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Che Guevara and guerrilla warfare

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ABSTRACT

Che Guevara's life as a public figure (1959-1967) coincided with the golden years of the Cuban Revolution. Ernesto Guevara became Che Guevara, a glorified revolutionary guerrilla comandante and theoretician of guerrilla warfare in this short period. Especially during the sixties his texts on guerrilla strategy were studied and applied by many insurgents in Latin America and the Caribbean. Paradoxically, he supervised or was directly in charge of three ill-fated guerrilla campaigns in Bolivia/Argentina (1963/64), the Congo (1965), and again Bolivia (1966/67). The themes of this article are (1) a discussion about the use and evolution of the rural *foco* approach, for many followers the guiding doctrine of armed insurgency; (2) Che's three guerrilla campaigns and the reasons for failure; (3) the rural *foco* approach as implemented by other Latin American guerrilla leaders; and (4) some concluding remarks about post-*foco* guerrilla warfare in the region.

KEYWORDS

Guerrilla warfare; Che Guevara; rural *foco*; Cuba and Latin America; revolutionary left in Latin America

1. Introduction¹

Ernesto Guevara, a young leftist Argentine doctor, joined a group of Cuban exiles training in Mexico for guerrilla warfare in the south-eastern region of Cuba as a medical officer. During this campaign, he became 'Che Guevara', a war hero and a legendary guerrilla comandante. The period of his short public life (from January 1959 to April 1967) coincided with the golden years of the revolutionary fervour of the Cuban Revolution.

Che Guevara also became a kind of roving ambassador of the Cuban Revolution to the Soviet Union, China, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America. He headed the first mission to Moscow, became acquainted with chiefs of state of the Middle East and Africa, and was one of the very first Cubans to befriend Algerian leader Ben Bella, Egyptian President Nasser and several other leaders of African states still engaged in insurgency warfare or following their independence.

A prolific writer, he had kept diaries during his previous trips as a young political traveller. Even in combat in the Cuban Sierra Maestra, in the Congo and finally, in Bolivia, he meticulously reported war chronicles that later – sometimes much later – were published. In all these accounts, Guevara is surprisingly sharp and honest, also with respect to his own shortcomings.

The main argument of this article is threefold: (1) to discuss the concept of rural *foco*, a key element in Che Guevara's writings on guerrilla warfare; (2) to analyse how the three guerrilla campaigns ('Operación Sombra' in Bolivia and Argentina with his friend Masetti as deputy-commander

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in 1963/64, his Congo operation in 1965/66, and his own guerrilla warfare in the Bolivian campaign in 1966/67) were organized and overseen or directly headed, and why they ended in sobering results neither foreseen nor consistent with his own recommendations; and (3) to compare these results with the other guerrilla campaigns in Latin America in the sixties and afterwards.

In many respects, Guevara was an undogmatic theoretician. His influential writings on guerrilla combat were mainly practical, but most readers of his time were inclined to interpret his ideas as a general theory on strategy and tactics even though they were based on only one case. For many followers, Che's ideas were synthesized into a theory of the guerrilla *foco*: rural guerrilla leaders would advance as the nucleus of revolutionary resistance against exploitation and repression, and eventually would become the vanguard of fundamental economic and social transformation in a later phase. Guevara's influence on the rising guerrilla organizations in the sixties is obvious. These guerrilla efforts were localized in remote and underdeveloped Latin American regions and followed, in general, Che's ideas on guerrilla warfare, which became known as the rural *foco* concept or the *foco* approach.

His articles on guerrilla fighting, most of them published in the Cuban journal *Verde Olivo* that he had founded, were based on his experiences in the isolated Sierra Maestra mountain region. In Che's early publications one can discern a tendency to overemphasize the importance of the rural guerrilla and underestimate the role of the urban insurgency. Urban support and infrastructure had been vital during the Cuban guerrilla operations. Oltuski (2002), an urban war veteran and Che's vice-minister of planning, and Sweig (2002) published two detailed studies on the role of the urban underground. This rural bias is an reiterated element in both the Guevara guerrilla campaigns and the guerrilla efforts in the sixties.

