When did Guerrilla Warfare Become Truly Revolutionary?

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Introduction

This essay outlines evolutionary trends in revolutionary thought and practice since the 18th Century. It will be shown that whilst Great War doctrine predominated military thought before the 1930s/1940s, many theorists of guerrilla warfare perceived the potential to subvert the political order using both guerrilla tactics and political, social and economic efforts. This approach was actively attempted with varying degrees of success in certain pre-20th Century cases of guerrilla warfare. Yet it achieved greater maturation in a wider number of contexts following the 1930s.

The term 'guerrilla' has, historically, had different meanings. Initially, it described the Spanish *partidas* (irregulars) who fought the French occupation between 1808-1814.[i] Subsequently, writers such as Callwell used the term to refer to partisan units fighting alongside regular troops, and categorized any conflict featuring non-regular belligerents as a 'small war'.[ii] The term 'guerrilla warfare' also came to denote a particular array of military tactics including night raids, hit-and-run attacks, strategic withdrawals and ambushes.[iii] These tactics, as Gray rightly argues, are hardly innovative; rather, both urban and rural-based guerrilla tactics have pervaded military history.[iv] Indeed, guerrilla methods date back at least as far as 500BC, when they were used by the Scythians against Darius I.[v]

For scholars such as Beckett and Mackinlay, however, guerrilla tactics until the 1930s/40s were predominantly a 'military affair'; i.e. a resort of the militarily-weak for harassing the militarily-powerful.[vi] Seldom were they perceived, or employed, as the main means of overthrowing a political order when combined with political, psychological, economic and social endeavours (a mixture which might be designated 'insurgency', or RGW – i.e. revolutionary guerrilla warfare).[vii] This approach was captured, for instance, in Mao Tse-tung's 'classic' three-stage doctrine of the 'people's war.' Mao prioritised political over military efforts by focussing on gaining the guerrillas' popular support in specific rural areas (e.g. through propaganda – Stage I). Consequently, the guerrillas could muster enough recruits from the masses to stalemate the conflict through protracted guerrilla warfare (Stage II). Eventually, the guerrillas would gather sufficient strength to overthrow the state through conventional means (Stage III).[viii] The Maoist model requires a resilient, cohesive guerrilla-organisation with a shared goal to establish a specific alternative political order in a given setting.[ix] However, in certain cases, successful RGW might not pass neatly through Maoist 'phases' towards conventional warfare (e.g. Afghanistan, 1979-1989); indeed, such cases may feature multiple religious/ethnic groups which all oppose a given political order, yet which possess limited/absent structural unity both in and amongst themselves, as well as varied aims with regards to the replacement of that order (e.g. communism etc.).[x]

This analysis suggests that RGW was observed by several thinkers before 1930. However, admittedly these ideas remained the minority view within military establishments that favoured Great War doctrine.[xi] This is demonstrated in Part I of this investigation, which examines writings by prominent military theoreticians prior to the mid-20th Century. Part II then analyses iconic pre-20th Century guerrilla wars to demonstrate how RGW was applied in various degrees within specific contexts, although the 20th Century witnessed its full development in practice. This latter point is revealed in Part III through case studies, including China, South-East Asia and Cuba.

Part I – Revolutionary Theory

Pre-20th Century thought concerning guerrilla warfare was considerably diverse. Johan von Ewald, for instance, in his *Treatise on the Partisan Warfare* (1790) closely identified light-infantry warfare with guerrilla tactics, and stressed the latter's usefulness in battle when employed by partisans in combination with more conventionally-tailored regulars.[xii] For Carlo Bianco (1795-1843), moreover, guerrilla tactics were indispensable for achieving Italian national liberation, in his work *On the National war of Insurrection by Bands*. Indeed, Bianco argued that guerrilla and terror tactics should be employed by small armed groups against the state in the initial phase of a 'people's war,' which would culminate in the creation of a revolutionary army that could overthrow foreign rule and domestic tyranny.[xiii] Giuseppe Mazzini (1805-1872), furthermore, maintained that popular insurrections joint with guerrilla-bands resisting regular armies could eventually realise the political aims of national self-determination and democracy across Europe.[xiv] Anarchist thinker Johann Most (1846-1906) also saw the political effectiveness of terror and guerrilla tactics, deeming them a form of 'propaganda of the deed' which could grant the population the courage to revolt.[xv]

