

Guerrilla warfare: the history



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During the early years of the Vietnam War, insurgency and guerrilla warfare was the Viet Cong's main tactics. With the most advanced efforts of the U. S., these primitive tactics still proved effective in combat.

In 1975, the reunification of Vietnam was accomplished when North Vietnam invaded and defeated South Vietnam. This invasion was preceded by 29 years of guerrilla warfare: First, from 1946 to 1954, against the French, for independence; Second, from 1955 to 1975, against South Vietnam, and until 1973, the United States, for the unification of the two Vietnams.

In 1955, the North began infiltrating and conducting guerrilla warfare against South Vietnam. Also in 1955, the United States began its support for South Vietnam, and would be in South Vietnam for eighteen years, leaving in 1973. Then in 1975, two years after the United States pullout, South Vietnam was invaded and defeated by North Vietnam, thus completing the unification of the two Vietnams.[1: 22]

Although not formally defeated, the United States had removed its forces from South Vietnam, and did not support South Vietnam when the North invaded in 1975. [11: 59-60] One of the reasons the United States left South Vietnam was the United States' inability to stem the guerrilla warfare, which was being waged by the South Vietnamese guerrillas - the Viet Cong. How could guerrilla warfare compel one of the most powerful military forces in the world to abandon a cause which had lasted eighteen years, and at the cost of over 50, 000 United States lives? A starting point is to understand guerrilla warfare, and in particular, the guerrillas. We must understand how guerrilla warfare relates to other forms of warfare, the phases of guerrilla warfare,

and the guerrillas' philosophy, organization, support, equipment, and tactics. Without these understandings, conflict with a team who uses guerrilla warfare will cause problems.

If placed on a path depicting the forms of warfare based on the extent of combat, and the selection of targets, guerrilla warfare would be located between terrorism and conventional warfare. Terrorism involves a limited amount of combat against any target, military or civilian. Conventional warfare involves extended combat, and limits the warfare to military targets, unlike terrorism which uses both military and civilian targets to instill terror. Guerrilla warfare, being located in between, involves combat which is mostly quick skirmishes, but may include extended battles, and is still limited to military targets.

A discussion of guerrilla warfare can be found in Mao Tse-Tung's book *On Guerrilla Warfare*. In his book, Mao describes guerrilla warfare as one of many methods used by an oppressed people to combat aggression. Mao divides guerrilla warfare into three phases. Phase I is devoted to the organization of an underground resistance movement to spread propaganda and recruit support for the movement from the people. [14: 20] the purpose of the underground is to develop support for the overthrow of the existing government, or for resistance against an occupying force. The underground does not get involved in direct military action against the enemy, but harasses the enemy through espionage, sabotage, or civil unrest. [12: 40] During Phase II, small scale combat operations would be initiated, to include both terrorism and guerrilla operations. Phase III would begin when some of the guerrilla forces have obtained superiority over the enemy, and are

transformed into conventional fighting forces; only in this phase can the enemy be defeated. [14: 20]

The guerrillas' philosophy is that they represent the people. For a valid guerrilla movement to continue, the support of the masses is necessary. [6: 19] Therefore, the guerrillas attempt to win the support of the masses by attacking an oppressive government or occupying force. In addition, the guerrillas treat the masses with respect and dignity, and capitalize on the oppressive behavior of the enemy. Many feel guerrilla warfare is the result of the masses being forced to produce goods and services without an adequate amount of compensation. [13: 38-39] It is one of the guerrillas' philosophies to take advantage of the masses' discontent with the current government's or occupying forces' policies. This philosophy is very political in nature, and is part of the guerrillas' indoctrination.