For years after the death of Che Guevara when receiving foreign guerrilla delegations consulting him, Fidel Castro used to underline the importance of support and mobilization of non-guerrilla actors and large segments of society.²

I will discuss the *foco* ideas in section 2. I examine Che's three guerrilla campaigns and their outcomes in section 3. In section 4, I will compare the results of these with the outcomes of other Latin American insurgencies, emphasizing the general unfamiliarity and 'strangeness' of the incipient guerrilla operations conducted by Guevara and many other guerrilla leaders in the region.

Furthermore, all Latin American and Caribbean guerrilla movements in the sixties ended in defeat or were largely crushed by brutal military counterinsurgency. In retrospect, several of the conditions for establishing lasting political support for the insurgents were absent.

2. The *foco* approach

One of the first authors who wrote about the emergent Latin American guerrilla movements in the sixties (Lamberg, 1972, p. 18) typifies Che's war memoirs as 'absolutely not a theoretical treatise about guerrilla warfare but more a practical handbook, a kind of instruction manual for field commanders'. *La guerra de guerrillas* (Guevara, 1960) was probably meant as a guide for small guerrilla operations and irregular warfare which then could evolve into larger popular revolts and eventually a national revolution. Guevara commented that new experiences could improve the concept, that it was an outline and not a bible. However, in all the new editions Guevara claimed the potential replicability of the Cuban Revolution – as he writes on the first page of the first chapter – postulating that (1) popular forces can win a war against the army; (2) it is not necessary to wait until all conditions for making revolutions exist; and (3) in underdeveloped Latin America the countryside is the basic area for armed fighting.

Guevara was not naïve and also paid attention to urban guerrilla and urban ('semi-urban' in his own words) support networks. But his emphasis was mostly on rural guerrilla warfare. Many guerrilla movements at that time were initially inspired by Guevara's concept of the guerrilla *foco*. Furthermore, Cuban guerrilla instructors coached their Latin American trainees in the same mindset. Eventually, it became a kind of all-purpose remedy that was based on vanguard guerrilla leadership opting for national revolutionary warfare in remote rural regions. But operating far away from the cities implied a divorce from organized mass movements. In the sixties, the fate of the guerrilla militants was usually sealed by counter-insurgency campaigns by military elite formations, often assisted by indigenous backing (see section 4).

Childs (1995) analysed the gradual evolution of the *foco* thesis between 1960 and 1967. Initially, Guevara had been cautious about a guerrilla outbreak under democratic rule. Childs examines Che's early speeches and articles, and remarks on an important element in the *foco* concept: the Cuban Revolution had proved that there could be a revolutionary movement without a revolutionary (Leninist) theory (1960). Here Che emphasized pragmatism instead of following 'dogmatic interpretations: where one really learns is in a revolutionary war'. From 1963 onwards, Marx, Engels and Lenin are quoted, marking a 'Marxianization' of the *foco* thesis. And in September 1963, in the introduction to the second edition of the *La guerra de guerrillas*, Guevara dropped that impediment supporting armed insurrection in democratically governed countries such as Venezuela. The third phase in the evolution of the *foco* was its internationalization, adopted by the Organization for Solidarity with the Peoples of Africa, Asia, and Latin America (OSPAAAL), an organization founded at the Tricontinental Conference in January, 1966. Che Guevara had an eminent role in the design and preparation of this conference.

Maybe even more than Fidel Castro, Che Guevara had supervised Cuba's support to the incipient or already existing guerrilla in the region.³ He supervised an informal rudimentary structure to assist in creating guerrilla *focos* in Latin America. But early efforts in Panama, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, and Haiti ended in failure, capture or the death of many of the guerrilleros. When comandante Manuel Piñero, who had served under Raúl Castro and had become a trusted political operative of Fidel and Che, was appointed head of a more formal intelligence structure, a professional intelligence organization was set up. In 1961 Piñero's organization—both an intelligence apparatus and a structure assisting and training guerrilla initiatives—became incorporated into the ministry of the interior.

Several times Che had hinted at the proliferation of guerrilla uprisings on a continental scale with a *guerrilla madre* (central guerrilla nucleus) from which new guerrilla *focos* in neighbouring countries would originate. When in power, his ideas were gradually fitted into plans to launch a coherent wave of revolutions on a continental scale. 'Argentina, Peru, Bolivia (...) was part of his encompassing project to bring forward his strategy of revolutionizing the continent', says Manuel Piñero.⁴ At that time, Cuba's leadership supported a variety of rural *foco* initiatives in the entire region, strangely enough securing the training of ideologically different guerrilla initiatives within the same country instead of favouring a unitary command structure.

