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If you experience a jolt of recognition every time you see a t-shirt emblazoned with the bearded face and black beret, you're not alone.

Forty-five years after the death of Ernesto “Che” Guevara — the Argentine doctor who led the 1959 Cuban Revolution alongside Fidel Castro — his portrait is the most reproduced image in the history of photography. The photo, entitled *Guerrillero Heroico*, or “heroic guerrilla,” was captured by Cuban photographer Alberto Korda at a funeral in 1960. It was first published following Guevara’s execution in 1967 and exploded as a symbol of revolution.

Today, the image has largely been torn out of its historical, social and political context. It is seen as a symbol of rebellion against mainstream society, but the original connotations of communism and violent revolution are forgotten. It has also lost its physical context: the image is actually a cropped version of the full. The original frame shows Guevara flanked on one side by the profile of another man and on the other by the branches of a tree.

Some say the original did not have the same revolutionary spirit today’s famous crop is known for.

“When you put it in the bigger context of the whole of the image, in some ways it loses some of its power,” photography curator and documentary filmmaker Trisha Ziff said. Ziff curated a 2006 exhibit of Guevara photos at London’s Victoria and Albert Museum entitled “Che Guevara: Revolutionary and Icon” and directed the 2008 documentary *Chevolution*, about the iconography of the famous photo.

The image’s appeal, Ziff says, boils down to little more than Guevara’s attractiveness and Korda’s flair for style.

Ziff called the photo “very stylized,” and she said that’s unsurprising. “Korda was a fashion photographer; he worked for Vogue, [and] he applied to his work very stylistic values in terms of ... his notion of beauty, his notion of seduction. And of course, Che was gorgeous. It helps. So I think you have this image ... of a very handsome man, and ... you really don’t know what you’re looking at, so it’s filled with mystery.”

This sense of mystery applies to not only the photo, but also the person Che Guevara was. While he is still extremely famous in Cuba and throughout Latin America, where children are taught to see him as a hero from a very young age, much of the rest of the world appears to see him only as an icon.

“Images become removed from their initial contexts and they kind of fly on their own, and that’s what happened to the Che image,” Ziff said.

In 1998, a Taco Bell ad featured the signature chihuahua sporting the Guevara beret. Several months later, the Church of England faced widespread criticism for its advertisement bearing the face of Jesus Christ in the style of the Che Guevara photograph. The ad was geared toward attracting churchgoers to Easter mass. Just over a year ago, the Mercedes-Benz corporation apologized publicly for depicting Guevara wearing the company's logo on his beret.

“If you've reached a point where Taco Bell can turn you into a caricature and use you in a massive ad campaign, that's probably not a good sign,” Eric Selbin, a professor of political science and university scholar at Southwestern University, said. “The commodification of Che is surreal.”

Selbin, an expert on global revolutions, emphasized the impact Guevara has had on social movements since the 1960s. In 1968, the year after Guevara's assassination, his image was spotted in the West Bank and Gaza. It cropped up again in Tehran in 1979 and, more recently, has made appearances in the 2011 Arab Spring.

“He shows up almost anywhere there's a struggle,” Selbin said. “In places like Tahrir Square, and in Tunisia, and in Bahrain and Yemen, in all those places at various points, either as posters or t-shirts, or stenciled on walls, there were figures of Che Guevara.”

For these frustrated people, Guevara represents the power to influence history, an ideal that fuels their revolutionary efforts. “Instead of ... this sense of people as passive

consumers of their own lives, what Che Guevara represented...was the idea that you could be an agent of history,” Selbin said.

As the image explodes around the world, one thing keeps it grounded: the people who claim legal ownership. While Korda did not originally pursue copyright of the image — he intended it to be available for public use — he later claimed intellectual property rights when he felt the image was being misused. In 2000, Korda sued the advertising agency Lowe Lintas for using his photo of Guevara on an advertisement for Smirnoff vodka.

“Che Guevara was a teetotaler. He didn’t drink,” said Korda’s lawyer, Razi Mireskandari. “And his estate in Cuba was particularly upset, as I understand it, that his image was being used to promote alcoholic drinks.”

