

CHÉ GUEVARA'S FORGOTTEN VICTIMS

By Maria C. Werlau

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.

While Ché's face adorns t-shirts worn by opponents of capital punishment, he exhibited an acute disregard for the sanctity of human 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. At 25, he wrote a long and passionate note of revolutionary awakening on the margin of the “Travel Notes” from his motorcycle journey in the Americas; it is chillingly prophetic of the fervently violent course he would embark on.

Ché's long trail of blood began in Cuba's Sierra Maestra Mountains. As biographer Jon Lee Anderson writes, he 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 it led to ending many lives -some by his own hand, hundreds, maybe thousands, by his direct order, and countless tens of thousands at his urging.

“(...) 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

A harsh disciplinarian even with his own 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. 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, as it was being waged in terrible conditions, with the troops often going hungry for days. Some were local peasants accused of crimes ranging from annoying loitering, to stealing food intended for the rebels, to graver offenses such as rape or murder against the rural population. All were robbed of due process of law and essentially killed on the spot, at times almost casually at Ché's order. 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.*”

Eutimio Guerra
Executed February 17,
1958

Guerra, a peasant who had joined the Rebel Army and served as 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. Guevara wrote that he shot 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 even the head of the Tribunal, Ramiro Valdés, did not want to shoot Guerra. When Ché shoots Guerra, Costa hears him say for the first time a phrase he would come to famously coin: "When in doubt, execute."

Ché was merciless even if the offender was just a young foot soldier wearing the enemy uniform. One 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 own interests. He rejected punishment for highly dependable underling 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, but fierce 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. He and the Castro brothers were the main proponents of the necessity of taking lives to guarantee the hold on power of the new revolutionary order. Beginning 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, 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. 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.

Domingo Álvarez Martínez
Executed in Santa Clara
January 4, 1959

Member of the 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.

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 served as a prison as well 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 veneer 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. 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.”* They have testified that he would lecture them: *“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 did preside over the appeal hearings (known as “revisión de causa”). These were usually very short, 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 soon 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 and 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), the documentation project “Cuba Archive” has reports of 100 executions presumably under Guevara’s orders. (See Appendix and www.CubaArchive.org.) Twelve executions are documented for 1959 without a precise month

Ariel Lima Lago, Age 17 Executed 1959

Only 16 years old, Ariel joined the resistance against Batista in a fit of idealism. He was captured by police, tortured and eventually forced to inform on his co-conspirators after his mother was brought in, stripped naked and threatened with rape. When the rebel forces took over, Ariel was still in jail. He was immediately sent to La Cabaña prison, where a revolutionary tribunal sentenced him to death. The chaplain at La Cabaña pled on his behalf with Ché, citing his young age. But, at his appeal hearing a few days later, Ché ratified the sentence in less than thirty minutes and ordered him executed immediately. Ariel’s mother threw herself on the floor and begged Ché for his life. Mockingly, he told her to talk to the chaplain, who “was a master at consoling people.” Tragically, a few years later, in 1962, Ariel’s older brother, Abel, was also executed by firing squad at la Cabaña.

or day. From January to May, when he was unquestionably present, 59 executions are recorded. During his travels abroad, from June 4th to September 8th, the degree of his involvement with the tribunals is unknown, although he remained in charge. Ten executions are documented from September 8th to November 26th, after he returned from his travels. Afterwards, he went to serve as President of the Central Bank of Cuba. It is possible, in fact, probable that he left orders for at least the 5 additional documented executions recorded until year-end. A witness relates to being present at a meeting of the Central Bank, with Ché in his new capacity, at which he was interrupted with the list of executions to be carried out the following day, which he signed off on.

Other sources report a wide range in the number of executions at La Cabaña in 1959. 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. He may have been referring to executions all over Cuba. Cuba Archive has 981 documented executions in Cuba in 1959, of which 608 reportedly took place from January to June. This information cannot all be properly scrutinized, as Cuba's official records are not public and field work inside Cuba is not possible. Cuba Archive's existing 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.

After Guevara left his command for other key positions in the new government, the executions at La Cabaña continued. 417 executions are documented there by Cuba Archive for the period 1960 to 1965, for a total of 517 for 1959-1965. This is the period Ché was in Cuba, although his direct responsibility over executions in La Cabaña is not established after November 26, 1959.

