Mao Zedong’s On Guerrilla Warfare and Joseph Kabila’s Lost Opportunity

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Abstract: By most metrics, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is a failed state, with ongoing risk to regional security and stability rooted in the conflicts that wracked the country for decades. However, this needn’t have been the outcome. There were numerous contextual similarities between the guerrilla movement in DRC under Laurent-Désiré Kabila, and China under Mao Tse-Tung during the Japanese occupation when he wrote On Guerrilla Warfare. Given this, it seems possible that if Kabila had implemented Mao’s advice during the First Congo Civil War, a revolution by any definition and, therefore, an arena for implementation of On Guerrilla Warfare, he could have proven to be far more successful in generating real political change via a far less brutal conflict in Zaire. However, despite probable exposure to the tenets put forth by Mao, Kabila did not employ them during the conflict. This paper will argue that as a result, his victory in the First Congo Civil War was far less politically meaningful in the aftermath, and far more brutal, with more negative implications on regional security today, and than if he had followed a Maoist approach to insurgency.

Introduction

Mao Tse-tung wrote On Guerrilla Warfare in 1937 while fighting the Japanese Imperial Army as it occupied China. In it, he laid out a clear, succinct, and comprehensive strategy for victory in a revolutionary struggle. Given that he was victorious against both the Japanese and, later, the Chinese Nationalist Army, it would appear he understood the topic.[1] In his work, he addressed two main thrusts in a successful insurgency: the incorporation, indeed the subordination, of the military fight to political efforts; and the importance of the population—the proverbial “sea” in which the guerrilla “fish” must swim to survive—as the keys to military and political victory.

More than six decades later, Laurent-Désiré Kabila led Congolese rebels in a brutal 30 year civil war in Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) against President Joseph Mobutu.[2] There were numerous similarities between Mao’s China and Kabila’s Zaire. For starters, China’s peasants were largely rural and uneducated, as were Zaire’s. Chinese rebels were fighting an outside oppressor in the Japanese Army, while in Zaire, Kabila’s rebels were fighting an army supported, and in some cases only kept alive, by the resources of foreign powers. And finally, in the introduction to the 2000 translation of On Guerrilla Warfare, Griffith writes:

   An external factor had for almost a century contributed to the chaos of China: the unrelenting
pressure and greed of foreign powers. French, British, Germans, and Russians vied with one another in exacting from a succession of corrupt and feeble governments commercial, juridical, and financial concessions that had, in fact, turned China into an international colony…Mao once described the China he knew in his youth as “semi-colonial and feudal.” (14)

Considering the nature of Zaire’s colonial past with Belgium, this parallel may well have been the strongest.

Given the above, it seems possible that had Kabila implemented Mao’s advice during the First Congo Civil War, a revolution by any definition and, therefore, an arena for implementation of On Guerrilla Warfare, he could have proven to be far more successful in generating real political change via a far less brutal conflict in Zaire. However, despite probable exposure to the tenets put forth by Mao, Kabila did not employ them during the conflict. This paper will argue that as a result, Kabila’s victory in the First Congo Civil War far less politically meaningful in the aftermath, and far more brutal with more negative consequences, and than if he had followed a Maoist approach to insurgency.

This can best be demonstrated by listing key tenants from Mao’s work and outlining times when Kabila could have been exposed to them as well, and comparing them to his actions and the actions of his army with regards to On Guerrilla Warfare. Finally, we will discuss the potential post-conflict outcomes had he followed Mao’s principles. This paper will show that Kabila had ample opportunity to learn about Mao’s ideas, both via personal experience as well as through relationships with those familiar with them. The First Congo Civil War provided him sufficient chances to implement the recommendations that Mao made, in a context that was well suited to them. However, much of poor condition DR Congo finds itself in today could have been avoided because he did not.

**Background to the First Congo Civil War**

1995 found Kabila in close consult with Generals Paul Kagame of Rwanda and Yoweri Museveni of Uganda for the invasion the following year. The regionally-backed Congolese rebels re-invaded Zaire in 1996, however, at no time during the First Congo Civil War did he show himself to be a Maoist with regards to either his military tactics towards enemy forces or the civilian population, or his strategic planning for a post-conflict Zaire. These indispensible aspects of a guerrilla war, which Mao discussed at great length in his writings, are as notable in their absence from Kabila’s approach to the revolution as the presence of war crimes he committed while ignoring them. While he did not seem to ascribe to any doctrine other than “kill the enemy/defeat Mobutu,” had Kabila followed Mao’s tenets with regards to an insurgency, he could have avoided the path that condemned post-conflict DRC to its current status.

