Title:
How Copper started the legend of Che Guevara

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Summary:
Copper production in Chuquicamata began in 1915, just as German scientific successes in the quest for artificial nitrates had resulted in the collapse of the world market for Chile’s traditional export: saltpetre (potassium nitrate). Since then copper acquired a pre-eminent position in Chile’s economy, and thousands of indigenous workers deserted the floundering haciendas to find work in copper mines like Chuquicamata, El Salvador and El Teniente, all American-owned until the Chilean copper nationalization program of the late-1960s.

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Article Body:
Locals around the Chuquicamata continue to claim that the Ernesto Guevara who visited the area in 1952 was nothing more than a brawling drunk, with a penchant for one-night stands. If Che had caught the boat to Easter Island, as one story goes, “there would have been no Cuban Revolution.” That may well be an exaggeration; but a good case can be made for the proposition that the huge open-pit copper mine of Chuquicamata, or Chuqui as it is commonly known in Chile, remained firmly etched in the psyche of the Argentinean revolutionary right until his death.

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Initially, it was the plight of those mine workers which shocked Che as he headed north from the historic city of Valparaiso, after abandoning plans to reach Easter Island. But as Che and his companion, Alberto Granado, entered the Chuquicamata mining complex, the full story of Chile’s copper, and the world demand for that copper, began to unfold. Chuquicamata also emerged as a classic

example of the relationship between supposedly modern mining techniques and crucial role of exceptionally cheap labor on the commercialization of copper.

It was at Chuquicamata that Che learnt, from a mine foreman, the value of copper in the post-war industrialization of North America and Europe. In Valparaiso, a barroom conversation with an American prospector had left Che wondering why ordinary Chileans were obsessed with their copper deposits. “There is an unimaginable amount of gold and silver riches lying hidden in the Andes Mountains,” the prospector repeated to anybody who cared to listen. But, as a Chuquicamata foreman explained to his visitors, “there is one and only one truth about mining, any mining, and the gringos will tell you that: focus on keeping the production cost as low as possible, let the rest of the world worry about demand and supply cycles.”

The picturization of life around the Chuquicamata in The Motorcycle Diaries left Robert Redford and his guests deeply moved at the 2004 Sundance Film Festival. But Che apparently took away more than the images of extreme poverty from Chuquicamata. In later years, he was able to see how the United Fruit Company used clout and politics to make windfall profits, year after year, from its Chiquita bananas in Guatemala. During an essentially failed trip to Africa, to advance the Laurent Kabila-led insurgency, he saw how foreign companies were scrambling for the vast mineral potential of the Congo, and destroying the social fabric of the region in the process. Finally, a few weeks prior to his death in 1967, Che studied the tin mining sector of the Bolivian economy and noted, once again, that mine owners and traders had continued to make profits, regardless of boom and bust cycles in the industrialized economies.

Though he never returned to Chuquicamata, Che kept abreast of the story of Chile’s copper. And perhaps the story of Chile’s copper continued shaping the Che legend. Since copper constituted a significant portion of Chilean exports, American mining interests exercised a domineering influence in the Chilean economy. At the same time, disease and hunger continued to cast dark shadows over the shanty towns around Chile’s copper mine, whatever the level of international copper prices. Citing copper, Che regularly warned Latin American governments, at every available opportunity, that foreign domination would only compound the problem of impoverishment.

But who was listening? “This continent is full of Chuquicamatas,” said a senior Chilean mining official at a seminar in Havana as the socialist government of Salvador Allende proceeded to nationalize Chile’s copper mines and introduce worker emancipation legislation in 1971. “The mining laws need to be revamped urgently. But who has the will, and the muscle?”

President Allende, an ardent admirer of Che, came to power as a result of the

1970 elections. Three years later he was overthrown in a military coup; while the nationalization of the copper mines was not reversed, trade unionists in Chile’s copper belt had to wait for another 30 years to legitimize the demands of those indigenous workers Che encountered along the road from Valparaiso to the Peruvian border.