The guerrillas have an intense political indoctrination process, whereas, the guerrillas are not only fighting for military goals but also for political goals. This adds to the intensity and dedication of the guerrillas. [9: 8] Part of normal guerrilla training is to be continually indoctrinated in the political goals of the guerrilla warfare movement. These goals normally revolve around the desire to free the country and people from the oppression of the enemy. The guerrillas want to fight for the motherland, and against the cruelties, greed, and maltreatment that the enemy has inflicted upon the masses. [10: 48]

In carrying their fight to the enemy, the guerrillas have the capability to inflict great damage and casualties, but do not have the available resources

to completely defeat the enemy. To compensate for this weakness, the philosophy of guerrilla warfare is to harass and weaken the enemy. [10: 1] In general, the guerrillas rely on deception, apply strength against weakness, chose when to do battle, and concentrate their attacks against weak spots in the enemy's flanks and rear. [14: 46] this process continues until the enemy has been sufficiently weakened, and the force ratio is now in the guerrillas' favor. At this point, the guerrilla organization will convert some units into a conventional force, and engage the enemy in conventional warfare. If the conventional force lacks sufficient resources to defeat the enemy, and is in fact defeated; the philosophy of the guerrillas is to revert back to a guerrilla type organization, and wait for another opportune moment.

The guerrilla organization may be formed from the general population, personnel temporarily detailed from the regular army, permanently detailed regular army personnel, local militia, deserters from the ranks of the enemy, and former and current bandits – although the bandits are not necessarily the best choice. [14: 71] the most efficient size guerrilla unit for most operations is about 13 men. [6: 20] However, the entire guerrilla organization may be quite large. In fact, the guerrillas are organized along the lines of most conventional forces to include companies, battalions, and regiments. [14: 44] the overall size of a guerrilla force is dependent on the number of individuals willing to participate, and the number of qualified applicants. The basic qualifications of the applicants are complete loyalty and spirit of sacrifice for the cause, physical stamina to endure hardships, and familiarity with the local terrain and populace. [10: 5] the high degree of

loyalty and self-sacrifice for the guerrillas' cause are two of the key morale factors which make a guerrilla movement difficult to control and defeat.

A guerrilla organization needs support to continue its operations; this support can be internal or external to the country. Internal support is the most important support for a guerrilla organization and comes from the people. During the initial phase of an insurgency, an underground movement is formed which will exist during the entire insurgency. The underground movement will be the internal organization which will support a guerrilla movement; this support will include equipment, medical, food, and intelligence. [12: 40] Remember, the guerrillas' philosophy is one of representing the people; if the guerrillas' goals do not match those of the people, then the sympathy, cooperation and assistance of the people will be nonexistent. If the people do not support the guerrillas' cause, the guerrillas may continue to operate, but their effectiveness will be reduced and the ability to defeat them will be increased. [14: 43] sometimes the support of the people for the guerrillas is increased by actions of the enemy. [7: 37-40] Restrictions on human rights, oppressive policies, and acts of terror carried out by the enemy will only harden the guerrillas' position with the people, and result in more covert and overt support.

Another possible source of support for the guerrillas is external support. [9: 10] foreign countries whose political views parallel those of the guerrillas may be a source of resources. In some cases, the foreign support may initially be more abundant than the internal local support of the people. This may be the case when the guerrilla movement does not represent the will of the people, or the enemy's policies are so restrictive and oppressive that

popular support for a guerrilla movement is difficult and dangerous. Two important areas of external support are the supply of equipment, particularly weapons, and the availability of a safe haven from the military capabilities of the enemy. Normally, the local populace cannot provide manufactured weapons to the guerrillas; therefore, the ability to receive weapons from an external source is important. In addition, the ability to continue a guerrilla movement is increased when a safe haven is provided by an external country. [9: 10] Numerous examples, such as the Viet Cong's use of Laos and Cambodia, and the Nicaraguan Contras' use of Honduras, are available.

The ability of the

guerrillas to retreat to a safe haven in another country, particularly a bordering country, can be vital to the success of their operations. In these safe havens, the guerrillas can train, rest, and plan future operations without the fear of being assaulted by the enemy; this provides a psychological boost to the guerrilla, and frustrates the enemy.