Scholars such as Beckett acknowledge that theorists linked guerrilla warfare to insurrection prior to the 20th Century, although he suggests this was uncommon.[xvi] Granted, many prominent thinkers failed to elaborate a theory of revolutionary irregular warfare in their writings to the same degree as Bianco, Mazzini or Most. Clausewitz's *On War* (1831), for instance, apparently perceived the defensive power of a 'people's war' in containing an external aggressor, but only when waged jointly with a regular army within specific tactical environments.[xvii] General Baron de Jomini saw more revolutionary potential in guerrilla warfare in his *Treatise on the Art of War* (1838), where he spoke of 'national wars,' which were conducted by an external aggressor against a unified population committed to their self-determination.[xviii] He saw these wars as extremely difficult to win due to the inhabitants' superior knowledge of the local area, as well as their persistent hostility towards the invader.[xix] Additionally, Major von Decker, a contemporary of Clausewitz, perceived Mao's observation that irregulars, due to their military inferiority, must be regarded as liberators by local inhabitants in order to hide amongst them, therefore evading overt confrontation with regular forces.[xx] Yet von Decker's work did not explicitly mention partisan warfare as a means of overthrowing a political order.

However, it seems difficult to sustain the notion that theories such as Bianco's or Most's were rare prior to the mid-20th Century, especially when 19th Century Polish military writings are considered. General Henryk Kamieński, for instance, in his work *People's War* (1866), outlined a four-phase war of national liberation beginning with disseminated popular outbursts of guerrilla attacks against state forces, and culminating with the formation of powerful regular military units, which could supplant the ruling regime through orthodox means.[xxi] General Wojciech Chrzanowski, in his work *On Partisan War* (1835), highlighted several observations of guerrilla warfare that resembled Maoist doctrine: national subjugation could be thwarted if partisans avoided overt confrontation with enemy regulars, undermined them over a prolonged people's war, and eventually implemented conventional tactics to defeat the enemy once they had gathered sufficient strength.[xxii] Moreover, Karol Bogumil Stolzman, Józef Bern, Ludwig Bystrzanowski, Ludwig Mierosławski and Józef Pawlikowski all perceived popular insurrection and outbursts of guerrilla violence, as step one in a revolutionary 'people's war' of national liberation.[xxiii]

Whilst the revolutionary potential of irregular warfare was indeed perceived by many pre-20th Century theorists, it remained generally doctrinally-unpopular compared to the Great War paradigm which dominated military thinking and practice.[xxiv] Andreas Emmerich in his work *The Partisan in War* (1789), for instance, drew upon his experiences during the American Revolutionary War and mentioned guerrilla tactics (particularly surprise attacks), but only outlined their value when employed by light infantry battalions during conventional warfare.[xxv] Other prominent writers took a similar view, such as Major General Georg Wilhelm von Valentini in his*Treatise on Small Wars and the use of Light Troops* (1799), and General Denis Davidov in his *Essay on the Theory of Partisan Warfare* (1821).[xxvi] Callwell's understanding of guerrilla warfare fell into his notion of 'small wars,' which included: 1) wars of appropriation/conquest; 2) wars for subduing revolt; and 3) wars to 'wipe out an insult', gain vengeance, or remove a threat.[xxvii] For Callwell, guerrilla and irregular operations were generally assumed to occur within all three categories as an enemy tactic; however, he did not explicitly elaborate whether these activities would incorporate psychological, economic and political components in order to overthrow the imperial power.[xxviii]