Cuba Archive has documented to date 1,152 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 same group of people -the notorious paramilitary group Masferrer Tigers and a few well-known and feared members of the military or police. Thanks to the painstaking research of the late Armando Lago, Ph.D., Cuba Archive has recorded 707 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 reports in Cuban media sources in the early days of 1959, there has been near absolute silence on the matter from official or academic sources in Cuba. 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, the editor of the official newspaper *Revolución*, has reported that in a speech of May 18, 1962 at State Security officers in Havana, Ché Guevara stated: "It is logical that in times of excessive tension we cannot proceed with weakness. 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 about the executions 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 decades, cost thousands more lives. Finally, not by his hand, 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 million -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 vision for society. His worldview was deliberately anchored in hatred for those who didn’t fit his dogmatic conceptions. The priest who looked after La Cabaña, a young Spaniard by the name Javier Arzuaga, had many conversations with Ché and attended many 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 took it upon himself to impose it at all costs and with frightful consequences. The tragedy is that he became a celebrity nonetheless –and a glorified one at that.

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. 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 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 guerrilla uprisings and exporting subversive violence.

Those who idolize Ché cannot even claim that he was a visionary of a better world that was 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 militants). Clothes as well as food remain strictly rationed for Cuba's citizens since Ché had his hand on imposing rationing on March 12th 1962 (by Law No.1015). 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.

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 alliances. If 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.

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 by the news service Prensa Latina on April 16, 1967.

In the era of mass consumption and mass media, Ché's just "cool" and prime capitalist merchandise. But, in the age of suicide bombers blowing up civilians in pursuit of fanatical quests, it may be timely to give Ché his due. The anti-establishment 1968 generation that was fertile ground for creating the Ché myth is long gone. Back then, his call for many more Vietnams may have sounded romantic, certainly less threatening and far 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 on a t-shirt- his victims are mostly unknown. Generally, they were killed in the prime of their lives and left scores of orphans in their wake. 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, yet give almost no attention to his victims. In his 410-page biography of Ché (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 twenty-seven pages to Ché's childhood and adolescence and another eight pages to his first love, only four pages of the entire book deal with the revolutionary tribunals and executions at La Cabaña. Four additional lines scattered in the volume makes 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 the idea, or at least never questions it, 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 indication of their family members or how their loss affected them, and no mention of any attempt by the author to inquire about or examine any one case tried at La Cabaña or contact anyone related to any of the victims.

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 at 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, and promptly tried there and immediately executed. The affair was a national scandal well-covered by the still existing Cuban media, recalled in many written accounts, and witnessed by many people alive today in exile who could talk without fear of reprisal. It seems that Anderson made no effort 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 more interest than the life he stole from any one of his multiple victims and the trail of pain he caused to their grief stricken families.

Selected Profiles of Ché's Victims

Rafael García Muñiz



Age 23 - Member of the National Police Force of Cuba
Executed by firing squad at La Cabaña
March 18, 1959

García Muñiz had been a policeman in the radio patrol car division for only six months when the revolutionary government came to power January 1st, 1959. He had just married. His family is adamant that he had committed no crimes and had performed his duty faithfully. For this reason, he saw no need to go into hiding. In fact, the new revolutionary government initially kept him in his post. But, on January 30th a group of armed revolutionaries went to his police station and arrested all members of the police there.

Rafael was sent to La Cabaña Fortress Prison and accused of murdering three members of the 26 of July movement who had broken into an armory and stolen a cache of arms. His family claims these charges were ludicrous, all fabricated. At his trial, a member of the 26th of July movement testified he was innocent; the prosecutor prevented other witnesses from testifying of his innocence.

After Rafael was sentenced to death, his brother Sergio went to see Ché at La Cabaña, accompanied by a family friend and former member of the Rebel Army who had known Ché. They explained that Rafael was innocent and that killing him would be a mistake of the revolution. Guevara responded that they would forgive no one and that he must die "for having worn Batista's blue uniform" (the traditional uniform of the police force of the Republic of Cuba). Ché Guevara was the presiding judge at the

appeal hearing and promptly ratified the sentence, sending him to be executed. The family was not allowed to see him before his death. The body was not released to the family for burial and a death certificate was never provided.

