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Lost in Transition: The Myth of Mao and the Origins of COIN

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Mao Zedong, and even more so the myth surrounding his political figure, has had an enormous influence on contemporary military strategy. In the last seventy years Mao's military teachings have impacted formidably on the theory and practice of irregular warfare, not just by inspiring revolutionary groups all over the globe, but by affecting the development of modern counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine. Indeed, the idea itself that counterinsurgency is essentially a battle for the control and support of the population – what is generally regarded as Mao's own great contribution – would form a core feature of the population-centric approach used in Iraq and Afghanistan.[1]

Although the impact of Mao's doctrine on modern counterinsurgency has already been examined,[2] what the existing scholarship has mostly failed to point out is that the West's reception of Mao's writings and deeds is largely based on a selective interpretation of his actual strategy, with a view to making counterinsurgency more palatable to western public and, in doing so, succeeding in "selling" COIN in the West. In particular, most western counterinsurgents erroneously took for granted that Mao's successful insurgency in China resulted from the Communists' capacity to win over the consent and support of the population. Like most myths, this narrative is not completely false, but it tells only half the story. And, interestingly, it leaves out from Mao's theory and experience what Westerners could not accept.

In particular, in the *transition* from Maoist people's war to COIN, two crucial aspects of the former were lost. Firstly, for Mao the use of force remains the supreme and decisive instrument in war. The type and intensity of violence employed (e.g. terrorism, guerrilla, conventional force) change depending on the circumstances and the phases of the conflict but, according to the Chinese

leader, armed force is the crucial means in any type of military struggle. Secondly and more importantly, the centrality of violence qualifies Mao's ideas about the role played by the population in two important ways. On the one hand, for Mao popular support is not only political, economic and logistic, but also includes an armed contribution, which means that the population must be actively involved in combat. Unlike COIN proponents, Mao argued that the local population is expected to provide not only shelter, supplies, and intelligence: the populace must be thrown directly into the battle. In other words, according to Mao, by turning civilians into combatants, the population had to be employed as a force multiplier. While such a strategy was indeed a key aspect of previous western experiences in partisan warfare, as in the cases of T.E. Lawrence in the Middle East and the "interface services" during WWII, modern COIN theorists have greatly reduced the role of the population as a force multiplier. On this point it must also be emphasized that popular support does not merely result from psychological, social and economic policies intended to win the "hearts and minds" of the population,[3] as COIN seems to suggest. In fact, during Mao's military campaigns, popular support was not only the result of a 'good governance' approach, but also the outcome of coercive and ruthless policies. In this light, if one considers the brutality that characterized insurgencies during and after WWII, Mao's strategy was no exception.[4] On the other hand, whereas for COIN theorists and practitioners the security and protection of the population is a crucial *goal*, for the Chinese leader the population – though critically important – was a mere *instrument* that could be sacrificed if the conditions of the conflict so required.

In laying bare the misunderstandings and the selective reading ingrained in the reception of Mao's theory of people's war, this article shows that COIN is based on a mythical and mistaken historical foundation: Mao's capacity to gain the uncoerced support of the Chinese population. In so doing, the present paper contributes to the debates on the origins of modern counterinsurgency, and on some of its limits and foundational pitfalls. The article is organized as follows. Section one examines the Maoist roots of US COIN, especially the influence exercised by David Galula and Edward Lansdale, whose reading of Mao's works and deeds greatly contributed to the shaping of

population-centric counterinsurgency. Through an analysis of Mao's writings on people's war, section two is meant to shed light on both the ubiquitous role that the Chinese leader attached to the use of armed violence and what he really meant by popular support. Finally, section three examines how this is reflected in Mao's actual strategy of revolutionary warfare employed from the Agrarian Revolutionary War to the Liberation War.[5] This part illustrates how Mao often did the exact opposite of what COIN enthusiasts suggest: coercing and sacrificing the people, rather than serving and protecting them.

The Maoist Roots of COIN

What are the sources of population-centric COIN? In his forward to the book edition of Field Manual 3-24 (*FM 3-24*), John A. Nagl provides an unequivocal answer to this question: 'Of the many books that were influential in the writing of FM 3-24, perhaps none was as important as David Galula's *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice.*'[6] In particular, the French officer taught the new generation of counterinsurgents that the first law of every counterinsurgency campaign is that the 'support of the population is as necessary for the counterinsurgent as for the insurgent.'[7] In his view insurgencies are political conflicts that cannot be won by merely winning battles. Thus, the use of force is not the decisive means; rather, social, economic and political instruments must be deployed in order to gain broad popular support. In his *Counterinsurgency Warfare* Galula even queries the idea that in irregular warfare annihilating enemy forces is the way to win the conflict: the actual goal is to build '(or rebuild) a political machine from the population upward.'[8]

Galula and, more generally, the French theorists of *guerre révolutionnaire* took the idea of the centrality of the populace for counterinsurgency warfare directly from their reading of Mao's theory of people's war.[9] Although there exist precedents of counterinsurgency campaigns focused on the civilian population, such as General Weyler's strategy in Cuba and Colonel Gallieni's approach in Tonkin in the 1890s, these were meant to isolate the population from insurgents rather than securing

civilians.[10] Moreover, in outlining his argument, the French officer not only made a number of positive references to Mao, but he also took Mao's words as the epigraph for his *Counterinsurgency Warfare*.[11] By no means coincidentally, in a recent study on Galula, he is described as "Mao's disciple" and the Chinese Revolution ranks as the most significant influence on his ideas on counterinsurgency.[12] On this point Galula's biographer argues that 'Galula and other counterinsurgents' emphasis on isolating the insurgent from the population is simply the flip side of Mao's insistence that the insurgent draws his support only from the people.'[13] Actually, Galula himself went so far as to describe Mao as "his master 'quite despite himself'."[14]