Despite near thirty years of low level insurgency, the most violent and truly international incarnation of the conflict began in the wake of the April 1994 Rwandan Genocide in which over 800,000 people—mostly ethnic Tutsi and moderate Hutu—were murdered in around 100 days. The rebels of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) under General Paul Kagame, having previously agreed to an uneasy peace in Arusha, Tanzania after a three-year civil war, once again went on the offensive, eventually taking Kigali. However, Hutu militias (referred to as Interahamwe, literally “those who attack together”) (93) fearing punishment for the genocide, fled the country in droves, accompanied by fellow tribal members fearing retribution.

They eventually numbered two million and settled largely in the Great Lakes region, primarily in Zaire. Of the refugees crossing into that country, the UN Force Commander at the time, Lieutenant General Romeo Dallaire, observed that:

The Zairians were finally disarming the RGF (Rwandese Government Forces, mainly Hutus at
that time) at the border, stripping some of them of items such as machetes and rifles, but large weapons—artillery, heavy mortars, anti-aircraft guns and anti-tank systems—were being waved through and escorted north of the city. Neither the Zairians nor the French were taking any measures to separate the militias, gendarmes or soldiers from the civilians as they crossed the border. [4]

It was a situation that would hardly facilitate regional stability, and it set the conditions for the chaos that still resonates today.

The Hutus stood up a government-in-exile and began a campaign to destabilize the Tutsi-dominated government in Rwanda, basing their operations out of refugee camps. Supported by Mobuto, they employed Rwandan exiles and Congolese Hutus as fighters (526-527). As a result of the attacks that followed, Rwanda and Uganda—with assistance from Angola and Burundi, and accompanied by local Congolese Tutsi rebels—invased Zaire. Thus began a series of wars subsequently dubbed the “First Congo War” (November 1996-May 1997) and “Second Congo War” (August 1998-July 2003), the former resulting in rebels under Kabila defeating Mobutu and Kabila himself taking over as President. The conflict is known without hyperbole as “The Great War of Africa,” and has had almost indescribable outcomes still felt today.

By many measures, the DRC is a failed state. More than 5.4 million people have been killed, with children accounting for almost 50% of the casualties. There are more than 1.5 million Internally Displaced Refugees (IDPs), and conditions normally preventable or treatable (such as malaria and malnutrition) continue to cause a majority of the casualties, with some 45,000 more dying every month. When assessing statistics on health, human development, democratic governance, education, or about any other metric, DRC’s low—indeed, sometimes last—ranking indicates that things continue to go grossly wrong.

The Economist Intelligence Unit’s “Democracy Index” ranked it 155 out of 162. Reporters Sans Frontiers’ “Press Freedom Index” indicated a relatively free press when it first started keeping stats in 2002; DRC has since slipped more than 30 places and consistently ranked lower than 141 out of 178 for 7 of the last 9 years. And in the 4 years from 2008 to 2011, Foreign Policy’s “Failed States Index” ranked it ranked 6, 5, 5, and 4 respectively…from the bottom. But were the poor security conditions and failed state status predetermined? Or did the way that Kabila conducted the First Congo War have anything to do with the conditions that followed?

Mao’s Writings on Guerrilla Warfare

Mao, a 44-year old guerrilla leader in the Communist Red Army in China when he wrote On Guerrilla Warfare, outlined what he felt was an overarching strategy for guerrilla forces in order to achieve victory. In it, he repeatedly emphasizes the importance of two main foci in revolutionary warfare: an overarching national strategy going into the campaign, of which military action is but one pillar; and the importance of the civilian population to all aspects of the strategy. He revisits these themes throughout his work. More than simply a manual of tactics, Mao writes extensively on the incorporation, and the subordination, of military considerations to political ones.

On the importance of the latter, Mao stated simply “there is no reason to consider guerrilla warfare separately from national policy…without a political goal, guerrilla warfare must fail” (43). Whereas previous revolutionary leaders may have focused more on the kinetic fight, Mao started his work by describing guerrilla warfare as “but one step in the total war, one aspect of the revolutionary struggle” (41). This “big picture” approach to a revolution resonates through the book and, indeed, his entire career. That is not to say that Mao ignored the minutiae of a successful guerilla fight: He certainly had the
personal experience in combat, both in conventional and unconventional units, to fully appreciate that “
guerrilla warfare has qualities and objectives peculiar to itself.” (42) and he does address tactics in
On Guerrilla Warfare. But he kept this in the context of an overall strategy, even one as simple as “kill
the enemy/defeat Mobutu” (regardless of how he defined “enemy”).

