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**GUERRILLA WARFARE THEORY AND PRAXIS: THE CASE OF REVOLUTIONARY
LEADER ERNESTO 'CHE' GUEVARA**

by

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**Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree**

of

DEPARTMENTAL HONORS

in

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1. Introduction

Guerrilla warfare is an ancient style of armed conflict that continues to be practiced throughout the world to the present day (Guevara, "A Method" 266, Tzu 168, Taber 149-150), and many countries and peoples have either taken part in guerrilla warfare or have sought to counteract irregular war with counterinsurgency methods, for example the United States (Anderson, *Guerrillas* xi; West xiii; Guevara, *G. Warfare* 18; O'Neill vii-xi).¹ Guerrilla warfare heavily impacts every aspect of society, ranging from the family unit to foreign policy decision-making. Only through properly understanding the motivations, strategies and nature of guerrilla warfare will we be equipped to progress in terms of the social, political and economic aspects of society that guerrilla warfare activities influence (Taber 16).

This study consists of an analysis of the guerrilla warfare theories and battlefield strategies utilized by Ernesto 'Che' Guevara, the Argentine-born Cuban revolutionary considered by most people as the premier thinker on the nature of guerrilla warfare (Anderson, *Che* xiii). Guevara developed his *foco* theory of guerrilla warfare based on the mode of warfare used successfully during the Cuban Revolutionary War, and then sought to replicate this achievement in the The Congo and Bolivia (Guevara, *G. Warfare* vii; Guevara, "To Fidel" 375; Villegas 1).² After a brief introduction on the nature of guerrilla warfare in general, this thesis proceeds to analyze the theoretical writings on guerrilla warfare by Guevara, as seen in his seminal treatise *Guerrilla Warfare: A Method* (1963). We then proceed to analyze his application of *foco* theory

¹ Guerrilla Warfare continues in myriad locales around the globe (e.g. Mexico's group, the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, as well as other manifestations of this form of warfare) (MacIntyre 1-88; O'Neill vii-xi). *The Village*, a product of the Vietnam War, portrays the realities of war and the tactics of differing armed conflict styles—in this case, it depicts Vietnamese guerrilla warfare strategies and U.S. counterinsurgency methods.

² *Guerrilla Warfare*, a manual written by Ernesto 'Che' Guevara provides a theoretical-practical perspective of guerrilla warfare based on the experiences of the revolutionary war in Cuba. *Reminiscences of the Cuban Revolutionary War* walks the reader through Guevara's personal experiences and battlefield notes during the war providing an in-depth understanding to Guevara's guerrilla warfare theories and ideology, based on the Cuban Revolutionary experience (Moreno 120).

as an on-the-ground guerrilla leader to evaluate the praxis of said theory during his guerrilla campaigns in Cuba, and later on in The Congo. In our evaluation of Guevara's understanding of guerrilla warfare and its application *in situ* in The Congo, this study seeks to determine where battlefield applications of said theory were successful or not, according to the author himself, and why he perceived them in that manner. We also hope to uncover what lessons may be gleaned from both his guerrilla warfare theory and its praxis to provide an analytical lens through which we may better understand today's insurgent/guerrilla methods. A proper analysis of the principles and practices of guerrilla warfare is imperative to understanding the dynamics of guerrilla ideology, as well as the resolution of the underlying conflicts at hand that lead to guerrilla conflicts, in general.

2. Understanding Guevara's *Foco* Theory

Ernesto 'Che' Guevara's *Guerrilla Warfare* sought to develop armed conflict theory rooted in the objective and subjective realities of the Cuban Revolutionary War for application in terms of future battlefield situations (Guevara, "A Method" 268-269; Guevara, *G. Warfare* vii; Villegas 1; G. March 3). Written in 1963, this manual provides a theoretical outline of the essence of guerrilla warfare by addressing its fundamental purpose, principles, and the nature of its combatants (Guevara, *G. Warfare* vii, 13-45, 49-91; Villegas 1). Its purpose is also to inform and inspire others to rise up against their exploiters through revolutionary struggle (Guevara, *G. Warfare* 13; G. March 3; Guevara, "Socialism" 250-252).

2.1 Guerrilla Warfare's Purpose

Ernesto Guevara defines guerrilla warfare as “the basis of the struggle of a people to redeem themselves” (*G. Warfare* 15). That is, Guevara perceived the guerrilla army as a defensive movement rooted within the fighting masses with the purpose of interpreting and fulfilling the people’s aspirations, with the guerrilla fighter as the vanguard of the people (“A Method” 272; *G. Warfare* 16; “Socialism” 247). The struggle is “a war of the people,” where the people fight for their freedom to liberate themselves when oppressive authorities have maintained power against established law and have exhausted efforts for peace-making (Guevara, *G. Warfare* 13-14, 16). The name the rebel leader uses in his manual adequately depicts this definition of guerrilla warfare, which he referred to as the form of warfare utilized in the “Cuban war of liberation” (Guevara, *G. Warfare* 41; Guevara, “A Method” 278).

