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he sun was dipping below the ridge of a steep ravine. Another few minutes, and under cover of darkness, and the group might have escaped. But the fading light caught the blonde curls of the woman in the group. She stood out starkly from the dark figures of the men beside her wading into Bolivia's Rio Grande.

There are many conflicting accounts of how the woman known simply as "Tania" lived her short life. To some she was a heroine of the revolutionary struggle started by her comrade-in-arms, and reputed lover, Che Guevara. To others she was the manipulative Mata Hari who finally betrayed him – the only woman fighting with him in his last, ill-fated attempt to foment left-wing revolt throughout Latin America.

But this was the moment the 29-year-old secret agent met her death: 5.20pm on August 31, 1967, at a point on the Rio Grande called Vado del Yeso. Tania was waist-deep in the water, her rifle held above her head. The faded green-and-white-striped blouse she wore over her battle fatigues marked her out. She was among the first to be shot. All but two of her fellow guerillas were shot in quick succession. Their bodies were recovered, but Tania's was swept away. A week later her corpse washed up downstream. By then piranhas had gone to work. The woman who had changed her identity and appearance so many times as a secret agent was almost unrecognisable. All that identified her was her clothing and a small bag in which she collected coloured pebbles to brighten the rigours of the guerrilla regime she endured.

When the deaths were announced, Guevara, still struggling through the jungles close by, refused to believe the news. Tania and her small group of fighters had been separated from the main column of his straggly rebel army four months earlier. He suspected the radio transmission was army propaganda to demoralise him. But nearly six weeks later, on October 8, he too was ambushed near the Rio Grande. He was interrogated overnight before being executed by a Bolivian soldier in the morning. His body was then lashed to the landing skids of a helicopter and flown to the nearby town of Villegrande. There his corpse was displayed to the world on the stone slab of a hospital laundry room, and his hands severed and dispatched for fingerprinting to convince incredulous followers that ➤➤➤

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HER NAME WAS TANIA AND SHE DIED IN A HAIL OF BULLETS ON THE RUN WITH CHE GUEVARA. BUT WHO WAS THIS CAPTIVATING AND MYSTERIOUS MATA HARI WHO WAS BURIED NEXT TO HIM?

BY CHRISTINE TOOMEY

# LOVER, TRAITOR, SOLDIER, SPY?

the iconic revolutionary had been killed.

Given Tania's gripping short life, it is understandable that authors and film-production companies – including Robert Redford's Wildwood Enterprises and Sir Mick Jagger's Jagged Films – have vied for years to portray the story of the woman who was born Haydée Tamara Bunke Bider in Buenos Aires in 1937, to German-Russian parents fleeing the Nazis.

For many years, until she was well into her nineties, Tania's mother, Nadia Bider, was her staunchest defender. If she got wind of a book or film project that might besmirch the reputation of her daughter, she would launch a lawsuit. Since her death, her son, a statistician living in retirement in Berlin, continues the family vigil.

Such litigious tenacity might be one reason why Steven Soderbergh has relegated Tania to a small role in his four-hour epic about the life of Che Guevara – divided into two films, *The Argentine* and *Guerrilla* – due to be released here in the autumn. In shying away from revealing the depth of Tania's involvement with Guevara, however, Soderbergh has overlooked the story of one of the most fascinating female protagonists of recent history.

Only those who knew both Guevara and Tania can vouch for the passion and political idealism their union entailed. And of these there are very few left alive. But one summer evening at a cafe in Paris, I sit drinking coffee with one of only three surviving witnesses to those months of high drama in which both lost their lives in the Camiri mountains of southern Bolivia. The story he has to tell is intimate and compelling.

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The sadness in Dariel Alarcon Ramirez's rheumy eyes finally lifts when he starts to talk about the woman who was assigned to him for military training in 1961, with Fidel Castro's regime still in its infancy. The 69-year-old, still known by his *nom de guerre*, Benigno – given to him when Castro's rebel army set up temporary headquarters on his family's farm in the Sierra Maestra mountains – was a pivotal member of Castro's inner circle until he defected in 1995. Benigno had accompanied Che Guevara as his personal bodyguard before joining him in the Bolivian jungle for what was to be his idol's last stand. One of just five men to escape capture when Guevara was ambushed, he crossed the Andes to Chile and returned to Havana, where he became director of the Cuban prison system.