In terms of equipment, the guerrillas are lightly armed organizations. The type of equipment that a guerrilla force has will impact on the guerrillas' ability to engage and defeat the enemy. Normally, during the earlier phase of guerrilla warfare, the type of equipment is crude and the quantity is small. In some cases the equipment, especially the weapons, are homemade and may be nothing more than farm implements. As the guerrilla forces gain strength, the sophistication and quantity of weapons increases. The guerrillas begin to seize the enemy's supplies and equipment, and convert it to their use. [14: 83] If external sources of support are available, the guerrillas may be supported by another government or by individuals

sympathetic to their cause; in addition, the guerrillas may purchase weapons on the open market. The seizure of enemy resources and the obtaining of weapons from external sources add to the capabilities of the guerrilla forces, and their ability to continue waging guerrilla warfare. When the quantity of supplies and equipment available to the guerrillas becomes sufficient, and trained manpower is available, the guerrillas will transform some of their forces into conventional armies.

The tactics which are used by the guerrillas will be driven by the organization, support, and equipment which are available. During Phase I, the guerrillas will concentrate on small attacks against isolated units and supply facilities in an attempt to obtain supplies and equipment. As more supplies and equipment become available, and the size of the guerrilla force expands, the guerrillas will enter Phase II, and begin to attack larger enemy facilities and units. When the guerrilla organization is of sufficient size and strength, and possess adequate supplies and equipment, the guerrillas will enter Phase III, form conventional fighting units, and engage the enemy in a more conventional style.

In all these phases of guerrilla warfare, some of the common tactics are the dispersion of guerrilla forces, the night attack as a psychological weapon against the enemy, the emphasis on attacking isolated forces, and the use of the local populace for support. [10: 8-12] the guerrillas will keep their forces dispersed to prevent complete defeat by the enemy. When tactical situations dictate, the guerrillas' leaders will coordinate the buildup of forces necessary to defeat the enemy.

When attacking the enemy, the guerrillas like to use the night attack. The night attack has a severe psychological effect on people, and the guerrillas use this fact as a force multiplier. Since the guerrillas try to pick the time and place to do battle, they attempt to have a thorough knowledge of the terrain, and the enemy before instituting an attack. With this knowledge, the guerrillas are able to better control their actions at night than the enemy.

Since the guerrillas prefer to choose the time and place of attack, they will try to attack lightly defended supply facilities and isolated units. By attacking supply facilities they are able to obtain needed supplies and equipment for their own use, and at the same time deprive the enemy of the items.

Because the size of the guerrilla organization is normally small, the guerrillas will tend to attack isolated units which cannot be reinforced in time to prevent defeat. In addition, the guerrillas, when attacking an isolated unit will plan on ambushing any reinforcements.

In carrying out their operations the guerrillas rely heavily on local support. This local support can be medical assistance for the wounded, food supplies for the guerrillas, or intelligence. The ability of the local populace to gather intelligence is a key factor in conducting operations against the enemy. [10: 13] unless the enemy has completely stripped an area of the local populace, there are numerous opportunities for intelligence to be gathered. Another important factor to remember is that the guerrillas are sometimes the local populace; in this case, the guerrillas have integrated themselves with the enemy, and are able to conduct intelligence gathering operations through the observation of the enemy's activities. [7: 34-3] In fact, if the enemy

relies on support from the local populace, guerrillas may even be employed by the enemy they are fighting.

Guerrilla warfare has been used throughout history. Some successful guerrilla campaigns include the guerrilla operations of the Swamp Fox during the American Revolution, the Spanish when Napoleon invaded Spain, and the Viet Cong in South Vietnam.

During the American Revolution, Francis “ Swamp Fox” Marion realized that his forces were no match for the highly trained and superbly equipped British forces. To compensate for his forces lack of training and equipment, Marion used guerrilla type tactics against the British. [14: 11] Marion was very successful in initially avoiding the British. When Marion was forced to confront the British headlong in combat his forces were defeated; however, the British forces were so weakened by the chase and the battle, they had to return to England. Although Marion was not able to defeat the British in battle, his forces nonetheless caused the British to depart the southern colonies.