Guevara did not believe a simple impulse was enough for a revolution, but rather that a purpose/reason rooted in concrete social goals must be embedded within every *guerrillero/a* (guerrilla combatant/fighter) in order to withstand the grueling nature of guerrilla combat and to sustain the ongoing revolution (*G. Warfare* 14; 53-54; “A Method” 268, 273; “Socialism” 260). An example of a primary social goal of the Cuban Revolutionary War was that of “agrarian reform” in which peasants joined the guerrillas to seek changes in ownership of cultivable land and changes in social treatment leading to greater social justice (Guevara, *G. Warfare* 17; Guevara, *Reminiscences* 30, 159; Taber 32). Social goals function as a catalyst for a dedication to the cause during and beyond moments of actual combat because they stem from the peoples’ aspirations and desires.³ In other words, they are social goals for and of the people (Guevara, “Socialism” 247, 258; Guevara, *Reminiscences* 30).

³ Voluntary work is something Guevara gave strong dedication to because he saw it as a stepping-stone towards building Cuba’s new society (“Voluntary” 238).

2.2 Principles, Strategies, and Tactics of Guerrilla Warfare

Guevara's writings repeatedly emphasize a primary component of guerrilla warfare: the people (*G. Warfare* 13-21; "A Method" 267; "Socialism" 252-253; *Reminiscences* 83).⁴ In "Guerrilla Warfare: A Method," he expresses that a "guerrilla war is a people's war, and it is a mass struggle. To attempt to conduct this type of war without the support of the populace is a prelude to inevitable disaster" (Guevara, "A Method" 267). Why would Guevara consider guerrilla warfare a war by and of the people? In this text, the rebel strategist quotes *The Second Declaration of Havana*, which states that the masses/rural populations in Latin America constitute the majority of Latin American populations, exceeding 70 percent of a country's population (Guevara, "A Method" 267). The Declaration also states that the masses earn their "living as farm laborers for wretched wages, or they till the soil under conditions of exploitation not exceeded by the Middle Ages" (Guevara, "A Method" 267). Guevara considers guerrilla warfare a people's war because the masses are the exploited peasants who when unified, make up the bulk of the fighting force, and will fight for the justice they have always been neglected. This was the case in the Cuban Revolutionary War, a successful revolution supported by its masses (Guevara, "A Method" 267; Anderson, *Guerrillas* xi; Guevara, *Reminiscences* 257-272).

The Cuban experience not only provided Guevara with ideological principles on how to conduct guerrilla warfare, but also a wide range of on-the-ground strategies and tactics for the analysis, and the incorporation of said analysis, into his theory of guerrilla warfare. Throughout *Guerrilla Warfare* and his Cuban campaign diary *Reminiscences of the Cuban Revolutionary*

⁴ Citations included are from the many written statements where Guevara emphasizes the people being central to guerrilla warfare.

War, the following four strategies/tactics appear constantly, and are emphasized throughout Guevara's writings: 1.) Organization and discipline; 2.) Knowledge of the terrain; 3.) Support of the people; and 4.) Mobility. Therefore, a brief overview of the importance of these strategies/tactics to the success of the revolution is necessary.

Guevara identifies that, in order for the guerrilla band to ensure its survival and ultimate goal of conquest of political power, the guerrilla must have organization and discipline ("A Method" 272; Moreno 121). Guerrilla fighters must be strategically organized in all movements to produce continuous blows, wear down the enemy while appearing to be everywhere at all times (Guevara, *G. Warfare* 20, 22-23; Taber 31). Otherwise, unnecessary occurrences can take place, such as what occurred in the Battle of Pino del Agua of 1957 during the Cuban Revolutionary War. Guevara writes that, "although it was a political and military victory, our shortcomings were enormous. The surprise factor should have been fully exploited...a false order to retreat had been circulated...a lack of decisiveness was evident in seizing the vehicles" (*Reminiscences* 152). Among other mishaps, low discipline and organization within the guerrilla forces can lead to mutinies among its troops. This was almost the case some time after September 1957 during the Cuban Revolutionary War when a combatant in Guevara's guerrilla band pointed his gun at another guerrilla combatant's head as if he intended to shoot; the gun unintentionally went off killing the *guerrillero* (*Reminiscences* 156-157).

