



# SMALL WARS JOURNAL

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smallwarsjournal.com

August 24, 2010

## Deep Inside the Insurgent's Mind:

*Past the Motorcycle Diaries towards understanding Che Gueverra*

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The second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was dominated by the Cold War; however, partisan warfare, guerrilla warfare, brush-fire wars, civil wars, rebellions and insurgencies – what British Major General Charles Callwell<sup>1</sup> summarizes as “small wars” – continued to proliferate throughout the world. Western militaries focused almost exclusively on preparing for high intensity, technologically advanced warfare. Meanwhile, the study of insurgencies and the development of counter-insurgency (COIN) doctrine essentially came to a halt. Since 2001, the protracted wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have once again brought the study and development of counter-insurgency principles and doctrine back to the forefront of Western military thought<sup>2</sup>. For the most part, these “new counter-insurgency doctrines”<sup>3</sup> have been based on the works of theorists like the Frenchmen Bernard Fall<sup>4</sup>, David Galula<sup>5</sup> and Roger Trinquier<sup>6</sup>, the American John J. McCuen<sup>7</sup>, or the Englishmen Frank Kitson<sup>8</sup> and Robert Thompson<sup>9</sup>. Although these works are valuable resources, they focus primarily on the American, English, French and even

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1 Charles Callwell, Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice, 1896.

2 See Colonel (US Army) Robert M. Cassidy, Counter-Insurgency and the Global War on Terror, Stanford University Press, 2008.

3 The most known is the American Field Manual 3.24 but NATO developed its own AJP 3.4.4 and France its Forces Terrestres 13 (FT13). Colombia also developed the very interesting FF.MM.3.10 ‘*Reglamento de Operaciones en Combate Irregular*’.

4 Bernard Fall was a prominent war correspondent, historian, political scientist and expert on Indochina and Vietnam during the 1950s and 1960s. His most famous and important book is Street without Joy, 1961.

5 Lieutenant-colonel in the French Army, David Galula became an expert in counter-insurgency by observing the wars in China and in the Philippines during several appointments in South-East Asia, in Greece, but also by taking part to the war in Algeria. He gathered all his knowledge in his book Counterinsurgency, Theory and Practice, published in English in 1964 and considered as the reference in that domain. General Petraeus even qualified him once as the ‘Clausewitz’ of counter-insurgency.

6 Officer in the airborne infantry and the Special Forces, Colonel Roger Trinquier wrote Modern Warfare in 1961 based upon his own experience in Indochina and mainly in Algeria as an airborne battalion commander.

7 Former officer in the US Army and director of the Internal Defense and Development course at both the Vietnamese National Defence in Saigon and the US Army War College, Colonel John J. McCuen wrote his book The Art of Counter-Revolutionary War in 1966.

8 Major General Frank Kitson acquired a concrete experience of irregular warfare in Malaysia, Kenya, Cyprus, Oman and Yemen. He published in 1971 Low-Intensity Operations, Subversion, Insurgency and Peace Keeping.

9 As a British officer, Robert Thompson took part to the counter-insurgency war in Malaysia and ended his career as the head of the British Advisory Mission in Vietnam. Specialist of the Maoist revolutionary war, he later became President Nixon’s special advisor on the Vietnam war. He wrote a trilogy composed of Defeating Communist Insurgency in 1966, No Exit from Vietnam in 1969 and the famous Revolutionary War in World Strategy (1945-1969) in 1970.

sometimes the Soviet counter-insurgency experiences and perspectives<sup>10</sup>. The shortfall of these works is that they fail to examine the insurgency from the point of view of the insurgent.

As every soldier or strategist knows, one must "turn the map around" and view the situation from the enemy's perspective. One must understand and anticipate his opponent's most likely courses of action in order to defeat him. As such, it is very interesting to try to enter into the mind of an insurgent to understand how an insurgency is conceived, developed, and led on "the other side". Of even greater interest and value, given the insurgencies currently being fought in Iraq and Afghanistan, is to choose to study insurgents who won their fights within the last six decades. The number of insurgents that fit this criteria are relatively small, with the most famous being Mao Zedong, who defeated the Chinese nationalists to seize power (1949), Võ N'Guyen Giap, who served as Hô Chi Minh's strategist against the French (1954) and the Americans (1975), and finally Che Guevara, who took a prominent role in the rise to power of Fidel Castro in Cuba (1959).