The importance of the population, harkening back to Clausewitz’s concept of “center of gravity” in On
War, is also a common theme throughout the book. Using the now-ubiquitous analogy of the guerrilla
moving through the population like a fish moving through water, Mao repeatedly extols his troops to stay
in the good graces of the civilian population. He also emphasizes the need to educate peasants about the
guerrilla’s cause. Mao mocks “those who ridicule the masses by wildly asserting that the people have no
understanding of the war of resistance.” To those, he retorts, “The moment that this war dissociates
itself from the masses of the people is the precise moment when it dissociates itself from the hope of
ultimate victory” (44).

In addition to emphasizing the importance of education and indoctrination of the population, he goes to
great lengths to emphasize the importance of taking care of the population, even putting out a a “code of
conduct” concerning relations with the population (92). His own forces did commit atrocities
against civilians during the fight against the Japanese and the power struggle against the
Nationalists (238); and the “Great Leap Forward” may have resulted in the deaths of up to 45 million
Chinese in the four years from 1958-1962, trampling any notion of benevolence in dealing with the
population. But at the time, On Guerrilla Warfare did solidify the difference between his troops and those
of both the Nationalist and Japanese Imperial forces. Concurrently, it set the stage for the Communists to
be viewed in a more favorable light by a majority of the Chinese and allow for an eventual Communist
political victory.

It would seem that any guerrilla movement that hoped to mirror Mao’s victories would also mirror his
strategy. The principles in On Guerrilla Warfare are theoretically simple and clearly outlined in terms
meant for uneducated masses of soldiers and peasants to understand and implement; a lack education
would not be impairment to execution. Indeed, the writings of Mao would be more applicable in Zaire
than those of Lenin or Marx as the conditions in Mao’s China closely mirrored that of Kabila’s country
where “Congolese rebellions had little truck with Marxist arguments of surplus labor and the
exploited proletariat” (83).

A Lost Opportunity

There exists plausible evidence that Laurent Kabila should have been exposed to the tenets of On
Guerrilla Warfare, even if he hadn’t actually read it. Chinese Communist involvement in Africa after
World War II revolved around usurping Western colonialism, spreading revolutionary ideas, and playing a
role in the liberation struggles that would follow. In late 1963, Zhou En-lai, China’s premier, gave a
speech in Somalia where he observed that, “revolutionary prospects are excellent throughout the
African continent.” An alternative translation was, “Africa is ripe for revolution” (148).

If Kabila were to hear about Mao, it would most likely have been during this period of his life. In 1964,
Kabila went to Moscow and Belgrade as part of a socialist delegation, and may have enrolled in a
university there before being sent by Zairian rebel leadership to Burundi. There, he was to meet with
representatives from the Chinese government and then launch a rebellion in the Kivu region (83). Another
opportunity to engage in the ideas of people’s revolution arose a year later when, in an effort to
spread revolution and impress his Soviet benefactors, Fidel Castro dispatched a 120-man expeditionary
force under Argentinean Ernesto “Che” Guevara to explore the revolutionary possibilities in
Africa, particularly in Zaire (149). Guevara, who had read Mao—[5]—we can assume On Guerrilla
Warfare


Given his position as guerrilla leader—and supported Maoist principles over Soviet ones, despite Soviet support of Cuba, would have undoubtedly tried to impart the wisdom of On Guerrilla Warfare, though there exists no record that definitively states he did.

The record does show, however, that Guevara thought the chances of Kabila succeeding as a revolutionary were slim. After seven months with the rebel leader, Che assessed Kabila as lacking “revolutionary seriousness” and his troops as “untrained, undisciplined, disorganized, riven by tribal rivalry and petty squabbles, and led by incompetent commanders who preferred the safety and comfort of bars and brothels…to revolutionary action” (150). Before returning to Cuba, Guevara expressed “very great doubts about [Kabila’s] ability to overcome his defects in the environment in which he operates,” and described his time with Kabila as “the history of a failure” (84-85). Given this, while Guevara may well have spoken to him about Mao, it does not appear that Kabila understood or implemented his ideas.

There is one definitive piece of evidence showing Kabila took note of Mao’s teachings, though it does not arise until decades after his struggle began in the 1960s. By August 1997, the Congolese leader’s former allies (Rwanda, Uganda, Burundi, and others) turned against him and the Second Congo War began. In August 1999 a cease-fire was signed, but Kabila—quoting Mao’s adage of “talk/fight, fight/talk” (271)—continued to engage in operations, believing victory was possible. In the end, his new allies, mostly Zimbabwe and Angola, withdrew support for the sinking cause. Kabila’s forces were overcome by their lightly armed, well-trained opponents, and pressure mounted for him to sign a peace accord. He was assassinated before this could happen, and another four years went by before his son and successor, Joseph Kabila, signed the 2002 agreement that resulted in some reduction in violence, but not true peace or effective national control to this day.