Along with organization and discipline, knowledge of the terrain also ensures the security and continuity of the guerrilla fighters. To know the lay of the land gives the guerrilla the advantage, ranging from attacking from zones difficult to reach to being able to move through the terrain more efficiently and effectively than the enemy (Guevara, *G. Warfare* 32-33; Moreno 117; Taber 155). Guerrilla combatants must have perfect knowledge of the topography because

they will be outnumbered and will need to use the ground to their advantage (Taber 155). Guevara's written accounts of the Cuban Revolutionary War describe a situation in the Battle of El Hombrito where the guerrilla troops were up against at least 140 regular army soldiers, well armed for modern warfare (*Reminiscences* 139). The guerrillas not only had far less numbers but also only a "handful of weapons" to fight with (Guevara, *Reminiscences* 139). In the Battle of Santa Clara, the odds for the guerrilla troops were more disadvantageous: the ratio was one guerrilla combatant against 10-15 Batista army soldiers (Guevara, *Reminiscences* 257). By knowing the lay of the land, the guerrilla band can better and more efficiently determine when to attack, where to hide, and how to use its resources (e.g. ammunition) to have the upper hand in such scenarios (Guevara, *G. Warfare* 32-36; Moreno 117).

Given that guerrilla warfare is a people's war, the support of the people is vital to the survival of the guerrilla movement: the masses facilitate transport, communication, supplies and much more (Guevara, *G. Warfare* 17, 31-37; Moreno 118, 122; Taber 27). An inhabitant of the region, a peasant, also has better knowledge of the terrain and can prove to be an exceptional guide (Moreno 117-118, 122). Experiences from the Cuban Revolutionary War show the effectiveness of this strategy: "a peasant informed us that a large troop was preparing to ascend the Sierra Maestra along the road to El Hombrito" (Guevara, *Reminiscences* 135). Because of the support of the people, the guerrilla movement was provided with valuable intelligence allowing the guerrillas to get in position to attack rather than be attacked. In "Guerrilla Warfare: A Method," Guevara reminds us once again that "revolutionary power" is based on the support of the people and therefore the needs and wants of the peasants must be attended to at all possible levels (277).

Lastly, a guerrilla band may develop different stages throughout its protracted war but in nearly all of the stages, the mobility of the armed group remains a vital factor for its security and survival (Guevara, "A Method" 276; Moreno 117; Taber 161). Based on the Cuban Revolutionary War experience, the guerrillas start out as a small group that devotes itself almost entirely to hiding and moving nomadically between the wildest and most inaccessible places (Guevara, *G. Warfare* 88). As the guerrilla force grows in number, it then begins to camp out for several days at a time, rapidly moving to another location when the enemy is near. Even when the guerrilla band has reached a stationary state where its numbers are larger than ever before, it maintains small groups that it can dispatch to other places of combat; that is, the guerrilla army is constantly moving (Guevara, *G. Warfare* 88-89).

2.3 Nature of the Guerrilla Combatant

In his manual, Guevara expresses that the guerrilla fighter fights, "to change a social regime that affects one's own world"—meaning they fight against oppression and for social justice (*G. Warfare* 17, 52; Moreno 116; Taber 3). The guerrilla combatant is embodied as a "social reformer" who is the bearer of the people's cause (Guevara, *G. Warfare* 17, 49-50). The *guerrillero/a* is a protector who exemplifies the significance of the revolution in all s/he does, always having rigid self-control, employing high moral conduct and discipline both within and outside of the guerrilla movement (Guevara, *G. Warfare* 49-51, 52-65; Moreno 116).⁵ The best

⁵ Among many other traits vital to a guerrilla fighter are benevolence and respect (Guevara, *G. Warfare* 52-53). They must be benevolent to defenseless prisoners and provide medical assistance to the captured wounded enemy (Guevara, *G. Warfare* 53; Guevara, *Reminiscences* 148-150). Guevara exemplifies these characteristics well in the battle of Pino del Agua during the Cuban Revolutionary War. When a guerrilla combatant kills a wounded soldier from Cuban Dictator Batista's army rather than providing medical assistance, Guevara reprimands the combatant fiercely for "this mindless act of violence" who had seen his family killed by Dictator Batista's army (*Reminiscences* 148-149). Another captured wounded Batista soldier overheard Guevara's words and whenever a *guerrillero/a* would pass near him he would yell, "Don't kill me! Don't kill me! He says not to kill prisoners!" (Guevara, *Reminiscences* 149-150).

guerrilla soldier is considered to be a peasant, for it is s/he who lives the daily burdens of an unjust reality (Guevara, *G. Warfare* 52).