Another successful use of guerrilla warfare was the guerrilla warfare waged by the Spaniards in 1808 after Napoleon’s French army invaded the Spanish peninsula. The Spanish guerrillas were able to continue applying pressure to Napoleon’s forces, and thus, not permit the French to concentrate their strength against the much smaller British force which was sent to fight them. Hence, the British forces were able to defeat the French. [11: 14]

A more current example of guerrilla warfare was practiced by the Viet Cong in South Vietnam against the government of South Vietnam, and the United

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States forces sent there to support the government. The Viet Cong were a highly organized guerrilla force which was supported internally by people in South Vietnam, and externally by North Vietnam and the Soviet Union. The Viet Cong used both sophisticated equipment, either taken from United States or South Vietnam forces, or supplied by outside allies. The tactics used by the Viet Cong included small and large scale operations, and relied heavily on night attacks, surprise, and intelligence. A significant success of the Viet Cong was the removal of United States troops and support of South Vietnam. The removal of United States support allowed the invasion and defeat of the South by North Vietnam, and the reunification of the two Vietnams. [11: 60]

However, all guerrilla operations are not successful. In Greece immediately after World War II, Communist guerrillas began waging a war against the Greek government. The guerrillas were able to receive massive external support over the Yugoslavian and Bulgarian borders, and use Yugoslavia and Bulgaria as safe havens. When Tito, of Yugoslavia, broke with the communist party in Moscow, Yugoslavia closed its borders with Greece. With fifty percent of its support removed, and a significant reduction in safe havens, the communist guerrilla effort in Greece was contained by the government. [9: 10]

Another failure occurred in Bolivia, South America. After a successful guerrilla effort in Cuba, Ernesto "Che" Guevara attempted to begin another guerrilla movement in Bolivia. Che assumed three things in his planning for guerrilla warfare in Bolivia: First, the current government could be defeated by the guerrillas; second, the countryside offered a perfect medium for

guerrillas since guerrilla warfare was primarily a class struggle waged by rural society; third, guerrillas could agitate a revolutionary atmosphere, even where one did not

Exist. [11: 108]

These assumptions proved false in Bolivia. The government proved to be a very strong force. The countryside did not prove to be fertile ground for revolutionary rhetoric since the people had sufficient land to farm. Finally, the guerrillas could not generate a revolutionary atmosphere, and sufficient internal support. The people were complacent with their standard of living. In fact, the attacks on the military tended to inflame the people since the soldiers were from the very countryside that Guevara tried to unite. [11: 109-115] Therefore, the guerrilla warfare that had occurred in Cuba could not be exported by Guevara to Bolivia, and his forces were defeated.

Guerrilla warfare has been practiced throughout the ages as a method of oppressed people to overcome the strength of an enemy through an unconventional form of warfare. The philosophy of the guerrilla is that the guerrilla represents the masses. Guerrilla warfare is conducted in three phases depending on the organization and strength of the guerrilla and the comparable strength of the enemy. The organization of the guerrillas is based on small unit cohesion, but formed along the lines of a conventional military force. The organization will grow as support of the guerrilla movement increases. This support may be internal from the people or external from other governments or individuals. Support will range from covert to overt support, and include safe havens, equipment, and supplies.

The tactics of the guerrillas will primarily be small unit actions relying on surprise, and a superior knowledge of the area. Night attacks will be used extensively to accomplish surprise, and to have a negative psychological effect on the enemy.

In considering an impending operation, the military commander does an analysis of the enemy. When the commander analyzes the enemy, he looks for the enemy's strengths and weaknesses. To combat guerrilla warfare, an analysis of the enemy must be accomplished. One must know guerrilla warfare and the guerrilla, and develop the techniques necessary to defeat them. Only when this occurs, will we be capable of defeating a tyrant who uses guerrilla warfare. [15: 1]