

An Analysis of Guerilla Warfare:  
From Carl von Clausewitz to T.E. Lawrence

**Introduction.**

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The science of warfare is often thought to be as old as humanity itself; a statement not so unlikely, considering that certain cave paintings, dating back thousands of years, depict groups of armed men, employing rudimentary flanking maneuvers. Many of civilization's greatest legends and triumphs are considered to have taken place in war, and no small number of our most honored men were generals and leaders in times of war. War seems to be a part of civilized living that has been cultivated and considered for as long as household has existed. The development of warfare in technology, discipline, and general lethality has inspired awe in both the awesome and awful way. In this research paper, I will explore the military practices, theory, and genius of one of these honored men of history, Thomas Edward Lawrence, in the light of Carl von Clausewitz's theory of warfare. Few men in history match up to Lawrence of Arabia's military genius. Winston Churchill said that of the people he had known, "T.E. Lawrence and David Lloyd George [were] the most interesting and gifted."<sup>1</sup> B.H. Liddell Hart said that Lawrence "was more deeply steeped in knowledge of war than any other general of the [Great] war,"<sup>2</sup> and Shelford Bidwell said that Lawrence can say "as much in one paragraph as Clausewitz says in a chapter."<sup>3</sup> Therefore, we may have confidence in considering Lawrence as an authority, not only on the subject of guerrilla warfare, but on warfare in general. To attempt this project of illuminating the theory of guerilla warfare adequately, first, I give a definition of

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<sup>1</sup> B.H. Liddell Hart, *Memoirs I*, (London: Cassell, 1965), 339.

<sup>2</sup> J.A. English, *Kindergarten Soldier: The Military Thought of Lawrence of Arabia*, (Charles Town, WV: American Military Institute, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> Shelford Bidwell, *Modern Warfare*, (London: Allen Lane, 1973), 197.

war in general. Secondly, I discuss strategy in light of the works Clausewitz and Liddell Hart. Thirdly, I attempt to specify guerrilla warfare, and fourthly I consider each of the three principles of guerrilla warfare strategy that have been given by T.E. Lawrence: the algebraic, the bionomic, and the psychological.

### **Part I: A Definition of War.**

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Whenever investigating the meaning of any word we look to the way in which that word is used. Economic warfare, political warfare, and class warfare are all said to be “warfare” because of their similarity to the proper concept of war which this paper investigates. Each time we speak of war, and apply it to anything other than fighting, we are insinuating a sort of combat. For example, when someone says that an apple is healthy or exercise is healthy or medicine is healthy, the true meaning that ‘healthy’ refers to is the wellness of the body. Similarly, the same consideration must be given to war, and this most proper definition of war considers the fighting and the shedding of blood by men in combat.

On the first page of Carl von Clausewitz’s *On War*, we are given the definition of the book’s subject as “an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will.”<sup>4</sup> Later on, Clausewitz tells us that “essentially war is fighting, for fighting is the only effective principle in the manifold activities generally designated as war.”<sup>5</sup> Given the principles espoused by Clausewitz throughout his book, it is apparent that war can be analyzed as something with four causes. War might be said to have a determined formal cause, that is “the destruction of the organized forces of the enemy;”<sup>6</sup> said more clearly, the destruction of forces “whether by death, injury, or any

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<sup>4</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989). P. 75

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>6</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

other means—either completely or enough to make [the enemy] stop fighting.”<sup>7</sup> The efficient cause may be said to be the political patronage, as “politics is the womb in which war develops,”<sup>8</sup> and this is the given leader of the executive branch. The material cause of war is certainly the two armies, that is the flesh and bone, guns and powder. And lastly, peace is the final cause, as Clausewitz says, “[with] the conclusion of peace the purpose of the war has been achieved and its business is at an end.”<sup>9 10</sup>

## **Part II: A Definition of Strategy.**

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Clausewitz builds upon this definition of war to teach us of strategy, which is of the utmost interest to this essay. “Strategy,” according to Clausewitz, is “the use of engagements for the object of the war.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, strategy is the use of fighting (since engagement means fighting) for the sake of subduing the enemy for peace. Strategy is not to be confused with tactics, which has fighting as its means, because the means for strategy are the tactical victories.<sup>12</sup> For Clausewitz, strategy is broken into five elements: the moral, the physical, the mathematical, the geographical, and the statistical:<sup>13</sup>

The first type covers everything that is created by intellectual and psychological qualities and influences; the second consists of the size of the armed forces, their composition, armament and so forth; the third includes the angle of lines of operation, the convergent and divergent movements wherever geometry enters into their calculation; the fourth comprises the influence of terrain, such as commanding positions, mountains, rivers, woods, and roads; and, finally, the fifth covers support and maintenance.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 227.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>10</sup> B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, (London: Meridian, 1991), p. 353.

