

*Perspectives on Western and Russian Approaches to  
Counterinsurgency<sup>1</sup>*

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Internal state conflicts over political power, commonly referred to as insurgencies or irregular warfare, are a recurring feature of warfare.<sup>2</sup> For example, data compiled by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program demonstrates the preponderance of intra-state conflict rather than conventional engagements between states that dominated post-

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<sup>2</sup> D. H. Ucko, *The Insurgent's Dilemma: A Struggle to Prevail* (London: Hurst, 2022); S. Biddle, *Nonstate Warfare: The Military Methods of Guerillas, Warlords, and Militias* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021); and R. B. Asprey, *War in the Shadows: The Guerilla in History* (New York: William Morrow, 1994).

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World War II warfare.<sup>3</sup> Reliance on insurgency as a major modality to advance political aims expanded during the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Afghanistan, Chechnya, Iraq, Syria, Ukraine, Somalia, Libya, Yemen, and elsewhere. This article employs a case comparison and historical analysis approach. It examines insurgency's place within the spectrum of warfare, delineates the primary features of contemporary Western (i.e., the US, UK, and NATO) versus Russian approaches to counterinsurgency, elucidates the differences and common ground between the Western and Russian approaches, and demonstrates the overwhelming similarity of conditions facing counterinsurgents even in conflicts that might look quite different.

### Conceptual Foundations

Insurgency like other modalities of warfare reflects an explicit calculus about will, quality, quantity, tactics, training, and morale of adversaries.<sup>4</sup> Because insurgent warfare is not state-on-state conflict, as Mao Tse-tung noted controlling or co-opting the population, not territory *per se*, is what matters.<sup>5</sup> Although major state-on-state wars occurred between 1946 and 1991, insurgencies characterized warfare during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (commonly referred to as the Cold War era) with the superpowers avoiding another world war at least partly by sponsoring a plethora of lower-intensity conflicts between governments and domestic challengers.<sup>6</sup>

This pattern has continued into the 21<sup>st</sup> century as Russia and the West have either supported or opposed insurgencies in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Chechnya, and Ukraine. Importantly, and underscoring Mao's assertion, insurgencies have significantly altered the political, economic, and social structures of the contested society when waged against

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<sup>3</sup> See Uppsala University, Department of Peace and Conflict Research, *Uppsala Conflict Data Program* [UCDP] (Uppsala, Sweden: Uppsala University, Department of Peace and Conflict Research, 2022) [https://ucdp.uu.se/downloads/charts/graphs/pdf\\_21/armedconf\\_by\\_type.pdf](https://ucdp.uu.se/downloads/charts/graphs/pdf_21/armedconf_by_type.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> See C. von Clausewitz, *On War* edited and translated by P. Paret and M. Howard (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 87.

<sup>5</sup> Mao Tse-tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare* translated by S.B. Griffith II (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000). Mao postulated two keys for an insurgency to win: (1) subordination of the military fight to political efforts and (2) the importance of the population as the 'sea' in which guerrilla 'fish' must swim.

<sup>6</sup> R. H. Shultz, ed., *Guerrilla Warfare and Counterinsurgency: U.S.-Soviet Policy in the Third World* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1989); and A. J. Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine 1942-1976* (Washington: United States Army, Center of Military History, 2006).

states (e.g., China in 1949, Cuba in 1959, Algeria in 1962, Vietnam in 1975, Nicaragua in 1979, Afghanistan in 2021).<sup>7</sup> Despite losing militarily, even unsuccessful insurgencies created pressures for systemic change (e.g., Malaya, Oman, and the Palestinian 2<sup>nd</sup> intifada).<sup>8</sup> In contrast, although some territorial exchanges or occasionally regime change may happen when hostilities cease, most conventional wars since World War II typically ended without fundamentally altering the *a priori* strategic status quo (e.g., the Korean War, the Arab-Israeli wars, Falklands War, Iran-Iraq war, and first Gulf War).<sup>9</sup> Underscoring this pattern, barring significant reversals for Ukraine in the future, the weight of evidence so far indicates Russia's 2014 *little Green Men* insurgency seizing Crimea and much of the Donbas was much more effective in changing political borders than its 2022 invasion using conventional warfare.

Importantly, regardless of results on the battlefield, the evidence indicates that even militarily unsuccessful insurgencies can still transform the strategic *status quo* within a country.<sup>10</sup> The American experience in Vietnam, including defeating the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army during the 1968 Tet Offensive, provides stark evidence for this observation's veracity.<sup>11</sup> In a study written originally for the US Army War College, Colonel Harry G. Summers, Jr. noted: "In engagement after engagement, the forces of the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army were thrown back with terrible losses. Yet,

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<sup>7</sup> O. Westad, *Decisive Encounters: The Chinese Civil War, 1946-1950* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003); S. Farber, *The Origins of the Cuban Revolution Reconsidered* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); J. McDougall, *A History of Algeria* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017); and R. E. Feinberg, *Nicaragua: Revolution and Restoration* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> D. H. Ucko, "Counterinsurgency as armed reform: The political history of the Malayan Emergency," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 42, 3-4 (2019): pp. 448-479; and D.H. Ucko, "The Malayan Emergency: The Legacy and Relevance of a Counter-Insurgency Success Story," *Defense Studies* 10, 1-2 (2010): pp. 13-29.

