The 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 guerrillas 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...
languages—she spoke Russian, English, Spanish and German—she was sent to study in the United States to gain a higher education. She learnt that she had become a nom de guerre.

Bolivia 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 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 just laughed at me, saying, ‘But what do I do in the jungle to 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 an 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, her family had returned to Berlin. She was the Andes to Chile and returned to Havana, where she became director of the Cuban prison system.

After going to France in 1964, she moved to London, denouncing Castro’s regime, accusing it of betraying its early revolutionary ideals. She also accused the government of abandoning Guevara and his rebel band by not sending them reinforcements in their hour of need in Bolivia.

Guevara and his rebel band by not sending them reinforcements in their hour of need in Bolivia. It was decided Bolivia would send its only three surviving witnesses to those months and transmissions and coded messages by radio. It was only after her daughter’s death, and Castro declared ‘Tania the guerrilla’ a hero of the revolution that Nadia Benitez was able to piece together the undercover life that Tania had led in her final years. The various guises she adopted in these years stood out in the blurred identity papers provided by Cuba’s intelligence service and their allies. First there was Tania as Mara Iraré—a fake passport provided by the Czech security services. Then she is Haydée González, and later Yvetón Paseiro, an Italian citizen travelling in Europe. She used these first three identities while perfecting the persona she wanted to adopt. As Bauer in Bolivia’s administrative capital of La Paz, Tania had been introduced to the country’s air-force commander, and later president, René Barrientos. Both men fell for her charms and took her to high-society parties. Using the cover story that she was the daughter of the author Haydée, she travelled the country to gauge the popular mood. She briefly entered into a marriage of convenience with one young Bolivian politician who was used to gain Bolshevik 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 in Argentina with him. Benigno claims she played an as an agony aunt on a weekly radio programme. Together with the radio equipment found in Guevara’s jungle hideout. He tells how, shortly after arriving in Bolivia, Tania, learnt that the son of the country’s army chief and junta head, General Alfredo Ovando, was planning to study in the United States. By finding out where the general lived, she rented a room nearby and put a sign in the window advertising ‘German lunches.’ The play 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, René Barrientos. Both men became enamoured with her and took her to high-society parties. Using the cover story that she was the daughter of the author Haydée, she travelled the country to gauge the popular mood. She briefly entered into a marriage of convenience with one young Bolivian politician who was used to gain Bolshevik 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 in Argentina with him. Benigno claims she played an as an agony aunt on a weekly radio programme. Together with the radio equipment found in Guevara’s jungle hideout. He tells how, shortly after arriving in Bolivia, Tania, learnt that the son of the country’s army chief and junta head, General Alfredo Ovando, was planning to study in the United States. By finding out where the general lived, she rented a room nearby and put a sign in the window advertising ‘German lunches.’ The play 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, René Barrientos. Both men became enamoured with her and took her to high-society parties. Using the cover story that she was the daughter of the author Haydée, she travelled the country to gauge the popular mood. She briefly entered into a marriage of convenience with one young Bolivian politician who was used to gain Bolshevik 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 in Argentina with him. Benigno claims she played an as an agony aunt on a weekly radio programme. Together with the radio equipment found in Guevara’s jungle hideout. He tells how, shortly after arriving in Bolivia, Tania, learnt that the son of the country’s army chief and junta head, General Alfredo Ovando, was planning to study in the United States. By finding out where the general lived, she rented a room nearby and put a sign in the window advertising ‘German lunches.’ The play 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, René Barrientos. Both men became enamoured with her and took her to high-society parties. Using the cover story that she was the daughter of the author Haydée, she travelled the country to gauge the popular mood. She briefly entered into a marriage of convenience with one young Bolivian politician who was used to gain Bolshevik 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 in Argentina with him. Benigno claims she played an as an agony aunt on a weekly radio programme. Together with the radio equipment found in Guevara’s jungle hideout. He tells how, shortly after arriving in Bolivia, Tania, learnt that the son of the country’s army chief and junta head, General Alfredo Ovando, was planning to study in the United States. By finding out where the general lived, she rented a room nearby and put a sign in the window advertising ‘German lunches.’ The play 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, René Barrientos. Both men became enamoured with her and took her to high-society parties. Using the cover story that she was the daughter of the author Haydée, she travelled the country to gauge the popular mood. She briefly entered into a marriage of convenience with one young Bolivian politician who was used to gain Bolshevik 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 in Argentina with him. Benigno claims she played an as an agony aunt on a weekly radio programme. Together with the radio equipment found in Guevara’s jungle hideout. He tells how, shortly after arriving in Bolivia, Tania, learnt that the son of the country’s army chief and junta head, General Alfredo Ovando, was planning to study in the United States. By finding out where the general lived, she rented a room nearby and put a sign in the window advertising ‘German lunches.’ The play 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, René Barrientos. Both men became enamoured with her and took her to high-society parties. Using the cover story that she was the daughter of the author Haydée, she travelled the country to gauge the popular mood. She briefly entered into a marriage of convenience with one young Bolivian politician who was used to gain Bolshevik 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 in Argentina with him. Benigno claims she played an as an agony aunt on a weekly radio programme. Together with the radio equipment found in Guevara’s jungle hideout. He tells how, shortly after arriving in Bolivia, Tania, learnt that the son of the country’s army chief and junta head, General Alfredo Ovando, was planning to study in the United States. By finding out where the general lived, she rented a room nearby and put a sign in the window advertising ‘German lunches.’ The play 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, René Barrientos. Both men became enamoured with her and took her to high-society parties. Using the cover story that she was the daughter of the author Haydée, she travelled the country to gauge the popular mood. She briefly entered into a marriage of convenience with one young Bolivian politician who was used to gain Bolshevik 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 in Argentina with him. Benigno claims she played an as an agony aunt on a weekly radio programme. Together with the radio equipment found in Guevara’s jungle hideout. He tells how, shortly after arriving in Bolivia, Tania, learnt that the son of the country’s army chief and junta head, General Alfredo Ovando, was planning to study in the United States. By finding out where the general lived, she rented a room nearby and put a sign in the window advertising ‘German lunches.’ The play 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, René Barrientos. Both men became enamoured with her and took her to high-society parties. Using the cover story that she was the daughter of the author Haydée, she travelled the country to gauge the popular mood. She briefly entered into a marriage of convenience with one young Bolivian politician who was used to gain Bolshevik citizenship and make her position there more secure. But her main objective was spying on the country’s political and military elite.
Che Guevara’s corpse is laid out in the laundry room in the hospital of Villegarde.

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.

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.”

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. But 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 seems little chance of this. Besides the books and films about her, her name is now engraved on Guevara’s grave in a small pit on the periphery of the Villegarde army base. They too were flown to Santa Clara and laid to rest alongside Guevara’s.

HE DENIES SHE WAS CARRYING GUEVARA’S CHILD WHEN SHE WAS KILLED

For more features by Christine Toomey from The Sunday Times Magazine, go to

www.timesonline.co.uk/christinetoomey

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