It must be emphasized that Galula did not merely read and study Mao's writings. After serving in the army during the liberation of France, in 1945 he was sent to China as an assistant military attaché, where he had direct experience of the last phase of the Civil War and where he was captured by Mao's troops.[15] In the early 1960s Galula retired from the French Army and was offered a fellowship at the Center for International Affairs at Harvard where he wrote his first book on French counterinsurgency in Algeria.[16] In April 1962 he participated in a symposium organized by the RAND Corporation along with several other scholars and practitioners such as Edward G. Lansdale, Frank Kitson, and George Tanham. Interestingly, during the discussion the analysis centered on the "Maoist" insight as to the "indispensable need of popular support."[17] During the roundtable discussion, Kitson – a British officer who served in Kenya and, more importantly, in Malaya against the Communist rebellion – supported Galula's view by "stressing the need of political and economic factors" and their "inseparability from military consideration."[18]

In the same years a second parallel and interconnected movement linking Mao's thought to US counterinsurgency developed. It can be described as an intense lobbying activity carried out by a group of influential individuals fascinated by Mao with the goal of inducing the Kennedy Administration to adopt a specific counterinsurgency doctrine. Indeed, counterinsurgency became popular in the American administration during the presidency of Kennedy, who "encouraged all those around him to read Mao and Che Guevara […] and took a personal interest in special forces and their

training manuals and equipment."[19] As RAND political scientist Jefferson Marquis noted, the intellectual environment at that time was characterized by a struggle of ideas to lobby the government for a population-centric strategy.[20] This struggle involved Tanham and Lansdale, among others. The latter, as Max Boot has recently noted, "was one of the few Americans of [that] period who had read Mao Zedong's work." Lansdale "knew that the Communist leader instructed his guerrillas to 'keep the closest possible relations with the common people', 'be courteous and polite', and 'pay for all articles'."[21] In 1964 Lansdale published an article in *Foreign Affairs* in which he stressed the specific nature of people's war and went as far as to argue about the common roots shared by revolutionary warfare and "the spirit of the British Magna Carta, the French '*Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*' and our own Declaration of Independence."[22] In the same article, Lansdale also highlighted the need for "civic action," which is "more than giving economic help; it is an attitude of behavior, an extension of military courtesy, in which the soldier-citizen becomes the brotherly protector of the civilian-citizen."[23] These ideas were taken directly from Mao's famous "Three main rules of discipline and eight points of attention" (*san da jilü, ba xiang zhuyi*), which Lansdale did not fail to quote; they are also among the foundational principles of US COIN as developed in *FM 3-24*.

In the process, thanks to Galula, Lansdale and others, the writings of Mao were adapted by modern counterinsurgents to their needs (i.e., portraying the military activity as a benevolent nation-building activity). In 1967 this approach was briefly and partially applied in Vietnam with the creation of Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS), a population-centric strategy based on Vietcong tactics, which in turn were adapted from Mao's doctrine.[24] However, the debacle in Vietnam, which can hardly be put down to the pacification effort, caused this population-centric strategy to be set aside for several decades.[25] But marginalizing it from US military and policy circles would do nothing to change its content. When the conventional phase of the Iraq War ended and insurgency erupted, it would be brought out again almost whole.[26] The author, or rather coordinator, of that 'back to basics' is known to have been David Petraeus, who would go on to head counterinsurgency operations following the Surge in Iraq as of February 2007. By no means

coincidentally, the mantra informing such operations was "secure and serve the population," "people" as "the decisive terrain," counterinsurgency as "a contest" for the people whose "trust and support" is crucial for the final victory.[27]

The new teaching emphasized the more political side to operations, scouting the purely military aspects. As Galula had insisted, and the Mao myth allegedly taught, in irregular warfare the ratio between the political and the coercive should be the inverse of regular conflict: 80 percent state-building and only 20 percent military operations.[28] This doctrine was echoed by other analysts such as Michael O'Hanlon, Steve Metz, and John Mackinlay, a British army officer who went so far as to describe COIN as a "repackaging of the Maoist campaign."[29] Significantly, when those modern COIN theorists do not quote Mao directly, they make reference to "the other side of the COIN", i.e. the work of David Galula.[30] The connection between COIN and Mao via Galula emerges explicitly in Nagl's *Forward* to Galula's book, where the American analyst uses Mao's famous "fish and water" analogy to describe the great theoretical contribution of the French officer: "An insurgency is a competition between insurgent and government for the support of the civilian population, which provides the sea in which the insurgent swims."[31]

Arguing that COIN theorists and adherents were directly or indirectly influenced by Mao is not tantamount to suggesting that officers such as Kilcullen, Petraeus and others interpreted insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan as Maoist strategies. Kilcullen, for example, is explicit in arguing that in Afghanistan the US were not facing a protracted Maoist war, but rather an "exhaustion" strategy meant to sap "the energy, resources, and support of the Afghan government and its international partners."[32] However, the recipe to counter such a strategy – and this is the crucial point – is still the uncoerced loyalty of the population: one needs to create the right socio-political conditions for counterinsurgency to win, reducing the use of force and following Mao's example which – on the traditional view of the counterinsurgents – was to secure a territorial base not by military means but by painstaking persuasion of the rural population. In other words, to dry up the pond in which enemy guerrillas are swimming and multiplying.

However, as we show in the next section, modern population-centric strategy stems from a partial reading of Mao's writings on people's war as well as from a broadly mistaken understanding of the strategy actually employed by CCP in the wars fought between the late 1920s and 1949, especially regarding the role played by the population, i.e. the very core of US COIN.