After fleeing to France in 1995, he wrote a damning indictment of Castro's regime, accusing it of betraying its early revolutionary ideals. He also accuses Castro personally of abandoning Guevara and his rebel band by not sending them reinforcements in their hour of need in Bolivia. For years, Benigno lived under police protection in Paris. He still appears edgy when we meet.

But when our conversation turns to Tania, he becomes animated. "She was gracious, beautiful and kind. But she was also tough, very tough," he says of the slender woman with green-blue eyes who arrived at his training camp in Pinar del



Rio, western Cuba, sporting the olive-green trousers, denim blouse and tilted beret of the newly formed People's Defence Militia. Guevara had issued instructions that particular care be taken in preparing her for an undisclosed "special mission". She was to be taught self-defence – how to use a knife, a sub-machinegun and a pistol – and how to send and receive telegraph transmissions and coded messages by radio.

"This training meant that she had to work until midnight on many occasions," says Benigno. "But she never complained. She gave the impression she knew she had very little time left and felt she had to make the maximum use of it. When I told her once that she should advise me if she was menstruating so she could rest, she laughed at me, saying, 'Is that what I would do in the jungle: tell the enemy not to attack that day?' No, she wanted to be treated just like a man."

Benigno was told little about his new recruit's background, though he immediately noted that she spoke Spanish with an Argentine accent, and would entertain others in the training camp by playing Argentine folk songs on accordion or guitar. "She played the guitar better than she sang," Benigno notes with a laugh.

He did not know she had been born in Buenos Aires to parents fleeing Hitler's Germany, nor that in 1952, the year she turned 15, the family had returned to Berlin and the new socialist GDR. Raised by parents who were both staunch communists, she soon joined the country's Socialist Unity party. Her ability with

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languages – she spoke Russian, English, Spanish and German – caught the attention of the authorities in what was rapidly becoming a police state. While studying political science at Berlin's Humboldt University, she was recruited by the Stasi as an *inoffizielle Mitarbeiter* (unofficial collaborator), with a brief to spy on other students. Later she worked as an interpreter for visiting delegations from Latin America, and her brief widened to pass on information about them too. This was how she met Che Guevara. As

## THE MANY FACES OF TANIA

Tamara Bunke (bottom right) travelled under a series of aliases, including Haydée



Gonzalez (top left), Laura Gutierrez Bauer (top right) and Marta Iriarte (below left)



head of a trade delegation for Castro's fledgling Cuban state, he visited Leipzig in 1960, and she was assigned as his assistant and translator.

It is hard to say whether the young woman her mother describes as a "serious student and devout communist" was more attracted by Guevara's revolutionary credentials or by his charisma. But she must have seen in him much that she missed about the country where both of them were born. What is certain is that the following year, Tamara travelled to Cuba as an

interpreter for the Cuban national ballet, adopted the *nom de guerre* of Tania, and never returned to live in Germany. Inspired by the idealism of the Cuban revolution, she sought out voluntary work, teaching and building homes and schools in the countryside, alongside her hero Guevara. Until, that is, he gave the order that she was to receive "special training". By then he had set his sights on spreading revolution far beyond Cuba's shores, to Africa and throughout Latin America. It was decided Bolivia would



Far left: Tania as a child on holiday in Argentina with her mother, Nadia Bider. Centre: her many personas, including (bottom right) how she looked when she arrived in Cuba when she went under her real name of Tamara Bunke. Left: aged 18, displaying her natural grace in a park in East Germany

become the next seedbed for a peasant uprising: a strategic "focus" from which rebel armies would spread into five neighbouring countries: Argentina, Paraguay, Brazil, Peru and Chile. It was a grave miscalculation: Bolivia had already undergone limited land reform and the population there had little appetite for revolt.