In analysing the publications produced by each of these insurgents, the works of Che Guevara, and particularly his book Guerrilla Warfare<sup>11</sup>, stand-out as an excellent "guidebook" to the mind of an insurgent. Indeed, after the victorious Cuban campaign of the late 1950's led by Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, it was Guevara's goal to publish and widely disseminate what he considered to be the best rules and practices to ensure victory to any insurgency. Due to the influence and impact of Guevara's book, it is now considered by counter-insurgency theorists to have an equal place of importance next to the revolutionary doctrines of Mao<sup>12</sup>. As a result, the study of Che Guevara's Guerrilla Warfare is extremely pertinent because it clearly lays out the keys to weaken, discredit, and ultimately defeat - sometimes before it has really even started - an insurgency.

Before delving into Guevara's insurgency theories found in Guerrilla Warfare in the second part of this article and before identifying in a third and last part what are the weaknesses of his theories and what can be useful for a counter-insurgency force to defeat an insurgency, one must first put this book into context by remembering, without any political or ideological blindness, who Che Guevara was and what he did. This will allow the reader to avoid any preconceptions and to concentrate only on his theories and their usefulness in modern counter-insurgency warfare. That's the aim of the first part of this article.

## ***Background***

*"I have never been a moderate, and I will try never to be one."* -Che Guevara

Ernesto Guevara was born in Argentina on June 14, 1928. He was the eldest of five children in a middle-class family of Spanish-Irish descent. As he was heavily asthmatic, he did not go to school and was taught at home. While growing up, he was instilled with a leftist ideology that continued to influence him throughout his lifetime. For example, in 1937, his father created a committee in support of the Spanish Republic and was considered a radical opponent of General Peron's regime.

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10 For that last experience, see the books The Bear Went over the Mountain and The Other Side of the Mountain: Mujahideen Tactics in the Soviet-Afghan War, written by Lester Grau.

11 La Guerra de Guérillas, first publication 1962.

12 See B. H. Liddell Hart, Foreword to Mao Tse Tung and Che Guevara: Guerilla Warfare, Cassel, 1962.

As a student of medicine, he dedicated himself to the service of those less fortunate by serving in a city medical clinic. He also traveled extensively during this time period. Before obtaining his medical degree in 1952, he served as a medical assistant on an oil tanker between 1945 and 1951. He then travelled across South America on his motorcycle from 1951-1952. Influenced by his Marxist-oriented readings and the tremendous poverty he observed during these travels, he became convinced that the only viable solution to end the social inequalities within South America was armed revolution. He also started to consider Latin America not as a group of independent nations but as a global economic and cultural entity which needed a “continental strategy of liberation”. This Bolivarian vision of a united South America, without borders and sharing a mixed culture, became a recurrent theme of his revolutionary activities.

In 1953, Guevara again travelled around South and Central America. During the summer, he took part in the revolution led in Bolivia by the Revolutionary Nationalist Movement; however, he quickly left, angered by the persisting racial inequalities. In December 1953, he arrived in Guatemala where President Arbenz led a populist government that attempted through various reforms, particularly land reform, and sometimes by bloody means, to bring about a social revolution. The overthrow of the Arbenz government by a CIA-backed coup d'état in 1954, cemented his view of the United States as an imperialist power that would consistently oppose governments attempting to address the socioeconomic inequalities endemic to Latin America and other developing countries. Guevara took his new found combat experience, gained while fighting alongside Arbenz's partisans during the coup d'état, and moved to Mexico when his friends lost their fight.

In July 1955, while living in Mexico City, he was introduced to Fidel Castro and was captivated by his charismatic personality. He then joined Castro's movement where he eventually served as a doctor during the revolutionary expedition organized by Castro to overthrow Batista's dictatorship. In June 1956, he was imprisoned for one month with his Cuban comrades. In November 1956, he left Mexico for Cuba on the boat *Granma* with 81 Cuban revolutionaries whose objective was to depose Batista by organizing a revolution on the island. They disembark in Cuba on 2 December. They were quickly spotted by the security forces and were forced to scatter before gathering again at the end of December in the mountains. On January 17, 1957, the revolutionaries won their first victory by assaulting and occupying a Cuban army compound.