<sup>11</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 128.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 142 and 143.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 183.

<sup>14</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

This understanding of strategy applies to the two kinds of engagements that can be considered in war: direct and indirect. Carl von Clausewitz tells us that “they are indirect if other things intrude and become the object of the engagement—things which cannot in themselves be considered to involve the destruction of the enemy’s forces, but which lead up to it.”<sup>15</sup> According to Clausewitz, strategy is a form of cunning, it is an art of exploiting force for grand purposes.<sup>16</sup>

B.H. Liddell Hart expounds upon the Clausewitzian theory of indirect warfare by analyzing the history of war strategy and its successes. In his book, *Strategy*, we can observe maxims for strategic orientation that make war more fluid in nature, and exalt indirect warfare as the superior and more practical kind of the two. Hart introduces several maxims, each of which imply a more subversive and cunning understanding of war, “1. adjust your end to your means... 3. Choose the line (or course) of least expectation... 5. Take a line of operation which offers alternative objectives.”<sup>17</sup>

Later in his book, Liddell Hart, being one of many biographers of T.E. Lawrence, claims that it is Lawrence who made guerilla warfare as prominent as it is today. Che Guevara, the famous Marxist revolutionary, and General Lu Cheng-Ts’ao, a commander of the Central Hopei Communist guerrillas, both kept copies of T.E. Lawrence’s *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*.<sup>18</sup> In *Strategy*, Hart changes his introductory phrase from “If you wish for peace, understand war,” into the new phrase “If you wish for peace, understand war—particularly the guerrilla and subversive form of war.”<sup>19</sup> This statement, illustrating Hart’s fondness of Lawrence, is explained

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 181.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 202.

<sup>17</sup> B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, (London: Meridian, 1991), p. 335.

<sup>18</sup> Basil Aboul-Enein and Youssef Aboul-Enein, *A Theoretical Exploration of Lawrence of Arabia’s Inner Meanings of Guerrilla Warfare*, (Bethesda, MD: Small Wars Journal, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, (London: Meridian, 1991), p. 361.

by J.A. English of Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry. In his article, *Kindergarten Soldier*, English tells us that Liddell Hart's *Strategy* reiterates the same message as T.E. Lawrence's *The Evolution of a Revolt* by describing the "general avoidance of pitched battles, the influence of ideas, the use of indirect pressures, and the value of small, highly mobile forces of intense firepower."<sup>20</sup> These few principles are the principles that defined both Lawrence's idea of guerrilla warfare and Hart's concept of the indirect method.

Often it is considered that Clausewitz's theory of war is in contradiction to the indirect method, and guerrilla warfare is merely a tool for the large scale conduct of arms. This is true to some extent. For Clausewitz, the best strategy is always to be as strong as one can possibly be. The Prussian theorist tells us that "there is no higher and simpler law of strategy than that of keeping one's forces concentrated."<sup>21</sup> Clausewitz believes that there may be good reasons to divide a force, and throughout the book he gives examples, but he is also certain that so long as concentration is the norm commanders can avoid great folly.

Certainly it is true, then, that Clausewitz is no advocate of the indirect method. Nevertheless, Clausewitz's preference for the direct method over the indirect does not mean that concepts of Hart and Lawrence are not more of a development than a negation of Clausewitzian principles. Both Hart and Lawrence are engaged in more of a mixing and balancing than a rejection. They are taking from both Clausewitz's syllogisms and, of another less spoken of war theorist, Maurice de Saxe's principle of war having "no certain rules of conduct."<sup>22</sup> This is to say

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<sup>20</sup> J.A. English, *Kindergarten Soldier: The Military Thought of Lawrence of Arabia*, (Charles Town, WV: American Military Institute, 1987).