<sup>9</sup> M. Hastings, *The Korean War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988); I. J. Bickerton and C. L. Klausner, *A History of the Arab Israeli Conflict* 7th Edition (New York: Pearson, 2014); M. Hastings and S. Jenkins, *The Battle for the Falklands* (New York: Norton, 1984); P. Razoux, *The Iran-Iraq War* trans. by N. Elliott (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2015); and R. Atkinson, *Crusade: The Untold Story of the Persian Gulf War* (New York: Mariner Books, 1994).

<sup>10</sup> I. Arreguin-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005). See N. Leites and C. Wolf, Jr., *Rebellion and Authority* (Chicago: Markham, 1970), pp. 87-89 for a dissenting view asserting hearts and mind's core precept that popular support for a government or shifts in support for insurgents is not decisive to successful counterinsurgency.

<sup>11</sup> M. Bowden, *Huê 1968* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2017); L. Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999); B. Palmer, Jr., *The 25-Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1984); and D. R. Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet: U.S.-Vietnam in Perspective* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1978).

in the end, it was North Vietnam, not the United States, that emerged victorious. How could we have succeeded so well, yet failed so miserably?"<sup>12</sup>

Because controlling the population is the key battlefield during an insurgency (i.e., the centre of gravity), the salient doctrinal question is: Does counterinsurgency success rest on what is commonly called 'winning hearts and minds' within a critical mass of the population by securing their security and sense of governmental legitimacy, or is coercion sufficiently effective to compel acquiescence and compliance to rule by the established regime?<sup>13</sup> And, as a corollary, does a substantive difference exist between the two approaches in terms of outcome? In other words, is compliance with the desired political order a sufficient end state regardless of whether that compliance is achieved with incentives/co-option, coercion, or a combination of the two?<sup>14</sup> These questions dominate the debate over how to wage counter-insurgency campaigns.<sup>15</sup>

## Evolving Western Doctrine and Practice

<sup>12</sup> H. G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1982), 1.

<sup>13</sup> "The term's origins during the French colonization of Indochina make it symbolically problematic that 'hearts and minds' is used widely instead of 'trust and confidence', which seems to us a more direct and reasonable way to phrase the goal": personal correspondence with Major General John H. Admire (US Marine Corps, ret'd). The phrase was used first by Marshal Louis Hubert Gonzalve Lyautey in his 1895 campaign to counter the Black Flags rebellion along the Indochina-Chinese border, D. Porch, "Bugeaud, Gallieni, Lyautey: The Development of French Colonial Warfare," in P. Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 394.

<sup>14</sup> Does the same decision calculus apply to the insurgent? For example, a recurrent question posed by Coalition forces in Afghanistan was: "Why wasn't the Taliban worried about 'hearts and minds' like we were?" The Taliban was willing to use violence and fear to impose their will on the populace whereas the Western wisdom was 'kill one and create 100 enemies'. See A. Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War: 2001 – 2018* (London: Hurst, 2019); H. Abbas, *The Taliban Revival: Violence and Extremism on the Pakistan-Afghanistan Frontier* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014); and E. Ackerman, *The Fifth Act: America's End in Afghanistan* (London: William Collins 2022).

<sup>15</sup> Ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, the Maghreb, and sub-Saharan Africa illustrate this. See J. L. Regens and N. Mould, "Continuity and Change in the Operational Dynamics of Islamic State," *Journal of Strategic Security* 10, 1 (2017): pp. 53-80; J. L. Regens, N. Mould, C. M. Sartorius, and J. O'Dell, "Effect of Foreign Military Intervention and Controlled Territory on the Operational Tempo of Al-Shabaab Attacks," *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 9 (2016): pp. 95-107; J. L. Regens, N. Mould, E. Vernon, and A. Montgomery, "Operational Dynamics of Boko Haram's Terrorist Campaign Following Leadership Succession," *Social Science Quarterly* 97 (2016): pp. 44-52; and D. R. Springer, J. L. Regens, and D. N. Edger, *Islamic Radicalism and Global Jihad* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2009).

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The historical record shows that there has always been a dynamic tension between *coercion* and *co-option* in the practice of counterinsurgency. Punitive actions designed to compel or persuade by the use or threat of force have been the norm for what commonly was described as irregular warfare, guerrilla warfare or constabulary actions. In 2021, in a book that challenged the conventional wisdom of Western counterinsurgency doctrine, Jacqueline Hazelton argued that coercion of civilians and bribery of elites are more effective than good governance and that counterinsurgency is a competition between elites rather than a conflict about winning the loyalty of the people.<sup>16</sup> In essence, Hazelton accurately notes that Western doctrine rests on the potentially false assumption that counterinsurgency automatically requires good governance and ‘winning hearts and minds’ to succeed given its population-centric nature.