Leading 148 men, “el Che” as he was nicknamed by his friends (Guevara ends all his sentences by this Argentinean interpellation which is usually used in South-America to name the Argentines), operated in the Sierra Maestra region and won the decisive battle of Santa Clara on December 30, 1958. This battle provoked the fall of Batista. On January 2, 1959, Che Guevara entered Havana while Fidel Castro entered Santiago of Cuba. Victory assured, he then became the main instigator of the bloody purges within the Cuban administration and later the population. He was also responsible for the installation of a socialist economy in Cuba.

Guevara's experience in Cuba strongly shaped his concept of guerrilla warfare. He then developed his main concept - the *foco* theory<sup>13</sup>. This theory was based on the idea that the population was oppressed by capitalism. As such, its main principle was to mobilize and launch,

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<sup>13</sup>Che Guevara is considered the father of this theory. However, this theory was mainly formalized after his death in the book Strategy for Revolution by the French philosopher Regis Debray who fought alongside Guevara in Bolivia.

as soon as possible, attacks from rural areas with small, armed, fast-moving paramilitary groups primarily composed of peasants. The purpose of these attacks was to be able to provide a focus (in Spanish, *foco*) for popular discontent against a sitting regime, and thereby lead a general insurrection. As he wrote himself “*it is not necessary to wait for the fulfilment of all conditions for a revolution because the focus of insurrection can create them*”.

After holding several ministerial and diplomatic posts in the new Cuban regime, Guevara returned to his travels and spent time in the USSR, China, Algeria and North Korea. His travels only reinforce his theory that a socialist revolution through armed conflict was the only way to improve the quality of life of workers. He then returned to fight in Africa where he took part in the civil war in Congo. On November 3, 1966, he arrived in Bolivia to lead the revolutionary guerrillas. Wounded and then captured on October 8, 1967, he was executed on the 9<sup>th</sup> by the CIA-backed government forces. The execution and all traces of it were suppressed for the next 20 years as he was reported as killed in action against government forces.

As a war theorist, Che Guevara's theories very closely resemble the Maoist concept of revolution based on the countryside. The theory being that the countryside is used to encircle the cities, both from a tactical (peasants are the basis of the insurrection) and a strategic point of view (rural areas of the world like Asia, Africa or South America encircle the cities of the world represented by North America and Western Europe). He also shares with Mao the idea of a three-phased shaping of a revolution. The first phase is a defensive phase dedicated to the creation of the core of the rebel movement. During the second phase, the guerrilla warfare commences. And, during the third and final phase, the now strong insurgent forces can abandon guerrilla warfare to conduct conventional warfare operations. In fact, it is Guevara's *foco* theory that sets him apart from Mao. Guevara believed with conviction that phase one could be very short, that the second phase must start as soon as possible in order to be most effective, and that the third phase is not compulsory as long as the guerrillas obtain sufficient results during the second phase.

As a politician, he must be replaced within his very extreme Marxist vision of social relationships: he wants the physical elimination of the leading social class and voluntarily lies when he describes the capitalist social organization. In 1964, he even designates North-Korea as a reference to be copied; that shows how hard-line his ideology is.

On the same level the clement position regarding legalist prisoners and casualties he develops (and that is presented later) must be put in perspective with the cruelty he displayed during the fights he led and later during the conduct of the Cuban purges. As the supreme procurator of the Cuban Revolutionary Court, he ordered between 150 and 550 summary executions and later, as the minister of industry he created forced labour camps.

However, Che Guevara became, after his death, an emblem for all the Marxist revolutionary movements worldwide. But he still remained controversial because of the purges he organized as well as the executions he directly ordered or performed. Thus, extremist and idealistic, Che Guevara is not a neutral character. He embodies a certain vision of the romantic ‘guerillero’ and the content of his books contributes to the building of his image of a “white knight” defending the oppressed against the oppressors.