A guerrilla combatant serves as a “guardian angel” of the masses, leading them towards “profound, essential changes in the social structure,” and bringing about a new society through revolutionary awareness (Guevara, *G. Warfare* 50-51; Guevara, *Reminiscences* 159; Guevara, “Socialism” 249-250, 252). Guevara calls this process, *concientización*, an awakening of a social consciousness among the people that, in the development of a post-capitalistic society, leads to the creation of a “New Man” (i.e. new person/self with a new mindset, beliefs, and values) (“Socialism” 247, 252; Spicer-Escalante 398).⁶ As Michael Löwy states,

The dream of all great revolutionaries....has been to change not merely ‘the world’ but also ‘man’: the revolution, for them, is not only a transformation of social structures, institutions, and regimes, but also a profound, radical, and ‘overturning’ (*umwälzende*) transformation of *men*, of their consciousness, ways, values, and habits, of their social relations. (17)

It is the duty of the guerrilla combatant to instill the significance of the revolution within the masses through *concientización* (Guevara, *G. Warfare* 51; Spicer-Escalante 398)⁷. S/he must also

⁶ In Guevara’s original Spanish text of “Socialism and Man in Cuba,” he does use a male gendered form of the “New Man.” Given that Spanish is a very gendered language, this factor must be considered in the analysis of Guevara’s construct of the “New Man” as a gender-neutral or gender-specific concept (Guevara, “Socialism” (1965); Spicer-Escalante 399, 405).

⁷ Depending on the circumstances, the guerrilla fighter’s role may seem as a contradiction in Guevara’s guerrilla warfare ideology. His theory states that the revolutionary struggle is a people’s war that of which the *foco* (group of conscious rebels) is the peoples’ leader. The contradiction appears because the struggle is said to be of the people, when it is led by a *foco* of conscious rebels who may not have emerged from the masses, such as Guevara himself who was from an aristocratic Argentine family (Guevara, “A Method” 267; Moreno 118, 119, 130; Anderson, *Che* xiv; Taber 24). In the case of Camilo Cienfuegos, a peasant who later became third in command of the Cuban

provide a "revolutionary indoctrination," informing "the soldiers, peasants, and workers, who have all come from the people, the justice and the truth of each revolutionary act, the goals of the revolution, why there is a struggle" (Guevara, *G. Warfare* 139-140). The guerrilla fighter is part of a vanguard that awakens the masses' awareness of the necessity of their incorporation into society, and their importance as the "motor of that society" (Guevara, "Socialism" 247, 252). These revolutionary ideas, gleaned from Guevara's experience in the Cuban Revolutionary War, are directly related to his later involvement in the revolutionary movement in the post-colonial Congo.

Guevara's *foco* theory of guerrilla warfare, primarily based on the experiences of the successful Cuban Revolutionary War as noted above, outlines in essence that the conditions necessary for a revolution can be created (Moreno 115). The use of a "highly cohesive group" of organized guerrilla fighters, called a *foco*, emerge from rural areas and act as the catalyst for a revolutionary situation (Moreno 115). The *foco* instills revolutionary consciousness⁸ within the masses, mobilizes the people and as the vanguard leads them into revolutionary action with the ultimate goal of conquering political power (Moreno 118-119, 129, Guevara, "A Method" 268, 272; Taber 43).

3. Guerrilla Warfare Praxis: The Congo

Having established the basis for Guevara's *foco* theory, we now proceed to apply his ideas to his experience in The Congo. From the beginning of his writings on his experience in The Congo, the rebel strategist describes his involvement within the Congolese guerrilla force as

Revolutionary War, the contradiction of the guerrilla combatant's role is not present because he rose from *within* the masses and became one of his people's trusted leaders (Guevara, *G. Warfare* 7-9).

⁸ The *foco* instills revolutionary consciousness through social class awareness and understanding, while providing justice and protection for the masses when the repressive government does not (Guevara, "A Method" 268; Guevara, "Socialism" 252; Moreno 118; Dodd "Focoism").

“a failure” (Guevara, *Congo* 15). Our task is to determine why, according to Guevara, the application of *foco* theory was unsuccessful in that country. In order to do so, we hope to establish what objective and subjective conditions were present which led to Guevara’s assessment of the guerrilla campaign as a failure. Obviously, there are many conditions that may have contributed to Guevara’s evaluation of the unsuccessful on-the-ground practice of *foco* theory in The Congo. For the purpose of this thesis, we will focus on the historical background and the impact of racial divisions and conflicting geo-political interests on the awakening—or lack thereof—of a revolutionary consciousness among the masses in The Congo.

