

AD-779 566

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE GUERRILLA
STRATEGIES OF MAO AND LAWRENCE

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28 November 1973

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STRATEGIES OF MAO AND LAWRENCE

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US Army War College
Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania
28 November 1973

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE		READ INSTRUCTIONS BEFORE COMPLETING FORM	
1. REPORT NUMBER	2. GOVT ACCESSION NO.	3. RECIPIENT'S CATALOG NUMBER	
		AD 779 566	
4. TITLE (and Subtitle)		5. TYPE OF REPORT & PERIOD COVERED	
A Comparative Analysis of the Guerrilla Strategies of Mao and Lawrence		Student Essay	
7. AUTHOR(s)		6. PERFORMING ORG. REPORT NUMBER	
Colonel Thomas P. Rametta, Field Artillery, USA			
9. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME AND ADDRESS		8. CONTRACT OR GRANT NUMBER(s)	
US Army War College Carlisle Barracks, Pa. 17013			
11. CONTROLLING OFFICE NAME AND ADDRESS		10. PROGRAM ELEMENT, PROJECT, TASK AREA & WORK UNIT NUMBERS	
Same as Item 9.			
14. MONITORING AGENCY NAME & ADDRESS (if different from Controlling Office)		12. REPORT DATE	
		28 November 1973	
		13. NUMBER OF PAGES	
		12	
		15. SECURITY CLASS. (of this report)	
		Unclassified	
		15a. DECLASSIFICATION/DOWNGRADING SCHEDULE	
16. DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT (of this Report)			
Approved for public release; distribution unlimited.			
17. DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT (of the abstract entered in Block 20, if different from Report)			
18. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES			
19. KEY WORDS (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number)			
<p style="text-align: center;"> <small>Approved by</small> <small>NATIONAL TECHNICAL</small> <small>INFORMATION SERVICE</small> <small>U.S. Department of Commerce</small> </p>			
20. ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number)			
<p>The problem is to compare the guerrilla strategies of Mao, Tse-tung and T. E. Lawrence and to determine whether a broad strategy for guerrilla warfare can be developed. The techniques of Mao and Lawrence were compared, and differences and similarities noted. The techniques were found to be remarkably similar; and the two notable differences, in methods for gaining popular support and in military objectives, resulted more from differences in environment than in the philosophies of the two men. The Arabs required</p>			

no political indoctrination by Lawrence; Mao, however, was establishing communism in China and, therefore, indoctrinated all Chinese to accept his political views. Lawrence sought to defeat the Turks through attrition because he had few Arab guerrillas and because the Turks placed high value on material; Mao sought to annihilate his enemies--and, unlike Lawrence, he had ample manpower. In all other respects Mao and Lawrence were much alike. They both adhered to classic guerrilla concepts and their doctrines were not new. No new concepts for guerrilla warfare need be developed as the concepts of Mao and Lawrence, themselves, could be expected to be successful universally, modified only by such variables as geography and politics.

II

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE GUERRILLA
STRATEGIES OF MAO AND LAWRENCE

"Guerrilla warfare (...) a type of warfare characterized by irregular forces fighting small-scale, limited actions, generally in conjunction with a larger political-military strategy, against orthodox military forces. The guerrillas (...) employ highly unorthodox tactics which (...) embrace all aspects of psychological warfare. (...) Guerrilla warfare (...) may be employed independently, or it may be used to complement orthodox military operations in which case it can be employed inside enemy territory or in those areas which have been seized and occupied by an enemy."¹

The broad general strategies of guerrilla warfare are those of continuous harrassment accompanied by extremely subtle, flexible tactics designed to wear down the enemy while gaining time to either develop sufficient military strength to defeat him in orthodox battle or to subject him to political and military pressures sufficient to cause him to seek peace. This strategy embodies political, social, economic, and psychological factors to which the military element is often subordinated. In short, guerrilla warfare is based on deception and surprise, the avoidance of strength and exploitation of weakness. Guerrilla warfare, by its very nature, is dependent on partisan support by the populace-at-large, or at least by sizable segments of the local people. A common objective in many guerrilla operations has been to separate enemy forces from their supply lines, cut their lines of communications and, to paraphrase Denis Davidov, destroy units while their wagons are waiting to join them, inflict surprise blows on the enemy when they are without food or ammunition and at the same time block his retreat.²