<sup>21</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 204

<sup>22</sup> Maurice de Saxe, *Reveries, or, Memoirs concerning the art of War*, (Edinburgh: Sands, Donaldson, Murray, and Cochran for Alexander Donaldson, 1759).

that Lawrence's main criticism of Clausewitz is not so much with the Prussian theorists logical system, but rather the fact that his rigor often confused his disciples.<sup>23</sup>

### **Part III: A Definition of Guerrilla Warfare.**

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In chapter XX of Book VII, Clausewitz talks briefly about the concept of "peoples' wars," determining them to be diversions. The Prussian discusses the possibility of small forces of around 1,000 men attacking with great speed and daring; and he tells us that whoever employs this method must make certain that "there is more to be carried off or threatened in the defender's area than in his own. Where that is so, even a fairly weak diversion cannot fail to keep a much larger enemy force occupied."<sup>24</sup> Where Clausewitz and Lawrence differ is in the ability for the guerrilla to be strong and influential. For Clausewitz and his theory on the forces of space and time "there is no higher and simpler law of strategy than that of keeping one's forces concentrated"<sup>25</sup> and "no conquest can be carried out too quickly."<sup>26</sup>

As for a definition of guerilla warfare, Samuel Huntington delivers an attempt saying that:

Guerrilla warfare is a form of warfare by which the strategically weaker side assumes the tactical offensive in selected forms, times, and places. Guerrilla warfare is the weapon of the weak. It is never chosen in preference to regular warfare; it is employed only when and where the possibilities of regular warfare have been foreclosed.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> B.H. Liddell Hart, *Lawrence of Arabia*, (Lebanon, IN: Da Capo Press, 1989).

<sup>24</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989). p. 562

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 204.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 598.

<sup>27</sup> Franklin M. Osanka, *Modern Guerrilla Warfare: Fighting Communist Guerrilla Movements*, (New York: The Free Press, 1962) p. xvi.

This is in line with the root of the word, since ‘guerrilla’ means little war, and is derived from *guerrilleros*, which referred to the Spanish and Portuguese irregulars operating against French occupation armies in 1808-14.

In today’s nuclear age, however, it may be difficult to say that guerrilla warfare is characterized as a weapon of the weak. Today, it seems as though most wars will necessarily be waged by guerrilla forces, since an organization of larger scale forces might quickly devolve into nuclear flexing, and consequently irreparable destruction. Liddell Hart criticizes the policy of Vice President Nixon to threaten guerrillas with nuclear force saying the threat was as absurd as using “a sledgehammer to ward off a swarm of mosquitoes.”<sup>28</sup> This sort of threat by annihilation does not stop the mosquitoes, as Hart points out, guerrilla forces are impervious to this nonsensical approach of mass destruction. As a result, guerrilla warfare appears to only elicit the response of formulating one’s own irregular army, to fight fire with fire.

It seems then that the specific difference that characterizes guerrilla war as a species of War proper is merely that of its size relative to the enemy. But even this is inadequate as it appears that two guerrilla forces can be pitted against one another, as did the counter Communist guerrilla forces under United States Secretary of Defense, Mr. McNamara. Perhaps then guerrilla warfare can be characterized mainly by its subversion of the Clausewitzian principle of ‘concentration in space.’ This then, the factor of space, seems to be the identifying principle: in other words, orthodox war is identified by concentration, while guerrilla warfare is identified by “fluidity of force.”

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<sup>28</sup> B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, (London: Meridian, 1991), p. 363.

It is important, then, to keep in mind that this fluid nature in no way excludes the prudence of concentration. As Clausewitz, himself, says, “the very nature of war impedes the simultaneous concentration of all forces.”<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, the primary principle of guerrilla strategy is not concentration, as in Clausewitz’s theory, but dispersion; and concentration for the guerrilla means merely the assembly of manpower that is necessary for the task.<sup>30</sup> As Mao Tse Tung says, “dispersion, concentration, constant change of position—it is in these ways that guerrillas employ their strength.”<sup>31</sup>

#### **Part IV: The Strategic Science of Guerrilla Warfare.**

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Given this understanding of warfare and Clausewitz’s five principles of strategy, Lawrence is able to summarize “the moral, the physical, the mathematical, the geographical, and the statistical” into three elements. These three principal causes of guerilla warfare are so called: one algebraical, one biological, and another psychological.