3.1 Necessary Objective Preconditions

Guevara believed all venues of action must be exhausted before taking up armed conflict (*G. Warfare* 14; Moreno 115; Taber 25). When turning to guerrilla warfare as a last resort, Guevara expressed that there are certain preconditions necessary to develop a revolutionary situation (*G. Warfare* 14; Moreno 115): “Objective conditions for struggle are provided by the people’s hunger, their reaction to their hunger, the terror unleashed to crush the people’s reaction and the wave of hatred that the repression creates” (“Cuba: History” 136). According to José A. Moreno, such necessary preconditions result from: 1.) An illegitimate government; 2.) Tensions that cannot be addressed through regular/legal means of action; and 3.) No legal action has changed the situation (115). According to *foco* theory, based on the historical background of The Congo, certain objective conditions were already in place for a revolutionary struggle (Guevara, “A Method” 267). Unlike Cuba, The Congo was emerging from colonialism in 1960. From the late 1800s and early 1900s on, The Congo had been under Belgian rule (Hennessy 79-83; *Lumumba*; BBC *Democratic*; Leslie 8; Nzongola-Ntalaja 26). Exploitation, discrimination,

killings, and other ongoing conflicts run deep in The Congo's history (Nzongola-Ntalaja; Lumumba; BBC *Democratic*). For example, Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja depicts the economic exploitation of over a century forced upon the Congo: "[I]n 110 years of mineral extraction, the wealth of the country has not been used to the benefit of the great majority of its people. Since the days of King Leopold, it has gone to serve the interests of the country's rulers and those of their political allies and business partners in the international community" (28). The Congo as a postcolonial state resolved little of the country's issues and remained a conflict zone. For example, Joseph-Désiré Mobutu's regime from 1965 to 1997, promised peace and stability but instead governed "at the pleasure of foreign powers to the disadvantage of their own people" (Nzongola-Ntalaja 141-145). The Mobutu regime was born during the Cold War era and was brought to power through the external support of the United States and its allies (Nzongola-Ntalaja 141-143).⁹ His dictatorship was to become synonymous with acts of assassination, massacres of civilians, and banishment to penal colonies, among other atrocities (Nzongola-Ntalaja 141). Due to its history as a colonized nation and an area where outside powers have long ruled, Guevara was convinced that The Congo had the objective preconditions necessary for the emergence of a revolution ("A Method" 267; *Congo* 20).

Guevara believed that the exploited masses shared common interests and goals, which served as the basis for solidarity when fighting the enemy ("A Method" 267; Moreno 123). Consequently, he perceived the nature of the struggle to be international, thus making it an international revolution. As stated in his last letter to his children, Guevara believed that a person must "always be capable of feeling deeply any injustice committed against anyone, anywhere in the world" —that we must do what is possible to heal that injustice without limiting ourselves to

⁹ During the Cold War, these outside sponsors had thought that in order to protect and promote their interests in Third World countries, a leader with no political base was better than one with a strong political position such as Fidel Castro from Cuba or Patrice Lumumba of The Congo (Nzongola-Ntalaja 142-143).

political borders ("His Children" 371).¹⁰ He felt it was his duty to continue the revolutionary mission to fight against imperialism wherever it took him ("To Fidel" 375). Guevara believed in his own leadership ability to lead an international revolution, which he expressed in a farewell letter to Fidel Castro when leaving Cuba to continue the revolutionary movement abroad: "Other nations of the world summon my modest efforts. I can do that which is denied you because of your responsibility at the head of Cuba..." ("To Fidel" 375). Guevara viewed Cuba as the revolutionary vanguard of Latin America and saw the successful use of guerrilla warfare in the Cuban Revolutionary War as an example to follow in other locations around the world ("Socialism" 258).

Guevara thought that the objective factors in The Congo were ripe for a committed *foco* to improve the country's subjective conditions, of leadership and strategy, and initiate a revolution. Indeed, the revolutionary situation in The Congo had already been developing for some time (Nzongola-Ntalaja). African resistance against colonial rule had taken form in peasant rebellions, workers' revolts, and urban uprisings during the early to mid 1900s and with "politico-religious" movements since 1921 (Nzongola-Ntalaja 42, 51, 60). Given the existing objective preconditions in The Congo, the Cuban Revolutionary War experience, and Guevara's internationalist ideals, the rebel strategist left for the African nation in 1965 to offer his experience and knowledge as a guerrilla combatant and help strengthen the revolution in the country (Guevara, "A Method" 275; Guevara, "To Fidel" 375; Guevara, "Socialism" 258; Dodd "Che"; Nzongola-Ntalaja 13-60; *Lumumba*; BBC *Democratic*; Guevara, "Preface" 16; G. March 7; Spicer-Escalante 394).