Beckett rightly notes that Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, like Clausewitz, de Jomini and von Ewald, also perceived little revolutionary potential in guerrilla warfare; rather, they relegated such tactics to a supplementary role within conventional regular operations.[xxix] Lenin's views on guerrilla warfare are less contemptuous towards guerrilla tactics.[xxx] Indeed, in his 1906 publication *Partisan skaya voina*, Lenin maintained that guerrilla and terror tactics were acceptable for prolonging a revolutionary struggle when a swift coup d'état was not immediately possible for the revolutionary vanguard.[xxxi] Lenin emphatically stated that 'Marxism …recognizes the possibility that struggle may assume the most variegated forms,' and that it 'will never reject any particular combat method.'[xxxii] Lenin did, however, apparently see the vanguard as the main route to power; guerrilla warfare was assigned a secondary role to enable time for the educational organisation of the populace.[xxxiii]

Undoubtedly, however, the revolutionary thoughts of the aforementioned Polish-Italian radicals were seldom actually implemented within their contexts.[xxxiv] The Polish uprisings of the 19th Century were predominantly quashed by Russian imperial might, with many, such as the 1830 November Uprising, chiefly adopting conventional warfare in pursuit of national liberation (e.g. the Battle of Olszynka Grochowska), and rejecting protracted guerrilla warfare as a realistic strategy.[xxxv] Other rebellions, such as the 1846 Greater Poland Uprising and the 1863-1864 Revolt, were quickly crushed despite outbursts of guerrilla violence, whilst the political aspect of guerrilla warfare failed to gain momentum in many cases.[xxxvi] Indeed, in 1846 the Polish peasantry were overwhelmingly uncommitted to the Polish nationalist movement.[xxxvii] Guerrilla warfare certainly became neglected in revolutionary thinking following the suppression of uprisings across Europe in 1848, and even in 1917 it had not been a vital factor behind the Russian Revolution's success.[xxxviii] Mazzini sought to actualise Bianco's first phase of the people's war by creating *Young Italy*, although the group's revolutionary efforts were systematically thwarted during the 1830s, leading to its eventual demise.[xxxix]

Some notable exceptions, however, do stand out, especially within the early 20th Century. Most prominent is T. E. Lawrence. Writing retrospectively of his experiences fighting with the Arabs against the Ottoman Turks, Lawrence maintained that guerrilla warfare could achieve political independence if three conditions were met.[xl] First, the guerrillas must have an impregnable base; second, the enemy must comprise regulars with restricted strength and with a large territory to patrol; and third, the masses must be principally well-disposed towards the guerrillas so as not to betray them to the opponent.[xli] Lawrence's strategy involved utilising the 'smallest force in the quickest time,' gathering superior intelligence, destroying Turkish military assets (e.g. bridges), and employing psychological warfare. Indeed, Lawrence maintained that 'the printing press is the greatest weapon in the armoury of the modern commander' due to its ability to influence both friendly and enemy morale.[xlii] Lawrence's tactics saw significant success after revolt in the Hejaz in 1916, with Feisal's army harassing Turkish targets vaporously until their withdrawal in 1918.[xliii]

Part II – Revolutionary Practice

Callwell's categorisation of small wars provides an expedient means for gathering pre-20th Century case studies of guerrilla warfare. Callwell's first category would include Britain's three wars of Burmese pacification (1824-6, 1852-3 and 1885-86, resulting in annexation). All three, however, were fought largely along conventional lines by both sides (e.g. the Battle of Yangon – 30,000 Burmese soldiers against 10,000 British regulars).[xliv] Guerrilla uprisings did emerge across the country between 1887 and the mid-1890s, often led by village leaders, Buddhist monks, and former officers in Thibaw's army.[xlv] Evidence suggests that the guerrilla violence, although locally-organised, contained some political and psychological elements; undoubtedly, several villages aligned themselves with irregular groups because of Burmese nationalism or due to a lack of confidence in the British to suppress the uprising.[xlvi] Yet irregulars apparently failed to fully grasp the potential of the political factor of guerrilla warfare (i.e. winning the population's sympathy); indeed, thousands of villagers in Upper Burma were killed or harassed by both sides, and the guerrillas ultimately failed once the British severed their support base through the imposed relocation of villagers.[xlvii]

