



## Relevance of Guerrilla warfare in 21st Century

Dr. AJAB SINGH,

“Assistant Professor of Defence Studies of CRM Jat College Hisar”

**Abstract:** Guerrilla warfare is not a new phenomenon and history is witness to its repeated occurrence. In the modern era, it acquired prominence during the Napoleonic Wars which led to an examination of its role by leading nineteenth-century thinkers including Clausewitz, Jomini, Marx and Engels. Over the course of the subsequent century, the concept and practice of guerrilla warfare was integrated within social, economic and political programmes that aimed to overthrow established authority and transform society through an armed struggle. The link that was forged in the mid-nineteenth century by Italian and Polish revolutionaries like Carlo Bianco and Mazzini achieved fruition in the writings and practice of Mao Tse-Tung in the twentieth century. This paper traces such conceptualizations of guerrilla warfare.

**Keywords:** Guerrilla warfare, phenomenon and history, Napoleonic Wars which, revolutionary war, armament.

**Introduction:** It is thus generally employed: by small bands of irregulars fighting a superior invading army or to weaken the latter's hold over conquered territory; by a weaker side, or as a supplementary means in a conventional war; and in the preliminary stages of a revolutionary war that aims at overthrowing the existing political authority. Guerrilla strategy is determined by the rebels' weakness in relation to the superior military forces that they confront. Since weakness precludes a direct trial of strength in open battle, guerrillas necessarily aim at denying military victory to their opponents. The guerrilla strategy of denial does not aim at control over territory. Instead, hit-and-run operations and ambushes are carried out to loosen state control over territory and population. Consequently, the armament needs of guerrillas are limited to light weapons. Guerrilla warfare is thus relatively cheap to wage, though it is rather expensive to counter. The guerrilla's goal is to impose costs on the adversary in terms of loss of soldiers, supplies, infrastructure, peace of mind, and most importantly, time. In other words, guerrilla war is designed “to destroy not the capacity but the will” of the adversary.

**An Adjunct to Conventional War:** Guerrilla warfare emerged as a major phenomenon in the study of war in the aftermath of the Spanish-Portuguese guerrilla operations against French occupation forces in the first decade of the nineteenth century. Since in the overall analysis these rebel operations were seen as a comparatively minor component of the Napoleonic Wars, post-war analysts tended to view guerrilla warfare as merely an adjunct to conventional war or as part of a national uprising against a foreign invasion. Clausewitz, for example, thought of guerrilla warfare as an auxiliary to regular military forces in the context of resisting an invading army. Irregulars, in his view, should not be employed against any sizeable enemy force. Their aim is not to “pulverize the core but to nibble at the shell and around the edges.” They should be used outside the theatre of war, in order to deny the invader these areas. Clausewitz pictured partisans as “nebulous and elusive,” whose resistance “should never materialize as a concrete body.” Otherwise, an adequate regular force would be able to easily crush them. Jomini too located guerrilla warfare within the matrix of national uprisings against an invading army. In his view, the difficulties of an invading force were particularly great when the popular uprising is “supported by a nucleus of disciplined troops.” Without the support of a disciplined and regular army, popular uprisings would always be eventually suppressed.

Even the socialist pioneers, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, saw guerrilla operations only as an adjunct to conventional warfare. Reviewing the past, Marx noted that guerrilla bands were most successful while they remained small. Once they began aping a regular army, they were frequently defeated. Engels, on his part, concluded that guerrilla warfare did not have much of a future. Given the modern military system of skirmishes along an extended line, behind which stood support groups and reserves, as well as the tactics of concentrating troops against a common target, guerrillas faced certain defeat. The only condition in which even large armies will not be able to make rapid progress is when popular resistance has been awakened. Even then, guerrilla war can succeed only in conjunction with the operations of regular forces.

**An Aspect of Small Wars:** While the ‘long peace’ established itself over Europe in the aftermath of the Congress of Vienna (1815), major European powers set about parcelling out among themselves vast areas in Asia and Africa.<sup>9</sup> Given the superiority of European arms, any resistance against colonial conquest had to necessarily adopt irregular tactics. Experience in some of these campaigns led a young British artillery officer, Captain Charles Callwell, to write an essay on what he termed ‘Small Wars’.

**Guerrilla Warfare as an Exact Science!** The next landmark in the conceptual evolution was T. E. Lawrence's articulation that some factors, if pursued along certain lines, guerrilla warfare could be proved an exact science.<sup>14</sup> The factors that Lawrence had in mind were: an unassailable guerrilla base, a regular opposing army of limited strength with the task of controlling a wide area and a sympathetic population. What the guerrillas themselves needed in these circumstances were speed and endurance, independent lines of supply as well as technical equipment to paralyse the opponent's lines of communications. “Granted mobility, security (in the form of denying targets to the enemy), time, and doctrine (the idea to convert every subject to friendliness), victory will rest with the insurgents.

His very first contact with the rebels convinced Lawrence that they were not suitable for a European-style military drill



and, hence, for organization into regular units. Consequently, he envisaged a war of “dervishes against regular troops.” Given the absence of organized forces and, therefore, the capacity to destroy the Turkish Army in battle, the actual Arab goal must be “geographical, to extrude the Turk from all Arabic-speaking lands in Asia.” The way to achieve this was for the Arab irregulars to become “an influence, an idea, a thing intangible, invulnerable, without front or back, drifting about like a gas.”

Lawrence’s conceptualization also moved away from the notion of guerrilla warfare as a purely military phenomenon and laid far more stress on the political dimensions of such conflicts. Only a third of guerrilla warfare, in his view, was a military problem. And the nature of even this ‘technical’ aspect “depended fundamentally on the political two-thirds.”