¹⁰ Further exemplifying his international revolutionary spirit, on December 11, 1964, Guevara addressed the Nineteenth General Assembly of the United Nations in New York expressing that "[a]ll free men of the world must be prepared to avenge the crime of the Congo," manifesting his internationalist position (Guevara, "United Nations" 321, 326). He shortly later became an on-the-ground guerrilla combatant in The Congo in 1965.

3.2 Subjective Conditions within The Congo

Guevara begins his *Congo Diary*¹¹ cautioning the reader with a preface titled "An Initial Warning" whose first sentence reads "this is the story of a failure" (15). Guevara's failed assessment partially came from quickly realizing that he faced the enormous task of unifying a country that had not reached "real revolutionary maturity" (*Congo* 22; G. March 11). That is, The Congo did not have the necessary revolutionary consciousness required to continue an ongoing revolution for the development of a new society and people (Dodd "Che"; Guevara, *Congo* 22; Guevara, "Socialism" 252; Guevara, *Reminiscences* 159; Löwy 17). An incomplete understanding of the vital subjective conditions in The Congo, further aided his interpretation of the experience as a failure. The Congo had not only deep racial divides but also conflicting geopolitical interests that played prominent roles in the revolution (Nzongola-Ntalaja).

When the guerrilla leader arrived *in country*, multiple liberation movements were taking place at the same time (Guevara, *Congo* 18). The Congo was not unified under one revolutionary movement, meaning that the masses were not united. A reason for these divisions was the deep ethnic and racial divisions that existed amongst the Congolese population (Nzongola-Ntalaja 216-218; Hochschild 160-165; Hennessy 26). It is important to note that the potential for ethnic conflict was already grounded in pre-colonial society through its historical roots of inequalities. However, it was the colonial system that helped intensify antagonisms and rivalries among different ethnic groups by intensifying the rigidity of the already established relations of inequality (Nzongola-Ntalaja 218). For example, Belgian colonization helped strengthen ethnic

¹¹ Guevara's published account of the liberation movement in The Congo was written in 1966, at the end of his participation in The Congo's Revolutionary War (G. March 5).

divides amongst the Hutu, Twa, and Tutsi peoples (Nzongola-Ntalaja 216-218). In 1925, the Belgian Congo annexed two African pre-colonial kingdoms, Burundi and Rwanda, which had previously survived European conquest (Nzongola-Ntalaja 216). Belgium advanced from governing one territorial unit to governing three distinct areas as one colonial entity (Nzongola-Ntalaja 216). Although the Hutu, Twa, and Tutsi shared the same culture and language, an increasing oppression under colonialism caused advantages for the Tutsi and disadvantages for the Hutu (Nzongola-Ntalaja 218). This deepened the socio-economic inequalities already in the societal structure, further instigating greater ethnic divides (Nzongola-Ntalaja 217).¹²

Racial divisions at times cut deeper than ethnic divides in The Congo due to its brutal history of colonialism. During King Leopold's rule, the economic interest in The Congo's resources led to an atrocious exploitation of the local population. Take for example, the Anglo-Belgian India Rubber and Exploration Company that went to The Congo to collect rubber (Hochschild 160). Gathering rubber was a physically painful and an arduous process (Hochschild 161). The laborers had to disperse deeply into wild rain forests, often travelling days to find fresh rubber vines (Hochschild 160-163). Who would do this strenuous work? Europeans found needed labor for the rubber enterprise by implementing policies of hostage-taking of natives and by severing their natives' hands, feet, and other body parts (Hochschild 161-165). Colonization of the Belgian Congo meant that an African had no rights and a European's word was law (Hennessy 26). Such memories remain raw for the peoples of The Congo (Hochschild 165).

¹² The three social groups differed in social status and occupations, as well as physical characteristics (Nzongola-Ntalaja 217). Yet, neither race nor ethnicity distinguished the groups' level of influence and authority in pre-colonial society (Nzongola-Ntalaja 217). Rather, the "proximity and/or service to the royal court and its representatives in the provinces" determined their ranks (Nzongola-Ntalaja 217). The Twa had a low social status and were often discriminated against (Nzongola-Ntalaja 217). The Hutu had a middle social status since they had agricultural positions and were clients of Tutsi nobility (Nzongola-Ntalaja 217). Lastly, many Tutsi were cattle owners who had ties with the royal court and were involved in the court's matters of territorial expansion (Nzongola-Ntalaja 218). Thus, with the intensifying of colonial oppression, the rigidity in these ethnic relations increased (Nzongola-Ntalaja 218).