The Spanish Insurrection (1808-1814) is often presented as a people's guerrilla war. For instance, de la Pisa contends that the 300,000 occupying French troops were forced to withdraw after enduring four years of Spanish guerrilla warfare, supported by – and emanating from – the people themselves.[xlviii] Unquestionably, guerrilla tactics

by irregulars characterised the Spanish effort until the conflict became more regular in nature during the latter years.[xlix] The Supreme Central Junta in 1809, moreover, called upon the masses to shelter, nourish and back the *partida* bands, which resulted in several areas becoming impenetrable to French forces due to popular hostility.[l] Beckett dismisses the political element of the *guerrilleros,* claiming they 'live[d] off rather [than] …among their own people,' yet this seems difficult to sustain.[li] Guerrillas possessed significant sympathy with their localities and the same political allegiances and dispositions.[lii] Asprey, moreover, rightly notes that the masses were driven to insurrection by a united popular drive for autonomy rather than by the authorities.[liii] However, whilst guerrilla warfare undoubtedly contained political elements, victory was perceived by many belligerents to hinge not primarily upon 'winning hearts and minds', but rather upon conventional actions by Portuguese, British and Spanish regulars, with guerrillas providing a supporting role.[liv]

Callwell's second category – suppressing insurrection/lawlessness – incorporates a wide range of iconic conflicts featuring guerrilla warfare. The American Revolutionary War (1775-1783), for instance, featured both British and US partisan/irregular groups (e.g. Patrick Ferguson and Lt. Col. Francis Marion, respectively) utilising guerrilla tactics against the other side, notably where regular armies could not be effectively applied (e.g. the Carolinas and Georgia).[lv] It is difficult, however, to typify the conflict as a revolutionary guerrilla war. From the outset, both sides principally sought victory through engagements utilising professional standing armies (e.g. the Battle of Long Island). Both George Washington and the US Congress perceived militias as a way of compensating shortfalls within the Continental Army, and they were typically assigned to conventional operations (e.g. artillery).[lvi] Indeed, popular guerrilla war was only seen as a realistic method for overthrowing the British during the beginning of the conflict in the border areas, and then again in the South during the final years.[lvii] Washington, furthermore, regarded victory as attainable only through a combined critical strike by the French Fleet and Continental Army, not through RGW.[lviii]

The Second Boer War (1899-1902) also provides an interesting case. The Boers principally comprised irregulars (aside from the 'States Artillery'), and gradually turned to guerrilla tactics following the British re-conquering of the Transvaal.[lix] RGW, however, was not initially regarded as the road to victory by the Boers. Indeed, from October 1899 Kruger's 40,000-strong force scored impressive victories against British regulars in four conventional battles (e.g. The Battle of Colenso; 6,000 Boers against 18,000 Britons).[lx] Once the Boers eventually adopted guerrilla methods, they were met with brutal 'scorched earth' tactics by the British: 30,000 farms were destroyed, many villages were scorched, and 116,000 Boers were forced into 40 detention camps across the country.[lxi] Granted, the guerrillas clearly incorporated a political dimension by promoting the shared political goal for independence among civilians, as well as a collective nationalist/religious ideology.[lxii] Yet the Boer guerrillas' political efforts often failed, particularly with regards to relations with neighbouring African tribes, which worsened towards 1902 (the year of Boer defeat).[lxiii]

Callwell's final category might encompass the American Civil War (1861-1865), where Unionist leaders sought to remove the threat of Confederate secession. Irregular forces featured prominently on both sides throughout the conflict. Unionist regulars were often thinly-spread as they sought to conquer a territory equivalent to the size of Italy, Spain, Switzerland, Poland, Germany and France combined, thus rendering them susceptible to guerrilla raids (e.g. John Mosby's Rangers).[lxiv] Whilst Confederate guerrillas certainly incorporated political efforts (such as protecting sympathetic civilian communities), and guerrilla tactics produced some remarkable results (e.g undermining river transport in Missouri by 1864), Aprey correctly notes that guerrilla activities were limited during the War.[lxv] Confederate commanders largely perceived guerrillas such as Mosby's to be bandit-like, lacking in discipline, and possibly detrimental to the morale of regular troops. For instance, William Quantrill's Raiders massacred 180 Kansas civilians in 1863, causing civilians and military leaders on both sides to harden their opinions against guerrillas.[lxvi] Conventional battles such as those in Gettysberg, Fredericksburg and Shiloh were seen by both sides' strategists as the main path to victory; indeed, in 1874 partisan/irregular groups would actually be banned by the Confederate Congress due to their perceived lack of discipline.[lxvii]