Korda’s settlement with the agency was the first time his copyright was formally recognized, according to Rob Miller, director of the Cuba Solidarity Campaign, a London-based organization that aided Korda in pressing charges against the advertising agency.

“It still remains incredibly difficult for the family to police the use of the photo around the world,” Miller said.

The case revealed the challenge Korda — and, after his death, his estate — would face if he decided to control the use of the image more stringently. Since use of the photo is so widespread, it would be impossible to track every individual case.

Korda, however, is not the only one looking to protect Guevara image from misuse. The Guevara family wants to preserve the revolutionary sentiment of the photo and guard it against commercial exploitation. They insist they aren't looking for commercial value themselves. "We're not after money ... we just don't want him misused," Aleida Guevara March, Che's daughter, told *The New York Times* in 2007.

The family took a stand against a fashion designer who created a bikini patterned with the iconic photo, modeled by Gisele Bündchen at a Brazilian fashion show in 2002.

"His face appeared repeatedly; there was no message at all," Marc Lacey, who has reported on Guevara for *The New York Times*, said. "He had become just sort of a pattern, a design — and on high fashion: extremely expensive bikinis ... So all of that together, they thought just went too far."

While extraordinarily popular as a figure of revolution — and as a commercial item — Guevara's record as a historical figure is far from spotless.

A doctor from Argentina, Guevara as a young man embarked on a motorcycle journey up the coast of Latin America; the poverty he saw inspired him to work as an advocate of the

poor — a story documented in his memoir, *The Motorcycle Diaries*, and popularized in a 2004 film of the same name. In 1959, he was introduced to Fidel Castro in Mexico City and joined him in the movement against Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista. Together, Castro and Guevara traveled to Cuba to lead the revolution.

Guevara spent the years leading up to the Cuban Revolution commanding guerrilla forces in the Sierra Maestra region of Cuba. Within the revolutionary army, “he was seen as tough,” Selbin said. Known to work his soldiers to the bone and dole out harsh punishments for relatively minor transgressions, Guevara was “willing to push people in a way that sometimes some of the other Cuban military leaders weren’t,” Selbin said.

Once Castro took the presidency, Guevara was appointed Minister of Industries and put in control of military trials of Batista’s remaining forces at the La Cabaña prison.

According to biographer Jon Lee Anderson, he ordered the execution of 55 prisoners, but the numbers are widely disputed and estimates often range into the hundreds.

“That’s when he begins to be associated, by at least some people, with this much more brutal streak,” Selbin said.

Omar López, 58, human rights director of the Miami-based Cuban American National Foundation, was living in Havana during the time of the revolution and recalls that Guevara caused violence as head of the military tribunals. What Guevara did at that time, Lopez says, would “right now...be called terrorist activities, but in those times they

were called revolutionary activities.” He says this despite his family’s own involvement in the Cuban revolution. “Some members of my family — almost everybody, at that time — sympathized with the revolution because we were under dictatorship with Fulgencio Batista, but we got an even worse dictatorship with Fidel Castro.”

Many of López’s family members eventually were exiled, though López himself remained in Cuba and became a founder of the human rights movement in 1988. In 1992, he moved to Miami. Even today, he is frustrated by the image of Guevara that persists throughout the world.

“The biggest paradox concerning Che Guevara is the fact that he’s considered the ultimate revolutionary in spite of the fact that he was never successful in any of his revolutionary adventures,” he said. “The only one that came to power was in Cuba, but he was not in charge. He failed in Venezuela — he conducted a guerrilla attempt in Venezuela and was suffocated immediately after they disembarked. He was involved in Congo and was defeated also in Congo, and the last one in Bolivia, [is] where he was ... captured and killed.”

With so many interpretations of one man, there is a chance the famous name and face may lose their meaning altogether. Selbin warned against such broad and abstract perceptions of Guevara for this very reason.

“If a word can mean so many things, then it almost means nothing,” he said. “There’s a level at which Che as a figure is right on the edge of being an empty signifier. You can make him mean whatever you want him to mean.”