3. Guevara's guerrilla campaigns

In a fine study about Che Guevara's military preferences, Dorsal (2003:, p. 307) remarks that during his life he had basically commanded units not larger than 100–150 guerrilla fighters (and that he greatly enjoyed leading them). In Che's three independent guerrilla campaigns discussed here, the Cuban leadership had previously organized reconnaissance missions and supported him

with experienced volunteer Cuban fighters. The personal tragedy of Che Guevara, nevertheless, is that the missions under his supervision or his direct command ended in misfortune.

The first complications became clear during ‘Operation Sombra’ in Bolivia and Argentina. Both Argentinean author Rot (2010) and Bolivian scholar Rodríguez Ostría (2006) suggest that the Bolivian government had turned a blind eye to the fact that Cuban-Argentinean guerrilleros would pass through Bolivia to Argentina. Guevara’s Argentinean friend Masetti was the leader as ‘(...) “deputy commander” until the advance party had created [more adequate] conditions’ and Guevara in person would consolidate the triumph. In Algeria, Masetti had acquired ‘some kind of combat experience, and he also had received military training in our country [Cuba]’.⁵ Previously, Che had discussed the opening of a *foco* in Argentina with small groups of Argentineans. Che clearly preferred a rural *foco* to be established in Salta and Tucumán. Others favoured the large cities in Argentina. His revolutionary Peronist friends John William Cooke and Alicia Eguren, founders of the Acción Revolucionaria Peronista (ARP), decided to assist but had expressed doubt about the viability ‘especially because of the non-existence of political relations between the guerrilla group and the labour originations and popular movements’ (Rot 2003: 150-151). Initially, Guevara had wanted to lead the first guerrilla column,

but was persuaded by Fidel to wait until the advance party had created [more adequate] conditions (...) Fidel didn’t want someone of continental prominence like Che to be at risk during the first phase of the guerrilla struggle.⁶

A group of nearly 25 guerrilleros, mostly Argentinian students and a few Cubans, trudged through the jungle and organized reconnaissance missions. The region was thinly populated and the poverty-stricken inhabitants were not interested in joining the armed expedition. The newcomers suffered from hunger and thirst. The alerted National Gendarmery sent troops. One of the camps was attacked, five members were arrested. Masetti split the group, and one of the groups split again. Some died in combat, others were wounded. Some died of hunger. Most of the combatants were captured. Masetti and one of his men disappeared and were never seen again. Inexperience, lack of trust of the local population, and lack of deep knowledge of the local ethnic, social and political relations, and the concentration of Gendarmery forces in the combat region of combat explain a portion of the ‘blatant failure’, as Rot typifies this doomed campaign between mid-1963 and March 1964.

In the first appraisal, land-locked Congo in the middle of Africa should have been a central country for long-term and sustained warfare against colonialism and imperialism. Fidel Castro had probably recommended this choice. When Che departed for the Congo, the African decolonization process was still ongoing. The complicated civil wars in post-colonial Congo were also still ongoing among a multiplicity of armed actors: rebellious groups, foreign mercenaries, warlords, and local army commanders. In early 1964, Che had tested the waters for his African expedition, discussing his participation with Nyerere (Tanzania), Ben Bella (Algeria) and Nasser (Egypt). Apparently, both Ben Bella and Nasser had expressed reserves, given the unfamiliarity with the tangled situation.

In eastern Congo, a revolutionary group claiming to be the heirs of Lumumba were under siege by government forces with Belgian, American, and mercenary support.⁷ Tanzania assisted the insurgents. Che offered the young leaders Kabila and Soumaliot support with Cuban instructors, training and weapons; the offer was immediately accepted. The Cuban leadership sent more than 100 highly experienced Afro-Cuban guerrilleros together with Guevara, a contingent larger than any other sent to Latin America at that time.⁸ But the Congolese leaders, already divided

into several factions, were largely absent. The local troops to be trained did not seem very interested, and the Cuban veterans remained outsiders. Additionally, South African mercenaries threatened to encircle Che's Cuban and African fighters. To complicate things, a meeting of African presidents decided to revoke support. They withdrew 'defeated militarily and politically' (Gott, 2004, p. 224). The Cubans were exfiltrated by another Cuban mission from Tanzania.