Guerrilla Warfare, like all the books of Che Guevara, must then be seen as a propaganda work which aims to attract people to the Marxist ideology. However, as a student of Mao as well as Sun-Tzu and Clausewitz, Che Guevara established himself as a revolutionary war theorist,

outlining in his books systemic rules and generic structures suited to revolutionary war. Thus his work is of interest to a modern army in spite of its political agendas, sometimes blatant propaganda, and several subsequent failures by others to apply the *foco* theory, this precise point being developed later in that article.

### ***Che Guevara's Guerrilla Warfare Vision***

Written from 1961-1962, Guerrilla Warfare is a synopsis of Guevara's theoretic and practical experiences during the Cuban revolutionary war. This book consolidates the analysis and lessons learned by Guevara himself, in order to build a "how to" book that can be used by any oppressed people in order to start an insurrection. His main goal is to prove that guerrillas can win a war. To do that, Guevara divided his book into three parts going from the top of his theory (his strategic vision) to the bottom (handbooks about particular subjects) through his view of its tactical implementation. Roughly these three parts can be presented as follows:

- The general principles of guerrilla warfare (strategic vision)
- The leadership of guerrilla warfare (tactical implementation)
- Practical guidelines (handbooks)

#### ***The General Principles of Guerrilla Warfare (Strategic Vision)***

In this mostly theoretical part of his book, Che Guevara explains what he believes to be the necessary conditions to win a guerrilla war, and presents what can be considered a true insurgency doctrine. According to him, guerrilla warfare is most of time just a step leading to conventional warfare, the only form of warfare able to give victory. All his theory is based on this idea and organized along four points:

**1) The population is the heart of the fight.** Without its support, any insurgency is condemned to fail. It is then mandatory to gain its support by making the people understand that a legal fight is no longer possible or useful. In that goal, it is essential to define a unifying objective and to permanently promote it by all means, as well as to maintain an exemplary behaviour within the revolutionary fighters. Thus Guevara lauds the total respect of the enemies: casualties and prisoners may even be liberated in certain cases; and the dead ones must be treated with respect and must receive simple funerals when possible.

**2) Propaganda is an essential weapon.** Guevara wrote that "*the irrefutable truth that the people cannot be defeated must be propagated*". To complement the promotion of a final objective which aims to rally the population, Che Guevara explains that revolutionary and legalist forces must systematically be compared regarding their courses of action (David vs. Goliath) and their behaviour (liberation vs. repression) in order to win the support of the population and to make the enemy lose credibility. That's the reason why Guevara rejects terrorism, considering it counter-productive because it provokes a peak of fierce repression against the revolutionary forces and may alienate any support from the civilians.

**3) Surprise is the key of tactical success.** Due to the asymmetrical means of government forces and the guerrilla, Che Guevara puts action by surprise at the very center of his strategy. According to him, night action is its basis and aggressiveness and mobility its means. These factors are reinforced by the fact that a conventionally structured army struggles to go

outside of the “classical” schemes of combat. The aim is to permanently harass the government forces to create a psychosis and a protracted feeling of impotence, making them think that winning is impossible.

**4) Terrain is a main factor of the fight.** Guevara considers difficult terrain to be the place where an insurgency must first develop because a conventional army will have difficulties moving while the guerrillas will be able to easily hide themselves. This kind of terrain allows the creation of safe heavens and lines of communications and supply routes. During the fight, the use of terrain is also very important: in favorable terrain (i.e. difficult) a guerrilla will rely on surprise and numbers and in an unfavourable terrain (i.e. open, accessible) he will rely on instantaneous firepower and mobility. Finally, Guevara clearly banishes military operations in urban terrain as too costly and limiting for a guerrilla.

### *The Leadership of Guerrilla Warfare*

In this part of his book, Guevara explains how to implement his strategy at a tactical level. This implementation is organized around four factors. Combat is the most important of these factors and a whole paragraph is dedicated to it. The four factors are as follows:

**1) General organization.** Che Guevara considers it imperative to have a charismatic leader because he can unite and organize his movement or embody his fight. Regarding pure organization, he rejects the distinction between a political and a military structure and recommends the maximum decentralization of the freedom of action within a determined and known objective. Concretely, he considers that the best insurgency structures are groups of 150 men owning a battle space and in which autonomous teams of 8 to 10 men are the basic acting cell. In this structure, every military chief at every level is also the political leader of his unit.