For several years after Tania trained in Pinar del Rio, Benigno had little contact with his former pupil. While he travelled the globe with Guevara, Tania entered the most secretive phase of her life, about which she could not tell even her parents, though she continued to write to them regularly. It was only after her daughter died, and Castro declared "Tania the guerrilla" a hero of the revolution, that Nadia Bider was able to piece together the undercover life that Tania had led in her final years. The various guises she adopted in these years stare out from the forged identity papers provided by Cuba's intelligence service and their affiliates. First there is Tania as Marta Iriarte – on a false passport provided by the Czech security services. Then she is Haydée Gonzalez, and later Vittoria Pancini, an Italian citizen travelling in Europe. She used these first three identities while perfecting the persona she would finally adopt, Laura Gutierrez Bauer, working as an undercover agent in Bolivia.

Throughout the spring of 1964, Tania was hidden on a small farm on the outskirts of Prague, where she was schooled in the art of espionage, in preparation for infiltrating high society as Bauer in Bolivia's administrative

and junta head, General Alfredo Ovando Candia, was planning to study in Germany. After finding out where the general lived, she rented a room nearby and put a sign in the window advertising "German lessons". The ploy worked; she started teaching the general's son German.

Through him she quickly secured an introduction to the general himself, and through him was introduced to the country's air-force commander, and later president, Rene Barrientos. Both men fell for her charms and took her to high-society parties. Using the cover story that she was in Bolivia to study folklore, she travelled the country to gauge the popular mood. She briefly entered into a marriage of convenience with another young student to gain Bolivian citizenship and make her position there more secure. But her main objective was spying on the country's political and military elite.

She continued to court Barrientos, and went on holiday with him to Peru. Benigno recounts how Tania, playing on the president's insecurity about his looks, once arranged for a tailor to gain access to the presidential palace to make Barrientos a series of "English-style" suits.

When the fiercely anti-communist Barrientos discovered, through deserters from Guevara's guerrilla force, that she was spying for the Cubans, he ordered that the walls of her apartment be torn down. "He went mad when he found out the woman he loved had betrayed him," says Benigno. In a compartment behind a wall was the radio equipment she used to send coded messages to Havana. Later it emerged that she had also been passing coded signals to Guevara – by then rallying his rebel army in southern Bolivia – through advice she gave to fictitious lovelorn couples when she posed as an agony aunt on a weekly radio programme. Together with the radio equipment found in her flat was documentation that would lead Bolivian soldiers to Guevara's jungle hideout.

With her cover blown, Tania swapped her urban disguise for battle fatigues and joined Guevara, despite his order that she remain in the capital as his communications link with Havana. "To stay in La Paz would have been very

## Che Guevara's corpse is laid out in the laundry room in the hospital of Villegrande

difficult for Tania, since soldiers were looking for her everywhere," Benigno says. "Anyway, she wanted to fight." He denies the assertion made by some that by abandoning the city and leaving behind incriminating material, she deliberately betrayed Guevara. Just the opposite, he says.

He firmly believes the two were lovers. "You could tell by the way they spoke so quietly and looked at each other when they were together near the end." But he denies rumours that Tania was carrying Guevara's child when she was killed; reports claimed she was three or four months pregnant. The timing of her death would have made this impossible, says Benigno.

In April 1967, as Guevara's band of a few dozen guerrilla fighters increasingly succumbed to sickness, he separated them into two columns so that the weakest could travel more slowly.



## HE DENIES SHE WAS CARRYING GUEVARA'S CHILD WHEN SHE WAS KILLED

Tania, who was suffering from a high fever and a leg injury, remained in the rearguard with 16 other ailing combatants, while Guevara, Benigno and the others went on ahead. He recounts how, shortly before the two groups separated, he tore his vest into strips for Tania to use as sanitary napkins. "If she was pregnant, as they say she was, then I believe the child she was carrying was Braulio's," he says, referring to an Afro-Cuban guerrilla called Israel Reyes Zayas. "Some people think a woman who carries arms cannot be feminine. But Tania was quite flirtatious. She took care of her appearance. Even in the jungle she would sometimes ask us how she looked," Benigno says, mimicking how she would stroke her hair away from her face to be admired.