History is replete with countless examples of guerrilla actions, beginning with independent operations of peasant bands which were of little consequence and culminating with those actions which were planned in conjunction with and complemented the efforts of regular forces. In modern days, guerrilla warfare evolved from the loosely knitted bands of riflemen in the

American Revolution, in particular those led by Francis (the "Swamp Fox") Marion in South Carolina, who were so effective against the formally trained and regimented British. Since then, guerrilla warfare was used successfully by Spanish and Portuguese in support of Wellington against the French of Napoleon; by the Chinese peasants in the T'ai P'ing Rebellion; by John Mosby in support of the Confederacy during the American Civil War; and by Lenin's Bolsheviki circa 1918, to cite but a few examples. Many leaders have made their contributions to the art of guerrilla warfare, but few have had more significant successes than T. E. Lawrence and Mao, Tse-tung.

Lawrence, a British officer, led a revolt of Arab tribesmen in a prolonged guerrilla action during World War I. His men raided the Turkish rail line between Damascus and Medina, and later the railway line from Dar'a in the Yarmuk valley to Jerusalem. His Arab guerrillas never fought a major battle, but their mosquito raids detained 25,000 to 30,000 Turkish troops. The Arabs finished the war in control of about 100,000 square miles and there is no question of their value to General Allenby's success in driving the Turks out of Palestine and Arabia.³

Mao, on the other hand, successfully led an insurgent group of Chinese Communists concurrently against the invading Japanese and the Chinese Nationalist (Kuomintang) government of Chiang Kai-shek. Mao was deeply concerned with the fate of his homeland and fellow Chinese. He was born a peasant, studied to be a teacher, and later became active in politics and joined forces with Chiang Kai-shek. However, he became disenchanted with the Nationalists in 1925 and became a communist when he discovered the latent strength of the peasants. He initially took to conventional, positional warfare against the Kuomintang forces of Chiang on the advice of Russian advisors, but that proved disastrous. He then shook off the Russians, and proceeded on his famous 6,000 mile "Long March" to Yenan, spending much time in meditation. As a result, he became convinced that guerrilla warfare was the only way. He also became undisputed leader of the newly organized Chinese Communist Party during this period.

Lawrence did not fight on his homeland but, during his years of studying archeology in the mid-East, cultured a love for the Arabs. Although he was considered by many to be a quasi- or honorary Arab, nevertheless he remained a British officer. Lawrence was a brilliant scholar with an extraordinarily clear and penetrating intellect; he was educated at Oxford. Just as Mao had a period of meditation, the "Long March," during which he formulated his strategies of guerrilla warfare, so too, did Lawrence. In the case of Lawrence, it occurred during 10 days of frightful fever and dysentery when he, also, concluded that the only way was through guerrilla warfare. While bed-ridden, Lawrence considered that it was a mistake to impose Western conceptions of war on the Arabs, since the Arabs were guerrilla fighters and were more successful as guerrillas than as disciplined troops.⁴

The purpose of this paper is to compare the guerrilla strategies of these two men -- their attitudes on popular support, training, tactical objectives, the value of holding territory, mobility, relationships of guerrilla warfare to orthodox warfare, planning, leadership, and their analyses of the concepts of guerrilla warfare; and to determine whether a concept for guerrilla warfare can be developed which could be expected to be successful regardless of where employed.

With regard to popular support and training, the two leaders had different outlooks, primarily because of the different problems they faced. Mao relied almost wholly on popular support. Without popular support, he was convinced that no guerrilla operations could remain successful for long. He felt that strength was not in machines, but in the people -- the country peasants; and that the countryside was the key to success. Mao recognized the dangers of localism. Therefore, he actively organized his Communist Party to train local populations politically, and to support his guerrillas in their base areas.⁵ His military training was rudimentary and emphasized use of the simplest, often "home made", weaponry.