**2) The fighter’s training.** Guevara defines the training of the fighters as a key factor for success because of the clandestine aspect of a guerrilla and the weakness of his means, at least initially. This training must be physical demanding in order to match the needs of a continually moving and isolated fight in rough terrain. It must also develop the moral and political base of the guerrilla to maintain confidence within the movement and develop the sense of initiative. Guerrillas must receive in-depth weapons training focused on accurate and well-disciplined fires. Moreover, the leaders must receive tactical training to be able to plan their operations.

**3) The conduct of the campaign.** Instructed strategist and tactician, Che Guevara was a strong believer in the well-known “oil spot” technique. According to him, being clandestine, a group comes and stays in a defined zone, leads propaganda and armed actions in it, then wins the support of the population and pulls the legalist forces out of it. This allows this group to then establish administrative, social, and training structures before heading to another zone. This is the core of his *foco* theory: to create the conditions of a revolution by establishing rebel areas whose success will inspire other regions to join the movement.

**4) Combat.** If combat is the heart of a guerrilla, it was not Guevara's goal to describe it in detail in his book. He merely isolates a few basic principles linked with common sense and proven practice. Within these principles figure the systematic use of covering and deceiving actions, the need to always improve a defensive position and to act at night, the recommendation of ambush as the usual course of action, the destruction of the enemy vanguards and the

intermingling with their troops to avoid air-strikes. These principles are generic but fundamental.

### ***Practical Guidelines***

After the presentation of his strategic and tactical visions of guerrilla warfare, the author uses the third part of his book to transition from theory to practical "how to" information for the guerrilla - small practical handbooks for 'guerilleros'. The themes of these handbooks are sustainment, civil organization, the place of women in the fight, health, sabotage, war industry, propaganda, intelligence and training. Because this section of the book is more oriented on the practical aspects of guerrilla warfare than the two previous parts of the book, it is less interesting for a military reader who is already well-aware of these points. However, the following three points deserve to be underlined:

**1) The civil organization of the guerrilla.** When Guevara speaks about the civil organization, he doesn't refer to the political structure in charge of the insurgent movement. For him, this political structure can't be separated from the military structure, as it has been said before. The civil organization he speaks of is in the first instance in charge of organizing agricultural and industrial means working for the guerrillas and in a second instance in charge of ruling current life. This civil organization is subordinated to the political-military structure defining its action.

**2) Sabotage.** As it was mentioned previously, Guevara rejects blind terrorism because he considers it as an inferior and unproductive stage of the war. However, he recommends the use of sabotage which is for targeted terrorism against infrastructure. If in the government's mind these courses of action are very similar, the distinction is very important in an insurgent's propaganda which wishes to avoid losing the support of the population by degrading its image.

**3) Propaganda.** Guevara places a great deal of emphasis on the importance of propaganda. It is a matter for everyone involved in the insurgency movement. It starts with the exemplary behavior of the guerrilla in the areas it controls and goes to the image of the movement toward the International Community. To organize that capacity, the author proposes to create an "internal" office in charge of diffusing messages within the guerrilla force (its members) and its controlled areas (population's support). In addition, he recommends the use of an "external" office, out of the country, in order to gain international support.

Finally, Che Guevara concludes his book by emphasizing the very sensitive transition period which follows the seizure of power. It is at this critical moment, when the guerrilla movement must prove that is capable of running a legitimate government. The failure to provide basic services, security, and re-establish order can lead to a massive rejection by the population.

### ***Usefulness for the Conduct of a Counterinsurgency Campaign.***

Guevara's Guerrilla Warfare, at the same time doctrine and practical handbook, is a reference for anyone who is interested in counter-insurgency warfare. Indeed, after having determined the most relevant theories and concepts developed by Che Guevara, a reader can then identify the weaknesses of these theories and concepts. He can then develop a plan to target these weaknesses in order to defeat an insurgency.