This situation posed a problem for Guevara because without the unification and support of the masses, *foco* theory states that there cannot be a revolution as guerrilla warfare is “a war of the people” (“A Method” 267). The intensified ethnic and racial divisions of The Congo differed from those of Cuba where the guerrilla combatants and peasants of the revolutionary movement also shared cultural, linguistic, and racial backgrounds (Nzongola-Ntalaja 216-218; Hochschild 160-165; Hennessy 26; Moreno 132). Instead of deepening existent divides—such as in The Congo—these commonalities allowed the Cuban masses to become unified, despite the fact that Cuba had previously been under North American imperialistic influence (Pérez-Stable 4-10; *BBC Cuba*).

In analyzing The Congo’s racial and ethnic divisions, we must remember it was a country drawn up on a map by Europeans in the 1880s. Borders were set and claims without consideration for the demographics of the population and the implications of such actions for African peoples (Nzongola-Ntalaja 19; Hennessy 13-16; Hochschild 84-87). The population of The Congo, instead of portraying *a people*, resembled a nation made up of many nations, with approximately 250 different ethnic groups, deep tribal divisions, and a cruel history of slavery forming racial divisions (Hennessy 10, 26; Nzongola-Ntalaja 14, 19, 20-23; Leslic 4, 68-71). Guevara’s *Congo Diary* portrays these historical tensions. For example, in regards to ethnic relationships and tribalism he wrote the following passage: “The Rwandans and the different Congolese tribes regard each other as enemies, and the borders between ethnic groups are clearly defined. This makes it very difficult to carry out political work that aims toward regional union” (*Congo* 35). This statement reflects the importance of historical occurrences and the roles they play in contemporary realities in The Congo. Another example provided by Guevara’s diary deals with racial divisions within the country. The following excerpt describes when Guevara is

subtly asked by one of the revolutionary leaders, Laurent Kabila, to provide black men to fight in the liberation movements of The Congo: "On behalf of our government, I offered him some 30 instructors...He recommended [...] it would be a good idea if the instructors were black [i.e., Afro-Cuban]" (*Congo* 20; G. March 11). Kabila's key request to Guevara gives insight into the country's racial tensions, reflecting the fact that race *can* matter within the revolution. With a light skin complexion and European heritage, Guevara's racial and ethnic make-up also limited him greatly in conducting guerrilla warfare in The Congo as well as unifying the masses, because whiteness was historically synonymous with oppression (Nzongola-Ntalaja 134).

Linguistic differences further contributed to the divides of the Congolese (Nzongola-Ntalaja 14; Guevara, *Congo* 42). In the *Congo Diary*, for example, Guevara writes that when he arrived to The Congo, a widely used language was Swahili (42). Since the rebel leader did not speak or understand the language, he was assigned an interpreter to be able to communicate with the rebel fighters and leaders of the liberation movements, as well as with the peasant population (Guevara, *Congo* 42). Language quickly became a barrier in Guevara's attempt to strengthen the development of the revolution (Guevara, *Congo* 42). Not only was meaning lost in language translation but language also posed social class divisions amongst the people:

Swahili is a language with quite a rich and advanced grammar...Swahili has to some extent become the language of conquerors and a symbol of superior power. It is the second language of nearly all the peasants, but the backwardness of the region means that what they actually speak is a highly simplified "basic Swahili."
(Guevara, *Congo* 42)

Guevara points out that the socio-economic status of a Congolese person directly correlated with how s/he spoke Swahili (*Congo* 42). An incomplete dialogue existed in Guevara's communication with the population of The Congo but also within the people themselves.¹³ This aided in the lack of unification and the ineffective strengthening of the revolutionary situation, the exact opposite of what *foco* theory prescribes (Guevara, *G. Warfare* 16; Guevara, "A Method" 267, 277).

Differences in geo-political interests served as another impediment to Guevara's efforts to effectively apply *foco* theory in The Congo. For a long period in the nation's history, these interests had taken priority over the interests of the masses (Hennessy 10, 21, 23-24; Nzongola-Ntalaja 13-41; Hochschild; BBC *Democratic*). For instance, since 1884 The Congo has been a playing field for the interests of outside powers, given its strategic location and wealth of natural minerals and resources (Nzongola-Ntalaja 94). First, during what became known as the "Scramble for Africa," Europeans all wanted a piece of the cake: Africa's endowment of raw materials (Nzongola-Ntalaja 94; Hochschild 26-27). Then, Africa became the *locus* of confrontation between the superpowers in the Cold War era, and most recently, during the Post-Cold War period, due to the interests of The Congo's neighboring African states (Nzongola-Ntalaja 94). During the Cold War alone, the United Nations Security Council deployed an approximately 20,000 member peacekeeping force to prevent a conflict between the Soviet Union and United States (Nzongola-Ntalaja 94). The deployment was said to be "in response to the threat posed to international peace and security by violent conflict in central Africa," a violence brought forth by the interests of external forces, in this case the U.S. and USSR

¹³ Guevara's limited French helped him communicate slightly better in locations where the Congolese masses had some knowledge of French, but even so, much of the time he wondered if his revolutionary message was communicated with the meaning and depth he meant to attach to it (*Congo Diary*).