**Kabila’s Conduct of the War**

Kabila was undoubtedly influenced by his early experiences as a rebel leader in Katanga Province. Unfortunately, these experiences did not contribute his image as a humanitarian, although Mao repeatedly counseled the need to take care of civilians. Guevara’s assessment of Kabila’s army at the time is telling: “The basic feature of the People’s Liberation Army was that it was a parasite army; it did not work, did not train, did not fight, and demanded provisions and labour from the population, sometimes with extreme harshness” (150). This description, from 1965, could just as easily have been written at anytime during the First (or even Second) Congo Civil War.

In the 1970s, the deeply superstitious Kabila had hundreds of elderly “witch doctors” burned at the stake in an effort to consolidate his power and prevent them from “using their powers” to plot against him (85). Additionally during the First Congo Civil War, Kabila’s army, particularly when operating alongside Rwandan forces, committed war crimes against the populace (for which some still stand accused today). Locals and Red Cross workers recalled witnessing the two allies killing throngs of Rwandan Hutu refugees in towns just across the border in DRC. The soldiers

> Made them kneel on the embankment with their hands behind their heads, and executed over a hundred of them. Many were bludgeoned to death with rifle butts or clubs. A local priest saw AFDL soldiers kill an infant by beating its head against a concrete wall...workers buried some nine hundred bodies...Bodies of others who had probably drowned were seen snagged in the floating clumps of water hyacinth in the Congo River. (138)

Regardless, this clearly goes against Mao’s warning against having “vicious people” in rebel ranks (87).
A 1998 US Congressional Committee lamented “the detention by Congolese security forces of hundreds, if not thousands of Congolese ethnic Tutsis and other believed to be Tutsis or rebel sympathizers. Many reportedly have been tortured and summarily executed simply because of their presumed ethnicity” (37). And a UN report concluded that “Rwanda troops and their AFDL allies killed tens of thousands of refugees, mostly in cold blood” (137). One rebel leader justified their actions with, “We didn’t take many prisoners, we were too angry, and, anyway, where would we have put them?” (275). Regardless of the logistics, Mao would have undoubtedly disapproved.

It was not only refugees fleeing the advance of Kabila’s rebels and their allies that suffered; it was also local Congolese that paid a dear price. Locals later wondered aloud to one writer, “Why do people always talk about the refugees?…The local population also suffered! Imagine 100,000 people arrive in this small town. They ate everything we had. Their soldiers raped our women and shot dead our traditional chief” (132). Given Mao’s emphasis on the subject (“The moment that this war dissociates itself from the masses of the people is the precise moment when it dissociates itself from the hope of ultimate victory”) (44), there is little doubt that Kabila and his troops were not Maoist in their treatment of local civilians.

On treatment of prisoners, Mao wrote that, “We further our mission of destroying the enemy by propagandizing his troops, by treating his captured soldiers with consideration, and by caring for those of his wounded who fall into our hands” (93). However, abundant evidence exists that Kabila’s army dealt with prisoners with little awareness of how this could impact the mission. Deserters and traitors from his army were treated no better, as they were routinely executed by both superiors and fellow fighters when the former wanted new soldiers to prove their mettle or to initiate them into the cause (148). This is a long way from the line in On Guerrilla Warfare that seems to just barely permit rebels to even take clothing from traitors (84).

Possible Outcomes, Had Kabila Followed Mao

Regardless of the fact that Kabila did not follow the tenants of Mao Tse-tung’s On Guerrilla Warfare, he was militarily victorious over Mobuto. His forces finally captured Kinshasa and he took office as President in May 1997, however, victory does not always equate to success, and the chaos, ongoing conflict, and years of suffering since the end of the First Congo War have proven this. It is worth the examining the potential positive outcomes had Kabila followed Mao’s advice.

