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A COMPARISON OF THE PRINCIPLES OF
GUERRILLA WARFARE AS DESCRIBED BY MAO
TSE-TUNG AND T. E. LAWRENCE

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COMPARISON OF THE PRINCIPLES OF GUERRILLA WARFARE
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SUMMARY

The purpose of this essay is to compare the principles of guerrilla warfare as described by Mao Tse-tung and T. E. Lawrence. Mao's ten principles of guerrilla warfare are used as a background against which to compare the views of Lawrence. It is found that the similarities far outnumber the differences. Major points of agreement and disagreement are noted and some lessons to be learned are enumerated.

Neither Mao Tse-tung nor T. E. Lawrence devised the concept of guerrilla warfare. However, both have made substantial contributions to its employment.

Mao developed his theories on guerrilla warfare during the period 1936-1938, and his work covered both the civil war against the Nationalists and the strategy which might be used in the conflict with Japan. He drew considerably from Russian and Marxist experience. It is equally obvious that he was familiar with the writings and teachings of such military philosophers as Clausewitz and Sun Tzu.

Heffelfinger suggests that Mao's contributions to guerrilla warfare include a unique appreciation of the need for effective correlation of the political and military aspects of guerrilla warfare, his visualization of the strategic significance of guerrilla activities in revolutionary war and operations against an invader, and that he is the first individual to synthesize the various aspects of the guerrilla war in such a comprehensive manner.¹

T. E. Lawrence practiced guerrilla operations on a strategic scale during 1916-1918 in Arabia and Palestine. His analysis of guerrilla strategy is undoubtedly based on his early readings of Napoleon, Clausewitz, Moltke, Foch, and particularly Marshal Saxe

¹Hugo W. Heffelfinger, Mao Tse-tung and Guerrilla Warfare (U) Thesis (Carlisle Barracks: US Army War College, 8 March 1962), pp. 28-30.

whose writings had great appeal for Lawrence. Saxe had written, "I am not in favour of giving battle, especially at the outset of a war. I am even convinced that an able general can wage war his whole life without being compelled to do so."² Regarding strategy and tactics, Lawrence felt that

they seemed only points of view from which to ponder the elements of war, the Algebraical element of things, a Biological element of lives, and the Psychological element of ideas.

The algebraical element looked to me a pure science, subject to the mathematical law, inhuman. It dealt with known variables, fixed conditions, space and time, inorganic things like hills and climates and railways, ...

...the nature of the biological factor in command. Its crisis seemed to be the breaking point, life and death, or less finally, wear and tear. The war-philosophers had properly made an art of it, and had elevated one item, "effusion of blood", to the height of an essential, which became humanity in battle, an act touching every side of our corporal being, and very warm.

...There remained the psychological element to build up into an art shape....Some of it concerned the crowd, ...Some of it concerned the individual, and then it became a rare art of human kindness, transcending, by purposed emotion, the gradual logical sequence of the mind. It was more subtle than tactics, and better worth doing, because it dealt with uncontrallables, with subjects incapable of direct command.³

²B. H. Liddell Hart, T. E. Lawrence: In Arabia and After, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1934), p. 476.

³T. E. Lawrence, Seven Pillars of Wisdom, A Triumph, (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday Doran and Co., Inc., 1935), pp. 192-195.

Throughout the writings of Lawrence we find evidence of these three elements: the algebraical, the biological, and the psychological. Comparing these elements with current US Army doctrine and with Mao's teachings, one is struck with the thought that the enemy, the terrain, and the weather would have been acceptable terminology to both leaders.

Ten principles of guerrilla warfare as established by Mao Tse-tung will be the framework for the author's comparison of the views of Mao and Lawrence on this subject.

Mao's first principle, "Attack dispersed, isolated enemy forces first; attack concentrated strong enemy forces later,"⁴ is reflected in part in this quotation by Lawrence:

So I began with three propositions. Firstly, that irregulars would not attack places, and so remained incapable of forcing a decision. Secondly, that they were as unable to defend a line or point as they were to attack it. Thirdly, that their virtue is in depth, not in face.⁵

By directing his attack toward small enemy forces which are out of reach of reinforcement, the guerrilla can overcome his relative weakness and insure success.

"Take medium and small cities and extensive rural areas first; take big cities later"⁶ is Mao's second principle.