Lawrence also realized he would not be successful without a sympathetic population, if not one totally dedicated to his

support. He sought at least a population friendly enough to not betray his movements to the Turks. As an ultimate goal, he wished for civilians who would die for the ideal of freedom; and he considered that the presence of the enemy was a secondary matter. He could not count on such widespread support. However, he did note that all Arabs had the common desire to rid their country of the invading Turks; and he did not have to indoctrinate his troops into a "precise conception of the political goal," as Mao did. Lawrence, therefore, merely attempted to keep the populace friendly to him and limited the training of his troops to use of the simple weaponry deemed necessary for the mission: elementary demolition techniques and light machine guns, with little concern for political indoctrination.

Another basic area of difference between Mao and Lawrence, considered by this student to be the most significant, is in the objectives sought by each. To Mao, the enemy soldier was the main objective. Mao used many words to express this view. In his treatise on the strategic problems in fighting the Japanese, he said you should "gather a big force to strike at a small enemy segment, and to annihilate the enemy."⁶ He used essentially the same thesis later, when he said that when the enemy attacks guerrilla base areas one should counter with counterattacks, encircle him and cut off his food supply, then annihilate him.⁷

To Lawrence, on the other hand, the objective was not to kill the enemy soldier (although he did very well on this score, indeed) but, rather, to destroy his machines. In Lawrence's evaluation, the Turks valued and required machines, whereas the Arabs needed every available man. Killing Turks was the least important task; it was more profitable to disregard their existence or to make their lives quietly unbearable. Killing was pure luxury, expensive and unnecessary.⁸ Lawrence believed that his most valuable idea was to "let the Turks remain at Medina and retain the Hejaz railway, and waste their strength in a futile and self-destructive game of maintenance."⁹ If he could spread the Turkish defenses so thin as to be ineffective, and be able to disrupt Turkish lines of communication and supply,

Lawrence felt he would best be able to break the Turks' will to continue fighting.

Interestingly, the objectives of Mao and Lawrence can be used to illustrate the two concepts of strategic surrender defined by Paul Kecksemeti: rout and attrition.¹⁰ Mao sought to rout segments of enemy forces, to render them defenseless, and to disrupt their organizational structure. To Lawrence, however, the goal was to defeat the Turks through attrition: by depriving them of the essential means of waging war as a result of relentless attrition inflicted upon their sources of strength by cutting off their supplies.

Both leaders agreed that to seize and hold territory were not appropriate objectives for their guerrillas. In the words of Mao,

"To gain territory is no cause for joy, and to lose territory is no cause for sorrow. To lose territory or cities is of no importance. The important thing is to think up methods for destroying the enemy. (...) It is altogether improper to defend cities to the utmost, for this merely leads to sacrificing our own effective strength."¹¹

Lawrence agreed with Mao on the relative merits of holding territory and for very practical reasons: he saw that the Arabs, because of their lack of organization and discipline, would not and could not attack places held in strength; and they could not defend a point, either. He never attempted to gain or hold ground.

With regard to mobility, both Mao and Lawrence were classic guerrilla leaders. The very cores of the strategies of each epitomized Sun Tzu's concepts of fluidity in guerrilla warfare. Lawrence developed a small, highly mobile force which he used successfully at distributed points of the Turkish line; and by making the Arabs "an influence, an idea, a thing intangible, invulnerable, without front or back, drifting about like a gas,"¹² he felt he could gain five times the mobility of the Turks or, put another way, the Arabs could be on terms with the Turks with

but one-fifth their number. To Lawrence, orthodox armies were "like plants, immobile, firm-rooted, nourished through long stems to the head;" and that a regular soldier, being immobile, owned "only what he sat on" and subjugated only what he could "poke his rifle at."¹³ Or, in the words of Mao, "guerrilla strategy must be based primarily on alertness, mobility and attack." "One must select the tactic of seeming to come from the east and attacking from the west; avoid the solid, attack the hollow; attack, withdraw; deliver a lightning blow, seek a lightning decision."¹⁴ Mao wrote that, as opposed to orthodox warfare, which is frequently static, guerrilla warfare was characterized by

"constant activity and movement. There is in guerrilla warfare no such thing as a decisive battle; there is nothing comparable to the fixed, passive defense that characterizes orthodox war. In guerrilla warfare, the transformation of a moving situation into a positional defensive never arises."¹⁵

For Mao, the fundamental strategical form of guerrilla warfare is the war of movement.