Raúl Clausell Gato

Age 33 - Sergeant in the National Police Force

Executed by firing squad at La Cabaña

March 15, 1959

Clausell came from a long line of career police officers, going back a generation, and was serving prior to Batista's takeover. His brother and several cousins were also policemen. He was divorced and had a nine year-old son. In mid February Raúl was arrested and taken to La Cabaña prison.

His sister and former wife attended the 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 - Sergeant in the National Police

Executed by firing squad at La Cabaña

April 29, 1959

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 - Guard in the National Police

Executed by firing squad at La Cabaña

February 1, 1959

Charged with having gunned down a member of the 26th of July movement.



Cornelio Rojas Fernández

Age 59 - Lieutenant Colonel and Chief of Police of Santa Clara

Executed by firing squad in Santa Clara
January 7, 1959

Rojas came from a line of distinguished generals of the independence wars against Spain. His father, grand-father, and other members of his family were part of Cuba's police force and 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, he was serving as Chief of Police for Santa Clara.

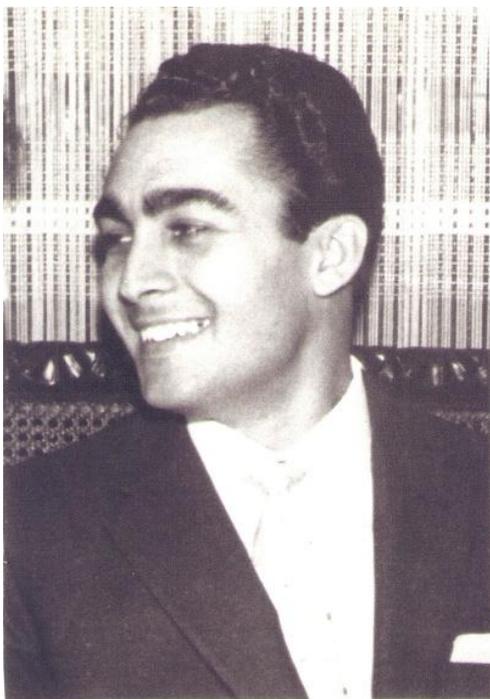
Almost immediately after the revolutionary forces came to power, Rojas was arrested. The family knew he had disappeared, but did not know his whereabouts. On January 7th, 1959, revolutionary forces surrounded their home and burned a family car. His wife and daughter were watching television when unexpectedly 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 at home, 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 police-man), and four sons, who were in the military.

The collage to the right appeared in a widely circulated magazine in Cuba. Many members of the media had been invited to witness the execution.





Miguel Ares Polo

Age 27

Member of the National Police Force of Cuba

Executed by firing squad at La Cabaña

February 6, 1959

“Miguelito” 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 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 had never even seen the witnesses. One of his sisters was allowed to attend the appeal, presided by Ché Guevara, in the early morning hours.

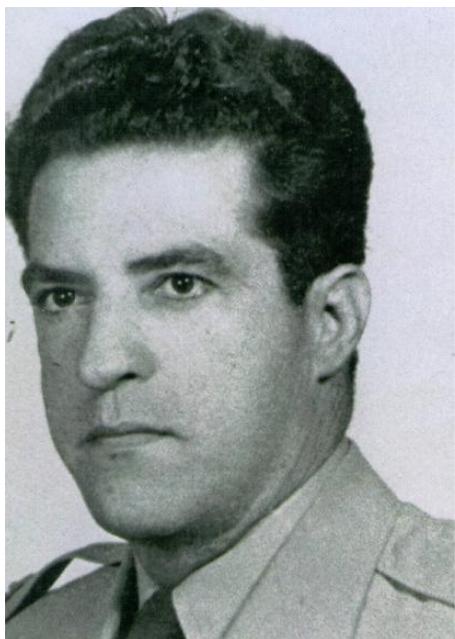
When his sentence was confirmed, she shook Ché by the shoulders and told him: “My brother is innocent and he is no traitor. You communists, you are the traitors.” Ché’s eyes widened and his bodyguard put his rifle over her shoulders, to make her back off. Miguel was immediately led to his execution. 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 his sister a small book he had kept on the life of Christ. On the front pages, he had written with forgiveness for those who had falsely accused him, writing that he prayed for his friend who betrayed him and begged mercy for his prosecutor. He also wrote: “A coward dies every new day, the brave die just once.”