One significant potential outcome was real stability. It is very possible that the excessive involvement of regional players—primarily Uganda and Rwanda, both directly and via proxies of rebel and guerrilla groups—allowed them to become a destabilizing force. Each had their own motivations and ulterior motives, and these did not always align with the Congo’s best interests. From the start of the multinational campaign against Mobutu, “The leader of this coalition was its youngest, smallest member: Rwanda…Kigali was acting as a last resort based on legitimate security concerns…Absent from these talks, however were the Congolese” (54-56). The Rwandans, given belated involvement by the UN in their own country and subsequent international sympathy, knew the importance of international perception. As such, they involved the untrained, undisciplined Congolese to ensure outsiders viewed the operation as one of regional powers helping a legitimate rebel group overthrow a repressive government, and not simply retribution. But by taking the lead from the beginning, Kigali’s forces were in a position where there was nobody to hold them in check once the invasion began, and many crimes against humanity were perpetuated by their forces. Reaction to these crimes quickly turned world opinion against Kagame, and some now see him as perpetuating crimes that make him no better than those who committed genocide in his country.
A 2010 UN report concluded, controversially but without irony, that, “the Rwandan troops may have been guilty of acts of genocide against the Hutu, given the systematic nature of the killing” (273-277). Ironically, Kabila knew the importance of not being over-reliant on third party nations, and in 1967, he published Seven Mistakes of the Revolution, a critique of the first rebellion three years earlier. One of the lessons learned was “We relied too much on external support and advice” (150). Ironically, like the written words of Mao, Kabila’s own recommendations went unheeded during the civil war, to the detriment of the war effort and subsequent security and stability there.

The leading role that third party nations played in the invasion of Zaire prevented another potential outcome: Consolidation of power. When Kabila finally decided to flex his muscle after becoming president, he did so to the chagrin of his Rwandan and Ugandan counterparts, who planned on staying for the long haul. When they were expelled shortly thereafter, the two former allies began a campaign against Kabila, and started arming rebel groups as proxies. It is these groups (that Mao would have referred to as “bandits”) that have facilitated much of the violence in Eastern Congo after other countries left.

They set up a parallel security structure that prevented either Laurent Kabila, or his son Joseph, from securing the hinterlands. Had Kabila been in charge from the start, he could have regulated third-party nations to a support role, using their conventional troops to secure the countryside while he developed his embryonic administration in the capital. Undoubtedly, Rwanda and Uganda would have chafed at being relegated to a support role, and there is a good chance they would have ignored him anyway. But with the unregulated parts of DRC secure, Kabila could have expanded his authority over these areas, better incorporated rebel groups, and prevented the chaos that reigns there today.

Perhaps one of the saddest outcomes related to the security breakdown in Eastern Congo is the shockingly high level of rape. One widely debated 2007 report found that between 1.69 and 1.8 million women in DRC have been raped, more than 400,000 every year. More and more often, men and young boys are also subjected to rape, and in 2009, approximately 10% of the victims were male. It is possible that, had Kabila exercised a more influential leadership role in the conduct of operations instead of being sidelined, and been able to consolidate his power as described above, this would not be the case today.

Conclusion

Corrupt and poorly supported Zairian government troops were defeated by a rebel force that was both undisciplined and guided by an overarching strategy little more than “beat Mobutu.” Had Kabila’s forces not been allied with powerful neighbors, this lack of strategy could have resulted in the civil war lasting even longer than the three decades it already had, or outright defeat. Given the years of fighting, repeated exposure to Maoist theory and writings, and personal interaction with revolutionary leaders such as Che Guevara, Kabila had ample opportunity to not only learn about Maoist strategy, but to implement this strategy in his fight against Mobutu. Obviously, a Maoist approach to revolution does not fit every circumstance, but On Guerrilla Warfare could have provided what amounted to a turnkey solution to Kabila’s strategy needs, both during the civil war and in the aftermath. It stresses the importance of nesting guerrilla warfare as part of a national strategy. It also lists rules for the treatment of people, civilians in particular, even if Mao did have his fair share of atrocities during the fight against the Japanese and later Nationalist forces, as well as during the “Great Leap Forward.” But as this paper suggests, despite potential exposure to the tenets put forth by Mao, Kabila did not employ them during the Congolese Civil War and as a result, it was more brutal, with worse consequences in the aftermath, than if he had followed them.

Most important for post-conflict stability, self-interested regional powers took the lead in the fight, and as a result, Kabila was unable to prevent them from becoming destabilizing factors after his victory. These
same players also frustrated efforts to consolidate power (particularly Eastern Congo near the Rwandan border), as a result, 16 years after the First Congo War began there is still little security or stability in these areas. Guerrilla leaders who wish to enjoy security and stability as the post-conflict fruits of their revolutionary labor would be wise to read, know, and follow the precepts that Mao puts forth. Maoism might not be the solution endorsed by liberal democracies of the West, but as Kabila’s lack of strategy proves, the outcomes could certainly be worse.

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