Mao's Theory of People's War

In Chinese sources, "people's war" (*renmin zhanzheng*) is presented as the solution developed by the CCP to cope with its central strategic problem from the late 1920s to the late 1940s, namely how to "defeat the superior from a position of inferiority" (*yi lie sheng you*).[33] Faced with militarily superior enemies, the CCP had to build on the relative nature of superiority and inferiority, identify its own advantages over the enemy, and leverage on them to shift the balance of forces in the military struggle. Hence the concept of "people's war", which singled out mass mobilization as the CCP's main advantage over the enemy and called for "fully arousing, organizing and arming the popular masses" under the leadership of the party.[34] According to the Chinese official view, "people's war" is "the core of Mao Zedong's military thought and the basic guiding line of the Communist Party of China for conducting revolutionary war and counter-aggression war".[35]

There is little doubt that, in his writings, Mao attaches great importance to popular support in irregular warfare.[36] In *Problems of Strategy in China's Revolutionary War*, for example, "a population that actively supports the Red Army" (*jiji yuanzhu Hongjun de renmin*) is ranked as the first and most important among the six conditions for a successful military campaign.[37] Likewise, Mao argues in *On Protracted War* that revolutionary war cannot be won without "widespread and extensive political mobilization," as "mobilizing ordinary people [*laobaixing*] of the whole country will create an immense ocean that will drown the enemy into fatal disaster, will create conditions that make up for deficiencies in arms and other aspects, will create the prerequisites for overcoming any war difficulty."[38]

Not surprisingly, the question of how to win over the population is a recurrent theme in Mao's writings. To begin with, Mao recommends that the party implement economic policies favorable to the masses. What is deemed as "favorable" changes considerably across time and space, but the general idea is that economic policy adopted in CCP-controlled areas should not create an excessive burden on the segment of the local population whose support is decisive for the military struggle.[39] Moreover, communist forces are expected to enforce strict discipline among their ranks. Hence, the above-mentioned "Three main rules of discipline and eight points of attention" that CCP troops must follow: "all actions are subject to command, do not take even a needle or piece of thread from the masses, all that has been captured [from the masses] has to be returned" (rules of discipline); "be polite when you speak, be fair when you buy, all that you borrow has to be returned, all that is damaged has to be compensated, do not beat or verbally abuse people, do not damage crops, do not take liberties with women, do not mistreat prisoners" (points of attention).[40] In general, CCP doctrinal documents are replete with instructions on how troops should behave in order to win the trust of the populace.[41]

Emphasis on popular support is so strong that even those who want to challenge this point have no choice but to admit, as Francis Grice has recently done, that "Mao's thoughts on this issue do mostly confirm the popular belief that Mao recommended the courteous treatment of civilians in his writings."[42] Yet, it would be mistaken to conclude that Mao's doctrine was preeminently based on the uncoerced support of the population, as erroneously thought by Galula, Lansdale, Kitson and others. In fact, in Mao's writings the importance of popular consent is combined with a second factor that is similarly ubiquitous: the central role of violence. Although Galula and Lansdale played down the importance that Mao attached to the use of violence in irregular warfare, sinologists have identified the use of force as a crucial and recurrent aspect in Mao's writings. As Stuart S. Schram noted, "the language of war, strength, and courage runs like a red thread through all of Mao's works. This is not merely one of the *important* strains in Mao's personality and thought: it is almost the *central* strain."[43]

After the collapse of the First CCP-KMT United Front in Spring 1927, Mao was among the Communist leaders who most emphatically insisted on the role of violence in the revolutionary process. On 7 August 1927, at the CCP Central Committee emergency meeting convened in the aftermath of the anti-Communist massacres, Mao criticized the party leadership for failing to recognize the importance of armed violence. According to Chinese sources, it was on this occasion that Mao first described political power as growing out of the barrel of a gun:

In the past we criticized Sun Yat-sen because he specialized in military campaigns and we did just the opposite: we avoided military campaigns and specialized in mass mobilization. […] In the future we have to pay great attention to the military element and realize that political power is obtained from the barrel of a gun [*zhengquan shi you qiangganzi zhong qude de*].[44]

Further developed in the following years,[45] this idea was reaffirmed by Mao in a speech delivered at the Sixth Plenum of the Sixth Central Committee in November 1938. Later published as *Problems of War and Strategy*, this text contains the most systematic exposition of Mao's ideas on the role of violence in revolutionary struggle. Since China is not a capitalist and democratic society, but rather a semi-colonial and semi-feudal country, Mao argues, revolution has to be carried out in peculiar ways: "In China, the main form of struggle is war and the main form of organization is the army. Everything else, such as mass organization and mass struggle, is very important […] but it is functional to war [*weizhe zhanzheng*]."[46] Hence Mao's famous maxim: "Every Communist Party member must grasp this truth: 'political power grows out of the barrel of a gun' [*qiangganzi limian chu zhengquan*]. Our principle is that the party commands the gun, and it must never be allowed that the gun commands the party." Although quotations of this famous speech usually stop here, what follows is even more illuminating: "But once we have guns, then we can create the party [*zao dang*]: the Eight Route Army in North China in fact created a big party. And we can create cadres, create

schools, create culture, create mass movements. Everything in Yan'an has been created with the gun. *All things grow out of the barrel of a gun* [*qiangganzi limian chu yiqie dongxi*]."[47].

This emphasis on armed violence qualifies Mao's ideas about the role of the people in two important ways, which both show the mistaken and selective reception of his writings by Galula, Lansdale and the latest generations of COIN proponents. First, Mao conceives popular support as functional to military combat. It follows that the kind of support that Mao intends to extract from the populace is not a generic form of political consent, but rather a more specific and functional form of direct involvement in the war. Mao conceives popular support as *armed* support, with civilians extensively mobilized in a vast network of military organizations fighting side by side with the CCP's main forces.[48] In *Problems of Strategy in China's Revolutionary War*, for instance, Mao explicitly theorizes people's participation in guerrilla actions:

The people's guerrilla war [operations], if observed from the perspective of the revolutionary war as a whole, help the Red Army's main forces as the left hand helps the right hand: the Red Army's regular forces without the people's guerrilla war [operations] are like a general with only one arm. In concrete terms, and especially when it comes to military operations, having the people as a factor in the base area *means having an armed people* [*wuzhuang qilai le de renmin*].[49]

Although the policy of recruiting armed forces from the local population had long been in use by colonial powers and would be applied later in Vietnam (Vietnamization) and, more recently, in Iraq (Iraqization) and Afghanistan (Afghanization), what Mao theorized was not just a mere form of recruitment, but rather an extensive political mobilization of the masses aimed at their large-scale involvement in war operations. This is what Mao ultimately meant by people's war and what distinguishes Maoist political mobilization from both the old recruitment of colonial powers and the development of local security forces by western powers in places like Iraq and Afghanistan.