Part III – Revolutionary Maturation

The early 20th Century witnessed irregulars increasingly actualising the potential of RGW. Various inferior irregular forces (such as T.E. Lawrence's, which met exceptional success) attempted to use time, space and propaganda to

wear down a superior regular army and provoke the masses to depose a political order; an approach attempted, for example, by Makhno's Revolutionary Insurrectionary Army of Ukraine between 1918-1921.[lxviii] Although it ultimately failed, Makhno's 25,000-strong force successfully engaged the sympathies of South Ukrainian peasants through a narrative of anarchism and autonomy from external rule. Guerrilla tactics featured significantly against enemy occupiers (e.g. Wrangel's White Army), along with infrequent semi-conventional battles (e.g. the Battle of Peregonovka).[lxix] The Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) is another interesting case in point. The guerrilla attacks employed by the *Zapatistas* actually heavily contributed to the ejection of Porfiro Díaz's government in 1911, although his successor (Madero) failed to pacify Zapata's guerrillas (which comprised thousands of peasants wooed by Zapata's land-reform programme).[lxx] The revolution met limited success, with Carranza's regime establishing a new constitution in 1917 to meet popular demands (e.g. for labour reforms). However, complete achievement of the revolutionaries' objectives was not accomplished.[lxxi]

In 1949, Mao's Chinese Red Army accomplished what had arguably only been achieved previously by Lawrence's forces; i.e. total overthrow of a political order predominantly through protracted RGW.[lxxii] From the 1930s, Mao emphasised political efforts in the revolutionary struggle; his 'Three Rules and Eight Remarks' stressing how rural civilians needed to perceive insurgents as liberators, since insurgent-survival depended upon 'swimming' in the 'sea' of the people (whose support and recruitment was imperative for delegitimising, and therefore eventually toppling, the government).[lxxiii] A series of successful RGW struggles subsequently followed across the globe. Mao's three-phase approach was imitated in Indochina by the Vietcong, which employed Maoist 'strategic defensive' (1945-1948), 'stalemate' (1948-1950), and 'strategic offensive' (1950-1954) doctrine to successfully oust French colonial control.[lxxiv] Additionally, in 1959 the Cuban '26th of July Movement' toppled Batista's regime through use of small, 'vanguard' guerrilla groups (i.e. *foco*), which acted as both catalysts and foci for instigating rural popular insurrection.[lxxv] Amílcar Cabral's PAIGC guerrillas also accomplished Portuguese expulsion from Guinea-Bissau, where rural labourers were galvanised into mobilisation against Portuguese rule through political meetings and pamphlets outlining the allures of nationalism.[lxxvi]

The 1960s onwards witnessed a proliferation of military theorists recognising the revolutionary potential of guerrilla warfare and political action, including David Galula (1964), Robert Thompson (1966), and Julian Paget (1967).[lxxvii] The Marxist Marighella wrote of the potential of urban RGW in his *Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla* (1969), though it did not materialise very successfully; *focos* in Brazil and Bolivia, for instance, were ultimately suppressed and failed to produce regime-toppling insurrections.[lxxviii] The 1979-1989 war in Afghanistan, however, is a notable case of triumphant RGW where indigenous *mujahedin* fighters eventually overthrew the USSR-sponsored PDPA regime through a protracted guerrilla campaign; ultimately wearing down the occupying Soviet forces and leading to their withdrawal.[lxxix] Not only did *mujahedin* warriors enjoy considerable local support, their political campaign also had a global reach (amplified by international media outlets). Recruits emanated from across the Arab world who perceived the *mujahedin* struggle as a jihadist war against an atheistic oppressor.[lxxx] Indeed, the 1979-1989 War provided an embryonic precursor to the 'global insurgencies' that later came to characterise many insurgencies in the post-Cold War era.[lxxxi]