The opening sentence of Che Guevara's African diary is: 'This is a history of a failure'. They had been studying Swahili, but their knowledge remained rudimentary. Of all Cubans, only Guevara spoke French. None of the other Cubans spoke one of the local languages. Many years after the Congo campaign, general Víctor Dreke, at that time Che's deputy comandante, summarizes the shortcomings, here commented on by his interviewer:

First, Che had been warned by Ben Bella of Algeria of the Organisation of African Unity's (OAU) Liberation Committee that his desire to assist in the armed struggle in the Congo was unwise, given the political complexities there. Second, Che and Dreke also learned that even though the Cubans had military readiness, it is near impossible to do basic training in the field, especially for those who lack even rudimentary knowledge of guerrilla warfare. For instance, the Congolese soldiers did not know how to fire and maintain weapons or prepare quietly for military engagement. And finally, (...) he and his men knew nothing about Africa except the stereotypes made up in Tarzan movies. This, of course, shaped the Cubans' cultural frameworks and their ability to grapple with major complications with chiefly power and a multi-ethnic/national struggle that was entirely distinct from Cuba.⁹

Guevara returned to Cuba in July 1966, preparing for his Bolivian trip.¹⁰ He was already 39 years old, and he felt 'much urged by his increasing age. He knew better than anyone how essential a good physical condition is for a comandante of a guerrilla movement'.¹¹ The fifteen members of his column were experienced volunteer combatants, selected by Che and Fidel Castro. Some had fought in the Sierra Maestra; others had been with him in the Congo. It was the only Cuban operation in Latin America where the majority of the guerrilla column was Cuban, not national. Once started, Che and his Cuban group, the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army, ELN) reinforced with some Bolivian and Peruvian volunteers, were operating alone. The support of the Partido Comunista Boliviano (PCB), already in disarray because of the Chino-Soviet split, was at best half-hearted. A dispute between Che and Monge, the secretary-general of the Bolivian PCB about the leadership of the campaign left Guevara without their urban communication structure. Support of the local population was scarce or non-existent. Their base encampment in Ñancahuazú was situated in an ethnolinguistic Guaraní region, which is a completely different language group, while Guevara and his Cuban companions were trying to learn Quechua, the most-spoken indigenous language in the global Andean region. To make things even worse, general Barrientos, Bolivia's then president, had made a pact with the indigenous leadership (Dunkerley, 1992, p. 2, 4). Communications with Cuba were disrupted, as well as those with La Paz. Rodríguez Ostría (2020, pp. 73–75), Bolivia's historian of the four consecutive *foco* waves, of which Che's campaign was the second one, sadly comments that:

[it] ended in the same way as that of 1963 [the Masetti campaign, DK], i.e. in defeat, due to logistic errors that had not been corrected and to the fact that the foquismo had remained unaltered.

The embryonic guerrilla force was quickly spotted and substantial counterinsurgency operations started, with American support. The guerrilla group was split in two, occasionally moving in circles. Che suffered so extremely from asthma (he had left his medicine behind in Ñancahuazú) that he had to be assisted by others while moving. Bolivian army units encircled the largest remaining guerrilla column. Che was captured, then executed in La Higuera on 9 October 1967. There is reason to

believe Guevara did realize why his campaign had failed. When captured, he had a 45-minute dialogue with lieutenant colonel Selich. His biographer Anderson (1997:, pp. 734–735, 768) quotes him:

‘I’ve failed,’ Che replied. ‘It’s all over, and that is the reason you see me in this state.’ (...) ‘What do you believe is the reason for your failure?’ ‘I think it was the lack of support of the peasants.’ ‘There may be something of truth [in that], but the truth is that it is due to the effective organisation of Barrientos’ political party, that is to say, his *corregidores* [local indigenous leaders] and political mayors, who took charge of warning the army about our movements.’

