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Guevara re-emerges to lead a cultural revolution

By Karen Thomas, USA TODAY

Welcome to the new Che revolution.



Not just for T-shirts anymore: A monument to Che Guevara in Havana.

AP photo

Che Guevara has been dead since 1967. But in film, books and fashion, fascination with the communist revolutionary is at an all-time high.

"It's what's hot right now," says Rafael Jimenez, founder of Republica Trading Co. "Before, you read the revolutionary books, and if you were lucky enough to live in New York City near the smoke shops, you owned a Che T-shirt. Now, for the first time, Che is multimedia."

Argentine-born rebel Ernesto "Che" Guevara was Fidel Castro's right-hand man during Cuba's 1959 revolution. He was executed in Bolivia at age 39. A handsome, middle-class med student, "Che had movie-star quality and rock-star good looks," says John Trigiani, aka Johnny Havana, owner of theCHEstore.com.

The past six months have seen a bumper crop of Che-inspired books (*Loving Che: A Novel*, *The Che Handbook*, *A Girl Like Che Guevara*). Now come the movies. Steven Soderbergh directs Benicio Del Toro in a 2005 film exploring the guerrilla leader's life. *The Motorcycle Diaries*, based on Guevara's journals, was a hit at Sundance in January and reaches theaters in October.

But fashion is where the Che influence, once limited to Army

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surplus T-shirts, is exploding. Republica has a \$98 cashmere sweater featuring Che's image in Bloomingdale's this fall. Che kiddie wear from Appaman is in demand at boutiques nationwide, with parents keen on street-smart onesies. Che is popping up on T-shirts worn by Lindsay Lohan in *Confessions of a Teenage Drama Queen*, by Elizabeth Hurley as she shopped in London and by Homer Simpson in a *New Yorker* cartoon.

Driving the trend:

- Photographer Alberto Korda, who snapped the 1960 picture of Guevara that became an icon of left-wing revolutionaries, died in May 2001. His famous shot is now a licensed image.

- Renewed concern about sweatshop labor, "especially among liberal-minded college students," has more folks interested in Guevara's story, trend watcher Irma Zandl says. "Another driving force is the anti-globalism network."

- Music icons such as Missy Elliott and Jay-Z first appeared in 2001 wearing Che clothing and gave it a new street presence.

"They made it their own thing and started an underground movement," says Trigiani, whose 5-year-old theCHEstore.com has quadrupled its Che T-shirt designs in the past year.

- The United States is at war, rekindling interest in some of history's prominent wartime figures. "He's part of our history: positive for some, negative for others," Jimenez says.

Despite the renewed wide-ranging affection for Che, "it's clear that many who use his image have very little clue about who he was," says Gareth Jenkins, co-author of *The Che Handbook*.

But can political naiveté stall the Che movement? Doubtful. "It's like Che is SpongeBob or something," Trigiani says. "I haven't seen a Che bobblehead yet, but I see it coming."

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