



Guerrillero Heroico: a Brief History

By Trisha Ziff

The portrait of Ernesto 'Che' Guevara' by Alberto 'Korda' Díaz (1928–2001) was taken on 5 March 1960. The day before a French freighter, Le Coubre, had exploded in Havana harbour, killing eighty-one Cubans; it was carrying over seventy tonnes of Belgium ammunition destined for the revolution. Outraged, and convinced that this was the work of the CIA, President Fidel Castro called for a mass funeral at Havana's Colón cemetery where, facing a sea of thousands of people, he gave his oration from a platform that included visiting French intellectuals Simone de Beauvoir and Jean Paul Sartre.

Among the crowds was Korda, Fidel's personal photographer. Before the revolution he had been a fashion photographer, so it was no accident that with his history and his eye for beauty he saw in this moment the enigmatic gaze that captured Che's charisma. Interviewed many times about the photograph, Korda described Che at that moment as *encabronado y dolente* (angry and sad). He snapped two frames with his Leica camera before Guevara disappeared from view.

Korda had been on assignment for the Cuban daily newspaper *Revolución*, although the image was not included in the following day's report. Noting the image on his contact sheet, Korda made a small print for himself, a cropped portrait, and

pinned it casually on his studio wall, where it remained for years. Many visitors passed through his studio and saw the print, but it is not known how many copies Korda made or gave away to either international visitors or friends – prints that could possibly have contributed to its early dissemination.

1961 – Image First Published in Cuba

Revolución first published the portrait a year later, when it was used to promote a conference during which the Minister of Industry, Dr Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara, was to be the main speaker. Scheduled for 16 April 1961 at noon, the conference was disrupted when 1,300 CIA-supported counter-revolutionaries stormed the beaches of Cuba in what would be a failed invasion, which became known as the Bay of Pigs. Che immediately left with others to defend his country. On 28 April a second, similar advertisement reusing the image appeared in the paper, announcing the rescheduling of the conference for 30 April 1961. It seems very likely that in the context of both these publications, Che would have seen the photograph that would later contribute to his iconic status.

1967 – Image Published in Italy

The phrase ‘Copyright Libreria de Feltrinelli’ was to become a source of contention for Alberto Korda. Gian-Giacomo Feltrinelli, a wealthy Italian intellectual and publisher as well as an admirer of the Cuban Revolution, had himself resigned from the communist party when pressured not to publish Pasternak’s Doctor Zhivago (having personally smuggled the work out of Russia in 1957). As his publishing house grew, Feltrinelli gained a cutting-edge reputation for publishing important works by prestigious contemporary authors and radical thinkers. In 1964, Feltrinelli visited Cuba with a journalist colleague, Valerio Riva. They had hoped to publish a

book by Castro on the revolution, but this project never came to fruition. Feltrinelli returned a second time to Cuba from Bolivia in 1967. He had travelled to Bogota to intercede in the release of French intellectual Regis Debray, who had been with Che Guevara before his arrest by the Bolivian military. Feltrinelli, understanding the gravity of the situation and the high level of CIA activity, might well have come to the conclusion that Che Guevara's days were numbered.

While in Cuba Feltrinelli visited Korda's studio and was given two gift prints of the cropped image by the photographer. Perhaps motivated by the desire to bring attention to the danger that Che was in, he published and disseminated thousands of copies of the poster free on his return to Italy.

Feltrinelli's son Carlo recalls that the image was published before Che's death with the idea of 'protecting' Che through international awareness of his vulnerability and not – as until recently historians of the image believed – that it was produced in response to the news of Che's murder. In the lower left corner of the poster there is an inscription that reads 'Copyright © Libreria Feltrinelli 1967' with no reference to the photographer, a practice that would have been commonplace at that time.

Soon after, Feltrinelli published Regis Debray's *Revolution in the Revolution* (1967) while Debray was still held in a Bolivian jail, and the following year (1968) he published Che's *Bolivian Diaries*, having obtained the worldwide copyright for the book. The Korda Che image appeared on the book cover and on posters promoting the book, and it was shown at that year's Frankfurt Bookfair in the month that Che was murdered. It is unclear exactly how Feltrinelli got access to the diaries, although it is known that Antonio Arguedas, a Bolivian general (who later became a

supporter of the Cuban revolution), had also guarded the severed hands of Che and his death mask; he was responsible for the book being smuggled to Cuba.