The remainder of the dispersed Cuban and Bolivian ELN members found refuge in Chile where their return to Cuba was arranged – through the personal intervention of then senator Salvador Allende and his daughter Beatriz, herself a member of the Chilean branch.

4. Foreigners in unknown societies: the *foco* approach in Latin America in the sixties

Guevara’s strategic ideas about guerrilla warfare, and in particular the primacy of the revolutionary rural *foco*, did not result in the anticipated successes. In most Latin American countries in the sixties and seventies, rural guerrilleros could hide and become ‘invisible’ in their rural environment (‘the mountains’ as they called it after the Cuban example). They could hold out, but time and again, regular armies assisted by other security forces defeated rural guerrilla movements. Additionally, many Latin American armies received advanced intelligence and counter-insurgency training through U.S. military support programmes. In Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Guatemala, Peru, and Venezuela, the military rounded up the guerrilla insurgencies of that time with unceasing success.

With the benefit of hindsight, one has to conclude that the guerrilla leadership experienced immense deceptions about the supposed enthusiasm and willingness of the rural and the indigenous population. In the sixties and seventies, an accelerated demographic and migration process from the rural areas to the cities was ongoing and a new social class of urban slum dwellers emerged. The urban population in the region swelled from 41% (169 million) in 1950–57% in 1970 (228 million) to reach around 70% in 1990 (446 million) (United Nations, 2018: file 1, 5, 9). The same doubts are to be raised about the supposed pre-revolutionary character of the urban and metropolitan favelas, *barriadas* or ‘popular neighbourhoods’.¹²

Cuba did not have a significant indigenous population. Poor *guajiros* (Cuban peasants) spoke and understood Spanish. But in the Andean countries and in Central America and Mexico, huge indigenous population segments were mono-lingual in non-Spanish languages. They spoke one of the multiple Maya languages or the many Quechua dialects, Aymara, or Guaraní, or other languages entirely. Their centuries-long segregation, their communal land tenure, their habits of traditions and conventions, their poverty and neglect: all these conditions made it difficult to facilitate contact with foreigners suddenly appearing who had no deep knowledge of indigenous aspirations, social hierarchies, or religious and cultural beliefs.

However, there was an institution that was more familiar with the indigenous masses from which they recruited their soldiers: the army. The armed forces were probably the only representative of the state of which indigenous communities had knowledge and confidence. They knew the army officers, the army doctors and nurses who cured the wounded and the sick, the army engineers who surveyed and built the small roads, the army lawyers that explained the law. Enlisted men, corporals and sergeants, trained and literate after military service, became community leaders or

the advisers of the traditional authorities. Military presidents, elected or dictators, were popular or at least esteemed within the indigenous communities.

Two of the most significant guerrilla countries in the sixties, Brazil and Peru, had been the early beneficiaries of abundant American assistance. In comparison with the small Caribbean armed security forces, the Latin American military and the police forces were sizable, well-trained, and much better equipped. After the coup in Brazil of 1964, Leonel Brizola, brother-in-law of deposed President Goulart, founded a resistance movement and sent militants to Cuba for training. Capitani, one of the leaders, remembers the strict divorce of technical issues and political aspects in the training they received in Cuba:

There is no training that makes you a [good] guerrilla soldier. That depends on the political aspects. The local political conditions have to be appropriate. That was one of the problems of the *foco*. It provided you with technical knowledge, but it neglected the fundamental, essential political options. Without the political issue, we turned into paratroopers. I felt a paratrooper parachuted down in the Serra de Caparaó. A foreign element (...). We could not recruit anyone in that region.¹³

In October 1966, eleven guerrilleros advanced in the Caparaó region. They spent five months there, isolated, without meeting any enemy forces, hungry and depressed. The security forces mobilized 10,000 servicemen. Eventually, the guerrilleros were arrested by the military police of Minas Gerais. When several urban guerrilla movements emerged, new repressive legislation was approved and specific counterinsurgency operations using torture after capture were launched. After the urban guerrilla failure, the Maoist party organized another desperate effort to establish another rural *foco*, this time in the thinly populated Araguaia River basin with 80 militants, mostly students and young professionals. The military mobilized some 12,000 troops and in due course, the guerrilla was annihilated. Castro (2020:, p. 91) rightly remarks:

(...) despite the violence of the repression that the leftist organisations that hit leftist organizations engaged in armed struggle (...) the position of the political vanguard that they assumed, together with their detachment from the national reality, were decisive factors for the political defeat (...). [Their] revolutionary perspective removed them from the representative political democracy (...) Politically isolated, these organisations were soon limited to a desperate attempt to save their cadres from physical extermination by the far superior force of the repressive apparatus assembled to combat them. They lacked, above all, the expected support of society in general.