The first of these elements, the algebraical (also known as the hecastics), considers the fixed conditions of the war; its space and time, hills and climate, railways and airports, technical weapons, whether it is landlocked or a port. T.E. Lawrence, while bedridden, thought deeply about these principles. The hecastic is a summary of Clausewitz’s physical, mathematical, geographical, and statistical principles. Lawrence came to the conclusion of the hecastic while considering that there were 140,000 square miles in question during the Arab Revolt. He noted that the method of war commonly chosen at the time was by trenches, and the Turkish army

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<sup>29</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 80

<sup>30</sup> Mao Tse Tung, *Mao Tse Tung on Guerrilla Warfare*, (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Navy), p. 130.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

would doubtless build such a trench along the bottom of the territory. The mileage, however, was almost certainly too vast for the Turkish forces, being approximately 100,000 men, to possibly control.

The conclusion that Lawrence arrived at was to turn warfare away from the concentrated methods of Clausewitz; rather, Lawrence desired that the Arab force be more like a gas. He says, "Armies were like plants, immobile as a whole, firm-rooted, nourished through long stems to the head. The Arabs might be a vapour, blowing where they listed."<sup>32</sup> Lawrence deduced that with 140,000 square miles to cover, the Turkish army would have to hold a post of twenty men for every four square miles; but this is an impossible feat with only 100,000 men, the Turkish army would need around 600,000 in order to effectively combat the rebellious Arab people. The British Officer deduced that these Turks, "being stupid,"<sup>33</sup> would assume war to be absolute and certainly take the direct approach to strategy; this meant that in terms of the algebraic calculation, so long as the Arabs were like a vapour, using an indirect method, they held the upper hand.

The next two elements of war for Lawrence are really a division of Clausewitz's singular moral principle of strategy. For Clausewitz and Lawrence the moral factor of war is a consideration of the human element in battle. This human element was named by T.E. Lawrence, the bionomic and psychological factors of warfare. This bionomic (or biological) element held as its main consideration the breaking point of an army, the life and death of its men, or, more colloquially said, the wear and tear. The bionomic is the element of feeling that exists among

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<sup>32</sup> T.E. Lawrence, *Guerrilla Warfare*, (Edinburgh: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1929).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

troops that cannot be expressed in any true accuracy, but this emotional factor is not the only part of bionomics: the men themselves in flesh and blood are a factor.

The biological is almost an intermediary step between the hecastics and the psychological; it takes from both elements making itself half numerical (like the algebraical), half emotional (like the psychological). As Lawrence said in his Britannica Encyclopedia entry, “the war-philosophers had properly made [war] an art, and had elevated one item in it, ‘effusion of blood,’ to the height of a principle. It became humanity in battle, an art touching every side of our corporeal being.”<sup>34</sup> That is to say, the humanity of battle is the individual spirits and numerical bodies that compose the bionomic factor. This bionomic element is “sensitive and illogical.”

As a case study, we can look at the Arab Revolt to see that war, and this biological element, is messy. The Turkish army had more men than materials, and T.E. Lawrence saw that the Arabs could not afford to lose men since the death of one was like a “pebble dropped in water: each may make only a brief hole, but rings of sorrow widen out from them.”<sup>35</sup> This pebble effect was not so with the Turkish army; what they had in abundance was men, what they lacked were materials. The Arabs, while being supported by the British, could then potentially match, or even exceed, the gun cotton or machine guns of the enemy. The Arab Revolt was not to be a war between men, but materials. It was then far more valuable to take down a Turkish bridge or rail, bomb or gun; to destroy any of these was more valuable than to destroy a Turk.

From this theory of war over materials there arose a disposition to not engage the enemy at all. To become an effective opponent, the Arabs could never give the enemy a chance to fire a

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<sup>34</sup> T.E. Lawrence, *Guerrilla Warfare*, (Edinburgh: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1929).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

shot, and as a result the Arabs were almost never in a defensive position. In order to achieve this goal of constant offensive, the Arab forces needed to leave nothing (or as little as humanly possible) to chance; a task impossible in the minds of many war theorists, but nevertheless the Arab rebels worked tirelessly to come as close as they could.

The third and final element was the psychological or, as Xenophon called it, the *diathetic*. This *diathesis* is defined in *Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon* as “a disposing in order, arrangement, a state, disposition, condition.”<sup>36</sup> Lawrence refers to this element as “the adjustment of spirit to the point where it becomes fit to exploit in action.”<sup>37</sup> Firstly, this element of the psychological involves an army’s collective reflection. High command must learn to orient the minds of their men, as their own minds had been arranged; but this does not apply only to one’s own army, the diathetic must also be a seeking to arrange the minds of one’s enemy. And thirdly, the diathetic must work toward the shaping of one’s supporting nation, the enemies nation, and the minds of any neutral onlookers.