Noting Hazelton’s powerful challenge to Western counterinsurgency doctrine, we offer the premise that the historical experience demonstrates there is an inverse and dynamic relationship between coercion and co-option as counterinsurgency tools. A corollary is actual as opposed to rhetorical good governance may reduce the need for coercion to suppress insurgencies. Hence, although good governance is desirable within the context of liberal democratic values, context-specific regime maintenance and tangible or perceived physical security considerations typically drive reliance on and the effectiveness of coercion or co-option. As a result, armies tend to go through stages of co-option and coercion, reflecting the timeless nature of counterinsurgency’s need to influence people by constraining their active or tacit support for insurgents rather than capture territory. Simply put, because counterinsurgency should be regarded as a uniquely population-centric form of warfare, there is a spectrum of tools available for counterinsurgents, and their respective use is a response to local conditions as conventional militaries and law enforcement face the reality of unconventional warfare.

Indeed, the popular notion that British counterinsurgency practice tends towards a hearts and minds approach is inconsistent with much of the historical record. British forces executed their 1899-1902 campaign against the Boers in South Africa based on the doctrinal principles outlined in C. E. Caldwell’s *Small Wars*, in which Caldwell

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<sup>16</sup>J. L. Hazelton, *Bullets Not Ballots: Success in Counterinsurgency Warfare* (New York: Cornell Univ. Press, 2021); Hazelton makes a strong case, though notably based only on six examples, that counterinsurgency should be seen more from the tactical and military perspective, and that the strategic aim of nation-building may actually be irrelevant to the success or failure of counterinsurgency campaigns.

emphasised the need to beat civilian populations into submission.<sup>17</sup> Not surprisingly given this perspective, the Boer War is remembered for its scorched earth brutality<sup>18</sup> and utilization of typhus-infested concentration camps to deny access to civilian 'territory'.<sup>19</sup> The British campaign from 1952 to 1962 against Kenya's Mau Mau insurgency also sought to win compliance from the populace through the widespread use of coercive violence.<sup>20</sup>

The British public's subsequent reaction to the atrocities of the Boer War counterinsurgency, however, marked the beginning possibly of not only the Western anti-war movement<sup>21</sup> but also a shift towards attempting to use *minimal force* in counterinsurgency. This approach was phrased best by General Sir Gerald Templer during the Malayan Emergency (1948-60) as *winning hearts and minds*.<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, during the Malayan Emergency, British tactics often were more coercive than co-optive in nature.<sup>23</sup> This is illustrated by the relocation of up to 500,000 civilians into camps, destruction of civilian homes, use of herbicide to eradicate crops, deportations of thousands of ethnic Chinese, and targeted assassinations and massacres.<sup>24</sup> These actions along with other measures tested the interpretation of the Geneva Conventions, which Britain argued did not apply since the Malayan Emergency was not a war. Templer

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<sup>17</sup> C. E. Caldwell, *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice* (London: His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1914), 148 regarding previous campaigns in South Africa: "...in 1851-2, in 1877, and again in 1896, rigorous treatment was meted out to the enemy in crushing our disaffection, with good results; the Kaffir villages and Matabili kraals were burnt, their crops destroyed, their cattle carried off." Caldwell added that "the French in Algeria...dealt very severely with the smouldering disaffection of the conquered territory for years after Abd el Kader's power was gone, and their procedure succeeded."

<sup>18</sup> D. Nash, "The Boer War and its humanitarian critics," *History Today* 49, 6 (June 1999): pp. 42-49.

<sup>19</sup> R. Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (New York: Random House, 2008), p. 164. See also P. Harris, "'Spin' on Boer atrocities: Letters reveal British effort to cover up true horrors of the first death camps," *Guardian* (9 December 2001).

<sup>20</sup> C. Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: the untold story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya* (New York: Henry Holt, 2005); and D. Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: Britain's dirty war in Kenya and the end of empire* (New York: Norton, 2005).

<sup>21</sup> See Nash, "The Boer War and its humanitarian critics" pp, 43-44.

<sup>22</sup> M. Doherty, "The Boer War and the Malayan Emergency: Examples of British Counterinsurgency in pre- and post-'minimum force'," *Small Wars Journal* (20 December 2018) <[smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/boer-war-and-malayan-emergency-examples-british-counterinsurgency-pre-and-post-minimum](http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/boer-war-and-malayan-emergency-examples-british-counterinsurgency-pre-and-post-minimum)>, also cites the 1919 Amritsar massacre as driving British military policy towards minimal use of force.

<sup>23</sup> P. Dixon, 'Hearts and Minds'? British Counterinsurgency from Malaya to Iraq," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 32 (2009): pp. 353-81, especially 363-69.

<sup>24</sup> C. Hale, *Massacre in Malaya: exposing Britain's My Lai* (Stroud, UK: The History Press, 2013).

famously used Dayak head-hunters to kill and decapitate suspected Communists,<sup>25</sup> and his intelligence-driven operations were designed to eliminate, not win over, Communists and their fellow travellers. Yet, at the same time, Templer offered concessions by working to ameliorate living conditions in camps and extending citizenship to Chinese residents of Malaya. On balance, it seems reasonable to infer that Templer's actions were guided by the interplay of military contingencies, his conscience, and British public opinion.<sup>26</sup> Although Western counterinsurgency was still sometimes brutal, the discourse was starting to shift towards co-option rather than coercion.