Che Guevara was also overseeing the preparations for several guerrilla campaigns in Peru. Two guerrilla movements received training in Cuba, the Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (MIR, headed by Luis de la Puente) and the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN, headed by Héctor Béjar).¹⁴ They had several meetings in Cuba, but ideological divergence and lack of personal trust could not unify their efforts. The Cubans convinced them of the convenience of rural guerrilla warfare.¹⁵ De la Puente (...)

was an expert on agrarian and peasant problems. He knew the situation very well and put Che Guevara on the defensive (...). He told him that the peasants were organised in unions. [That] there were thousands of peasant communities with a tradition of internal discipline and struggle. He doubted Che's 'pure *foco*'. Because De la Puente told him: 'There are concrete peasants' organisations, and when we call for an insurgency, we have to work with what the peasants have built. Moreover, the peasants will not leave their organisations because I am starting a guerrilla.'¹⁶

Apparently, Guevara and the Cuban trainers had been convincing. Anyway, the Peruvian guerrilla militants decided to follow their recommendations. For most of them, it ended in capture or death. What the insurgent new guerrilla had not perceived was the presence, prestige, and

influence of the armed forces in the Quechua communities. As explained by the former chief-of-staff of the army, then a junior coronel participating in the counterinsurgency operations, a group of officers radicalized during the campaign who after crushing the guerrilla prepared the coup of the reformist Revolutionary Government of the Armed Forces of General Velasco in 1968:

‘Béjar and De la Puente were middle-class professionals without deep knowledge of the daily life in the indigenous Highland. We military officers had to know at least something of the Andean communities because they provided by far the largest segment of the yearly conscripts. In general, they were extremely poor, Quechua-speaking, and illiterate. They learned to understand and speak Spanish. The corporals and sergeants received educational and technical training. They returned to their villages to become the young leaders or advisers of the old community leaders. And they were grateful to the army.’¹⁷

And this is the tragedy that committed guerrilleros experienced, coming in from the outside. In the sixties – in Bolivia and Peru, Brazil and Guatemala – they were foreigners operating in an unknown environment. For many urban intellectuals, the indigenous peasants were the ‘poor masses’; their conventions and customs were considered remnants of the underprivileged and uneducated. They didn’t realize that indigenous leaders were informing the local military authorities about their presence, asking what to do about them.

5. Conclusions

The death of Che Guevara and his unsuccessful guerrilla operation caused a shockwave in Cuba’s thinking about support for Latin American and Caribbean revolutions. The first immediate result was to put (some of the) *foco* training programmes on hold. Comandante Tomás (nom de guerre of Celso Morales), the military second-in-command of the Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres (EGP), the largest and most important of the four guerrilla organizations of Guatemala before the unification into the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG), remembers a long pause of months of guerrilla training in Cuba. The guerrilleros were asked to assist in Cuba’s economy; they cut sugar cane.¹⁸ Former colonel Caamaño, once a member of the presidential triumvirate of the Dominican Republic and then living as ‘comandante Ramón’ in exile in Cuba, wanted to organize a *foco* guerrilla but had a stormy discussion with Piñeiro who tried to persuade him to stay in Cuba. Fidel Castro also tried to convince him to think things over. He refused and eventually departed in February 1973, to the island where he and his guerrilleros were captured alive and murdered the day after.¹⁹

There are at least four consequences of Che Guevara’s death during a failed *foco* guerrilla. Firstly, in the late sixties to the mid-seventies, several countries in the Southern Cone (Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Uruguay) experimented with a new form of guerrilla warfare: urban insurgency. Eventually, the outcomes of this new style of rebellion were decided by the counterinsurgency operations by the armed forces, the police, the intelligence services and the paramilitary formations, all of them belonging to the military ‘national security dictatorships’ in these four countries.

