CHE'S GAZA

The Day a Revolution That Sought to Embrace the World Caught on the Grains of Sand

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June 18, 1959. Some four hundred and fifty kilometres from Cairo, along that narrow strip pressed against the southeastern coast of the Mediterranean, an unusual visitor appeared before them. A man in military uniform, his beret tilted, his gaze fathomlessly deep, Ernesto *"Che"* Guevara had landed in Gaza.

That morning, Gaza was still carrying the ashes of 1948 on its back. One hundred and twenty thousand Palestinian refugees were piled into camps of canvas and timber, waiting. People for whom even surviving had become a form of resistance.

When Che walked into those camps, what lay before him was heavier than any poverty he had encountered in Latin America during his years of medical training. This was the first official foreign mission of the Cuban Revolution. Fidel Castro had dispatched Guevara on a diplomatic tour spanning fourteen countries; the aim was to consolidate the new Cuba's position within the Third World.

Palestinian researcher Salman Abu Sitta described the visit in striking terms: *"Che Guevara's 1959 visit to Gaza marked the historic moment that signalled the beginning of the internationalisation of the Palestinian cause"*.

A Doctor's Road: From Rosario to the Sierra Maestra

Ernesto Guevara de la Serna was born on May 14, 1928, in the Argentine city of Rosario. He was the child of a middle-class family. Throughout his childhood he wrestled with bouts of asthma, yet that fragility never managed to compete with his will.

As he studied medicine at the University of Buenos Aires, a restlessness within him grew. In 1951 and 1952 he travelled the length and breadth of Latin America on a motorcycle. He walked through leprosy hospitals in Peru, bore witness to the conditions under which workers laboured in Bolivian tin mines, and spent nights in the poor neighbourhoods of Chile.

That journey, the great voyage of discovery that would later be immortalised as The Motorcycle Diaries, taught him one thing: the poverty that stretched across the continent had no individual remedy. Disease was a symptom; the true malady was the imperial order itself.

He received his medical diploma in 1953. But on that day he walked out of the institution not so much a physician as a revolutionary.

The Lesson of Guatemala and the Meeting in Mexico

1954 was the turning point of his life. He was in Guatemala at the time, where President Jacobo Árbenz's land reform law was transferring estates from landowners to peasants. A CIA-coordinated coup toppled Árbenz. Che witnessed that coup from the inside.

He fled to Mexico. And there, in 1955, he met Cuban revolutionaries living in exile. He and Fidel Castro spent a single night in argument. By the time dawn broke, Che had made a decision from which there was no return: he was now part of the Cuban Revolution.

"At my first meeting with Fidel, we spent the night debating. By the time morning came, I was already the group's doctor. Its doctor, but in truth its fighter", Ernesto Che Guevara

Sierra Maestra: The Revolution Learned in the Forest

In November 1956, a small group of eighty-two men sailed from the Mexican coast toward Cuba aboard a wooden yacht called the Granma. When they came ashore, Batista's forces were already waiting; the greater part of the group was either killed or captured within the first months.

The survivors withdrew into the Sierra Maestra mountains. There, Che was both physician and commander. The foco theory he developed during this period, the idea that the spark ignited in rural areas by small revolutionary nuclei would set broader masses into motion, became his most original intellectual contribution.

In January 1959, Havana fell. Batista fled. The Cuban Revolution was engraved into the memory of Latin America.

Nasser's Invitation: From Cairo to Gaza

Fewer than six months had passed since the Revolution had proclaimed its triumph when Fidel Castro gave Guevara a new assignment. At the invitation of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, the first stop was Cairo.

Nasser was the standard-bearer of Pan-Arabism; he had nationalised the Suez Canal and defied the West. Egypt at the time bore the name of the United Arab Republic, encompassing Syria and Yemen as well. The ideological distance between the two leaders was real, Nasser was not a Marxist but a nationalist; a significant portion of Egypt's communists were in prison. Yet they shared common ground: a stance against imperialism.

And Nasser made Guevara an offer: he should go to Gaza and see for himself.