⁴Mao Tse-tung, "Strategy for the Second Year of the War of Liberation," in Selected Military Writings of Mao Tse-tung, 2d ed. (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1966), pp. 332-333.

⁵Lawrence, Seven Pillars of Wisdom, A Triumph, p. 224.

⁶Mao, Selected Military Writings of Mao Tse-tung, 2d ed., pp. 332-333.

Neither Mao nor Lawrence emphasized the actual occupation of cities by guerrilla forces. Both men realized that manpower would be needed to control and govern the occupied city; manpower which might be much better used in a fighting role.

Lawrence had this to say about the attack on the city of Wejh which resulted in nearly twenty Arabs killed:

Vickery, who had directed the battle, was satisfied, but I could not share his satisfaction. To me an unnecessary action, or shot, or casualty, was not only waste but sin....Even from the purely military point of view the assault seemed to me a blunder.

...The two hundred Turks in Wejh had no transport and no food, and if left alone a few days must have surrendered. Had they escaped it would not have mattered the value of an Arab life.⁷

The seizure of the city of Aqaba by Arab forces prior to an attempt to take Damascus is an excellent illustration of Lawrence's adherence to Mao's second principle of taking the big cities later. Hear Lawrence as he points out the folly of bypassing Aqaba in favor of Damascus:

I pointed him in vain to Faisal yet in Wejh: to the British yet the wrong side of Gaza: to the new Turkish army massing in Aleppo to recover Mesopotamia. I showed how we in Damascus would be unsupported: without resources or organization: without a base: without even a line of communication with our friends.⁸

In his third principle Mao says, "Make wiping out the

⁷Lawrence, pp. 163-164.

⁸Ibid, p. 273.

enemy's effective strength our main objective; do not make holding or seizing a place our main objective."⁹

Flexibility and mobility were highly important to both leaders and they stressed freedom of action and the exercise of initiative on the part of the guerrilla.

Lawrence recognized Mao's third principle in the following way,

It was our obvious policy to be superior in some one tangible branch; gun-cotton or machine-guns or whatever could be made decisive. Orthodoxy had laid down the maxim, applied to men, of being superior in equipment at the critical point and moment of attack...The decision of what was critical would always be ours. Most wars were wars of contact, both forces striving into touch to avoid tactical surprise. Ours should be a war of detachment. We were to contain the enemy by the silent threat of a vast unknown desert, not disclosing ourselves till we attacked. The attack might be nominal, directed not against him, but against his stuff; so it would not seek either his strength or his weakness, but his most accessible material.¹⁰

A quote from Heilbrunn sets the stage for Mao's fourth principle dealing with the concentration of forces,

Avoid the enemy's strong points and attack only his weak points; in other words, do not insist on confronting a numerically superior or watchful enemy with our entire forces.¹¹

⁹Mao, pp. 332-333.

¹⁰Lawrence, p. 194.

¹¹Otto Heilbrunn, Partisan Warfare, (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1952), p. 79.

Mao states it this way, "In every battle, concentrate an absolutely superior force, encircle the enemy forces completely, strive to wipe them out thoroughly and do not let any escape from the net."¹²

The application of this fourth principle is well illustrated by Lawrence as the Arab guerrillas attacked the retreating Turkish Fourth Army in late September, 1918.

The Arabs were fighting like devils, the sweat blurring their eyes, dust parching their throats; while the flame of cruelty and revenge which was burning in their bodies so twisted them, that their hands could hardly shoot. By my order we took no prisoners, for the only time in our war.¹³

Lawrence was very careful not to attack unless he had made a thorough reconnaissance of the area and knew as much as possible about his objective. He drew heavily on his previous travels in the battle area and would spend hours, if necessary, learning to know the individual characteristics of his men. All of this preparation paid off in numerous successful raids against the Turkish lines of communication.

Guerrilla warfare demands a positive assurance of victory and Mao says in his fifth principle, "Fight no battle unprepared, fight no battle you are not sure of winning."¹⁴

Lawrence, on several occasions, restrained the Arabs from

¹²Mao, pp. 332-333.

¹³Lawrence, p. 632.

¹⁴Mao, op. 332-333.

making attacks when complete victory was not assured. He describes his Arab fighters in the following terms,

In mass they were not formidable, since they had no corporate spirit, nor discipline nor mutual confidence. The smaller the unit the better its performance. A thousand were a mob, ineffective against a company of trained Turks: but three or four Arabs in their hills would stop a dozen Turks. Napoleon remarked this of the Mamelukes.¹⁵

The fact that Lawrence drew heavily from his knowledge of military history is borne out by his reference to Napoleon in the above quotation.