### *The Weaknesses of Guevara's Theories*

In his book, Guevara wants to establish the Cuban revolution and the *foco* theory as a model to be universally followed to lead an insurgency to victory. History now shows that several different attempts to duplicate this model were sometimes catastrophic failures - in Congo and Bolivia for example. However, these failures don't necessarily prove the ineffectiveness of Guevara's theory, they merely show that some pre-conditions are required for the theory to be effective. As Guevara later wrote about Congo, these failures were not specifically linked to the use of this model but also to "*the ineptitude, the intransigence and the internal rivalries of the Congolese rebels*"<sup>14</sup>. However, if this position properly diminishes his responsibilities, it mustn't hide the following weaknesses of his theories:

**1) The control of the population is often gained by force because a political objective isn't sufficient to rally her.** As General Thompson wrote: "*the control of the population depends on methods which include intimidation and terror. Intimidation and terror, if used by [the insurgency] too harshly and indiscriminately, may back-fire and rally all the uncommitted sections of the population to the government*"<sup>15</sup>. Subject to his leftist ideology, Guevara ignores this point and builds his theory as if Marxism is the incontrovertible cement that will guarantee the support of the civilian population. As an example, he presents the support he received from the Cuban population, who wanted Batista to leave power, as if it was a complete adherence to the political project of Cuban revolutionaries. With a conscious ideological goal, he then develops a propaganda vision based primarily upon seduction and voluntarily dismisses the fact that the population was not compulsorily supporting a Marxist insurgency. Finally, Guevara lost his life and brought disaster to his followers in Bolivia partly because he insisted on basing his campaign there on a cause – revolution throughout South America – which did not command popular support in Bolivia. As noted by General Thompson, this political blindness hurts his theories for two major reasons, both of which can actually weaken an insurgent's position as the struggle for population starts:

- Firstly, from an insurgent point of view, Guevara never speaks about controlling the population by constraints and threats – which is a major reality of every insurgency and happened often in Cuba from 1957-1959 – and about the different ways to manage such activities in order to limit their damages and disadvantages for the revolutionary movement.
- Secondly, as a consequence of this first omission, Guevara leaves his theories wide open to government's actions that could discredit the insurgency. He fails to discuss how to conduct defensive information operations in order to ensure that the revolution does not lose popular support when "harsh techniques" are applied to control a non-compliant portion of the population.

**2) Intelligence is a necessity which is not discussed.** An insurgency gathers intelligence concerning the operations and plans of government forces via the population and its own knowledge of the terrain and environment. However, the lack of structured planning to organize intelligence actions is also a major weakness of Che Guevara's strategy. By omitting guidance concerning intelligence collection and planning, the insurgency is forced to react to

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14 The African Dream: the Diaries of the Revolutionary War in the Congo.

15 Revolutionary War in World Strategy (1945-1969).



government forces instead of anticipating and planning operations based upon solid intelligence. The two key take-aways are as follows:

- Guevara doesn't describe how to conduct an "offensive" intelligence campaign to collect information on government forces (i.e. the ongoing planning processes, the force structure, the force lay down...), to collect precise data for targeting operations (sabotage, assassination of leaders...), or even to block the government intelligence.
- Inversely, Guevara also doesn't present "defensive" intelligence operations to be led by an insurgency to protect itself. He never speaks about the infiltration of government intelligence agents within the rebel movement and their possible consequences on its organisation (permanent internal suspicion, purges) and its operations, ultimately leading to the loss of the crucial element of surprise.

**3) Combat in urban area is rejected.** It is well-known at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century that urban areas represent privileged terrain for insurgencies. These areas allow insurgents to draw attention to their cause by committing spectacular and media-related bombings. Urban terrain also greatly reduces the risk to insurgents as the technical and firepower advantages of conventional armies are negated in this type of environment. Even if the population was less urban in the late 1950s than now, and if Guevara adhered to Mao's vision of the importance of countryside in a revolution, this doesn't completely explain his rejection of combat in urban areas. However, it is feasible that Guevara considered the risk of collateral damage in urban areas to great to be beneficial to a revolution, ultimately alienating the population. Guevara preferred to focus his efforts on the countryside where the guerrillas could manoeuvre, where there were numerous safe havens, and where the insurgency could gather intelligence about the movements of government forces from a distance. Moreover, as his *foco* theory recommends launching the second phase of the insurgency as soon as possible, at his time, this was very difficult to do in urban areas where the government forces were traditionally present, well organized, and thus more able to quickly dismantle any underground movement before it really got started. Finally, it appears that Che Guevara was very impressed by the huge failure of the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) against the French Army during the battle of Algiers in 1957, only three years before he wrote his book<sup>16</sup>. Thus, although somewhat surprising considering the efficiency of the modern urban guerrillas, one can better understand why Guevara ruled out this type of warfare at his time.

