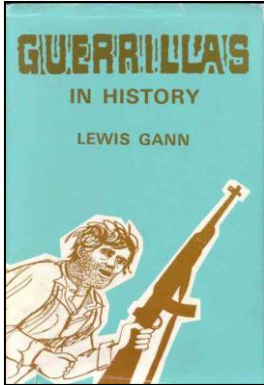




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## Book Review: *Guerrillas in History*

by Lewis H. Gann

Published by Hoover Institution Press, 1971, 99 pages, Stanford, CA. *Out of print*, ISBN: 081793281X

Reviewed by Mike Mourouzis

Guerrillas always win – at least that was the popular narrative that created an era of infatuation with guerrilla uprisings during the 1960s and 1970s. Consequently, Lewis Gann wrote his monograph on “small wars” to dispel the growing myth that partisan warfare was romantic or novel. His work, *Guerrillas in History*, follows guerrilla warfare from Biblical times to the book’s publishing in 1971. Gann describes the similarities of guerrilla warfare across time and details how guerrillas often lost, a relevant subject given today’s threat environment.

The author illustrates both successful and unsuccessful guerrilla wars in nearly every geography and culture. He chronicles partisan warfare from Maccabaeus in 166 B.C. through the twentieth century campaigns in Vietnam, Angola, and the Congo. He concludes that guerrilla warfare will remain protracted, violent, and will continue to challenge modern conventional militaries— an astute prediction forty years ago.

Gann provides insight on the specific conditions needed for successful guerrilla wars including assistance from regular forces, geographic sanctuary, an opponent’s broken will, and the means to effectively administer the civilian population. He finds that the most common factor for guerrilla victory is an opponent’s loss of resolve. A protracted war, like the Viet Minh’s against the French in Indochina, could break the will of a country fighting far from home. Even today, expensive and bloody guerrilla wars are often aimed at the slow attrition of both the opponents’ fighting forces and national will.

He also highlights that guerrillas were often unsuccessful. Isolation from their support bases frequently produced failed insurrections. In urban areas, partisans found it difficult to maintain constant guerrilla operations, and almost always failed without widespread rural backing. However, rural campaigns were also regularly defeated. Gann recounts how the failed rural Moroccan rebellion against Spanish and French forces in the 1920s served as a lesson for Mao later in China. Logistics were also critical to the guerrillas’ survival. The British counter-guerrilla campaign during the Boer War illustrated how guerrilla operations suffered greatly from diminishing supplies. Gann explains the challenge for guerrillas to govern civilian populations and notes the Irish and FLN as effective models of civilian administration. In addition, guerrilla warfare often requires the assistance of regular forces, frequently foreigners,

demonstrated by the Peninsular War and the wars for independence of the Latin American colonies of Spain in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Although less than one hundred pages, Gann provides more historical breadth than Robert Taber's exceptional work, *War of the Flea*. A senior fellow at Stanford's Hoover Institute and expert in colonial-Africa, Gann clearly explains the conditions under which most guerrilla wars began and the primary causes for their outcomes. His book is not as comprehensive as other anthologies, such as Walter Laqueur's *Guerrilla Warfare*, but the span is comparable. Readers should not expect detailed case studies on specific guerrilla wars. Some will consider a book this concise insufficient for such a complex topic, yet the forty-year-old book distills many of the important lessons from previous guerrilla wars armies are relearning today.

Gann's book should be part of any irregular warfare library—it is that good. With such an important topic, it is surprising to see his monograph often missing from many reading lists today. Rarely can one find such a coherent analysis of guerrilla warfare that extracts the essence of why they win or lose. While there are many longer works available to provide deeper context of a particular guerrilla war, it would be hard to find a more succinct retort to the suggestion that guerrillas were unbeatable.

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*Lewis H. Gann passed in 1997. An expert on Colonialist Africa, his New York Times obituary can be found [here](#).*

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