The following year, 1968, was an extraordinary year for the Feltrinelli publishing house, with major works appearing in print such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, by Gabriel García Márquez; Louis Althusser's *Leggere il capitale*; Herbert Marcuse's *Critic of the Repressive Society* and R.D. Laing's *Politics of Experience*. Feltrinelli the publishers had become a bastion of radical thought and of the new avant-garde writers of the late sixties. Feltrinelli died soon after in 1972 under somewhat extreme circumstances. Various theories surrounded his death, including suicide and that he was the victim of a fascist assassination. However, it appears that he accidentally blew himself up while engaged in planting a bomb outside Milan.

The importance of the image of Guerrillero Heroico continued to gain momentum as an icon, simultaneously symbolizing political struggles of the left to a world of designer radical chic removed as an icon from the man Ernesto Guevara to a new meaning devoid of its original context, disregarding the specificity its own history and emerging with its own contemporary resonance.

From gable ends in Belfast to Soweto, Korda was often proud that his photograph was reproduced. By the nineties, however, his own awareness of the nature of his image had changed, and he began to make references in interviews to the fact that he had not been paid by the publishing house of Feltrinelli, who, he argued, had become wealthy as a result of sales of the original poster. Gian-Giacomo's son Carlo wrote in his biography of his father that Feltrinelli printed 'thousands' of copies of what he refers to as the 'Che in

the sky with jacket' poster and had them hung in his numerous bookstores throughout Italy for no other reason than to respect the memory of the revolutionary. Korda, on the other hand, believed that the posters were sold, and often reflected in interviews that if he had requested a percentage on the sales from the poster he would have become a millionaire.

In a personal letter, confirmed in an interview in Milan in May 2005, Carlo Feltrinelli told historian David Kunzle that the poster was made 'with no lucrative intention'. Feltrinelli's political integrity is beyond dispute. In the Italian edition of Che's Bolivian Diaries, which bears the Korda photograph, it states: 'The proceeds of this publication will be donated entirely to the revolutionary movements of Latin America'. He certainly did not need to sell posters, but other political groups might well have sold them to raise their own funds, and Korda was responding to information on sales of his posters without perhaps knowing the circumstance in which these sales occurred. Today, those close to Korda still blame Feltrinelli, and not only complain that Korda's name was missing from the poster, but also that the author of the photograph never even got a sample poster – any more than he got from the Cuban government a sample of the Cuban banknote with the Korda-derived image on it. There was never any communication from Feltrinelli in the years up to his death in 1972, or from his publishing house since then.

Article in Paris Match, July 1967

Until the recent discovery of the article about Che Guevara in the July 1967 issue of Paris Match, it was assumed that Guerrillero Heroico was not reproduced in Europe until the time of Che's death in Milan. However, this issue of Paris Match was published earlier, just a few weeks before the revolutionary was captured and put to death. The issue featured a major article, 'Les Guérilleros' by journalist Jean

Lartéguy, author of the novel *Mercenaires*, who the magazine described as 'recently back from guerilla-controlled areas in South America'. Lartéguy wrote: 'At a time when Cuban revolutionaries want to create Vietnams all over the world, the Americans run the risk of finding their own Algeria in Latin America.' Lartéguy then asked: 'Where is Che Guevara?' The article reproduced Korda's photograph with the following caption: 'The official photograph of Che Guevara; on his beret the star, the symbol of Commandante. A high position in the Cuban army; only Fidel Castro held a position of more importance.' It is not known who provided the magazine with the photograph, and it is also not credited to Feltrinelli. With its large circulation beyond France and its influence in Europe at that time as an important news journal, this issue of *Paris Match* was clearly responsible for the image being seen and disseminated for the first time not only in France, but also to a wide European audience.

Guerrillero Heroico in Cuba

The very first time Cubans became familiar with the photograph, despite its earlier reproduction in *Revolución*, was on hearing the news of Che's murder, when it was enlarged and draped on a banner down the five-storey building of the Ministry of the Interior in the Plaza de la Revolución in Havana, as a backdrop to Fidel's speech of 18 October 1967 acknowledging the death of Che. Since then the building has seen many versions of the Korda Che. Today, a permanent steel outline derived from the photograph adorns the building.

16 October 1967 – the First Poster to be Printed in Cuba

Fréméz (José Gómez Fresquet), renowned Cuban poster maker and graphic artist, recalled how on hearing the news of Guevara's death he worked all night producing the poster to be used at the rally honouring Che, held in Plaza de la Revolución on 18 October. Korda had given Fréméz a copy of the portrait as a basis for the poster. Using the printing press of the Consejo Nacional de Cultura, Fréméz recalls that he could barely believe the news, and attributed the 'faint dots of the screen appearing and reappearing' as symbolic. There was no time to use more than one colour for the poster and only red paper was available. This was the first spontaneous and privately produced image using the Korda Che to be produced in Cuba.