Both Mao and Lawrence recognized that guerrilla warfare could not be effective unless it supported larger-scale, orthodox warfare; that guerrilla operations were primarily harrassing in nature. Mao wrote many words in his *Yu Chi Chan* (Guerrilla Warfare) on comparing guerrilla warfare with regular warfare. He said,

"the concept that guerrilla warfare is an end in itself and that guerrilla activities can be divorced from those of regular forces is incorrect. (...) An opinion that admits the existence of guerrilla war, but isolates it, is one that does not properly estimate the potentialities of such war."¹⁶

To Mao, it was wrong to exaggerate the function of guerrillas and minimize that of the regular armies. He disagreed with those who advocated guerrilla warfare as the primary war strategy or the only strategy possible for oppressed peoples. Mao, particularly against the Japanese, made certain that guerrilla forces were fit into their proper niche; that they did not attempt to assume responsibilities that should be carried out by orthodox forces; and that, above all, the important function of coordinat-

ing activities with regular forces must not be neglected.¹⁷ Thus, though Mao used guerrilla forces independently in the early stages of his wars against the Japanese and the Nationalist Chinese, he did so only because he did not have an orthodox army for them to complement. After his forces evolved into an orthodox insurgent army, Mao's guerrillas reverted to the role of complementing the regular forces. This was particularly true against the Japanese, whom Mao described as being too small in number to occupy a territory as large as China. Thinly spread, the Japanese left many "pockets" of areas insufficiently guarded and open to guerrilla attacks, and allowed the Chinese guerrillas to fight shoulder-to-shoulder with regular forces instead of being limited to a minor role. "This," according to Mao, "is new to the Twentieth Century."¹⁸

Mao summed up the relationship of guerrilla to regular operations by saying that although guerrilla operations against the Japanese appeared paramount at times, there was never any doubt that the regular forces were of primary importance because they, alone, were capable of producing the decision.¹⁹

Lawrence did not delude himself with visions of grandeur for his guerrilla forces, either. He never lost sight of the fact that his guerrilla forces were only a part of the total force fighting in Arabia; and that his guerrillas had the specific mission of diverting the Turks while the regular British army pursued the overall goal of defeating the Germans. Indeed, Lawrence was so successful that at times there were more Turks opposing his small, elusive forces than faced the entire British forces in Arabia. But, after his guerrillas had accomplished their mission of driving the Turks out of Arabia, Lawrence reverted back to British officer status and the orthodox war continued.

Both Mao and Lawrence fully understood the importance of careful planning to successful guerrilla operations. Mao, in codifying his thoughts on the subject, emphasized planning, and went on to say that regardless of the size of the unit involved, a prudent plan was necessary; and that those who fought without method did not understand the nature of guerrilla warfare.

Lawrence put it more succinctly in describing guerrilla warfare as being far more intellectual than a bayonet charge. He went on to say that perfect intelligence was an absolute requirement, so that he could plan in certainty.

Outstanding leadership at all levels is an unusual requirement of guerrilla warfare if a guerrilla force is to survive and prosper. Both Mao and Lawrence were well aware of this and they, themselves were the epitome of the types of leaders required: unusual, unorthodox personalities, with civilian backgrounds (in spite of his army commission, Lawrence was a civilian at heart), and with political philosophies virtually incomprehensible to the average professional soldier. They sought, and found, the same type leadership in their subordinates. With few exceptions, most notably Lin Piâio, Mao's hand-picked leaders are still the leaders of his Communist régime. In Lawrence's words, "nine-tenths of tactics were certain enough to be teachable in schools; but the irrational tenth was like the kingfisher flashing across the pool, and in it lay the test of generals."²⁰ He sought an Arab leader who possessed that irrational tenth, and weighed the merits of the great men of Arabia. He found the Sherif of Mecca too old; and, of the Sherif's sons, he found Abdulla too clever, Ali too clean, Zeid too cool; but Feisal had the necessary fire and reason, and thus was chosen.²¹ Feisal did not disappoint Lawrence.

