

Review

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Harry Villegas (Pombo), *Pombo: A Man of Che's Guerrilla: With Che Guevara in Bolivia, 1966-68* (London: Pathfinder Press, 1997), pp. 365, £39.00, £14.45 pb.

There are two quite different books between the covers of *Pombo: a man of Che's Guerrilla*. The first is an honest and undemonstrative account of Che's Bolivian campaign by his closest and most loyal colleague, for whom Che's death was a real and personal tragedy. It embraces a diary written in Bolivia up to May 1967 and later lectures based on a reconstruction from notes and memory. The second book is contained in the introduction, footnotes and the chronology that frame Pombo's account. It belongs to the realm of fantasy and selective concealment,

claiming for Che's Bolivian campaign an impact and an influence it simply did not have. Mary Alice Waters' foreword links it to the 'massive revolutionary upsurges in the Southern Cone years later', though later struggles in Argentina (1969 and 1971) and Chile (1970–3) owed nothing to Guevara's political method. The chronology employs the same sleight of hand, placing unrelated events side by side and implying a relationship between them.

It is right in these times to celebrate the commitment and courage that have made Guevara an icon for the rebellious youth of the nineties. But this is no reason to conceal the truth of the Bolivian campaign, as the book's editors have done. Pombo's accounts leave little doubt that Bolivia was an ill-conceived and badly organised military adventure. The guerrillas knew little of the terrain – an infertile and remote region chosen because of its proximity to Argentina rather than its strategic significance for the Bolivian struggle. In his *Bolivian Diary*, Che noted the absence of contact with the miners (the photographs of the miners in this volume are at best disingenuous) despite their history of revolutionary struggle. The local peasantry, too, were hostile and suspicious; the guerrillas were frequently misled or betrayed by fearful local guides.

Given these unpromising conditions, this volume provokes but does not answer the question – why Bolivia? Che's vision was as grand as his preparation was inadequate. He had just escaped the disastrous experience of the Congo, whose details are given in John Lee Anderson's recent exhaustive biography (*Che: a Revolutionary Life*). It is perplexing that Che should embark immediately on an equally ill-considered project. The guerrilla warfare strategy, of course, saw the revolutionaries themselves rather than the working class as the subject of revolution; Che's 1967 Message to the Tricontinental (reproduced here) spoke of the 'invincibility of the guerrillas'. The struggle is won or lost, in such a view, by the military skill and bravery of the fighters rather than the level of consciousness and organisation of the masses. The failures of this policy of 'substitution' (of the guerrillas for the revolutionary class) were littered across Latin America by 1967. Yet Che still spoke of a 'continental revolution' built upon the same perspective.

Bolivia was the graveyard for such misguided notions. Fidel Castro clearly no longer shared Guevara's notion of international revolution, and by 1967 was seeking rapprochement with Latin America's Communist Parties. The decision to build a *foco* in Bolivia was due, in part at least, to the refusal of any other Latin American Communist Parties to countenance guerrilla war on its terrain. Only the opportunism of one Communist leader gave Che access to Bolivia – and he proved unable to deliver on his promises. In Venezuela Douglas Bravo was complaining that by 1967 Castro had effectively withdrawn support from the Guevarist currents. While he mourned Che's death in Havana, Castro was developing new relationships with Torrijos in Panama and Velasco in Peru.

*A Man of Che's Guerrilla* is part of a major publishing campaign surrounding the 30th anniversary of Che's death; for the Cuban government the rediscovery of Che's message of sacrifice is part of an effort to persuade the Cuban population to accept scarcity and internal inequality. What Harry Villegas' book confirms is that Che Guevara is an inspiring symbol of revolution, but that Bolivia has only negative lessons to offer on how that transformation can be achieved.