First Officially Commissioned Poster, Cuba, October 1967

The first official poster to be commissioned by the Cuban state to commemorate the death of Che was produced by Niko (Antonio Pérez González), a graduate of the University of Havana. Niko studied at ICAIC in 1968 and designed posters for Cuban and international film, as well as political posters for revolutionary campaigns of the 1960s and '70s. This was one of his first and most influential works.

1968 – 'I wanted the image to breed like rabbits,' Jim Fitzpatrick

Irish artist Jim Fitzpatrick states that he too produced a graphic piece based on the Korda image before Che was murdered. At the time he had no idea who had taken the photograph. Fitzpatrick would print about a hundred copies of his posters at a time to fulfill the demand of political groups asking for the image from within Ireland, Spain, France and Holland. His own fascination with Guevara stemmed both from his respect for the rebel, who reminded him of the protagonists of the 1916 uprising in Ireland, and from having once met Che when he had visited County Claire while

travelling in Ireland from Cuba en route to the Soviet Union. Guevara, like many Argentineans, claimed Irish heritage: his grandmother Ana Isabel Lynch's family had come originally from County Galway during the Irish Famine to settle in Argentina. Not forgetting their Irish heritage, Che's family had always referred to themselves as the Guevara Lynchs.

Fitzpatrick remembers that he received a copy of the photograph in 1967 from a Dutch anarchist group who produced the magazine Provo; they in turn claimed it came into their possession via Jean Paul Sartre. The Provos originated in the Second Situationist International in 1961; they were the inspiration of Roel Van Duyn, a window cleaner and performance artist. Fitzpatrick remains adamant that his source material was not Feltrinelli and that his own poster was the first to be produced in Europe before Che's death, before the Feltrinelli poster.

This could be the case; we know for sure Sartre was present at the funeral at Colón Cemetery and that he travelled into the Cuban interior during his visit to Santiago de Cuba with Simone de Beauvoir, Castro and Korda all in the same car. It is possible that Korda gave a copy of the portrait to Sartre. However, Korda's daughter Diana Diaz does not recall her father mentioning this and neither does his colleague José Figueroa, who printed most of the images for Korda. Figueroa says the trip with Sartre was very hurried and most probably Korda did not have the time to present him with the photograph, although Korda had given Sartre a print of his portrait.

Fitzpatrick produced a variety of posters in 1967–8 using the Korda Che; the best known was printed on silver foil and was exhibited in an exhibition in London called 'Viva Che' at the Arts Laboratory in the spring of 1968. It was curated by Peter

Mayer, originally for the Lisson Gallery, and illustrates how fast the image moved from the language of protest into the fine art gallery. Included in the show were other Che works by Fitzpatrick, as well as a large oil painting, now lost.

1986 – Figueroa Prints Image Full Frame

It was not until 1986 that José Figueroa, an established Cuban photographer and close friend and printer for Korda, produced the first full-frame print from the negative. Korda continued to print both versions until his death in 2001.

2000 – the First Law Suit

Smirnoff Vodka used the Korda Che image in an advertising campaign in 2000 for the London Underground. Korda sued Smirnoff for copyright abuse and won an out-of-court settlement of \$50,000. Commenting on the suit in the Christian Science Monitor on 5 March 2004, Korda said: 'As a supporter of the ideals for which Che Guevara died, I am not averse to its reproduction by those who wish to propagate his memory and the cause of social justice throughout the world, but I am categorically against the exploitation of Che's image for the promotion of products such as alcohol, or for any purpose that denigrates the reputation of Che.'

Che's First Appearance in the United States

It was not until 1968 that the image first appeared in painted form by Paul Davis for the cover and a poster advertising the Evergreen Review in February 1968. Formatted to fit New York subway billboards, the poster was systematically defaced, and a bomb was tossed into the Evergreen Review offices.

The Image in Today's World

Guerrillero Heroico is considered to be the most reproduced image in the history of photography. Whether this claim can be substantiated or not, Korda's Che is nonetheless a unique image. It has come to symbolize anti-establishment radical thought and action, sustaining its currency from events such as the Prague Spring to the present conflicts in the Middle East and radical guerilla movements in Latin America, reverberating from the Cold War to our post-colonial reality. It is an image that has inspired contemporary art as well as commerce; it has been mimicked by superstars and comics, and its multiple renditions and silhouette are immediately recognizable even in the simplest of forms. Few images can claim such iconic flexibility: from the moment it was taken to its current global dissemination, a complex mesh of conflicting narratives has surrounded the image, from the bizarre to international lawsuits. Rashamonesque in its multiple guises, Guerrillero Heroico has remained fluid and buoyant, yet its meaning is clear even to those who know little about the man portrayed.