

## Che's Afterlife, The Legacy of an Image: Tracing the Myth of a Martyr

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### ABSTRACT

Book Review of Michael Casey, *Che's Afterlife: The Legacy of an Image* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009)

### INTRODUCTION

*Che's Afterlife: The Legacy of an Image* is a book written by Australian author Michael Casey, published in April 2009. It spans 400 pages of Latin American history revolving around the famed Korda photo of Ernesto "Che" Guevara. The thesis of this text is that, while Che Guevara's image has relatively maintained its ideological magnetism, it has been used too broadly to be the symbol of any clear ideology. In Casey's view, Che is now the "quintessential postmodern icon [of] anything to anyone and everything to everyone." To support his thesis, the author examines the history of the photo around the world and explores the mechanisms of mainstream art. Michael Casey is an author and researcher of economics, digital technology, and geopolitics. He was a Wall Street Journal columnist and has covered events in South-East Asia, Europe, and Latin America.

### DISCUSSION

*Che's Afterlife* takes a novelist approach through the history of the image of Che Guevara frequently used by politicians, protestors and businesses. Taken by Cuban photographer Alberto "Korda" Gutierrez, it features a 31-year-old Che at the state funeral for victims of the La Coubre explosion. The book examines the influence of the Korda photo through time and different locations. Casey begins his journey when he spots a bumper sticker of the Korda Che beside an image of Rambo in Thailand. Despite their guerilla-like resemblance, the author was intrigued by why these "political opposites" were shown together. The book then embarks on Che Guevara's journey from medical student to world-renowned revolutionary. All the while, Casey critiques Che's performance as a comandante, minister and martyr. One of the book's striking features is its objective analysis of the history of five different countries. Casey makes comparisons between how Guevara impacted the socio-political frameworks of Argentina, Bolivia, Cuba, Venezuela, and the

United States. Casey presents Argentina as Che's birthplace, while Bolivia was fundamental in his death. He explains how Cuba set the stage for the rise of Che's legend and how Venezuela's Hugo Chavez was central in its revival. Lastly, Casey covers how America affected Che's fate, and how Che influenced the American culture. From a historiographical perspective, these chapters are impressive due to their structure and the author's comparisons between each country.

The first noticeable feature of the Korda Che is its dissemination. Expectedly, Latin American revolutionaries continue to use the image as their "banner." However, the symbol has been donned by unlikely movements as well. It was a part of Iran's Islamic revolution to the extent that decades later, Guevara's children were invited as honorary guests to speak at Tehran University. The image has made Che a hero of the Intifada for Palestinians. Che's legacy is present in Nepal, where the Workers and Peasants Party advertises the Korda photo on billboards. These instances are intriguing because they show that Che's appeal is not limited to leftist movements. The Korda Che is not merely an anti-American symbol either; South-Sudanese Christian separatists, backed by the United States, embraced Che Guevara as an image of their struggle against the Al-Bashir regime. The author explains that the modern perception of Che is not a communist one, but rather, it is one of commitment to a creed. Casey describes Guevara as "a man, a teacher, [who] lays down a code of personal conduct from which to build a just society, a utopia, and then proceeds to live and die according to it."

Casey then argues that the popularization of the Korda Che was not a natural phenomenon, but rather a calculated political move. The book provides a background of the events preceding the capture of the photo by Alberto Korda. Casey posits that the photographer was just as essential in the making of the Guerrillero Heroico as Guevara himself. Before the revolution,

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Korda was a leading fashion photographer. Despite his extravagant lifestyle, Korda still managed to integrate into the revolution's mood, becoming Fidel Castro's "favorite photographer." Korda's photo remained hidden for many years. The photo was released as Che left Cuba indefinitely. He had become critical of the Russians for not supporting third world liberation, while Castro recognized that the regime's survival depended on Soviet support. This disagreement led to Che's mysterious exit from political life in Cuba. Two years after Che vanished, the Korda image was released into public consciousness in Cuba. Fidel Castro exploited the image as a propaganda tool in 1967, six months before Che's death. Casey describes this action as "one of the Cuban revolution's greatest marketing accomplishments," comparing the Korda Che with the Nike Swoosh. Che's eventual death in Bolivia further complemented the photo's popularity.