This point calls into question the conventional interpretation of the relationship between CCP troops and the population in Mao's theory of people's war, i.e. the idea that, based on a strict

differentiation of roles, the Red Army fights and civilians provide non-combat support (logistics, shelter, supplies, information, etc.). Such is the meaning mostly attributed to the famous fish-water analogy, which equates the relationship between people and troops with that between water and fish.[50] According to Schram, for example, by drawing a clear distinction between the fish and the water, "Mao's metaphor makes perfectly clear that the military struggle will be waged by the Red Army on behalf of the masses, *and not by the masses themselves*."[51] While it is true that no spontaneous action of the people is encouraged, the passage quoted above suggests a different type of relationship between the party and the people: the CCP will not just fight on behalf of the masses, but will rather arm civilians and direct them in *their fight* against the enemy. The differentiation of roles does not consist, then, in the fact that CCP troops fight while civilians provide non-combat support, but rather in the leading position of the party as ultimately responsible for the conduct and organization of the fight.

The second qualification regarding popular support is that civilians are highly expendable and can be sacrificed if needed. Their protection is not the ultimate goal of military operations. This is most notably implied in Mao's famous principle of "luring the enemy in deep" (*you di shen ru*). Formulated in the early years of the Agrarian Revolutionary War, this principle postulates that CCP troops should not resist an offensive launched by a superior enemy, but should rather retreat and let the enemy penetrate deep into CCP-controlled territory ("strategic defense," *zhanlüe fangyu*, or "strategic retreat," *zhanlüe tuique*). In the phase following the retreat (i.e. the "strategic stalemate," *zhanlüe de xiangchi*), the Red Army will consume the enemy through continuous engagements, until the balance of power changes in its favor. At this point, the Red Army will attack to regain the territory lost and expand into areas controlled by the enemy (i.e. "strategic counter-offensive," *zhanlüe fangong*).[52]

The cost of this strategy for the civilian population is immense. Whenever the Red Army is under major attack, the masses in CCP-controlled areas will be abandoned to the enemy's hands. Not coincidentally, the implications of "luring the enemy in deep" were the object of major controversies

between Mao and the local party leadership in Jiangxi province in 1930-31.[53] Mostly formed of members of the local gentry and rich peasant families who had a strong interest in avoiding destruction of their own home districts, the local leadership was fiercely opposed to "luring the enemy in deep".[54] The human cost of "luring the enemy in deep" was also one of the main reasons why the Comintern would later object to Mao's doctrine implemented in the first three "counter encirclement and suppression campaigns." According to a report submitted in 1933 by Comintern representative to China Pavel Mif, "luring the enemy in deep" "has implied that over the past two years war has been fought in Soviet territory from beginning to end, and all destructions have been shouldered by the workers and peasants of the Soviet area."[55] Comintern military adviser Otto Braun added that "although this type of strategy is effective from a military point of view, the sacrifices that it entails are disastrous: the losses that our army suffered in battle and especially during the retreat are immense, but the losses suffered by the population are even more shocking, because – as soon as the enemy occupies Soviet territory – it retaliates against the population with brutality."[56]

Writing about such controversies in retrospect, Mao resolutely defended the principle of strategic retreat despite its human cost: "If the pots and pans of some families are not smashed over the short term, the pots and pans of the whole people will be smashed over the long term. Fear of short-term negative political repercussions will be paid with long-term negative repercussions."[57] The objections of those who insisted on protecting the population were then dismissed as "revolutionary impetuosity of the petty-bourgeois intellectuals" or "narrow conservatism of the peasant small producers." Both positions were accused of being "unwilling to link the interests of today with the interests of tomorrow, to link the interests of a part with the interests of the whole."[58]

Mao's Practice of People's War

The two qualifications suggested by the examination of Mao's writings are confirmed by his practice of people's war. Throwing civilians directly into battle and sacrificing them on the altar of military expediency were two recurrent policies throughout the wars fought by the CCP between 1927 and

1949. To begin with, civilians were systematically involved in fighting. During the Agrarian Revolutionary War, the CCP devised a "three-ladder recruitment" system whereby local populations were extensively mobilized in military operations. The main forces of the Red Army and the local garrison troops were complemented by the armed masses, organized into insurrectionary detachments and Red Guard units. Composed of farmers and workers, the Red Guards were employed in guerrilla warfare on a temporary basis under the supervision of the Red Army, while continuing to carry out their production duties.[59] Further consolidated during the War of Resistance, this system remained in place during the Liberation War, with the CCP main forces – renamed as the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in 1946 – drawing on local militia units formed of several thousand men per county.[60]

According to Chinese official history, participation in this network of military organizations was largely spontaneous, which differentiated the forces of the CCP from those of the KMT, mainly recruited through coercion.[61] Yet there is strong historical evidence that peasants were far from enthusiastic about enlisting in CCP main forces and militia units, and that recruitment campaigns were often conducted with methods that did not differ much from those employed by the KMT. For example, in the New Fourth Army's recruitment during the War of Resistance, local cadres were assigned fixed quotas of recruits to be provided for CCP forces, which created strong pressure and led to fierce competition, with cases of cadres stealing each other's recruits in order to meet their quotas.[62] To convince reluctant peasants, cadres used economic incentives, with recruitment campaigns deliberately launched in winter and spring, when peasants had to cope with reduced food reserves and a seasonal shrinkage of the labor market. When economic incentives were not enough, cadres mobilized family and friendship networks and resorted to traditional forms of influence. When even social pressure did not work, cadres, desperate to meet their quotas, applied systematic "deception, coercion, and bribery."[63] Thus, peasants were forced to enlist with coercive measures such as temporary arrests, threats of long-term incarceration, denial of travel documents, as well as the closure of local markets to blackmail the village as a whole.