This diathetic element proved to be more than half of the duties for the Arab command.<sup>38</sup>

The Arab army was so weak physically that it could not let the metaphysical weapon rust unused. It had won a province when the civilians in it had been taught to die for the ideal of freedom: the presence or absence of the enemy was a secondary matter.<sup>39</sup>

Is this not a familiar maxim from other “people's wars” of history; namely, the American revolution with Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* and its aim to win local support for the cause?

To gain the psychological advantage over an opponent, a guerilla force is to let the enemy function enough so that they will not stop trying, but not enough to be in any way effective; as

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<sup>36</sup> Bruce Leigh, *Lawrence: Warrior and Soldier*, (Ticehurst: Flagship Press, 2014).

<sup>37</sup> T.E. Lawrence, *Guerrilla Warfare*, (Edinburgh: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1929).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

Lawrence said, “the ideal was to keep [the Turkish] railway just working, but only just, with the maximum of loss and discomfort to him.”<sup>40</sup> When waging a guerrilla war, the opposing army is merely an accident and in no way the subject of attack. The strategy is always seeking out the weakest link and attempting to coerce the enemy to stretch itself beyond reason without them realizing such.

### **Part VI: Conclusion.**

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Guerrilla warfare have been practiced for thousands of years. Alexander the Great encountered guerrilla forces during his invasion of India. Quintus Fabius Maximus essentially transformed the Roman military into guerrilla forces in order to weaken the Carthaginians under Hannibal Barca. And Vercingetorix orchestrated guerrilla raids against the Roman occupation of Gaul. It seems that in every instance in history, the guerrilla forces have relied on their cunning, their speed, and constant momentum.

In this paper, I have shown how principles of strategy have developed from Clausewitz’s five to Lawrence’s three. The algebraical, or hecastic, being an evaluation of the numerical and hard data or, as Hart puts it, the “mathematical-cum-geographical.”<sup>41</sup> The hecastic takes into consideration anything that can be discreetly quantified. Applying this principle to today, we may even need to include cyberspace as a new “dimension” of space. Today, our military information, weaponry, and orders are becoming increasingly, if not entirely, cybernetic; and this allows an enemy to attack from almost any location on the earth.

The psychological element as the factor where any sort of collective mind may be observed, which includes the mind of the two armies and nations engaged in war, might also

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<sup>40</sup> T.E. Lawrence, *Guerrilla Warfare*, (Edinburgh: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1929).

<sup>41</sup> B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, (London: Meridian, 1991), pg. 366

require a new analyses in the modern day. Lawrence tells us that “the printing press [was] the greatest weapon in the armoury of the modern commander.”<sup>42</sup> In keeping with this understanding, today we have to consider social media as one of the commander's greatest weapons in turning the minds of an army or nation.

We also observed that the bionomic, being somewhat of an intermediary factor between the hecastic and the psychological, analyses each individual soldier as one in many and as an illogical unpredictable human being. This may be the only consistent principle for all of war history, as ironic as that might sound. I said in the introduction to this paper that war might be considered a constant fact of civilized history, and the bionomic factor seems to supports this. Man is illogical and suffers concupiscence; and this may be the final factor, and most elusive, in any preparation for war.

It seems that, over the course of history, guerrilla strategy has been viewed as the only hope of peoples resisting foreign occupation, and thus often attributed to the weaker side in combat. In our discussion we have come to see that the use of guerrilla force is not merely the instrument of the weak. Under today's threat of nuclear stalemate the stronger military forces in the world have developed guerrilla based units, like the Navy Seals or the Special Boat Service, and we can now see that the true defining principle of the guerrilla force is its fluid nature. Of course this fluidity is not the entirety of guerrilla war. Guerrilla war is a subversion of the Clausewitzian theory, where concentration is the primary “rule” of strategy but never excluding times for prudent dispersion, its dispersive principle is the paramount factor and concentration at given moments and points is left to prudence.

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<sup>42</sup> T.E. Lawrence, *Guerrilla Warfare*, (Edinburgh: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1929).