Narrative
Che Guevara and Injustice

☐ I can use the story of Che Guevara to assess his Marxist ideas and his brand of revolutionary justice for Cuba.

☐ I can identify the benefits of justice in civil society and its complicated applications.

Essential Vocabulary

- **justice**: Upholding of what is fair and right. Respecting the rights and dignity of all.
- **injustice**: To harm others by applying unequal rules and damaging another’s inalienable rights and dignity.
- **communism**: A political theory derived from Karl Marx, advocating class war and leading to a society where all property is publicly owned, and each person works and is paid according to their abilities and needs.
- **capitalism**: An economic and political system in which a country’s trade and industry are controlled by private owners for profit.
- **ardor**: Enthusiasm, or passion.

Narrative

Ernesto “Che” Guevara (1928 – 1967) was an Argentine former medical student and often unemployed wanderer who traveled around Latin America as a young man. He witnessed dismal poverty and great inequality of wealth in repressive regimes and blamed the troubles in part on American imperialism. His quest for perfect *justice* led him to embrace ideas that created an unjust regime.

Guevara believed he found the solutions to these social ills in the writings of Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin, and became a committed *communist*. Karl Marx, a nineteenth-century German economist, saw history as the continuing struggle of class warfare in which oppressors exploited the lower classes. According to Marx, the working class would one day rise to overthrow the oppressive *capitalists*. They would usher in a
classless society in which everyone worked and the community would meet everyone’s needs—
communism. Therefore, communists such as Guevara believed that capitalism, private prop-
erty, and the profit motive were evil. They saw the United States as the best example of capital-
ism run amok—cruelly creating great disparities of wealth as the few acquired great wealth on the
backs of the beleaguered many. He also had great admiration for Soviet leader, Joseph Stalin.

In 1955, Guevara was living in Mexico City, where he joined Cuban revolutionaries Fidel and Raul
Castro in plotting to overthrow the corrupt and repressive dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista in
Cuba. Ironically, Guevara sought to implement his Marxist vision for a just society, but helped
impose a regime on the Cuban people characterized by great injustice and which was much
more oppressive than the Bautista government and characterized by great injustice.

In May 1957, Guevara was traveling through the mountains of the Sierra Maestra of Cuba for six months with Fidel Castro and a handful of
Communist rebels. They tried to turn the poverty of the peasants into discontent and revo-
lution against the regime of President Batista. When the people showed little revolutionary
ardor, Guevara and Castro turned to violence. The rebels received a cache of weapons, and
Guevara gleefully wielded a machine gun. He was delighted by the “marvelous spectacle” of
the instruments of death and knew he had “entered a new stage” in his life as “a full-time
combatant.”

Over the next few years, Guevara and a few dozen Marxist revolutionaries launched attacks
on army barracks to disrupt the Batista government and seize more weapons for the revolu-
tion. In several raids, they killed dozens of people and routinely executed prisoners without
trials. He even personally ordered the summary execution of several rebels in his own band
whom he deemed as insufficiently loyal. In addition, he killed several peasants accused of
supporting the government.

Later explaining his principles of terror and guerilla warfare as he sought to follow the
teachings of Marx and Lenin, Guevara wrote,

“We must come to the inevitable conclusion that the guerrilla fighter is a social re-
former, that he takes up arms responding to the angry protest of the people against
their oppressors, and that he fights in order to change the social system that keeps all
his unarmed brothers in ignominy and misery.”

Guevara (left) and Fidel Castro (right), photographed by Alberto Korda in 1961. Photo
from Museo Che Guevara, Havana Cuba.
Guevara and Castro believed that their acts of violence were justified because they were carried out for the good of the revolution.

Guevara and Castro discovered that there was no strong revolutionary fervor among Cuba’s peasantry or among the urban workers. Far from being opposed to capitalism, these people aspired to earn the advantages of free enterprise themselves. They saw private property as the solution to their problems, not the evil backbone of a corrupt system. Ignoring the fact that most Cubans were opposed to a Communist revolution, Guevara and Castro believed that they must serve as leaders of a revolutionary vanguard of intellectuals who liberated a people who had not yet developed a “class consciousness.” They would impose the Marxist revolution on the people from above.