Conclusion

In summary, this study has established three broad contentions. First of all, Great War doctrine dominated both the thinking and practice of military theorists and practitioners amongst the dominant powers during the 18th and 19th Centuries. Guerrilla warfare, in conjunction with 'winning the peoples' hearts and minds,' was not deemed a realistic avenue to political power in the works of prominent thinkers like Clausewitz, de Jomini, von Decker, Engels and Marx. Others, such as Valentini, Davidov and Emmerich, reflected the prevailing view, which saw the utility of guerrilla warfare as laying principally in its employment by partisan units acting in support of regular forces. Regulars, as such, would engage in the conventional operations that were seen as the means for ensuring victory.

Secondly, whilst Great War Doctrine prevailed in military establishments prior to 1945, several thinkers certainly recognised the revolutionary potential of guerrilla warfare. This is revealed, for example, in the writings of Bianco, Mazzini, and Most. Other theorists and military practitioners clearly also saw the potential of RWG to overthrow political order. This study has also mentioned, for instance, Stolzman, Bern, Bystrzanowski, Mierosławski,

Pawlikowski, Kamieński, Chrzanowski, Makhno, and (most notably) Lawrence.

Finally, whilst RGW was recognised as a viable means of subverting political order in theory, it rarely translated into practice in comparison to the post-1930s/40s, which featured successes in, for instance, China, South-East Asia, Guinea-Bissau, Cuba, and Afghanistan. Prior to the 1930s, 'irregular' victories such as Lawrence's were certainly singular events. Revolutionary conflicts featuring irregular forces – e.g. the American Revolutionary War, the American Civil War, and the Polish Uprisings – repeatedly played out according to Emmerich's model, with the Spanish Insurrection being a possible exception. Other conflicts such as the Boer War, the Burmese Uprising, the Mexican Revolution, and the Ukrainian Revolution witnessed the repeated failure of guerrillas to overthrow the political order.

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[ii] Callwell (1906), p. 21 & p. 125.

[iii] Beckett (2001), p. vii.

[iv] Gray (1999), p. 282.

[v] Joes (1996), p.3.

[vi] Beckett (2001), p. vii; Mackinlay (2009), p. 15.

[vii] Beckett (2001), p. vii; Mackinlay (2009), p. 15; Fall (1998). p. 47.

[viii] Kiras (2007), p. 168.

[ix] Katzenbach & Hanraham (1962), pp. 138-139.

[x] Kilcullen (2009), p. xxviii.

[xi] Laqueur (1998), p. 100.

[xii] Selig & Skaggs (1991), p. 27; Schmitt (2007), p. xi.

[xiii] Laqueur (1998), p. 135; Sarti (2004), p. 153.

[xiv] Recchia & Urbinati (2009), p. 24.

[xv] Harrison (2004), p. 266.

[xvi] Beckett (2001), p. 15.

[xvii] Hahlweg (1986), pp. 130-131.

[xviii] Asprey (1994), pp. 94-95.

[xix] Asprey (1994), pp. 94-95.

[xx] Liebenberg (2005), pp. 148-149.

[xxi] Billington (2009), p. 171.

[xxii] Chrzanowski (1995), p. 10.

[xxiii] Laqueur (1998), p. 136.

[xxiv] *Ibid*.. p. 150.

[xxv] Emmerich (1789), p. 5.

[xxvi] Grenkevich (1999), p. 2.

[xxvii] Callwell (1906), p. 25.

[xxviii] Ibrahim (2004), p. 114.

[xxix] *Ibid.,* p. 115.

[xxx] Beckett (2001), p. 14.

[xxxi] Guevara, Loveman & Davies (1997), p. 7.

[xxxii] *Ibid.*

[xxxiii] Fishman (1970), p. 80.

[xxxiv] Beckett (2001), p. 15.

[xxxv] *Ibid*.

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