This leads to the question of the role that popular support – and peasant support in particular – played in the Communists' victory. That such a role was central is a crucial thesis not only of Chinese official history, but also of a long tradition of western scholarship, which has identified peasant support as a key component of CCP success, although disagreeing on the sources of such support – whether CCP appeals to "peasant nationalism" or its land reform policies.[64] Yet the real extent of peasant support for the CCP is in fact more problematic than is often assumed. As shown by Kathleen Hartford in her study of North China's Jin-Cha-Ji base during the War of Resistance, the CCP managed to succeed not *because* of widespread peasant support, but *despite* a substantial lack of it.[65] As Lucien Bianco argued, what the CCP managed to obtain from the peasants was nothing more than "grudging acquiescence," something that did not qualify as genuine "support" but rather as a form of forced "compliance." While there was a measure of exchange in such compliance – with peasants benefitting from the economic incentives offered by the CCP – its ultimate root was "awareness of [the party's] intimidating power and capacity for repression."[66] From this viewpoint, the French counterinsurgent Roger Trinquier was a good interpreter of Mao when, speaking on the importance of popular support for the Chinese leader, he argued that "such support may be spontaneous, although that is quite rare and probably a temporary condition. If it doesn't exist, it must be secured by every possible means, the most effective of which is *terrorism.*"[67]

So far, we have argued that civilians were directly involved in military operations and that such involvement was often the result of naked coercion. We will now turn to the second qualification introduced in the previous section and show that civilians were readily sacrificed by Mao whenever he thought military needs so required. In this respect, Mao's practice was consistent right from the early stages of the Agrarian Revolutionary War. Eventually passed at the October 1930 Luofang Conference, the controversial doctrine of "luring the enemy in deep" was implemented during the first "encirclement and suppression campaign" launched by Chiang Kai-shek in December that year. In Jiangxi's Central Soviet Area, the Red Army let Chiang's three divisions penetrate, then counter-attacked and managed to annihilate two of the divisions, taking more than 10,000 prisoners. The

"counter-encirclement and suppression campaign" was a success, but it came at a high cost for the local population, exposed to all kind of violence from pro-KMT forces determined to extract information about the CCP and the Red Army. The same doctrine was then implemented during the second and third "encirclement and suppression campaigns" in spring and summer 1931, respectively.[68] By the time the fourth campaign was launched in June 1932, however, Mao's position in the CCP had significantly weakened and his doctrine of "luring the enemy in deep" had been harshly criticized. A major policy shift would then take place before the fifth and final campaign, which started in October 1933 and mobilized unprecedented forces, with nearly a million KMT troops supported by mechanized artillery and air power. Under Otto Braun's direction, the Red Army opted for positional defense, in a desperate attempt to defend the Central Soviet Area, which eventually fell in October 1934.[69] Mao would later criticize positional warfare at the Zunyi conference in January 1935 and then again in his 1936 essay on *Problems of Strategy in China's Revolutionary War*, where he ascribed the defeat to "those who advocate[d] 'keeping the enemy beyond the gates of the country' and oppose[d] strategic retreat on the ground that to retreat means to lose territory and *to endanger the people*."[70] It was precisely there that Mao openly theorized the sacrifice of the civilian population as quoted above – letting "the pots and pans" to be smashed in order to preserve the Red Army.

Consolidated thus in Mao's theory of revolutionary warfare, this approach was repeatedly applied in the following years. A major example was the PLA's retreat at the beginning of the Liberation War, after the KMT launched its general offensive in summer 1946. As in the Agrarian Revolutionary War, the retreat involved the main forces, the militia units and CCP cadres with their families, while the local population was left behind at the mercy of the enemy forces. The price that it had to pay was huge, especially in the areas where the CCP had meanwhile implemented land reforms. Whenever government forces regained control of an area previously controlled by the CCP, they immediately established "return-to-the-village corps" (*hui xiang tuan*), local armed forces recruited among landlords and members of the local elite most heavily affected by the CCP policies. These corps settled scores on their own initiative and resorted to widespread violence against peasants

and other social groups who had benefitted from CCP rule. In Northern Jiangsu and in the Hebei-Shandong-Henan area, indiscriminate retaliation was common, activists were summarily executed, women raped, and the autumn harvest requisitioned. The burden for the civilian population was so heavy that, once the PLA eventually managed to regain control of the area, the CCP was unable to rally any support from those who had previously benefitted from its policies.[71]

In Mao's practice of insurgency warfare as much as in his writings, the centrality of violence thus qualifies the role of popular support in important ways. With the revolutionary process conceived as an inherently violent struggle, the population is expected to be actively involved in fighting and bear the major brunt of war. Crucial for the positive outcome of the struggle, such an involvement is preferably voluntary, but if necessary harsh policies of persuasion are applied with no hesitation. The population is then instrumental to the overall cause just as it can be sacrificed at whim, and there is no real attempt to protect it when military threats against the CCP arise. This is far from the idea of Mao as the *ante litteram* theorist and practitioner of population-centric warfare, a myth based on a misunderstanding of what Mao meant by popular support and how this was obtained by the CCP.

In this respect, it is worth noting that the war that most contributed to such a myth – the Liberation War, with the PLA's surprising victory over the US-backed superior forces of the KMT – was ironically the least "population-centric" among the wars fought by the CCP. Compared to the Agrarian Revolutionary War and the War of Resistance, the Liberation War saw a more limited involvement of the population, with fighting conceived as the job of large-scale, regular forces. This conventional dimension, as argued by Elie Tenenbaum, is often neglected in the western strategic literature "obsessed with the popular aspect of the Chinese revolution".[72] That the Liberation War had to be fought differently was theorized by Mao himself in September 1946, in a military directive drafted for the CCP Central Committee's Revolutionary Military Commission, and then reaffirmed one year later, in his strategic directive for the second year of the war.[73] The final victory of the CCP was thus achieved through a conventional war that was no different from other conventional wars fought in the mid-Twentieth century – that is, a clash between large military formations with the use

of heavy weaponry and reliance on a large-scale mobilization effort.[74] Hence, there seems to be a paradox behind the myth: the victory that most decisively contributed to the legend of Mao as the father of population-centric warfare was in fact achieved conventionally.