Both Lawrence and Mao made analyses of the very nature of their guerrilla wars. Both were articulate in their expositions. To Mao, guerrilla warfare ultimately resolved into six basic principles: 1) Carry out offensives in a defensive war, conduct battles of quick decision, plan exterior-line operations within interior-line operations; 2) Coordinate with the operations of regular forces; 3) Establish base areas from which guerrillas can operate; 4) Undertake strategic defensives and offensives; 5) Develop a war of movement (do not remain static); and 6) Be sure to have good leadership and a correct relationship of commands (operations should be centrally planned and coordinated, but decentralized in execution).²²

Lawrence based his strategy on three elements: "the algebraic element of things, the biological element of lives, and the psychological element of ideas;"²³ the sum of which defined his guerrilla war.

The algebraic element was calculable, and dealt with known variables of space, time, geographics and force structures. Lawrence calculated that the Arabs goal was to recapture approximately 100,000 to 140,000 square miles of land. He went on to figure that, with the Arabs on his side, the Turks would require a fortified post of at least 20 men every four square miles, or a minimum of "six hundred thousand men to meet the illwills of all the Arab peoples, combined with the active hostility of a few zealots."²⁴

The biological element had to do with leadership, the relative values of men versus material, the importance of intelligence of the enemy and, ultimately, development of the tactical line to be used. Lawrence's views on leadership have been discussed. In considering men versus material he decided that machines were more important to the Turks.

"In Turkey things were scarce and precious, men less esteemed than equipment. (...) The death of a Turkish bridge or rail, machine or gun or charge of high explosive, was more profitable to us than the death of a Turk."²⁵

The Arabs had few men in comparison to the Turks; moreover, they were individuals fighting in irregular formations.

"An individual death, like a pebble dropped in water, might make but a brief hole; yet rings of sorrow widened out therefrom. We could not afford casualties."²⁶

Lawrence thus decided that his Arabs must be superior at the critical point and moment of attack even though they were vastly inferior overall. He would see to it, through perfect intelligence, that the decision of what was critical would always be his "by the silent threat of a vast unknown desert," not disclosing himself till he attacked; and his attacks would be nominal, directed "not against him, but against his stuff" which was accessible. He would cut empty stretches of rail and

might even develop a habit of never engaging the enemy. Using these tactics, Lawrence noted later that many Turks never had a chance throughout the war to fire on Arabs, and the Arab guerrillas were never on the defensive except by accident or in error.²⁷ In articulating his tactical approach, Lawrence might have been quoting Mao or virtually any other of history's noted guerrilla leaders.

Lawrence's psychological element involved the use of propaganda, which is an essential to successful guerrilla warfare recognized universally. Although Lawrence was not interested in inculcating specific beliefs into the Arabs, he realized the importance of the states of mind of his troops, the rest of the Arabs, and the Turks, both individually and collectively. He saw to it that he arranged the minds of his troops "in order of battle just as carefully and as formally as other officers would arrange their bodies." (He was interested in mental attitudes, not military appearances.) "And not only our own men's minds, (...) we must also arrange the minds of the enemy; (...) then those of the nation supporting us."²⁸

In summary, both Lawrence and Mao were classicists in their theories and strategies of guerrilla warfare. Although their strategies differed in some respects, they were much more alike than different. They both relied on well trained guerrillas using basically simple arms; they realized the importance of mobility; of surprise and deception. They were superb planners and leaders, and had the foresight to choose outstanding subordinate leaders. They fully appreciated Sun Tzu's admonishments to know the enemy, know yourself; know the ground, know the weather; avoid strength, strike weakness. They both knew how important it was to be supported by the local populace, and sought to gain such support (Mao by an active program of indoctrination, Lawrence more subtly, through the use of propaganda). They knew that with a sympathetic populace their troops could enjoy safe base areas from which to operate. It is interesting that both leaders codified their remarkably similar strategies during periods of personal stress and meditation.

