ForeWord Reviews

ESSAYS

Che on My Mind
Margaret Randall
Duke University Press
978-0-8223-5592-2

These personal essays on and acute observations of Che Guevara's legacy achieve insight into his enduring appeal to young revolutionaries.

Forty-six years after he was killed in an ill-conceived guerrilla movement in Bolivia, Ernesto "Che" Guevara remains the very essence of the romantic revolutionary. His beret-topped image stares out from political posters, book covers, T-shirts, and at least one egregiously ironic Smirnoff vodka ad (he was anti-capitalism and didn't drink). The author, a poet and social activist, undertakes to explain why Guevara has such enduring appeal—and why he still merits it.

Trained as a physician in his native Argentina, Guevara met Fidel Castro in Mexico in 1956 after Castro had been exiled from Cuba for rebelling against its American-backed dictator, Fulgencio Batista. Guevara fought alongside Castro until he came to power in 1959. Thereafter, he held a series of high-level government jobs, including minister of industries and president of the national bank. But he grew increasingly restless in these largely administrative roles and turned his attention to aiding liberation movements elsewhere, notably the Congo and Bolivia. Although still on good terms with Castro, he severed his formal ties with the new government in 1965, renouncing both his Cuban citizenship and membership in the country's Communist party.

Randall, who moved to Cuba in 1969 and lived there for eleven years, never met Guevara but came to know him through his writings and her friendship with his children, his younger sister, Celia, his first wife, Hilda Gadea, and Alberto Granado, the man who accompanied Guevara on his 1952 motorcycle trip through Latin America (chronicled in the 2004 movie *The Motorcycle Diaries*).

"I am moved more by [Guevara's] consistency and great generosity of spirit than by his sometimes questionable political strategy or tactics," Randall writes. Victory in Cuba, she says, did not diminish Guevara's sensitivity for the downtrodden everywhere. Nor did it cause him to abandon his almost monastic lifestyle, even as other in Castro's forces reveled in the material spoils of war. Still, Randall acknowledges Guevara's flaws: "his quick temper, his

impetuousness, and a tendency to place too much trust in the presumption of morality he hoped to find in others." His greatest legacy, she concludes, was "his unerring capacity to unify words and action, to be who he said he was."

In discussing Guevara's character, Randall also makes some acute observations about the successes and failures of the Cuban revolution, the place of violence in achieving social change, and the poisonous effects of nationalism. So should Guevara's early death be counted a waste? Not in Randall's book. "You can't kill transcendence," she declares.

Edward Morris