In the final chapters, Casey searches for the definitive meaning of Guevara's brand. At times teasing the irony of Che's success in market capitalism, Casey lists a myriad of consumer products sporting the Korda image, showing how Che has been transformed into a globally marketable product. His old home in Argentina has since become a Che Guevara museum. Ultimately, Casey suggests that adopting Che is "a very personal act". It is the spirituality of Che's visage that creates its appeal. The physical features of the revolutionary illustrate a sense of immortality. The author states that this sense of immortality is a source of hope for people, which encourages them to "defeat death." The connection that the book establishes between all of the uses of Che's brand is that it is a symbol of resistance against an imagined threat.

Che's *Afterlife* reads like a novel, making complex characters and events understandable. Casey does this through the use of many subjective and objective sources including published memoirs and interviews, describing historic figures holistically. The author refers to many scholarly articles and books by both historians and those involved in the Cuban revolution. He uses political sociologist, Eric Selbin's *Zapata's White Horse* and Che's *Beret* to reference Che's legacy. The author also conducted several interviews with Che-admirers, expatriates, and commoners. Most notably, his interview with Felix Rodríguez, the CIA agent who witnessed Guevara's death, is intriguing because it is arguably the closest source of Che's final moments. Most of the scholarly publications are easily accessible. Many citations come from Latin American sources dating as far back as the 1960s, such as Che Guevara's *The African Dream: The Diaries of the Revolutionary War in the Congo*. The author also had access to hidden archives from Sara Vega, a researcher at the Cuban Film Institute (ICAIC). Despite referencing sources whose involvement in the Cuban revolution could produce biased information, there is a balance in sources from partisans on either side of the conflict. Therefore, the sources offer diverse perspectives. By using historical facts as well, Casey leaves the morals of politics and ideology up to the reader. The author could have further solidified his credibility by depending even more on academic publications for his work. While the use of documentaries, interviews, and memoirs provides a creative angle, it can diminish the credibility of the book as a historiographical work.

On minor occasions, the author overlooks certain details. In the leadup to the author's description of the Korda Che, one senses the idea that Guevara was not well-known in the Western world. In reality, Che was consistently present in Western media and student circles. Historians like Van Gosse have argued that the Cuban revolution was a source of inspiration for some American New Leftists as Che was leading the assault on Santa Clara. Che Guevara was also the main topic during his visit to New York in 1964. Malcolm X is believed to have also praised Che in a positive light. Similarly, Guevara conducted many interviews in Europe as Cuba's Minister of Industry, before the photo's release. Either through hate or adoration, the American public was aware of his presence.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, Che's *Afterlife* uncovered facts while tending to both admirers and opposers of the notorious revolutionary. The overarching theme of this narrative proved that the ideological image of Guevara has been preserved, but its popularization led to its adoption by broad groups meaning that Che's legacy no longer belongs to just communism or the Cuban revolution. Casey has contributed many theoretical methodologies to prove his thesis. Despite some unnoticed details, he provides fair arguments and historical analysis. His theoretical approaches focus on causation, tracing the roots of the Korda photo's popularity to historical events, the use of artistic techniques and Guevara's legacy. The book was released at a lively time; Fidel Castro had recently stepped down from Cuba's presidency in favor of his brother. This was reciprocated by the change in the American presidency, increasing the prospect of diplomacy. Over four decades of sanctions had affected Cuba, prompting Raul Castro to embark on socio-economic reforms and so the European Union lifted sanctions on Cuba. By 2009, Obama eased travel and remittance restrictions, an important step in normalizing relations. As Casey's first work, the book was well-received. Critics like Deborah Adams have praised the book as admirable and well-written. Kirkus Reviews states that while Casey focuses on his perception of the Korda photo, he gets lost in trivial Latin American politics at times. The review describes Che's *Afterlife* as a "meandering but heady exploration of a focal point of politics and popular culture." This book is most useful for the younger generation, who are exposed to Che's image yet are unaware of his story. Through its diverse references, Che's *Afterlife* signifies that history is not as clear as "good and evil," Che Guevara is revered as much as he is hated. The young generation will have to rely on the works of authors such as Michael Casey to find the truth and make their own judgements.

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