Since the early to mid-1960s, applying minimal force required has become associated with best practice counterinsurgency in Western militaries, echoing Lyautey and Templer's use of the *hearts and minds* phrase.<sup>27</sup> Embracing hearts and minds, however, has not eliminated entirely the use of coercive techniques by Western militaries in the more than six decades since the Malayan Emergency ended. For example, counterinsurgency in Vietnam combined genuine attempts to win hearts and minds with coercion.<sup>28</sup>

Importantly, counterinsurgency fought ultimately over and for people rather than territory, has significant historical continuities. Unlike physical territory and evolving military technology, the basics of human psychology and society relevant to insurgencies remain largely unchanged. Thus, in the late Republic through to the second century CE, Roman forces in the Levant trying to deal with a restive Jewish population used counterinsurgency techniques that we would recognise. As well as adapting military tactics for violent coercion to deal with asymmetric attacks, Rome recognised the importance of co-option by engaging local proxies, relocating civilian populations (who

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<sup>25</sup> K. Hack, "Everyone lived in fear: Malaya and the British way of counter-insurgency," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 23, 4-5 (2012): pp. 671-699; and J. Newsinger, *British Counterinsurgency* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

<sup>26</sup> B. Drohan, *Brutality in an Age of Human Rights: Activism and Counterinsurgency at the End of the British Empire* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018) examines British public opinion's impact on counterinsurgency campaigns in Cyprus, Aden, and Northern Ireland.

<sup>27</sup> For example, specified strike zones in Vietnam (commonly called free-fire zones) attempted to limit indiscriminate use of firepower outside those zones by requiring approval from South Vietnamese province and district chiefs – most were South Vietnamese Army officers – before artillery or airstrikes.

<sup>28</sup> S. Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin, 1997); R. A. Hunt, *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995); R. W. Komer, "Pacification: A Look Back and Ahead," *Army* (June 1970): pp. 20-29; and W. A. Nighswonger, *Rural Pacification in Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1966).

often settled around Legionnaire bases, forming the nucleus of many modern cities), and rewarding those who were loyal with Roman citizenship.<sup>29</sup> In the West, Romanization tended to be an effective long-term strategy, whereas local proxies pre-dominated in the East.<sup>30</sup> In the Levant, Rome came to rely on brute force when local power dynamics and demographic changes undermined co-option, as a Julio-Claudian (27 BCE – 68 CE) policy of winning hearts and minds was transformed into a policy of brutal repression under the Flavian dynasty (69-96 CE).<sup>31</sup>

Moreover, it was only in the modern era that insurgency came to be viewed as a different type of warfare, rather than as part of the broader spectrum of conflict. As the Westphalian states of Europe and the Americas developed their conventional military forces in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, following the Prussian Revolution in Military Affairs, the doctrine was developed to facilitate what we now categorise as conventional warfare.<sup>32</sup> Unconventional warfare, except as it applied to colonial warfare, was viewed with a much lower priority than conventional conflict between states. Thus, well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, counterinsurgency was simply conventional military practice scaled down for application to unconventional contexts. This helps to explain why many counterinsurgency campaigns have been failures, caught in a logic of diminishing returns as military action against insurgents further undermines attempts by the counterinsurgent to win over the support of the civilian population.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> E. N. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire: From the First Century CE to the Third* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016); T. Tovy, "They make a solitude and call it Peace': Counterinsurgency – the Roman Model," *Small Wars Journal* (10 December 2012) <[smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/they-make-a-solitude-and-call-it-peace-counterinsurgency-the-roman-model](http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/they-make-a-solitude-and-call-it-peace-counterinsurgency-the-roman-model)>; and F. Russell, "Roman Counterinsurgency Policy and Practice in Judaea," in T. Howe, ed., *Brill's Companion to Insurgency and Terrorism in the Ancient Mediterranean* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), pp. 248-281.

<sup>30</sup> Tovy, "Counterinsurgency – the Roman Model."

<sup>31</sup> Russell, "Roman Counterinsurgency Policy and Practice in Judaea," p. 249.

<sup>32</sup> G. L. Herrera, "Inventing the Railroad and Rifle Revolution: Information, Military Innovation and the Rise of Germany," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 27, 2 (2004): pp. 243-271; D. E. Showalter, "The Prusso-German RMA, 1840–1871," in M. Knox, and W. Murray, eds., *The Dynamics of Military Revolution, 1300–2050* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and H. Holborn, 'The Prusso-German School: Moltke and the Rise of the General Staff', in P. Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986).