The *foco* approach did not disappear completely after Guevara’s death, but his efforts to implement a continental *guerrilla madre* in the mountains of the Andean countries were never tried again. The purely military campaigns were also replaced by joint political and military leadership in what in the late seventies and early eighties was called the ‘politico-military organizations’: a unified guerrilla political structure wherein labour unions, peasant organizations and intellectuals were represented, also forming political alliances with other social forces. With the explicit support

of Cuba, national unified guerrilla organizations were built up in Colombia (1987), El Salvador (1982), Guatemala (1982) and Nicaragua (1979).

Secondly, when Cuba decided on anticolonial warfare in Africa in the mid-seventies, its leadership sent large-scale regular army deployments with modern equipment instead of irregular small guerrilla bands (Gleijeses, 2002). This time they came in well-prepared and its armed forces were accompanied by civilian missions, medical and otherwise. In Angola, they even sent Cuban anthropologists for ethnolinguistic studies (Bonacci et al., 2020). Further analysis is beyond the scope of this article.

Thirdly, in the late seventies and the early eighties, Nicaragua and El Salvador abandoned the *foco* approach completely. In Nicaragua, the only other country where a united guerrilla organization clearly triumphed in 1979, the *foco* approach had prevailed during most of the sixties and seventies. Remarkably, the Sandinista leadership articulated a bitter critique of the rural *foco*. The leaders of the dominating faction, headed by Victor Tirado, and Humberto and Daniel Ortega decided that

(...) for fifteen years the catchword of the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) had been: 'We will bury the hearth of the enemy in the mountains.' But what happened instead was that 'The enemy buried us in the mountains' (...).²⁰

They requested Humberto Ortega to write a paper on urban insurrection. Its consequence was a radical strategy change:

(...) the guerrilla forces in the mountains cleared out (...) Everyone was sent to the urban centres. We even dissolved our [rural] Northern Frente. We (...) took up command in the cities, the Urban Front. The Southern Front [headed by Humberto Ortega, DK] was organised like a regular army.²¹

Also, the Salvadoran Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional (FMLN), whose campaign ended in a stalemate followed by peace negotiations, adopted a drastically different approach. This heavily populated country without remote mountain regions or vast jungles opted at a certain moment for a kind of regular warfare confronting the Salvadoran army using battalion-size guerrilla formations attacking urban army barracks. From the very beginning of the war, the FMLN always counted on the sympathy of strong popular organizations (Kruijt, 2008, pp. 74–75).

Fourthly, the armed forces overwhelmed the guerrilla eventually. True, in some countries guerrilla movements succeeded in organizing notable popular support. Gillespie (1983) mentions that the Argentinean Montoneros mobilized more participants in meetings than the national trade unions. The Guatemalan EGP organized marches of 70,000 Maya protesters but left them without arms to defend themselves. Peruvian Shining Path counted at its peak 7,500 armed guerrilleros. In 2007, the Colombian FARC had an armed guerrilla force of 18,000 men and women. Nevertheless, in all these countries the armed forces could always deploy much larger regular forces, not seldom assisted by paramilitary formations. Colombia's *Fuerza Pública* (the armed forces and the police) recruited between 300,000 and 400,000 fighters, sometimes in an unclear alliance with 30,000 heavy-handed paramilitaries. In Guatemala, from the late seventies to the mid-nineties, the army built an enormous paramilitary force of indigenous 'civilian patrol members' (PACs) of more than one million members, while the estimated national population amounted to nine million. Of course, many patrollers participated under pressure. But it cannot be denied that participation, at least in part, was voluntary. Indigenous authorities asked the military commanders to be equipped with weapons to fight incipient criminal gangs and the existing guerrilla.²² Also in the early nineties, the Peruvian armed forces provided arms to an independent social movement of

around 400,000 voluntary indigenous ‘self-defence patrols’ (*ronderos* in Spanish) who routed the guerrilla columns of Shining Path (Fumerton, 2018; Escalante, 2021).