Both leaders capitalized on the strengths of their troops. They differed quite dramatically in their views on discipline. Mao favored a rigid disciplinary approach in contrast to Lawrence who felt that discipline should not curtail the initiative of the Arab tribesman.

Mao states in his sixth principle, "Give full play to our fine style of fighting--courage in battle, no fear of sacrifice, no fear of fatigue, and continuous fighting."¹⁶

Here again the resemblance is strong as the two leaders characterize the individual fighter. Lawrence depicts his men in these words,

Our largest resources, the Beduin on whom our

¹⁵Lawrence, p. 136.

¹⁶Mao, pp. 332-333.

war must be built, were unused to formal operations, but had assets of mobility, toughness, self-assurance, knowledge of the country, intelligent courage.¹⁷

The Arabs continually amazed both friend and enemy with the distances they could travel on seemingly meager subsistence. Here, too, is an example of how Lawrence's knowledge of the individual and his camel paid handsome dividends.

The guerrilla force was pictured by Lawrence with the words,

...but suppose we were (as we might be) an influence, an idea, a thing intangible, invulnerable, without front or back, drifting about like a gas? Armies were like plants, immobile, firm-rooted, nourished through long stems to the head. We might be a vapour, blowing where we listed.¹⁸

Mao says, "When the situation is serious, the guerrillas must move with the fluidity of water and the ease of the blowing wind."¹⁹

"Fight when you can win, move away when you can't win,"²⁰ writes Mao as well as, "We generally spend more time in moving than in fighting and would be doing well if we fought an average of one sizeable battle a month."²¹ The preceding quotations from

¹⁷Lawrence, p. 224.

¹⁸Ibid, p. 192.

¹⁹Mao Tse-tung, "Mao's Primer on Guerrilla War," trans. Samuel B. Griffith in The Guerrilla--and How to Fight Him, ed. T. N. Greene, (New York: Praeger, 1962), p. 8.

²⁰Mao Tse-tung, "Strategy in China's Revolutionary War," in Selected Military Writings, 2d ed., p. 139.

²¹Ibid, p. 141.

Mao's writings on strategy are summed up in his seventh principle,
"Strive to draw the enemy into mobile warfare."²²

Lawrence took maximum advantage of the mobility of armored cars in his raids on the Turkish lines of communications and outposts. He compared his camel raiding parties to ships at sea and of his operations he said,

In character our operations of development for the final stroke should be like naval war, in mobility, obliquity, independence of bases and communication, ignoring of ground features, of strategic lines, of fixed directions, of fixed points. 'He who commands the sea is at great liberty, and may take as much or as little of the war as he will.' And we commanded the desert. Camel raiding parties, self-contained like ships, might cruise confidently along the enemy's cultivation-frontier, sure of an unhindered retreat into their desert-element which the Turks could not explore.²³

Discrimination of what point of the enemy organism to disarrange would come to us with war practice. Our tactics should be tip and run: not pushes, but strokes. We should never try to improve an advantage. We should use the smallest force in the quickest time at the farthest place.²⁴

Mac's eighth principle is "Resolutely attack and seize all fortified points and cities which are weakly defended."²⁵

Lawrence repeatedly applied this principle as small groups

²²Mao, "Strategy for the Second Year of the War of Liberation," in Selected Military Writings, 2d ed., p. 332-333.

²³Lawrence, p. 337.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Mao, p. 332-333.

cut the Turkish railway line.

We could develop a highly mobile, highly equipped striking force of the smallest size, and use it successively at distributed points of the Turkish line to make them strengthen their posts beyond the defensive minimum of twenty men.²⁶

A modern day application is evident in the Viet Cong practice of attacking and attempting to overrun isolated US Special Forces bases and Regional/Popular Forces camps.

Guerrilla forces do not have the logistical support common to regular army troops and recognition of this is apparent in the ninth principle, "Replenish our strength with all the arms and most of the soldiers captured from the enemy."²⁷

Mao refers to this principle of supply in his writings on guerrilla warfare in which he remarks,

We have a claim on the output of the Arsenals of London as well as of Hanyang, and what is more, it is to be delivered to us by the enemy's own transport corps. This is the sober truth, not a joke.²⁸

One excellent illustration of this supply principle is given by Lawrence as he writes of Arab action against retreating Turkish columns.

