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From The Times October 28, 2008

This is no time for heroes with bad causes

We must resist being seduced by the revolutionary glamour of Che Guevara, Bobby Sands and Ulrika Meinhof

David Aaronovitch

At the end of part one of Stephen Soderbergh's immense movie biography, Che, the audience at its London opening yesterday applauded, and some whooped.

I don't think Soderbergh, the occasionally demanding auteur, was the whoopee, but rather the long-dead revolutionary himself. For Soderbergh's Che Guevara is heroic, determined, paternalistic, idealistic, humorous, outspoken - a father-doctor-lover-warrior combination to excite all but the feeblest pulse. If he has a problem it is his obstinacy in smoking cigars despite being an asthmatic. True, in the movie he executes a couple of criminal wretches when he is in the Cuban forests, but it is wartime and their crime was rape, and in movies rape can only be punishable by death. It was interesting that while the audience laughed at the condemned rapist wanting more rum, they went very quiet when the unreconstructed Che used the word maricón (faggot) as a term of abuse. Death yes, homophobia no.

Che, however, used to execute non-rapists too. In January 1957, up in the hills, for example, he shot Eutimio Guerra in the head with a .32-calibre pistol for being suspected of passing on information, and a campesino by the name of Aristidio, for cowardice. This was confided in his diaries. One not unsympathetic biographer remarked that Che liked to see whether condemned men met their deaths with courage, or like a

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maricón.

Once the revolution in Cuba was won - 50 years ago in January - Che took command of the military court convened at La Cabaña fortress in Havana, and processed the death sentences of dozens - possibly hundreds - of prisoners after the most cursory of trials. A left-wing Basque priest officiated for the condemned. "I pleaded many times with Che on behalf of prisoners," he said later. "I remember especially the case of Ariel Lima, a young boy. Che did not budge."

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These semi-judicial murders were only one part of Che's implacability. At the time of the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, Che was prepared to countenance a first nuclear strike by Soviet missiles against the United States. One can imagine that it was with some relief that Fidel Castro saw him depart for Bolivia and oblivion.

The point is that being heroic is not, in itself, a cause for celebration. It can be quite the opposite. This was suggested to

me again by a review of the new film Hunger, which opens this week. Hunger deals with the republican hunger strikes in the Maze prison in Northern Ireland in 1981, in which ten IRA and INLA prisoners fasted to death. The reviewer writing in The Guardian was Ronan Bennett, a former republican prisoner, now a much esteemed novelist and playwright.

The film's main character is the IRA man and Sinn Fein MP, Bobby Sands, and the film-makers have captured "Sands' unsentimental idealism, resilience and determination", "allowing him to emerge undiminished in body or spirit", in the "simple recognition of his full, complex humanity".

But what would any of this avail us if Sands's cause was a bad one? Heroism is not confined to the virtuous - ask former members of the Waffen SS. Here Bennett lauds the moviemen for permitting "what is implicit in each scene to emerge unforced and unstressed...[and throwing] us as viewers in at the deep end, trusting that what we see will eventually make us understand", but admits somewhat contradictorily that "the emphasis is on the State as the perpetrator of violence and on republicans as the victims, something the 100,000 people who lined Sands's funeral route would have had no trouble in recognising".

Sands died on May 5, 1981. The second hunger striker, IRA man Francis Hughes, died exactly a week later. I am sure he would also have possessed a complex humanity. Hughes's problem - unexplored by Hunger or Bennett - was his habit of depriving other people of theirs. To

David Aaronovitch

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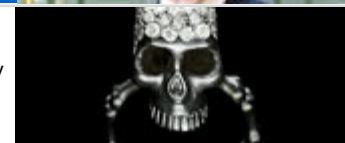
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take one example, on February 8, 1978, William Gordon, part-time soldier and school welfare officer, was, as on every weekday morning, driving his son and daughter to their primary school. Presumably this pattern was known to the IRA team led by Hughes, which planted a bomb under Gordon's car. The seven-year-old boy was blown clear, but badly injured. His father was killed instantly, his ten-year-old sister decapitated.

This one example will do. Between 1969 and 1999 thousands of British citizens were killed, the large majority by republicans. And this is Bennett's political judgment on the importance of Sands (and, presumably, Hughes) that he "probably did more to turn the tide of the republican struggle than any other individual. His death garnered worldwide attention and sympathy, and it marked the beginning of the long run of electoral successes that eventually propelled Sinn Fein into government".

In other words the IRA changed strategies, winning its goals through an increasing use of political rather than violent means. So, in a way, it was all - though horrible - worth it. A new book, Gunsmoke and Mirrors: How the IRA Dressed up Defeat as Victory, by the Observer journalist Henry McDonald, explicitly challenges this self-exculpatory mythology.

Sands's death came 12 years into the Troubles and 13 years before the first ceasefire. His funeral orations and those for his fellow hunger strikers helped to recruit a new generation of benighted bombers and shooters. What eventually forced the change of strategy on the IRA was not the success of the ballot box, but the defeat of the Armalite. McDonald argues that the key year was not 1981, but rather 1987 when one unit of the IRA was rubbed out by the SAS in Loughgall, and when an IRA bomb on Remembrance Sunday in Enniskillen caused international outrage. It was in this year, points out McDonald, that Gerry Adams made approaches to Charlie Haughey, the Irish Prime Minister, about charting a new course.