On January 1, 1959, Batista fled to the Dominican Republic while the rebels marched on the outskirts of the capital of Havana. There were those who rejoiced at the end of the corrupt Batista dictatorship. Unfortunately, the incoming regime did not usher in a new age of equality as promised, but rather remarkable injustice that belied its seemingly noble aims. Guevara immediately started signing death warrants for a dozen policemen of the regime because “they had committed crimes against the people.” A few days later, Castro and Guevara rode triumphantly in a tank and seized power in Cuba. Their communist regime would be more repressive and destructive than society under Batista’s government.

The communist government quickly imposed its form of revolutionary justice that destroyed the rule of law. Guevara presided over “show trials” that mocked real justice and executed at least 550 members of the old regime. The Communists lined up many “enemies” and machine-gunned them to death. They also held a public spectacle in the sports stadium in which many high-ranking officials were summarily found guilty and executed before cheering crowds. Untold hundreds of “war criminals” associated with the Batista government were killed across Cuba over the next few months. “Counter-revolution” was declared a crime punishable by death and “enemies of the state,” very broadly defined, were hunted down.

In the coming year, Guevara and Castro established a communist state that destroyed individual liberties, and economic and political justice. Guevara headed an agency for agrarian reform, which would confiscate all sugar plantations and cattle ranches for the “nation” and result in the wholesale government violation of property rights. The government also seized all rental properties and banned ownership of more than one house. Though Guevara had little economic or business knowledge, Castro appointed him to head an industrial agency and the national bank. However, they focused on nationalizing U.S. oil installations (and canceling $50 million of debt owed to those oil companies), American sugar properties, all banks, industrial and transport businesses, and 166 other American companies. All unions, which had been active under the Bautista government, were outlawed except the government-sponsored Communist one.

From his position in the Castro government, Guevara helped enforce Communist control over Cuban civil society and destroy freedom of thought. The government shut down all newspapers as it cracked down on freedom of the press and imposed absolute control over the media. The government also took over universities, and he informed students and pro-
fessors at the universities in Santiago that the government would impose a Marxist curriculum and determine the career choices of students for the good of society. He also created a Marxist political indoctrination program for the army which would now be a “people’s army” to defend itself against all “counter-revolution.” He contributed to the systematic destruction of any civic association that could promote a healthy civil society. The communist regime persecuted the Catholic Church, nationalizing Catholic schools, banning Catholic publications, and deporting hundreds of priests. Instead of the promised justice and liberation promised by the Marxist regime, individuals were deprived of their rights and coerced into accepting the views of the government.

Whereas Fidel Castro was content to be the dictator of the Cuban Communist government, Guevara devoted his life to spreading Marxist revolutions throughout Latin America. He praised Marxist revolutions in Africa and Asia and dreamed of encouraging more wars like the Vietnam War. In 1967, he was assassinated by the U.S. Special Forces-trained Bolivian Army while supporting the revolutionary movement in that country.

Guevara was filled with great passion against injustice in Cuba and Latin America. The violent means he chose to launch the revolution and the oppressive regime he helped to install was marked by great injustice. For decades, Cubans endured a despotic government, an unhealthy civil society, and economic squalor as they lacked natural rights and the most basic liberties.

**Analysis Questions**

1. Why did Che Guevara turn to Marxist ideology? What solutions did it seem to offer for the inequality and repression he found traveling around Latin America?

2. What were some examples of the brutal violence carried out immediately by the Communist revolutionaries against the Batista regime? Cite specific evidence for your answer.

3. How did Guevara justify the rebels’ violence against the Batista government? How did he justify their violence against the peasants he meant to help? How did Guevara justify his violence against members of his own revolutionary group?

4. What was Guevara’s dream for Latin America, Asia, and Africa? Based upon the experience of the victorious Communist revolutions that were imposed from above, do you think that spreading the revolution elsewhere would have promoted justice throughout the world?