The morning of his appeal hearing, February 5th, 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 the print and decided to take it with her, hiding it under her clothes in the bag she would be carrying. 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.

This is the first time in nearly 50 years that any member of the Ares family has spoken about these traumatic events. Though very painful, they feel it is their duty to tell their truth.



José de Jesús Castaño Quevedo

Age 44 - First Lt. of the Constitutional Army of the Republic of Cuba

Executed by firing squad at La Cabaña

March 7, 1959

Castaño had forged a career in the Army and was a renowned international expert in criminology and Communism who spoke many languages. His father had also been in the military. He had risen 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 as well as in Central and South America. Castaño was reportedly 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 offer testimony of how Castaño had helped them, but were turned away. They saw how witnesses presenting fabricated charges were being instructed to lie. At the 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, Ché 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 wanted to request for the case to be tried again for insufficient evidence. Fidel was giving a speech and signaled his agreement. Castaño was told not to worry, that 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. Inquiring how Ché stood on the matter, when he heard that Ché wanted Castaño killed, he ordered the execution to proceed. Castaño was immediately taken from his cell and 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, is convinced to this day that Castaño was an honorable and duty-bound man innocent of any crimes. He was familiar with the case against him, 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 related that Castaño had been the BRAC liaison with the CIA station in 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 see him and plead for Castaño's life. Ché told 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, the CIA Chief of Station, Agee relates, stated: "This is a declaration of war." Indeed, it was.

Fidel Díaz Merquías

Age around 50

Member of Cuba's Constitutional Army

Executed by firing squad at La Cabaña

April 9, 1959

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

Because he had committed no crimes, he had not gone into hiding or tried to leave the country. But, he was arrested and accused of murdering a resistance member whose body was found near Mariel, where his family was from. Taken as a prisoner first to Mariel, he was confident he would be released once the investigation revealed he was innocent. Instead, he was sent to La Cabaña, where he was sentenced to 25 years of prison. His younger sister would visit there, always returning home traumatized after also having to face insults and harassment from the guards.

The family received news one day that Fidel had been executed. He left a widow and a son plus five more children from other mothers.

One of Fidel's 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.

One of Fidel's nephews was 10 years old when the events took place. He had watched one of the televised trials of former members of the military under Batista and was impacted by the atrocities of which they were charged. He and his uncle were very close. So, when his uncle was arrested, he realized they had been fooled; it was impossible for such a good man to commit such crimes. To this day, for all these years, he says, he and his family have lived with that pain and loss.



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DOCUMENTED VICTIMS OF CHÉ GUEVARA IN CUBA IN 1959

Work in progress updated September 30, 2009

Ché 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 secondary sources. This may not be a complete record of all actual cases. For details, see: www.CubaArchive.org/database.

Executions in Santa Clara Jan. 1-3, 1959

1.	Ramón	Alba Moya	1/3/1959
2.	Joaquín	Casillas Lumpuy	1/2/1959
3.	Arturo	Pérez Pérez	1/24/1959
4.	Diego	Álvarez Martínez Fernández	1/4/1959
5.	José	Martínez	1/2/1959
6.	Héctor	Mirabal Montano	Jan-59
7.	Félix	Fernández	Jan-59
8.	Cano	Prieto	1/7/1959
9.	Ricardo	Rodríguez Pérez	1/11/1959
10.	Cornelio	Rojas Fernández	1/7/1959
11.	Francisco	Rosell	1/11/1959
12.	Ignacio	Rosell Leyva	1/11/1959
13.	Antonio	Ruíz Beltrán	1/11/1959
14.	Ramón	Santos García	1/12/1959
15.	Isidoro	Socarrás	1/12/1959
16.	Manuel	Valdés	Jan-59
17.	José	Velázquez Fernández	2/6/1959

SIERRA MAESTRA EXECUTIONS

Executed for deserting the Rebel Army

René Cuervo. August 1957.

Aristidio. October 1957.

Pedro Guerra. June 26, 1958.

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.

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.

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.