<sup>33</sup> J. F. Jeffrey, "Why Counterinsurgency Doesn't Work: The Problem is the Strategy, Not the Execution," *Foreign Affairs* March-April (2015), 78-180; R. H. Shultz, "Coercive Force and Military Strategy: Deterrence Logic and the Cost-Benefit Model of Counterinsurgency Warfare," *Western Political Quarterly* 32, 4 (1979):



Western counterinsurgency doctrine began to emerge in the late decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ironically, despite having spent much of its history prior to World War II engaged in irregular operations, the US Army in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century lacked written doctrine to guide performing unconventional missions.<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, the US Marine Corps distilled its experience conducting small wars and constabulary missions in the Caribbean and Central America through the mid-1930s into one of the first doctrinal compilations when it issued the *Small Wars Manual NAVMC 2890* in 1940.<sup>35</sup>

Once attention focused on counterinsurgency, Western militaries discovered that it was a type of warfare almost entirely antithetical to the conventional war for which they had been trained and equipped; and thus required entirely new military doctrines.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, soldiers deployed to Iraq in 2003 decried the absence of US Army understanding of counterinsurgency, often pointing out that the institutional knowledge developed during Vietnam had atrophied in favour of the Army's more traditional role of conducting full spectrum conventional warfare like defending the Fulda Gap against a Warsaw Pact attack.<sup>37</sup> The Iraqi insurgency came as a shock. It took several years before a coherent counterinsurgency strategy emerged and a COIN academy to fill the doctrinal and training gap was created north of Baghdad at Taji in 2006.<sup>38</sup> Meanwhile, the US and its coalition partners were facing a growing insurgency in Afghanistan that underscored the need to develop counterinsurgency tactics, techniques, and procedures grounded in

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pp. 444-466; and P. K. MacDonald, "'Retribution Must Succeed Rebellion': The Colonial Origins of Counterinsurgency Failure," *International Organization* 67, 2 (2013): pp. 253-286.

<sup>34</sup> A. J. Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine 1860-1941* (Washington: United States Army, Center of Military History, 1998).

<sup>35</sup> U.S. Department of the Navy, U.S. Marine Corps, *Small Wars Manual, NAVMC 2890* (Washington: Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps, 1940).

<sup>36</sup> D. Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era: U.S. Doctrine and Performance, 1950 to the Present* (New York: Free Press, 1977).

<sup>37</sup> M. O'Hanlon, "America's History of Counterinsurgency," *Brookings Counterinsurgency and Pakistan Paper Series No.4* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2016); and B. Hoffman, *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Iraq* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2004), pp. 2-13. J. Nagl's foreword to the new edition of US Department of War, U.S. Army, *Instructions for American Servicemen in Iraq during World War II, 1943* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007) vi, notes a tendency of armies to forget the lessons of previous campaigns (i.e., not just counterinsurgency campaigns). See also D. Kilcullen and G. Mills, *The Ledger: Accounting for Failure in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst, 2022) and D. Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West* (London: Hurst, 2022).

<sup>38</sup> J. D. Rayburn and F. K. Sobchak, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War, Vol. 1, Invasion, Insurgency and Civil War 2003-2006* (Carlisle, PA: United States Army War College Press, 2019), pp. 456-457.

real-world experience.<sup>39</sup> Finally, the doctrinal lacuna was filled in 2006 by *Field Manual 3-24* (USMC 3-33.5) aimed at codifying the US Army and Marine Corps' approaches to counterinsurgency in Afghanistan and Iraq.

### **Evolving Russian Doctrine and Practice**

The absence of a formal military doctrine for counterinsurgency also undermined Soviet approaches to insurgency. When Soviet troops entered Afghanistan in 1979 to support the communist government, they found that doctrine and training had not prepared them for unconventional conflict.<sup>40</sup> Soviet troops were informed by doctrine and training that envisaged a war against NATO forces in Europe.<sup>41</sup> This lack of foresight happened despite the fact that the Soviets knew they were deploying to Afghanistan on a counterinsurgency mission just a few years after the US withdrawal from Vietnam. Furthermore, poor preparation for counterinsurgency came despite a long history of Soviet and Russian counterinsurgency wars dating back to Czarist expansion into the Caucasus in the 16<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>42</sup> partisan activities conducted against German troops during WWII,<sup>43</sup> and Soviet post-WWII counterinsurgency operations in Ukraine, eastern Poland, and the Baltic states.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> S. G. Jones, *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2008); B. R. Pirnie and E. O'Connell, *Counterinsurgency in Iraq, 2003-2006* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2008); R. W. Glenn, *Counterinsurgency in a Test Tube: Analyzing the Success of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands, RAMSI* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2007); and T. X. Hammes, *The Sling and The Stone: On War in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (St. Paul, MN: Zenith Press, 2006).

<sup>40</sup> Y. Kim and S. Blank, "Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Russia: Contending Paradigms and Current Perspectives," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, 11 (2013): pp. 917-932; L.W. Grau, ed., *The Bear Went Over the Mountain: Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan* (Washington: National Defense University Press, 1996); and A. A. Jalali and L. W. Grau, *The Other Side of the Mountain: Mujahideen Tactics in the Soviet-Afghan War* (Quantico, VA: US Marine Corps Combat Development Command, Studies and Analysis Division, 1995).

<sup>41</sup> S. R. McMichael, "The Soviet Army, Counterinsurgency, and the Afghan War," *Parameters* 19, 1 (1989): pp. 21-35.