They were in panic; and by sunset we had

²⁶Lawrence, p. 224.

²⁷Mao, p. 332-333.

²⁸Mao Tse-tung, On Guerrilla Warfare, (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1961), p. 24.

destroyed all but the smallest pieces of them, gaining as and by what they lost. Parties of peasants flowed in on our advance. At first there were five or six to a weapon: Then one would win a bayonet, another a sword, a third a pistol. An hour later those who had been on foot would be on donkeys. Afterward, every man had a rifle, and a captured horse.²⁹

"Make good use of the intervals between campaigns to rest, train and consolidate our troops."³⁰ This tenth principle can certainly be termed "common sense" and received much attention from both Mao and Lawrence. Mao elaborates on this principle by saying:

It is not a question of shutting ourselves off from everything else for rest and training, but of finding time for rest and training while expanding our areas, mopping up small enemy units and arousing the people. This is usually also the time for tackling the difficult problem of getting food supplies, bedding, clothing, etc....It is also the time for destroying the enemy's communication lines on a large scale, and hampering his transport.³¹

Lawrence had to have help from his British allies and he exercised great ingenuity in securing from them light automatic guns, camels, artillery pieces, armored cars, and gold.

Raiding parties were certainly essential to Lawrence's success and again we see strong similarity in strategy as he applies Mao's tenth principle of rest, train, and consolidate.

²⁹Lawrence, p. 632.

³⁰Mao, p. 332-333.

³¹Mao Tse-tung, "Problems of Strategy in Guerrilla War Against Japan," in Selected Military Writings, 2d ed., p. 180.

The distribution of the raiding parties was unorthodox. We could not mix or combine tribes, because of their distrusts; nor could we use one in the territory of another. In compensation we aimed at the widest dissipation of force; and we added fluidity to speed by using one district on Monday, another on Tuesday, a third on Wednesday. Thus natural mobility was reinforced. In pursuit, our ranks refilled with fresh men at each new tribe, and maintained the pristine energy. In a real sense maximum disorder was our equilibrium.³²

As selected excerpts from the writings of T. E. Lawrence were compared to Mao Tse-tung's ten principles of guerrilla warfare, the similarities far exceeded the differences in this author's view point.

It would seem fair to say that agreement is in evidence on the following points: (1) guerrilla warfare is revolutionary in character; (2) successful guerrilla operations need the support of the populace and regular forces; (3) the guerrilla force must be flexible, adaptable, highly motivated, extremely well prepared, as mobile as possible, and always mindful of the need for offensive action; (4) leaders must capitalize on the strengths of their fighters; and (5) guerrilla operations should be planned to take advantage of the enemy's weaknesses and avoid his strengths; incorporate unorthodox tactics; maximize intelligence, counter-intelligence, and the psychological aspects; and have a very high assurance of success.

³²Lawrence, pp. 338-339.

We could expect some differences to arise due to the environment and times in which each of our leaders, Mao and Lawrence, practiced their strategy and tactics. Lawrence saw guerrilla war as a much more limited operation than Mao who was not restricted to a span of two years but had a long period of time to modify his thinking and practices.

With respect to organization of forces, Lawrence was very limited because of the independence of the Arab tribes. He was forced to spend much time in appeasing the whims of a host of tribal leaders whereas Mao could build a definite command structure with excellent discipline. Lawrence was also in an advisor role which was not true in Mao's case.

One of Mao's major contributions is in the correlation of the political and military aspects of guerrilla operations, while this is not a feature in the writings of Lawrence.

Mao believed that guerrilla forces would ultimately develop into more orthodox fighting units. Lawrence was hesitant to accept this idea; however, a longer conflict may have caused him to alter his views.

As one looks for lessons to be learned from a project such as this, the following thoughts appear to be applicable: (1) guerrilla and counter guerrilla operations should continue to be covered in service school curriculums; (2) professional military men should be encouraged to study the writings of a variety of guerrilla leaders; (3) well-planned, long range programs of

psychological warfare should be developed; (4) plans should be prepared for strategic guerrilla warfare, both of offensive and defensive character; and (5) counterguerrilla measures should be studied and plans completed for possible implementation anywhere in the world.

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