In summary, the three major weaknesses of Guevara's theory represent significant gaps that can be exploited by a counter-insurgency force. Even if one discounts the third weakness, the rejection of urban combat, as solely a sign of the times, the lack of intelligence planning and information operations can be targeted in a counter-insurgency campaign.

### ***Tools to Fight an Insurgency***

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<sup>16</sup>The battle of Algiers was a campaign of guerrilla warfare and terrorism carried out by the FLN between January and March 1957. The conflict began with a series of hit-and-run attacks against the French Police in Algiers and by five bombings causing 5 civilian dead and 34 civilian wounded (26<sup>th</sup> January). The French government deployed the 10<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division to suppress the FLN and civilian authorities left all prerogatives to his commanding officer, general Massu who successfully eliminated the FLN from Algiers. However, the use of torture triggered a huge controversy both in France and within the military.

As it has now been shown, contrary to conventional warfare, the approach of an insurgent involved in guerrilla warfare is very different. Thus, especially at a time when counter-insurgency is at the forefront of Western military thought, the study of Guevara's perspective is particularly interesting. Its study allows the reader to determine the main differences between the fight of the insurgent and the fight of government forces. From these differences one can then garner some practical lessons to fight against a guerrilla.

First of all, the more easily identifiable differences are linked to the military structures of these two organizations. Because of the need to be clandestine, the lack of support from the population, and unfavourable strength ratios, insurgencies must adopt flexible, light, and small structures. The efficiency of such an organization is then closely linked to the quality of the individual and the movement's collective training. This training must be relatively long in order to match these needs. This obliges the insurgent movement to create permanent training facilities.

Secondly, in spite of what Guevara writes to glorify and embellish his fight, the insurgents are not obliged to tell the truth and often use false propaganda. Similarly, as was noted earlier, they use the threat of violence against those portions of population who don't support them and often resort to the use terrorism, calling it "sabotage" instead. What Che Guevara presents in his book shows well what kind of lies he was ready to use as propaganda in order to reach his objectives (when he writes the book, the new Cuban regime is not yet recognized by all of the International Community). Only once in this book does he evoke, very briefly, reality by writing "*the greatness of the fight justifies the use of despicable courses of action.*"

### ***Lessons Learned***

An insurgency finds great strength in the ingenuity of its mean and the asymmetry of its organization and courses of action. In doing so, it inadvertently offers its enemies the opportunity to strike it with catastrophic blows and therefore to defeat it. There are four possible courses of action that can serve to weaken and discredit an insurgency. These courses of action are as follows:

**1) The use of public affairs as a tool of propaganda.** Acting like the insurgents but respecting the truth, a counter-insurgency force must develop its own "internal" and "external" propaganda – these are the words of Guevara. The support of the international community as well as the local population must be gained aggressively and systematically. The government must report and denounce insurgent crimes while highlighting government victories and acts to support and protect the population.

**2) Constant infiltration of enemy movements.** Facing a wily enemy who chooses where and when to strike, it is mandatory to be able to reduce the insurgent advantages gained from his use of terrain and surprise. To do this, one must weaken the insurgent movement from the inside. Indeed, the infiltration of the insurgency by government agents is very useful in order to:

- obtain intelligence about its actions and then counter those actions;
- target and neutralize its leadership;

- create an internal mistrust within the insurgency that can lead to purges and have significant negative consequences for the cohesion of the movement.

These two first points emphasize the importance of the cognitive fight, where perceptions, influence, and ideas are the weapons of this non-kinetic battle. As it was described by Colonel Roger Trinquier in his book Modern Warfare published in 1961, a counter-insurgent is facing in this instance the subversive part of the war. The importance of the part of the battle is at least equal to the kinetic fight. It naturally leads to the complementary use of conventional forces, Special Forces, and clandestine forces in order to fight on the whole spectrum of the counter-insurgency war.