<sup>42</sup> B. Davies, *Warfare, State and Society on the Black Sea Steppe, 1500-1700* (London: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>43</sup> L. D. Grenkevich, *The Soviet Partisan Movement, 1941-1944: A Critical Historiographical Analysis*, edited and with a foreword by D. M. Glanz (New York: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>44</sup> A. Statiev, *The Soviet Counterinsurgency in the Western Borderlands* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

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Soviet forces entering Afghanistan in December 1979 fared poorly against guerrillas using asymmetrical tactics.<sup>45</sup> Conventional division-strength operations characterised the first two years of the invasion. However, it is an oversimplification to describe the Russian approach to counterinsurgency as solely indiscriminate coercion and massive use of force. Soviet military writings indicate that they understood the limitations of their counterinsurgency training and doctrine.<sup>46</sup> Over time, the Soviets adapted to the environment with new tactics and enhanced use of special forces, but they were always playing a game of catch-up, one step behind the mujahadeen.<sup>47</sup>

Essentially, Soviet forces in Afghanistan found themselves in the same environment that counterinsurgents have encountered historically: fighting less over physical territory than over human terrain. Tactics, techniques, and procedures such as intelligence-driven special operations to ambush insurgents, small unit infantry formations, exploitation of tribal divisions, and destroying crops providing sustenance to insurgents emulated those used by Western militaries in places like South Africa, Malaya, Kenya, or Vietnam. Soviet support for land distribution programs, infrastructure development and women's rights similarly resembled Western campaigns to win hearts and minds. In a clear echo of Vietnam, the Soviets discovered how useful helicopters were for movement and surprise in counterinsurgency absent mujahadeen air defence capability.<sup>48</sup>

The Russian military's experience during the two Chechen wars marks an inflection point in Russia's approach to counterinsurgency, like America's long wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The Russians experienced defeats in the first Chechen War similar to those during its intervention in Afghanistan and then returned to Chechnya within a few years to fight a renewed insurgency. Coming so soon after the 1994 to 1996 rebellion by the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria against the Russian Federation, it appears the Russian military took advantage of the opportunity to use the experience of defeat to

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<sup>45</sup> S. S. Yadav "Failed great power war and the Soviet retreat from Afghanistan," *Comparative Strategy* 8, 3 (1989): pp. 353-368; and Zalmay Khalilzad, "Afghanistan: Anatomy of a Soviet Failure," *The National Interest* 12 (1988): pp. 101-108.

<sup>46</sup> McMichael, "The Soviet Army, Counterinsurgency, and the Afghan War," pp. 28 & 33.

<sup>47</sup> McMichael, "The Soviet Army, Counterinsurgency, and the Afghan War," p. 35.

<sup>48</sup> McMichael, "The Soviet Army, Counterinsurgency, and the Afghan War," p. 31; and S. R. McMichael, *Stumbling Bear: Soviet Military Performance in Afghanistan* (London: Brassey's, 1991).

modify its approach and improve its performance in the second Chechen war (1999-2009).<sup>49</sup>

The Russian approach to the second war in Chechnya should really be divided into two distinct phases that were fundamentally different tactically. The first phase was a highly conventional and extremely brutal war of attrition. Artillery and air power were used indiscriminately against military targets and civilians in urban areas (e.g., the 1999-2000 battle of Grozny).<sup>50</sup> Simply put, the indiscriminate use of brute force tactics employed at first in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Chechen war and subsequently in Syria are analogous to the ones being used by Russia in Ukraine since February 2022.

The second phase reflected adaption by the Russian military and on the surface mirrors the experience of Western forces pursuing simultaneously the application of coercive military force and co-option.<sup>51</sup> Russia was arguably quite successful in terms of employing a slow and methodical concentration of military force, civic actions, controlled media, and willing local collaborators (e.g., pro-Russian Chechen militias). In the 2<sup>nd</sup> Chechen War, Russia's approach embraced counterinsurgency practices that Western militaries or their Czarist predecessors would recognise. For instance, like 19<sup>th</sup> Century Czarist Russia, Putin's Russia employed the co-option of elites and encouraged Sufi strains of Islam by supporting Akhmed Kadyrov – Chechnya's religious leader – as a local proxy governing a semi-autonomous republic.<sup>52</sup> Akhmed's son, Ramzan, has

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<sup>49</sup> A. Cohen, *Russia's Counterinsurgency in North Caucasus: Performance and Consequences* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2014); M. Malek, "Russia's Asymmetric Wars in Chechnya since 1994," *Connections* 8, 4 (2009): pp. 81-98; E. Pain, "From the First Chechen War Towards the Second," *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 8, 1 (2001): pp. 7-19; G. J. Celestan, *Wounded Bear: The Ongoing Russian Military Operation in Chechnya* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Foreign Military Studies Office Publications, 1996); and L. W. Grau, "Russian Urban Tactics: Lessons from the Battle for Grozny," *INSS Strategic Forum* 38 (Washington: National Defense University, Institute for National Strategic Studies, 1995).

<sup>50</sup> See P. Aussaresses, *The Battle of the Casbah: Terrorism and Counterterrorism in Algeria 1955-1957* (New York: Enigma Books, 2002) for his memoir of traditional counterinsurgency operations in an urban area. D. Kilcullen, *Out of the Mountains: The Coming Age of the Urban Guerilla* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), using a wider range of examples of fighting in cities, argues that urban warfare is intrinsically destructive.