After so many years, wise old Fidel Castro (2009) had the last word about guerrilla warfare, explicitly criticising the most important Colombian guerrilla movement, the FARC on account of its conception of long term guerrilla warfare while building up a guerrilla army of 30,000 fighters as ‘not correct and not financeable in irregular warfare’. In 1994, at the summit of Non-Aligned Countries in Cartagena, while addressing the FARC and the ELN, the last two fighting Colombian guerrilla movements in South America, he was even more decided:

(...) the time of armed [guerrilla] warfare has come to an end; there is no more space or time for it (...).²³

Notes

1. I thank Kees Koonings (Utrecht University and University of Amsterdam) and Jan Lust (Universidad Ricardo Palma, Lima) and the two peer reviewers for their suggestions and comments on a previous version of this article.
2. As well as to his former guerrilla compañeros. On 8 January 1999, during a nocturnal conversation with the first Cuban delegation sent to Colombia at the request of Colombian President Pastrana and the FARC leader Marulanda, ‘(...) he reflected on the hypothesis of a military triumph: How to consolidate power? And he asked: ‘Is there nationwide support? Is there a strong political movement behind the military operations? Is there a successful alliance with other political parties and movements? Is there an ongoing dialogue with entrepreneurial sectors and the military?’ And he answered his questions: ‘If you don’t have broad popular support, a political alliance with other national progressive sectors, and a certain international support, it will be very difficult to form a sustainable government that can maintain power’ (author’s interview with José Antonio López Rodríguez, Cuba’s liaison officers with the FARC for years and a delegation member, 18 October 2011 and 1 December 2012; in Kruijt, 2017, pp. 187–188). López was a mission member who was so kind to give access to his still unpublished memoirs.
3. Kruijt (2017:, p. 84 ff.), based on interviews with members of Cuba’s intelligence officers.
4. Manuel Piñeiro in an interview with Luis Suárez Salazar (1999, p. 29).
5. Manuel Piñeiro in an interview with Luis Suárez Salazar (1999, p. 26).
6. Manuel Piñeiro in an interview with Luis Suárez Salazar (1999, p. 27).
7. Related by Gott (2004:, pp. 2019–225) and Risquet (2010:, pp. 333–334, 335–336).
8. Manuel Piñeiro in an interview with Luis Suárez Salazar (1999, p. 35).
9. Víctor Dreke interviewed by Brock (2019:, pp. 277–278).
10. Convinced by Fidel Castro. The text of this letter is published in the prologue by Aleida Guevara March (1999:, pp. 15–18).
11. Manuel Piñeiro in an interview with Luis Suárez Salazar (1999, p. 32).
12. Doubt about the pre-revolutionary consciousness of urban and metropolitan slum dwellers was already formulated in the pioneer study of Perlman (1976). In the late eighties and early nineties, Menjívar Larín, former rector of the Universidad de El Salvador started (urban) poverty studies in Central America. The results were similar: survival strategies and dependence on local politicians. I assisted in some of the country studies (Menjívar et al., 1997).
13. Avelino Capitani quoted in Rollemberg (2001).
14. Lust (2013, p. 137, 277) wrote the definitive study about the Peruvian guerrilla in the sixties.
15. Interview with Ulises Estrada (21 and 28 October 2011; in Suárez Salazar & Kruijt, 2015). Estrada was in charge of the training programme in Cuba.
16. MIR combatant Ricardo César Napurí Schapiro, quoted in Lust (2013, p. 246).
17. Author’s interview with general Ramón Miranda (Lima, 17 December 2009). General Miranda was minister of education (1975–1976) and retired in 1982 as chief of staff of the army.
18. Author’s interview with Celso Humberto Morales (Guatemala City, 20 April 2005; in Kruijt, 2008).

19. Author's interview with Osvaldo Cárdenas, at that time Piñero's deputy section chief for the Caribbean (Havana, 12 January 2012; in Suárez Salazar & Kruijt, 2015).
20. Author's interview with comandante Victor Tirado (Managua, 3 March 2006; in Kruijt, 2008, p. 70).
21. Author's interview with general Joaquin Cuadra Lacayo (Managua, 10 May 2016; in Kruijt, 2008, p. 71). Cuadra had headed the urban guerrilla in Managua. He and Humberto Ortega were the only two generals of the Sandinista Popular Army during the 1980s.
22. Author's interview with former Guatemalan minister of defence and co-signer of the peace agreements in December 1996, General Julio Balconi (15 April 2010).
23. Fidel Castro quoted in Celis (2019; p. 128).

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