Conclusion

COIN as a population-centric doctrine owes much to Mao, or rather the myth surrounding his doctrine of people's war, and especially to how this was selectively interpreted by certain proponents such as Edward Lansdale and David Galula. However, by thinking and practicing counterinsurgency as a population-centric strategy, these theorists and practitioners took from Mao only those palatable policies which western societies could normatively accept.[75] It is not clear whether the population-centric rhetoric adopted by COIN theorists originated in a genuine belief or, rather, from the need to 'sell a product' at home, i.e. portraying military interventions abroad as nation-building missions aimed at pacifying war-torn countries. However, the continuous reference to Mao in their writings is udeniable.

Although violence is far from sufficient for insurgents and counterinsurgents alike and the support of the population plays a key role, according to Mao the former remains a primary means and the latter can readily be sacrificed when functional to the war effort. In order to acquire the control and support of the population, Mao employed a powerful combination of propaganda and carrot-and-stick policies in which reprisal and collective punishment against recalcitrant civilians played a crucial role. While for Mao war has a political nature, we must not forget that he specified, paraphrasing Clausewitz, that "war is politics with bloodshed."[76] By contrast, Galula offered a more civilized version of Mao's doctrine that American military thinkers could employ in order to elaborate a type of strategy in which the use of force is further de-emphasized. The end result is COIN, a doctrine that David Kilcullen described as "armed social work."[77] To put it mildly, Mao would have derided this approach as petty-bourgeois humanitarianism.

COIN's failure to achieve its main objectives has produced an intense debate over its effectiveness and prospects of success. In light of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, scholars have criticized COIN for a variety of reasons, such as the difficulty of implementing it, the gap between ambition and resources, its lack of a real strategy, its overemphasis on manpower and political reforms rather than on the use of force.[78] To this heated debate, the present article would add that COIN's failures or, at best, its unsatisfying results may also be rooted in a misreading or a selective interpretation of one of its indirect but foundational source of inspiration. Indeed, unlike COIN proponents, those insurgents who adapted and revised Mao's original doctrine (e.g., Ho Chi Minh and other revolutionaries in the world) never questioned the central role of violence and the fact that the population must be coerced and sacrificed whenever required by the conditions of the conflict.

COIN has lost much of its appeal within political and military circles and one may argue that there is no need to bury it once again. Doubtless, that population-centric counterinsurgency is less attractive after the difficulties encountered in Iraq and Afghanistan is an indisputable fact. However, it must be stressed that even if it is put aside for years or even decades, it may re-emerge in the future, as happened during the war in Iraq when it was resurrected after a long period of latency following the end of the Vietnam war.[79] The fact that COIN offers a sort of 'humane' warfare based on the security and development of the indigenous population is in the long term a temptation difficult to resist.

The policy implication of this article is not that applying Mao's theory of people's war in reverse is the road to victory. The fact that the use of force and coercive policies against the population were crucial ingredients of Mao's success does not mean that they are also crucial for countering insurgency. Mao's military victories not only resulted from a variety of factors and accidents that went beyond his own doctrine and strategy (including the Japanese invasion of China which weakened the KMT), but the main limit of those analyses that point to the lack of brute force and coercion as COIN's main shortcoming lies in the fact that they suggest adopting military practices that belong to a world that no longer exists; and the clock of history cannot be put back. The main

implication is that we should admit the limits of what military interventions can do in the context of conflicts "amongst the people," because it is no longer reasonable to start wars that can hardly be won at an acceptable moral cost for our nations.

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[1] Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency*; Gentile, *Wrong Turn*; Porch, "The Dangerous Myths and Dubious Promise of COIN," 239-257.

[2] For an extensive examination of the influence of Mao on counterinsurgency see Shy and Collier, "Revolutionary War;" Shafer, *Deadly Paradigms*, especially chap. 5 and 6; Mackinlay, *The Insurgent Archipelago*; Porch, *Counterinsurgency*, 154-155, 162, 303. See also the special issue of *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 28/3 (2017).

[3] On the origins of the phrase, see Dixon '"Hearts and Minds'? British Counter-Insurgency from Malaya to Iraq," 363-367.

[4] Indeed, during the Second World War a variety of partisan groups adopted provocation strategies in order to trigger German retaliation. In France one of the advocates of this strategy was Pierre Georges, known as "Colonel Fabien".

[5] In China's official history, the wars fought by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) between the late 1920s and the late 1940s are divided into three phases: the 1927-36 Agrarian Revolutionary War against the Kuomintang (KMT); the 1937-45 War of Resistance Against Japan; and the 1946-49 Liberation War against the KMT: see Junshi Kexueyuan Junshi Lishi Yanjiusuo (hereafter JKJLY), *Zhongguo Renmin Jiefangjun de Bashi Nian*.

[6] Nagl, "The Evolution and Importance of Army/Marine Corps Field Manual 3-24," xix. Thompson and Frank Kitson are certainly two other important sources of inspiration for US COIN. However, this section focuses primarily on Galula because he appears the most important "dead theorist" behind COIN.

[7] Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, 52.

[8] Ibid., 95.

[9] On the importance of Mao for the French theorists of revolutionary warfare see Paret, *French Revolutionary Warfare from Indochina to Algeria*, 11, 18-19, 101-102, 109. Galula differed from the French theorists of revolutionary warfare on a variety of points, but especially on their overemphasis on "control rather than consent" and on "reliance on very coercive measures." See Durand, "France," 16. On the limits and failures of Galula's doctrine in Algeria see Mathias, *Galula in Algeria*.