**A Component of Revolution:** Insurrection was central to nineteenth-century revolutionary doctrine. Though its technique was not fully fleshed out at that time, advocates of ‘Revolution’ made important contributions in this regard. Chief among them were Italian and Polish radicals, who discussed the guerrilla warfare doctrine in the context of the most effective politico-military approach to attain national liberation and unification.

In contrast, it would be quite easy for them to mobilise two million Italians for a people’s war. Guerrilla units, in his view, should comprise only between ten and fifty rebels in the early stages of the struggle. Any larger force would be vulnerable to enemy military action and infiltration. Sustained guerrilla warfare would develop, over time, into a true people’s war involving all sections of society. In the later stages of the war, flying columns and eventually a regular army would be formed. Since the aim was not just limited to independence but also included the constitution of Italy as a ‘republic’, he foresaw a transitional period of revolutionary terror and the purge or even extermination of all internal enemies in liberated areas.

When the ‘Revolution’ finally succeeded in Russia in 1917, guerrilla warfare did not play a significant role. But Lenin’s pre-Revolution writings did envisage a protracted struggle organized under the strict control of the Communist Party. Combat, in his view, would assume numerous forms: selective terror through assassinations, confiscation of money from government and private persons as well as demonstrations, strikes and street fighting. Guerrilla warfare is “an inevitable form of struggle at a time when the mass movement has actually reached the point of an uprising and when fairly large intervals occur between the ‘big engagements’ in the civil war.” But guerrilla warfare is not the only or even the chief method of the struggle. It must be subordinated to other methods and “be ennobled by the enlightening and organizing influence of socialism.”

Mao’s ideas on Revolution rested on three essential principles: the decisive role of military forces; the importance of rural base areas; and the protracted character of the struggle.<sup>22</sup> Guerrilla warfare was an important element in Mao’s scheme which is employed by a nation inferior in arms and equipment. But it is only one aspect of the revolutionary struggle and by itself cannot achieve total success. It is not an end in itself and, therefore, cannot be divorced from the operations of regular forces. While guerrilla operations may temporarily become ‘paramount’ in the whole context of the war, regular forces are ‘of primary importance.’ For, only the latter are capable of ‘producing the decision.’ Guerrilla warfare can, of course, assist regular forces in producing this favorable decision. Thus, while it must be promoted as “a necessary strategically auxiliary to orthodox operations,” guerrilla warfare must not be assigned the primary position in the overall military strategy. Nor must it be substituted for “mobile and positional warfare as conducted by orthodox forces.” But Mao laced his analysis with the caveat that under specific conditions, guerrilla warfare can “develop and assume orthodox characteristics.”

Guerrilla operations must flow from a clearly defined political goal, which, in turn, must coincide with the aspirations of the people. If people’s support and assistance are not gained, guerrilla warfare will fail. Guerrilla warfare also cannot contribute to victory if it is unorganized.<sup>26</sup> The importance of the political factor led Mao to articulate the concept of the three unities, namely, political activities as applied first to the troops, next to the people, and lastly to the enemy. What these got translated into were three fundamental actions: ‘spiritual unification’ of officers and men within the Red Army, ‘spiritual unification’ of the Red Army and the people, and ‘destruction of the unity of the enemy.’

Urban guerrilla warfare emerged as an alternative strategy among Latin American revolutionaries in the late 1960s after rural guerrilla operations failed to bring about Revolutions in the continent. Many advocates of urban guerrilla operations, like Guillermo Lora, the Bolivian Trotskyite leader, for instance, felt that guerrillas were essentially an alien body in the countryside. When guerrillas spoke to the rural populace, they could not be sure whether the latter were ridiculing them. For, they were largely city-bred people with middle or upper class origins who had difficulty in adapting to the hard life of the countryside and in identifying themselves with the peasants. Guevara went so far as to write that the peasants “were impenetrable like stones.”

**A New Conceptualization for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?** An important feature of guerrilla warfare infused with revolutionary principles, was the involvement of citizens of other countries in what were essentially national struggles. Che Guevara was a prominent figure during the Cold War who was born an Argentinian but played a significant role in the Cuban Revolution and, subsequently, died while attempting to bring about a communist revolution in Bolivia. This phenomenon reached its zenith during the jihad that the United States helped to foster against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan which saw the incongruous assembly of religious-minded Muslim youth from across the world. The consequences of incongruity came



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home to the United States in the form of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. But many other countries—from Russia to India and from Algeria to the Philippines—have also had to bear the fallout wafted from the Afghan battlefield. With the recent turn of the United States towards an ‘imperial’ policy, one can foresee the re-emergence of classical guerrilla warfare as a means employed by less powerful countries when faced with actual or planned US military intervention. This phenomenon was on display, albeit in a modest manner, during the recently concluded ‘Operation Iraqi Freedom’. From the perspective of the United States, of course, these could be termed as Small Wars, a phenomenon Britain and other imperial powers had to grapple with earlier in the decades before the First World War. US success or failure in other potential target countries would determine whether history is written from the perspective of Small Wars or from that of a born-again guerrilla movement.

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- For example, the budget of the FLN (Front de la Libération Nationale) rebels in Algeria was about US \$30 to 40 million a year, which amount the French spent in less than two weeks. Cited in Walter Laqueur, *Guerrilla Warfare: A Historical and Critical Study*. 1986edn. Transaction Publishers; New Brunswick/London. p. 379.
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- For the sake of coherence, this subsection and the following one on T. E. Lawrence have been placed before the articulations of nineteenth century European revolutionaries. Evolution, it should be borne in mind here, is anyway not a linear progression.
- It generated so much comment that he expanded it over the course of the next eleven years into a book.