<sup>51</sup> Y. Kim and S. Blank, "Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Russia: Contending Paradigms and Current Perspectives," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 36, 11 (2013): pp. 917-932; and D. H. Ucko, "Cruel to be Kind: Authoritarian Counterinsurgency and the Winning of Hearts and Minds," *Lawfare* (22 May 2016).

<sup>52</sup> K. von Kumberg, "Russian Counterinsurgency Doctrine During the Second Chechen War 1999-2009," *Georgetown Security Studies Review* (6 March 2020): pp. 3-5.

continued this relationship by simultaneously emphasizing Islamic piety and identifying Salafism as a foreign innovation thereby downplaying Salafi internationalism while staunchly supporting Putin's war in Ukraine.

Syria offers the Putin era's most dramatic example of effectively combining coercion and co-option to achieve core Russian foreign policy goals. Russian application of its counterinsurgency doctrine as part of a broad spectrum of non-linear warfare underpins Russia's engagement in Syria.<sup>53</sup> As a result, its counterinsurgency approach – particularly as part of its doctrine of non-linear war<sup>54</sup> – reflects a geopolitical focus on extending its global influence, securing Russia's periphery, stabilizing the Middle East and North Africa, and countering popular uprisings (e.g., "color revolutions"<sup>55</sup>, the Arab spring, etc.) which threaten established authoritarian regimes. Russian strategy in Syria has shown itself adaptable to changing conditions, adopting temporary tactical alliances, and working to split opponents while focusing on sub-state structures and conflicts.<sup>56</sup> In essence, it embodies the assumption that weak nation-states unlike great powers are less important to conflict today than at any time since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, thus encouraging an approach to international relations according to a *de facto* post-Westphalian model.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> C. Clover, "The Unlikely Origins of Russia's Manifest Destiny: How an obscure academic and a marginalized philosopher captured the minds of the Kremlin and helped forge the new Russian nationalism," *Foreign Policy* (27 July 2016); and J. B. Dunlop, "Russia's New—and Frightening—"IsM," *Hoover Institute* (30 July 2004) <[hoover.org/research/russias-new-and-frightening-ism](http://hoover.org/research/russias-new-and-frightening-ism)>.

<sup>54</sup> P. Pomerantsev, "Non-Linear War," *London Review of Books*, (28 March 2014) <https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2014/march/non-linear-war>. See also B. Yourgrau, "The Literary Intrigues of Putin's Puppet Master," *The New York Review of Books* (22 January 2018), 6, and O. Jonsson, *The Russian Understanding of War: Blurring the Lines between War and Peace* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2019).

<sup>55</sup> R. Allison, "Russia and the post-2014 international legal order: revisionism and realpolitik," *International Affairs* 93, 3 (2017) pp. 519–543; I. Bērziņa, "Weaponization of 'Colour Revolutions'," *Journal of Political Marketing* 18, 4 (2019): pp. 330-343; and NAMEA, "Uncoiled Spring: Russia's new view of its role in the world: Syria and beyond," [www.namea-advisors.com/blog/geopolitical-analysis-russia-s-new-strategic-posture-syria-beyond](http://www.namea-advisors.com/blog/geopolitical-analysis-russia-s-new-strategic-posture-syria-beyond).

<sup>56</sup> J. R. Haines, "A Method to the Madness: The Logic of Russia's Syrian Counterinsurgency Strategy," *Foreign Policy Research Institute* (5 January 2016) <[pri.org/article/2016/01/method-madness-logic-russias-syrian-counterinsurgency-strategy](http://pri.org/article/2016/01/method-madness-logic-russias-syrian-counterinsurgency-strategy)>.

<sup>57</sup> See J. R. Haines, "A Method to the Madness: The Logic of Russia's Syrian Counterinsurgency Strategy," 15; and E. Götz and C.-R. Merlen, "Russia and the question of world order," *European Politics and Society* 20, 2 (2019): pp. 133-153 for examples of statements appealing to the concept of state sovereignty from Russian politicians that we view as self-serving rhetoric rather than genuine support for Westphalian state sovereignty.

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Given its utility in advancing Russia's post-Soviet strategic objectives, counterinsurgency has become more central to Russian military thought. The fact that Syria has been effectively split into different regions with an extremely weak central state and numerous sub-state armed groups suits Russian aims well, creating a buffer region on its southern flank that is unlikely to threaten Russia's strategic national interests. Russia along with Iran and Hezbollah, achieved military success on the ground and kept Bashar al-Assad in power despite Western, Gulf Arab, and Turkish opposition. Simply put, Russia's stunning battlefield reversals in Ukraine since its 2022 invasion using conventional military force offer a surprisingly stark contrast to its recent success as an insurgent and counterinsurgent.<sup>58</sup>

## Conclusions

Insurgents and counterinsurgents throughout history have essentially fighting the same type of war regardless of geographical setting or time period, so similarities inevitably exist between the contemporary Western and Russian approaches. Such convergence is not surprising. History reveals the difficulty that conventional militaries typically encounter facing insurgencies, particularly in the early stages. This is somewhat ironic because insurgencies are weak militarily if not politically when in their infancy. Nonetheless, an examination of actual counterinsurgency practices reveals that this pattern has held for the West and Russia since the end of World War II.