[10] As is well known, attempts to isolate civilians from insurgents through the use of concentration camps had devastating effects on the local population.

[11] Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, xi.

[12] Marlowe, *David Galula*, 27.

[13] Ibid., 27.

[14] Cohen, *Galula*, 73-74.

[15] Hosmer and Crane, *Counterinsurgency*.

[16] Galula, *Pacification in Algeria 1956-1958*.

[17] Hosmer and Crane, *Counterinsurgency*, 4, 9, 12, 15, 17, 21, 56-60, 65-66.

[18] Ibid., 123. Of course, the origins of western COIN are more complex. For a short but thorough reconstruction see Tenenbaum, *Partisans et Centurions*, 65-111. But Mao's idea of the need for popular support is central in the writings of western counterinsurgents. See, for example, Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, 50-58 and Kitson, *Low Intensity Operations*, 49-50, 95.

[19] Freedman, *Strategy,* 188.

[20] Marquis, "The Other Warriors: American Social Science and Nation Building in Vietnam," 79-105. According to Marquis, this debate was a sort of "academic war" over the strategy best suited to win the "hearts and minds" of the Vietnamese population, in turn centered on the concept of "modernization". See Latham, *The Right Kind of Revolution*. However, Gawthorpe has recently challenged the idea that the US approach was dominated by the assumptions of modernization theory. See Gawthorpe, *To Build as Well as Destroy*.

[21] Boot, *The Road Not Taken*, 127.

[22] Lansdale, "Viet Nam: Do We Understand Revolution?," 75-86, 76.

[23] Ibid., 85.

[24] Gawthorpe argues that the nation-building strategy carried out by CORDS failed "despite its attempt […] to emulate the success of the Vietnamese Communist movement". He also highlights that the strategy in Vietnam failed because nation building was an ill-defined concept, stemming out from multiple influences. On this point see Gawthorpe, *To Build as Well as Destroy*. It must be noted, however, that when CORDS began in spring of 1967, Lansdale's role in Vietnam had already become marginal.

[25] On US counterinsurgency during and after the Vietnam war, see Birtle, *US Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1942-1976*.

[26] On the relationship between present COIN and its interpretation in the 1960s see Jeffrey Michaels and Matthew Ford, "Bandwagonistas: Rhetorical Re-Description, Strategic Choice and the Politics of Counter-Insurgency," 352-384.

[27] See https://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/official_texts/counterinsurgency_guidance.pdf, 3; Petraeus, "Multi-National Force-Iraq Commander's Counterinsurgency Guidance,", 2. See also Krepinevich , "How To Win in Iraq," 97.

[28] Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, 63.

[29] O'Hanlon, "Toward Reconciliation in Afghanistan," 139-147; Metz, *Rethinking Insurgency*, available at http://www.dtic.mil/get-tr-doc/pdf?AD=ADA468470; and Mackinlay, *The Insurgent Archipelago*, 2.

[30] See Porch, "David Galula and the Revival of COIN in the US Military,"; Cromartie, "Field Manual 3-24 and the Heritage of Counterinsurgency Theory," 91-111.

[31] Nagl, "Foreword," viii. See also Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*, 21-29.

[32] Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla*, 52.

[33] Ning and Dan, "Mao Zedong Yi Ruo Sheng Qiang Lilun Zai Yanjiu".

[34] Xu, *Zhongguo Guofang Daolun*, 153.

[35] Zhang et al., *Zhongguo Xiandai Junshi Sixiang Yanjiu*, 163.

[36] Note on sources. The following analysis of Mao's writings is primarily based on the Chinese official *Mao Zedong Xuanji* [*Selected Works of Mao Zedong*], which is accessible online from the "Selected Works of Party and State Leaders" section of the CCP official website: http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64184/64186/index.html. Translations from Chinese are Simone Dossi's. In what follows, we will also consider two texts which – although not included in the *Xuanji* – are traditionally attributed to Mao outside China and have been particularly influential in orienting the Western interpretation of Mao's military thought: *Basic Tactics*, a 1937 text translated in English by Stuart R. Schram and published in 1966; and *Guerrilla Warfare*, a 1937 publication translated in English in 1940 by Samuel B. Griffith and republished in 1961 together with a text by Ernesto Guevara. See Mao and Che Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*.

[37] Mao, "Zhongguo Geming Zhanzheng de Zhanlüe Wenti".

[38] Mao, "Lun Chijiu Zhan". For similar statements of the importance of popular support, see Mao, "Zhongguo Gongchandang Zai Kang Ri Shiqi de Renwu"; "Wei Zhengqu Qianbaiwan Qunzhong Jinru Kang Ri Minzu Tongyi Zhanxian Er Fendou"; "Kang Ri Youji Zhanzheng de Zhanlüe Wenti"; and *Guerrilla Warfare*.

[39] For example, see Mao, "Kang Ri Youji Zhanzheng de Zhanlüe Wenti".

[40] This is the formulation contained in a 1947 order drafted by Mao and issued by the Headquarters of the People's Liberation Army. The "three rules" date back to the early years of the Agrarian Revolutionary War and were then complemented by the six (later eight) "points of attention." See Zhang, "Hongjun Chuchuang Shiqi dui Jianshe Xinxing Renmin Jundui de Tansuo"; Zhang et al., *Zhongguo Xiandai Junshi Sixiang Yanjiu*, 153-154.

[41] Mao, *Basic Tactics*, 134-135.

[42] Grice, *The Myth of Mao and Modern Insurgency*, 37.

[43] Schram, *The Political Thought of Mao Tse-Tung*, 125, emphasis in the original. On the role of violence in Mao's writings and its historical background, see also Tien, *Chinese Military Theory*, 249-250; Pye, *Warlord Politics*, 169.