Allegations that Tania had betrayed Guevara persisted after she died, however. Recognising her photograph in a newspaper article about her death, one former Stasi officer called Günther Männel, who defected to the West in 1961, claimed he had recruited her as a secret agent not only for the East German intelligence service but also for the KGB. Männel claims she was under specific orders to spy on Guevara, whose ambitions to foment revolution throughout Latin America alarmed the Soviets.

"I do not believe for a minute this is true," Benigno protests. "I do believe Tania worked for the East Germans as well as Cuba, but never for the KGB. Tania adored Che. He was her hero. He was a hero to all of us."

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The key to untangling the web of Tania's political and personal allegiances should lie in the musty intelligence archive of the Ministry for State Security of the former East Germany, once the most spied-upon nation on Earth.

The process of accessing the Stasi files stored in the archive's labyrinthine central office, near the Alexanderplatz in east Berlin, is a laborious

navigation of red tape. For weeks I wait for any document mentioning Tamara Bunke or Tania to be retrieved from the vaults. When 28 pages of ageing documentation are finally delivered, much of it makes only a passing mention of Bunke. All but a state-sanctioned article in a GDR youth magazine, published two years after she died, glorifying her heroism. The reason for the lack of information, an archivist says, is that many documents relating to agents working for the Stasi's foreign-intelligence division were destroyed after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Most of the pages here that do mention Tania relate to her former "handler"; the man referred to in the documents as "the traitor" or "deserter" – Günther Männel. These documents date from after his defection to the West in 1961, and lament how this compromised the GDR's intelligence services. One states that "a series of secret agents working abroad in capitalist countries have had to be warned and withdrawn from service". This document confirms that Männel did know of one female "GM" – *geheime Mitarbeiter*, or secret agent – working in La Paz. But, confusingly, it states that she died in March 1967 – and Tania was shot in August of that year.

The one document dealing exclusively with Tania – which refers to her only as "B", for Bunke – confirms her willingness to keep in touch with the Stasi after leaving the GDR. But once Männel defected, it says, attempts to make contact with her failed. Because he defected in the same year that Tania left East Germany for Cuba, Nadia Bider and others say he would have been in no position to know what she did after that. For this reason, Männel's claim that she was recruited to spy on Guevara is dismissed.

After the Uruguayan journalist Jose A Friedl Zapata published a book in 1997 – *Tania, the Woman Che Guevara Loved*, which portrayed her as a triple agent working for the Stasi, the

KGB and Cuban intelligence, and sleeping her way through Bolivian high society to betray Guevara for the Soviets – Bider, then 85, travelled to Moscow to have the claim refuted. When she returned with testimony from a retired KGB general saying Tania never spied for the Soviets, the book was withdrawn from sale.

Bider did not, however, stop publication of a book on Guevara by the American writer Daniel James, originally published in the late 1960s and updated in 2001, in which Tania is regarded as "a cog in the gigantic Soviet espionage apparatus". James depicts her as "a woman in love", although not, he claims, "in the bourgeois sense" – meaning she saw no contradiction between spying on Guevara and loving him at the same time.

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The year before Tania died, she wrote a poem asking: "Will my name one day be forgotten and nothing of me remain on the Earth?" There seems little chance of this. Besides the books and films about her, her name is now engraved beside Che Guevara's at the giant mausoleum built in his honour in Santa Clara, central Cuba.

Thirty years after he was killed, Guevara's body was recovered from its secret burial place and flown to Santa Clara, where he was given a full state funeral. The following year, Tania's remains were recovered from an unmarked grave in a small pit on the periphery of the Villegrande army base. They too were flown to Santa Clara and laid to rest alongside Guevara's ■

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Once hailed as an all-American hero, he became an international outcast

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