**3) To consistently strike the enemy training facilities.** As it was shown earlier, formation and training are vital functions for the conduct of an insurgency. However, these activities require infrastructure which can be located, targeted, and destroyed. Such actions undermine the insurgency's attempt to "grow" it forces and lowers moral through the systematic destruction of enemy equipment and resources. This forces the insurgents into a state of exhaustion as they must remain constantly on the move, while reducing combat effectiveness by forcing the insurgency to shorten the training cycle of its new recruits.

**4) The absolute respect of ethical imperatives.** Last but not least, ethical behavior represents a cornerstone of success in counter-insurgency operations because it directly contributes to "win the hearts and minds" of the local inhabitants. It is then mandatory for government forces to keep their reputation as pristine as possible by developing a strong respect for internationally recognized human rights, the local population, and the local culture. The following are the four main areas of consideration when discussing ethical conduct during a counter-insurgency:

- to maintain links and good relationships with the populations and their leaders;
- *"to preserve noncombatant lives by limiting the damage the troops do and to assume additional risk to minimize potential harm"<sup>17</sup>*;
- to adapt the behavior of a unit to its given mission (combat, police, humanitarian...) – often very hard to do when the same unit must perform the full spectrum of these missions;
- to respect the prisoners and detainees, to treat them correctly in accordance with the internationally recognized human right and the national and international laws.

This last point clearly underlines the importance of the popular perception of the people concerning the ethical conduct of both government forces and the insurgents. Thus, in order to maintain the ethical high-ground, government forces must receive proper training and always act in a fair and just manner. In addition, when infractions are suspected by government forces, they must be thoroughly investigated and prosecuted if necessary.

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<sup>17</sup> FM 3-24, December 2006.

## Conclusion

After a long period dominated by the paradigm of a high intensity, very technological warfare, the study and conduct of counter-insurgencies has returned to the forefront of modern Western military thought. As part of this movement, the study of the theories of insurgents is mandatory both to understand them and to be able to efficiently fight them. As was shown, Che Guevara's book Guerrilla Warfare lays out in detail an insurgent theory from the strategic-level through the tactical-level. And even if Guevara's concepts are rather weak concerning the control of the population, intelligence planning, and combat in urban area, his work remains a major consideration for anyone studying counter-insurgency operations.

The traditional counter-insurgency principles underlying the Western doctrines are organized around three usual "lines of operations" - security, reconstruction and development, and governance. Along these lines, the aim of the counter-insurgent forces is to have an efficient action towards the public opinion – local and international –, the population, the enemy, and the political powers involved in the conflict. The study of the theories of Che Guevara complement these ideas by emphasizing four actions identified as significant to fight any insurgency. These actions are the use of public affairs as a tool of propaganda, the constant infiltration of enemy movements, the disruption or destruction of enemy training facilities, and the absolute respect of ethical imperatives. In a kind of war that can either be won very quickly at the outset or protracted for many years, these four actions must be led with a strong determination at the beginning of the campaign. This is the main lesson Che Guevara gives us by wanting to help future insurgency movements. Even if modern insurgencies are often based on religious ideologies, not social inequalities, this idea of crushing an insurgency before it can really even get started remains very relevant.

As a final conclusion, it clearly appears that the study of Che Guevara's Guerrilla Warfare is very useful for a Western officer, especially for those involved in Afghanistan. As General McChrystal wrote in his initial assessment: the insurgent *"groups coordinate activities loosely, often achieving significant unity of purpose and even some unity of effort, but they do not share a formal command-and-control structure. They also do not have a single overarching strategy or campaign plan. Each individual group, however, has specific strategy, develops annual plans, and allocates resources accordingly. Each group has its own methods of developing and executing these plans and each has adapted over time. [Their common] aim is to weaken the government by demonstrating its inability to provide security"*. By some aspects of conducting the war, the Afghan insurgency cluster is then very close to the *foco* theory. Thus, beyond the study of the books of David Galula or Roger Trinquier, which is now done in most of the general staff colleges both in Europe and North-America, Guevara's book truly does "turn the map around" by giving insurgency views and theories "through the eyes of an insurgent."

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