In the end Adams and Martin McGuinness - brave though they have been - achieved for themselves no more and no less than a peaceful civil rights movement would have achieved ten years earlier and with 3,000 fewer deaths. It is this that republicans cannot bring themselves to admit, and that the mythologists want to obscure.

Also showing this week at the London Film Festival is a new German film about those other armed rebels, the Baader Meinhof gang. I think Ulrika Meinhof probably possessed qualities of idealism, resilience and determination. Just like Sands, just like Che. It should remind us that, with nothing certain and a world recession on the way, this is a bad time to be lauding bad heroes.



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The Che people talk about was a legend and it was with no sorrow that Castor saw him leave for South America - he was a poor administrator once in power (it is a rare revolutionary that is). It is Che the symbol that people revere not the violent intolerant revolutionary.

John, Knutsford, UK

"Che's life is an inspiration for every human being who loves freedom. We will always honor his memory."

--- Nelson Mandela

"Che is not only an intellectual, he was the most complete human being of our time - our era's most perfect man."

--- Jean Paul Sartre

John, Chicago,

Congratulations. Very timely.

Andras, Budapest, Hungary

I bet no-one who has ever had a poster of Che on their wall as a student or worn a Che T-Shirt would have if they'd known of half the things he'd done.

Even NOW, though, I bet some won't stop admiring him. They'll just ignore the evidence of his crimes.

Roger B, Norwich,

How about a bit of balance on both sides. Che was neither an angel or downright evil. Leftists may be blinded regarding Che's dark side but those on the centre and right are often blinded to the state of pre-1959 Cuba under U.S control/influence. Revolution was inevitable.

Shan, London,

There is a big difference between the cowards these days who attack innocent civilians, and the past radicals who targetted the rich and politically powerful. They were taking the fight to those who were the source of the problem. These days we have so-called radicals who badger the ordinary punter.

Frank Macdonald, London, UK

Tricky.

If an audience is predisposed to moral relativism, then the glamour will help remind them that there, but for the grace of god, go we.

If an audience is predisposed to moral absolutism, then the glamour will simply seduce (or enrage) them.

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Ian Kemmish, Biggleswade, UK

Here in Colombia, people are still dying on a daily basis thanks to the efforts of Che's heroic disciples. A revolting individual indeed...but not in the sense that he imagined.

James, monteria, Colombia

Aaronovitch demonstrates the evil of the IRA in killing innocent civilians i.e. the attack on the UDR man. He then, not disapprovingly, mentions the 'rubbing out' of an IRA unit by the SAS in 1987. He fails to mention the murder of an innocent bystander by the SAS in that attack. Double standards?

Rojo, Dublin,

On Sunday Sinn Fein/IRA will protest against troops home from Afghanistan parading in Belfast. In any other UK city there would be national uproar. Would Al Qaeda be allowed a protest at the same time as a parade on the site of 7/7 London bombs? The sectarian hate shines through their spin.

Keith, Belfast, UK

The unforgettable legacy of Billy Sands lies not in the misty eyed romanticism of this film but in the blatant anti-British sectarianism of Sinn Fein. Not content with opposing homecoming parades, they wish to ban the Police from wearing poppies over Remembrance, an event they killed 11 at in 1987.

Gerald Manly, Londonderry, Northern Ireland, UK

I don't get it, how many of us are actually getting excited about dead revolutionaries? It's a film.

James, Cambridge, UK

'Che' Aaronovitch in 2003 on British extra-judicial executions: "it was pretty much inevitable that some security force personnel would be tempted to use loyalist terror groups as a shadowy proxy... yet we are contemplating imprisoning the policemen who were trying – albeit illegally – to stop the terror?"

Danny Morrison, Belfast, Ireland

Viva Che Ernesto Guevara, he was an inspirational leader. He fought against the imperialists, colonialists and the greedy capitalists, if most had listened to Che we would not have a global economy meltdown. Viva Che.

Gabriel, Dublin, Ireland

A hero is someone who eschews violence and embraces peace. It's true that

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govts will kill, arrest, and beat peaceful rebels- but they always lose any moral ground they may have had- and in the end will lose. Is Gandhi the only hero in recent political history? There must be others...

eric, paris,

Interestingly a Che Guevarra monument was unveiled in Vienna by leading members of the socialist party this month. A war criminal is a war criminal one would think. Being blind on the left eye doesn't really help.

Thomas, Vienna,

And this is also why History is so important. It ought to be taught at schools correctly -- not politically correctly. Only then will our youth (who too often think movies are truth) will be able to make measured judgements. Otherwise our future will be one led by the Che's and Mao's of the world.

Sharon, Houston, US

And what are the oppressed and dispossessed to do? I bet the people of Zimbabwe would applaud the arrival of a Che Guevara or a Bobby Sands.

Kuma, Chengdu, China

And this is not something we only see in retrospect. The USSR understood very well that many in the West were susceptible to the hero-worshipping of murderers and terrorists - that's why they supplied them with aid and money. Given the nature of our society, it was a rational policy to do so.

jon livesey, Sunnyvale, CA/USA

Those who laud Che Guevara really should read his diaries, or go to Cuba, and not just look at his picture. He was a homicidal psychopath who helped set up one of the most brutal regimes in latin America and drove 100,000s to flee their country.

Pauline Renton, Camberley, UK

Tell this to the scores of Labour MPs who laud Fidel Castro and Che Guevara as "heroes of the Left" in various Early Day Motions.

Kay Tie, London, UK

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