The publication of these memoirs by one of Ernesto “Che” Guevara’s key men in Argentina and Bolivia is a major political and literary achievement. Politically, not because it shows the superiority of Che’s rural armed foco strategy and his peasant way to socialism over Marx’s strategy of building a revolutionary working-class political party, but because it provides a truthful account of Che’s guerrillas exploits, and in that sense it is the best homage that could have been paid to his memory. Artistically, because Bustos’ unique experiences are rendered in a lively and captivating style, which makes the reading of these at times brutal and traumatizing reminiscences an enjoyable experience.

Ciro Bustos was born in Mendoza, Argentina, in 1932. A painter by profession, he studied at the School of Fine Arts of the National University of Cuyo, Mendoza. Attracted by the Cuban Revolution, in 1961 he travelled to Havana, where he met Che, who included him in the group he chose to carry out his revolutionary project in Argentina – part of Che’s wider “continental plan” to set up a guerrilla base in Northern Argentina and Southern Bolivia and Peru. As such, along with Jorge Masetti, Bustos was a member of the founding nucleus of the People’s Guerrilla Army (Ejército Guerrillero del Pueblo, EGP), which operated in the Argentine province of Salta in 1963-4. After the failure of that attempt, Che reconvened Bustos for his guerrilla project in the Ñanacahuazú region of Bolivia. After
the defeat of this new project, Bustos was sentenced in Camiri to 30 years in prison. Released in 1970 by the government of General Juan José Torres in Bolivia, he lived under Allende’s Popular Unity government in Chile and moved to Argentina shortly before Pinochet’s coup in 1973, only in order to be forced to leave his country shortly before Videla’s coup in 1976. He now lives in Malmö, Sweden, where he wrote his memoirs, originally published in Spanish as El Che quiere verte in 2011.

We will skip over Bustos’ formative years in Argentina and begin with the account of his experiences in Cuba. He tells, for instance, that already in the second half of the year 1961 (“la segunda mitad del año 61”, the English version reads: “the mid-sixties”) “Political control had degenerated into Stalinist sectarianism, spreading through Cuban society” (38). He also recalls an Argentine professional couple, doctors sent by the Argentine Communist Party, who invited him over to dinner. The wife, seeing him excited about the revolution, told him: “Your disillusionment will be very painful, I’m afraid. Communists are coming out of the woodworks like mice, taking over everything, to get at the cheese” (43).

Those early symptoms of Stalinization led to an early crisis when Jorge Ricardo Masetti, the journalist who had risked his life to report on the Sierra Maestra guerrillas during the revolution, and who had been trusted with the creation of Cuba’s news agency, Prensa Latina, was ousted from that institution in April 1961, prompting Gabriel García Márquez’s resignation. The blow at Masetti – whose name would be erased from the history of Prensa Latina in a time-honoured Stalinist fashion (455-6) – was a blow at Che, who gradually changed his attitude towards the Cuban Trotskyists from denouncing them as agents of American imperialism to rescuing from jail those whom he could still help (by 1965 the Cuban Trotskyists were officially banned, see Gary Tennant’s outstanding dissertation, available online: Dissident Cuban Communism: The Case of Trotskyism, 1932-1965).

Che made perfectly clear to his recruits that commitment to his project was “more a commitment to death than to life” (50), telling them: “‘Remember, as from now, you are dead men. From now on, you’re living on borrowed time’” (76). This Guevarist conception of revolutionary politics as a suicidal enterprise stemmed from Che’s conception of armed propaganda as the demiurge of subjective conditions, but his urgency to set up guerrilla groups in Latin America must also be seen as a series of increasingly desperate attempts to rescue the Cuban revolution from the deadly embrace of Stalinism.

Che formally appointed Masetti, now persona non grata for the Stalinists, as his second in command or comandante segundo, at the head of a group of half a dozen people, recruited mostly from the periphery of the Argentine Communist Party, in charge of setting up a rural guerrilla base in the Orán region of the Argentine province of Salta.
Bustos’ memoirs recount in detail the “army of five madmen’s” tortured odyssey from Cuba through Prague, Algiers (an attempt by Masetti and Che to break free from their dependence on the Stalinist apparatus) and Bolivia to Argentina, from November 1962 to June 1963. Bustos was put in charge of the group’s communications with Cuba, and he vividly remembers this reference to the Cuban revolution in one of the messages: “In one that I helped decipher — the phrase is engraved on my memory — Che says: ’Nuestra atalaya se hunde lenta pero inexorablemente’ (Our vantage point is slowly but inexorably sinking), and he added that by now we should be in our zone of operation in northern Argentina” (99).

Masetti’s guerrilla army was swiftly and overwhelmingly defeated, more by its geographical isolation and lack of a social base than by actual combats, of which Bustos recalls only one incident. But still, twelve people died and thirteen guerrillas were taken prisoner and put on trial, Bustos himself only barely escaping because he had been put in charge of establishing the urban support network, of which the mainstay was the group that edited the journal *Pasado y Presente* in the city of Córdoba. It was in Córdoba that he learned that the border police had raided the guerrilla camp in Salta — through the local newspaper (172). Bustos vindicates his former *comandante*’s revolutionary record and rejects the accusation that Masetti executed two of his own men due to their Jewish extraction, adding that “half the EGP national leadership was Jewish” (155). He also sets the historical record straight against “the efforts of the Cubans in the Americas department to Peronize our experience [...] We worked exclusively with young people disenchanted with the Communist Party and groups that had split off from the party. Che gave express orders that no Peronists were to be accepted” (461), because, he said: “It’s too risky, they are too infiltrated” (289).