Western and Russian military forces have struggled in remarkably similar ways to develop and execute effective counterinsurgency campaigns against determined asymmetrical adversaries, especially when the insurgents have access to sanctuaries or some degree of popular support. Both also were fighting insurgents over control of

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<sup>58</sup> It is worth noting that in early 1904, before the disastrous 1905 Russo-Japanese War, Minister of Interior Vyacheslav von Plehve famously said to Czar Nicholas II: "What this country needs is a short, victorious war to stem the tide of revolution." Although belief in the possibility of a short decisive war often is a seductive assumption, defeat in a war of choice can be fundamentally destabilizing and erode support for a regime as Russia experienced in 1905 and again in 1917. See A. Åslund, "Russia's 19th-Century Approach in Syria," *The American Interest* (10 December 2015) [www.the-american-interest.com/2015/12/10/russias-19th-century-approach-in-syria](http://www.the-american-interest.com/2015/12/10/russias-19th-century-approach-in-syria) for a discussion of how late 19<sup>th</sup> century – early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Russian imperialism may inform Putin's approach to power and politics. Also see A. Stent, *Putin's World: Russia Against the West and with the Rest* (New York: Twelve, 2019).

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human terrain (e.g., social, ethnographic, cultural, and political elements of a population) making the political will, coherent long-term strategy, well-defined end states for victory, and changing human mindsets crucial for success. These shortcomings contributed significantly to the failed French and American experiences in Vietnam as well as the Russian and American-led Western experiences in Afghanistan. As a result, the post-World War II record reveals commonalities between the contemporary Western and Russian approaches to counterinsurgency that commonly are not acknowledged, especially tending to forget the hard-won lessons learned after each conflict and struggling to develop effective counterinsurgency campaigns in subsequent conflicts.

Consequently, success rests on gaining the loyalty of the local population by co-opting or coercing them to shape an effective strategy that responds to the core problem posed by counterinsurgency warfare. Hence, the extent to which countries rely on coercion which is inherently a feature of counterinsurgency strategies as opposed to emphasizing less violent co-option reflects the interplay between contextual factors including the physical environment, military doctrine, practice, and domestic political considerations.

The preceding analysis indicates that some degree of coercion and co-option are universal elements in the West's and Russia's counterinsurgency strategies and practices. The contemporary Western approach, in part reflecting public opinion in Western democracies, stresses discriminating and limited use of direct kinetic action (i.e., military force) relying on precision weapons and tactics that minimise collateral civilian damage and military casualties. Russian doctrine and practice, on the other hand, are not similarly constrained making coercion through the blunt application of force the default option to achieve military and political objectives. In that sense, Russian counter-insurgent forces operate more like their insurgent adversaries do making them more inclined than their Western counterparts to view coercion as the first, if not sole, option.

From an analytical standpoint, elucidating the differences and commonalities between the Western and Russian approaches enhances understanding of the role of coercion and co-option in counterinsurgency warfare. The findings suggest that reliance on non-linear warfare as a key stratagem for insurgency and counter-insurgency instead of physical coercion *per se* is a better indicator of divergence between the contemporary

Western and Russian approaches.<sup>59</sup> Recent examples include Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia, its 2014 occupation of Crimea and much of Donetsk and Luhansk in Ukraine, and its 2015 intervention in the Syrian civil war. These cases illustrate Russia's reliance on non-linear warfare operating in the grey zone (e.g., using disinformation, offensive cyber operations, subversion, economic pressure, diplomatic, political, and social means) offers a viable means to advance Russian interests by supporting authoritarian regimes to counter democratization or undermine emerging or mature democracies. Presumably, it also offers a stratagem that the West might employ selectively to counter authoritarian regimes or insurgencies. In addition, within the context of 21st-century insurgent warfare, reliance on non-linear warfare is a strategic choice that recognises and seeks to leverage the fact that most post-WWII insurgencies – whether militarily successful or not – tend to alter the balance of power between factions within a country and potentially have effects beyond its borders transforming the geopolitical strategic *status quo* with less risk of direct great power conflict.

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<sup>59</sup> See G. Torres, "Nonlinear Warfare: Is Russia Waging a Silent War in Latin America?" *Small Wars Journal* (22 January 2022), <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/nonlinear-warfare-russia-waging-silent-war-latin-america>. It is worth noting that President Eisenhower's conceptualization of clean demarcations between diplomacy, general purpose war, and nuclear war, formulated in the 1950s, has created transition barriers for American strategies, at a time that the US should be embracing non-linear transitions. See J.L. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); R. R. Bowie and R. Immerman, *Waging Peace: How Eisenhower Shaped an Enduring Cold War Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); W. R. Schilling, P. Y. Hammond, and G. H. Snyder, eds., *Strategy, Politics, and Defense Budgets* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962).



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