[44] Mao, "Zhengquan Shi you Qiangganzi zhong Qude de", 3-4. On the principle that "political power grows out of the barrel of a gun," see Shao, "Mao Zedong 'Qiangganzi Limian Chu Zhengquan' de Laili yu Yanbian".

[45] See Mao, "Jinggangshan de Douzheng"; "Xingxing zhi Huo, Keyi Liao Yuan".

[46] Mao, "Zhanzheng he Zhanlüe Wenti".

[47] Ibid., emphasis added.

[48] Tien, *Chinese Military Theory*, 230-233.

[49] Mao, "Zhongguo Geming Zhanzheng de Zhanlüe Wenti," emphasis added. On the issue of arming people see also Mao, "Lun Chijiu Zhan;" "Kang Ri Youji Zhanzheng de Zhanlüe Wenti," and *Guerrilla Warfare*, 52-56.

[50] Mao, *Guerrilla Warfare*, 67.

[51] Schram, *The Thought of Mao Tse-Tung*, 47, emphasis added.

[52] Mao, "Lun Chijiu Zhan." On strategic retreat and strategic counter-offensive see also Mao, "Zhongguo Geming Zhanzheng de Zhanlüe Wenti." See also Zhang et al., *Zhongguo Xiandai Junshi Sixiang Yanjiu*, 201-208. On the principle of "luring the enemy in deep," see Xia, "'You Di Shen Ru' Fangzhen de Tichu yu Di Yi Ci Fan 'Weijiao' de Shengli"; Huang, "Lun Hongjun Fan 'Weijiao' Zuozhan de Lishi Jingyan"; JKJLY, *Zhongguo Renmin Jiefangjun de Bashi Nian*, 48-49.

[53] Ch'en, *Mao and the Chinese Revolution*, 174-175; Meisner, *Mao Zedong*, 62-71. For a Chinese official account of the debate, see JKJLY, *Zhongguo Renmin Jiefangjun de Bashi Nian*, 39-51, 75-85.

[54] Rue, *Mao Tse-tung in Opposition 1927-1935*, 224-225. See also Xi and Yao, "Lüelun Zhongguo Hongjun de 'You Di Shen Ru' Zuozhan Fangzhen"; Huang, "Cong Yuanzhou Huiyi dao Luofang Huiyi"; Jiang, "'Luofang Huiyi Jueyi' Lunshu."

[55] In this context the word "Soviet" (*Suwei'ai*) refers to the rural base areas established by the CCP in Central and Southern China in Autumn 1927.

[56] Pavel Mif and Otto Braun are quoted in Huang, "Cong You Di Shen Ru Dao Jingong Luxian."

[57] Mao, "Zhongguo Geming Zhanzheng de Zhanlüe Wenti."

[58] Ibid.

[59] Tian, *Chinese Military Theory*, 230-233.

[60] Pepper, "The KMT-CCP Conflict 1945-1949," 723-788.

[61] See Xu, *Zhongguo Guofang Daolun*, 89-90; Zhang et al., *Zhongguo Gongchandang Jian Jun Zhi Jun Linian*, 40-42.

[62] Chen, *Making Revolution*, 383-404.

[63] Ibid., 385.

[64] The classics presenting these two opposing views are Johnson, *Peasant Nationalism and Communist Power* and Selden, *The Yenan Way in Revolutionary China*.

[65] Hartford, "Repression and Communist Success."

[66] Bianco, "Peasant Responses to CCP Mobilization Policies," 175-187, 182-183.

[67] Trinquier, *Modern Warfare*, 8.

[68] Ch'en, *Mao and the Chinese Revolution*, 160-184. For the Chinese official account, see JKJLY, *Zhongguo Renmin Jiefangjun de Bashi Nian*, 43-47. See also Xia, "'You Di Shen Ru' Fangzhen de Tichu."

[69] Ch'en, *Mao and the Chinese Revolution*, 160-184. For the Chinese official account of the fourth and fifth campaigns, see JKJLY, *Zhongguo Renmin Jiefangjun de Bashi Nian*, 78-85. On the Red Army's doctrine in the fourth campaign and its consistency with Mao's "luring the enemy in deep" principle, see Li, "Mao Zedong 'You Di Shen Ru' de Zhanlüe Fangzhen yu Zhongyang Su Qu Di Si Ci Fan 'Weijiao' de Shengli."

[70] Mao, "Zhongguo Geming Zhanzheng de Zhanlüe Wenti," emphasis added.

[71] Pepper, *Civil War in China*, 297-307.

[72] Tenenbaum, *Partisans et Centurions*, 117.

[73] Mao, "Jizhong Youshi Bingli, Gege Jianmie Diren"; "Jiefang Zhanzheng Di Er Nian de Zhanlüe Fangzhen."

[74] On the Liberation War as a conventional war, see Levine, *Anvil of Victory*; Pepper, *Civil War in China*; Paine, *The Wars for Asia*, 223-270.

[75] On the normative constraints of democracies as a cause of defeat in counterinsurgency see Merom, *How Democracies Lose Small Wars*.

[76] Mao, "Lun Chijiu Zhan." For a recent assessment on Clausewitz and people's war, see Levy, "Clausewitz and People's War," 450-456.

[77] Kilcullen, "Twenty-Eight Articles: Fundamentals of Company-Level Counterinsurgency," *IO Sphere* (Summer 2006), 33; available at http://www.au.af.mil/info-ops/iosphere/iosphere_summer06_kilcullen.pdf.

[78] Jones and Smith, "Myth and the Small War Tradition: Reassessing the Discourse of British Counter-insurgency," 436-464; Mumford, *The Counter-Insurgency Myth*; Ucko and Egnell, *Counterinsurgency in Crisis*; Strachan, "Strategy or Alibi?," 157-182; Porch, "The Dangerous Myths

and Dubious Promise of COIN"; Michaels and Ford, "Bandwagonistas"; Hazelton, "The 'Hearts and Minds' Fallacy," 80-113; Ladwig III, *The Forgotten Front*.

[79] David Fitzgerald, *Learning to Forget*.

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