After the disastrous Salta experience, the EGP began to have doubts about Che’s foquist strategy, and Bustos together with José María “Pancho” Aricó travelled to Cuba in May-July 1964 to explain them to Che himself, but Aricó was overwhelmed by Che’s presence and kept silent. The EGP urban structure in Argentina was still largely intact, and at the beginning of 1965 their leadership held a plenary session in Montevideo, Uruguay, where it was decided to suspend guerrilla activities in Argentina “until such time as conditions were ripe for us to move into a more populated area with access to, and the participation of, an organized workers’ movement” (206). But this resolution couldn’t be transmitted to Che, because in that same year he fired his parting salvo against the Stalinists at his famous last speech in Algiers on 24 February and then disappeared from sight, prompting all sorts of rumours until, in October 1965, Fidel Castro announced his departure from Cuba and his resignation from all his army ranks as well as his government posts.
In May 1966 Bustos was summoned back to Havana and later travelled through China. Then, in January 1967 he was met by Tamara Bunke, the young woman who would die later that year with Guevara in Bolivia, with the message “Che Wants to See You.” He flew to La Paz, Bolivia, where he met Régis Debray, the vain and superficial “theoretician” of focism, and Tamara herself. Together they reached Che’s guerrilla camp at Ñancahuazú in March 1967, where Che entrusted him with the mission of activating the EGP network. “Strategic objective: Seizing power in Argentina,” Che told him (276). His plans were to enter Argentina with two columns of about one hundred men, “Argentines, in the space of no more than two years” (277). Despite the mandate he had received from the EGP not to insist on a guerrilla foco, Bustos decided to go on with Che’s plans, faced with the fait accompli of his presence at the head of a guerrilla force, but events immediately went out of control.

The desertion of three unreliable recruits prompted their discovery by the army, the abandonment of the base camp and an early military confrontation on 23 March 1967, in which the army fell into an ambush, suffering several dead and injured as well as a major, a captain and many soldiers taken prisoner. Despite this early triumph, the prospects of Che’s Bolivian guerrilla were grim: contact with the outside world was lost, supplies were low, the number of sick people (due among other things to malnutrition) was mounting, and there were no realistic prospects of recruitment among the local population. Indeed, the chosen location was most unsuitable for creating a peasant base: “Bolivia was the only country in South America where (in 1952) a nationalist revolution had introduced agrarian reform, giving land rights back to its peasant farmers, descendants of the ancient Inca empire. The miserable inhabitants of the area where the guerrillas were fighting actually owned their shacks and strips of land — with more bugs than fruit on it, but nonetheless theirs. At the slightest sign of outside interference or latent threat to their possessions, they would inform the army” (284).

It was decided that Bustos, Debray and a freelance photographer who somehow managed to reach the guerrillas, George Andrew Roth, should try to escape the army’s dragnet, taking advantage of Roth’s bona fide status as a journalist, with a safe-conduct from the top military brass. They were quickly arrested on 20 April 1967 and subjected to intensive interrogation, though not tortured.

Bustos’ instructions were to keep the guerrilla’s network in Argentina (then under the military dictatorship of Juan Carlos Onganía) secret at all costs. As regards the Ñancahuazú guerrillas, Che instructed him to avoid revealing the presence of Cubans. As for Che’s own presence, it was to be revealed only if it became clear that the army already knew it, and then given as much publicity as possible to try to break the guerrillas’ isolation. According
to Bustos: “it did not matter what Debray or I said, nor when we said it: they already knew [...] they had already established the presence of Che under the alias of Ramón, a group of Cubans under his command, some Peruvians and, naturally, Bolivians” (343-4). In these conditions, Bustos drew sketches of the guerrillas which later led to the accusation that it was him who had betrayed Che, although according to one of the CIA agents, who spoke about it years later, Debray “sang like a canary” (xiv).

Bustos believes that Fidel Castro and the Cuban leadership abandoned Che and his guerrillas to their fate: “Cuban Intelligence had recalled their man Renán Montero (aka Moleón in Bolivia or Iván when the EGP were training in Havana) from his post in La Paz in March, immediately after the first combat. He was not replaced” (357). The same happened to him, and to his wife and two daughters, during his trial and subsequent imprisonment: they received no help whatsoever, while the Cuban state showered attentions on Debray, who did not really need them (his mother was a Gaullist member of parliament for Paris and he enjoyed the personal protection of General Charles de Gaulle).

During Bustos and Debray’s trial at Camiri, Che was murdered on 9 October 1967, and they were subsequently condemned to a thirty-year sentence, but released in December 1970 by the left-wing military regime of General Juan José Torres, subsequently killed in Argentina by the military dictatorship in 1976. During their time in prison Che’s diary was delivered to the Cuban government (which immediately published it) by Antonio Arguedas, minister of the interior in President Barrientos’ government, an ex-Communist and self-confessed CIA agent during the previous six years. “Arguedas lived in Cuba for a time (like Ramón Mercader, Trotsky’s killer), was showered with honours, received the honorary title of ‘compañero’, attended the 26th of July ceremonies in the Plaza de la Revolución in the government box, and returned to Bolivia two coups d’état later” (400).

The English translation is not a full rendering of the beautiful Spanish original but a slightly shortened version. On the other hand, the chapter headings have been improved and provided with a chronology. For reasons of space we cannot provide examples of Bustos’ prose, we will close this review with an anecdote from his time at Camiri prison: “Only once was a book confiscated: A Plan for Escape by Bioy Casares, which had nothing to do with prisoners escaping” (384).

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