto Mora**, local peasant, 4/15/1957.

- **Batista Army collaborator.** August 1957.
- **“Manolo Capitán”** (Manuel Fernández). Member of the Rebel Army. 1957.

4 executed for a assorted reasons

- **“The teacher,”** peasant member of the Rebel Army, executed October 1957 for trying to impress the local women pretending to be Ché Guevara.
- **José Martí,** peasant member of the Rebel Army killed September 1957 by fellow rebel Lalo Sardiñas for taking off his boots, violating rules. Ché and Fidel refused to punish Sardiñas.
- **Two brothers,** accused of spying, executed October 1957. Names unknown.

7 executed for committing crimes

- **José (“el chino) Chang.** Cuban-Chinese member of the Rebel Army executed October 1957 for collaborating with police and brutalizing the local population.
- **“The rapist.” Member of Chang’s gang** executed October 1957 for raping a peasant girl.
- **“El Bisco” Echevarría Martínez.** Member of the Rebel Army executed October 1957 for robbing local farmers at gunpoint.
- **Dionisio Oliva and Juan Lebrigio.** Brothers-in-law, suppliers and collaborators of the Rebel Army executed October 1957 for stealing food and supplies.
- **Member of the Rebel Army,** Cuban Army deserter, executed June 1958, accused of murder.
- **Member of the Rebel Army,** Cuban Army deserter, executed August 1958 for trying to rape a girl.

Executions in Santa Clara ordered by Guevara January 1-3, 1959. Documented to date (work in progress)

1	Ramón	Alba Moya	1/3/1959
2	Felipe	Barroso Pérez	1/-/1959
3	Pedro	Borrell	1/23/1959
4	José	Fernández Martínez	1/2/1959
5	Alejandro	García Alayón	1/5/1959
6	Horacio	Hernández	1/28/1959
7	Héctor	Mirabal	1/-/1959
8	Félix	Montano Fernández	1/-/1959
9	Rafael	Naranjo Calderón	1/28/1950
10	Arturo	Pérez Pérez	1/24/1959
11	Cano	Prieto	1/5/1959
12	Pablo	Rodríguez Carazo	1/27/1959
13	Ricardo	Rodríguez Pérez	1/11/1959
14	Cornelio	Rojas Fernández	1/7/1959
15	Narciso	Romero	5/12/1905
16	Francisco	Rosell	1/11/59
17	Ignacio	Rosell Leyva	1/11/59
18	Antonio	Ruíz Beltrán	1/11/59
19	Ramón	Santos García	1/12/1959
20	Isidoro de Jesús	Socarrás	1/12/1959
21	Manuel	Valdés	1/-/1959
22	Eligio	Zuley	1/23/1959

Executions at La Cabaña Fortress Prison during Guevara's command. Documented to date (work in progress)

1	Pelayo	Alayón	2//1959
2	Pedro	Alfaro	7/25/1959
3	José Luis	Alfaro Sierra	2/6/1959
4	Mariano	Alonso Riquelmo	7/1/1959
5	José L.	Álvaro	3/1/1959
6	Miguel Angel	Ares Polo	2/6/1959
7	Alvaro	Argueira Suárez	3/21/1959
8	Eugenio	Becquer Azcárate	9/29/1959
9	Ramón	Bicet	7/25/1959
10	Juan Manuel	Capote Fiallo	5/1/1959
11	Eladio	Caro	2/6/1959
12	Antonio	Carralero Ayala	2/4/1959

13	José de Jesús	Castaño Quevedo	3/7/1959
14	Gertrudis	Castellanos	5/7/1959
15	José Lorenzo	Chamace	10/15/1959
16	Ángel María	Clausell García	4/29/1959
17	Raúl	Clausell Gato	3/15/1959
18	Demetrio	Clausell González	2/1/1959
19	Eloy F.	Contreras Rabiche	4/1/1959
20	N/A	Cuni (brother #1)	6//1959
21	Roberto	Cuni (brother #2)	6//1959
22	Antonio	de Beche	1/5/1959
23	Mateo J.	Delgado Pérez	4/12/1959
24	José	Díaz Cabezas	7/30/1959
25	Fidel	Díaz Merquíás	4/9/1959
26	Rudy	Fernández	7/30/1959
27	Ramón	Fernández Ojeda	5/29/1959
28	Salvador	Ferrero Canedo	5/29/1959
29	Héctor	Figueredo	1//1959
30	Eduardo	Forte	3/20/1959
31	Ángel	García León	5/1/1959
32	Rafael	García Muñiz	3/18/1959
33	Evaristo Venereo	González	11/14/1959
34	Ezequiel	González	1//1959
35	José	González Malagón	7/2/1959
36	Ricardo Luis	Grao	2/23/1959
37	Gerardo	Hernández	7/26/1959
38	Secundino	Hernández Calviño	4/18/1959
39	Rodolfo de Jesús	Hernández Falcón	9//1959
40	Francisco	Hernández Leiva	4/15/1959
41	Jesús de la Caridad	Insua González	7/22/1959
42	Enrique	Izquierdo Portuondo	7/23/1959
43	Silvino	Junco García	11/15/1959
44	Ariel	Lima Lago	2/18/1959
45	Ambrosio	Malagón	3/21/1959
46	Armando	Mas Torrente	2/17/1959
47	Onerlio	Mata Costa Cairo	1/30/1959
48	Elpidio	Mederos Guerra	1/9/1959
49	José Manuel	Milián Pérez	3/4/1959
50	Pedro	Morejón	1/31/1959
51	Félix	Oviedo González	7/24/1959
52	Juan	Pérez Hernández	5/29/1959
53	Emilio	Puebla	4/30/1959

54	Alfredo	Pupo Parra	5/29/1959
55	Secundino	Ramírez	2/4/1959
56	Ramón María	Ramos Álvarez	4/23/1959
57	Pablo	Ravelo	9/15/1959
58	Rubén	Rey Alberola	2/27/1959
59	Mario	Riquelme	1/29/1959
60	Fernando	Rivera Reyes	8/10/1959
61	Pablo	Rivero Pérez	5//1959
62	José	Saldara Cruz	9/11/1959
63	Pedro	Santana	2//1959
64	Juan	Silva Domínguez	8//1959
65	Fausto Avelino	Silva Guerra	1/29/1959
66	Elpidio	Soler Puig	8/11/1959
67	Jesús	Sosa Blanco	2/18/1959
68	Renato	Sosa Delgado	6/28/1959
69	Pedro Antonio	Soto Quintana	3/20/1959
70	Oscar	Suárez	4/30/1959
71	Rafael	Tárrago Cárdenas	2/18/1959
72	Francisco	Tellez	1/3/1959
73	Ramón Teodoro	Tellez Cisneros	3/1/1959
74	Francisco	Travieso	2/18/1959
75	Marcelino	Valdés	7/21/1959
76	Lupe	Valdés Barbosa	3/22/1959
77	Antonio	Valentín Padrón	3/22/1959
78	Daniel F.	Vázquez	3/22/1959
79	Sergio	Vázquez	5/29/1959
80	Severino	Barrios Ramírez	12/9/59
81	Antonio	Blanco Navarro	12/10/59
82	Alberto	Corbo	12/7/59
83	Emilio	Cruz Pérez	12/7/59
84	Eufemio	Chala Cano	Dec-59

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