Their differences were more in the matter of degree than of basic philosophy. Although Mao established rather formal, militaristic organizations and chains of command, Lawrence was more informal in his approach, recognizing the individuality of his Arabs, and their allegiance to their own tribes. However, it is notable that Mao was setting up a political, as well as military, organization -- an organization with which he hoped someday to rule the most populous nation in the world. Lawrence had no such aspirations, being moved only to intercede (successfully) for the independence of the people with whom he fought. Mao's philosophies of seeking to annihilate the enemy and gain their surrender by rout was reasonable because he had ample manpower. Lawrence, on the other hand, was prudent in attempting to avoid confrontation with the enemy, because the Turks outnumbered the Arabs by a factor of four or five to one and because to the Turks material was more highly valued than were men. Thus he sought to defeat the Turks through attrition. Both leaders recognized that guerrilla operations were not decisive in their overall wars but, rather, augmented the operations of regular forces. However, Mao's guerrillas were eventually employed side-by-side with his regular forces. This is a tactic not used by Lawrence or any other guerrilla leader up to that time.

There is nothing basically new in the doctrine of either Lawrence or Mao. Theirs were doctrines of guerrilla warriors everywhere; doctrines which expounded of primitive warfare. The newness of Lawrence and Mao was in their elaboration of the doctrine in terms of Arabia and China, respectively. They added to the lessons learned in guerrilla operations through the centuries, and carefully recorded their experiences and thoughts. Since Mao and Lawrence, many other guerrilla wars have been fought; some independently, some to complement orthodox military operations: some successfully (e.g., Indonesia, Cyprus and Algeria), some unsuccessfully, such as in Malaya and the Phillipines. Nevertheless, the basic strategies of Mao and

Lawrence, modified by such variables as geographics and politics, are sound and universal; and could be expected to be successful regardless of where employed.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Guerrilla Warfare, Encyclopedia Britannica, 1973, Vol 10, p. 1000.
2. Otto Heilbrunn, Warfare in the Enemy's Rear, p. 21.
3. Lawrence, Thomas Edward, Encyclopedia Britannica, Vol 13, p. 829-830.
4. Robert Payne, Lawrence of Arabia, p. 74.
5. Mao, Tse-tung, Strategic Problems in the anti-Japanese Guerrilla War, p. 28-46.
6. Ibid., p. 12-13.
7. Ibid., p. 48.
8. Payne, p. 72-78.
9. Ibid., p. 77.
10. Paul Kecskemeti, Strategic Surrender, p. 5-8.
11. Mao, Basic Tactics, p. 67-68.
12. T. E. Lawrence, Seven Pillars of Wisdom, A Triumph, p. 192.
13. Ibid.
14. Mao, On Guerrilla Warfare, p. 48.
15. Ibid., p. 52.
16. Ibid., p. 55-56.
17. Mao, Strategic Problems in the anti-Japanese Guerrilla War, p. 24-27.
18. Mao, Strategies in Guerrilla Warfare, p. 3.
19. Mao, On Guerrilla Warfare, p. 56.
20. Lawrence, p. 193.
21. Ibid., p. 8.
22. Mao, Strategic Problems in the anti-Japanese Guerrilla War, p. 7-8.
23. Lawrence, p. 192.
24. Ibid., p. 192-193.

25. Ibid., p. 194.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid., p. 195.

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(An account of the author's service in the Royal Air Force. It gave insight as to his thoughts in later life and to his overall character.)
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- (A translation by B. J. McKinnis, LTC, USAF. The basic pamphlet is believed to have been published in a second edition in Hong Kong in July 1949. It lists Mao's six precepts of guerrilla warfare slightly differently than do references #18¹² and 25.)
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