(Nzongola-Ntalaja 94). Even with its independence in 1960, The Congo was controlled by outside powers rather than by its own population (Nzongola-Ntalaja 88, 94-95; *Lumumba*; Hennessy 79). For instance, in 1961 the U.S. and Belgium assisted in the murder of the first democratically chosen Prime Minister, Patrice Lumumba (Nzongola-Ntalaja 95; Leslie 23, BBC *Democratic*). Remembered as the greatest hero of The Congo's independence (Guevara, *Congo* 20; Nzongola-Ntalaja 80), the following quote from the film *Lumumba* portrays this historical figure as the voice of the people pushing for social justice for the Congolese masses¹⁴: "I'd given voice to a dream of freedom and brotherhood. Words they couldn't accept. Just words..." (*Lumumba*). Patrice Lumumba's death shows how The Congo was a pawn during the Cold War and how the masses' interests came last to the interests of foreign powers in the African nation.

World powers and leaders within The Congo government had done little to unify the Congolese people and better their daily lives.¹⁵ Local political and liberation leaders too had lagged in bringing the people together as *one* to instill solidarity to fight a common enemy. For instance, during the early 1960s the political leaders of the Congolese province of Katanga wanted secession (Nzongola-Ntalaja 32, 63, 66, 94-5; *Lumumba*; BBC *Democratic*). Various interests were at play, given that Katanga was not only 16 times larger than Belgium, but was also the main source of the nation's wealth and had much of the world's finance involved in its activities (*Lumumba*; Nzongola-Ntalaja 20, 99; Leslie 18; Guevara, *Congo* 66). Liberation leaders' interests also turned away from the peasant's cause. For example, Kabila, the revolutionary leader with whom Guevara chose to collaborate to strengthen The Congo's revolutionary situation, rarely met with the masses, much less fought alongside them (Guevara, *Congo* 18-22, 41). The *Congo Diary* portrays how Kabila continuously kept revolutionary

¹⁴ The film, directed by Raoul Peck, portrays The Congo's independence movement of 1960 through the lens of Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba's life.

¹⁵ There were exceptions, such as Lumumba, who were dedicated to the cause of the people.

combatants waiting for his arrival and leadership, which almost never came, as it was said that he was attending socio-political matters (41, 43, 65, 77; Nzongola-Ntalaja 134): "Each morning we heard the same old tune: Kabila has not arrived today, but tomorrow for sure, or the day after tomorrow..." (Guevara, *Congo* 41). Only once did Kabila show up to meet the masses during Guevara's time in The Congo, an occasion that Guevara described in his *Congo Diary*: "The top man was at last in the theater of operations...His activity was intense, as if he wanted to catch up for lost time..." (64-65). Within five days of his stay, Kabila withdrew to lead the revolutionary situation from a distance in the comforts of Kigoma, a city known for its prostitution and alcohol, and the city of Dar es Salaam, located in Tanzania, far away from the hazards of the revolution (Nzongola-Ntalaja 134; Guevara, *Congo* 25, 26, 31, 43, 64-65). Kabila's revolutionary leadership in The Congo differed greatly from that of Guevara's guerrilla praxis in the Cuban Revolutionary War. *Reminiscences of the Cuba Revolutionary War* offers a portrayal of Guevara's leadership style when employing *foco* theory in Cuba:

"None of us wanted to fight, we did so out of necessity..." (37);

"As we moved to take up our attack positions, our greatest concern was for the civilians" (95);

"This was a very favorable position for us, where we could annihilate their forward guard..." (177).

Such passages from Guevara's diary of the Cuban Revolutionary War, exemplify how the guerrilla leader fought alongside his guerrilla combatants and was with them through every step

of the struggle—a characteristic of *foco* leadership he did not find in The Congo, nor was able to develop.

Guevara's *Congo Diary* is replete with experiences that do not match the principles, nature of the combatants, and the purpose that his *foco* theory states. He describes the revolutionary situation in The Congo as the following: "The fundamental character of the People's Liberation Army was that it was a parasitic army that did not work, did not train, did not fight, and demanded provisions and labor from the local population, sometimes with extreme brutality" (38-39). Throughout Guevara's written account of the struggle in The Congo, there is a continuous, frustrating lack of organization and discipline among the revolutionaries. Near the beginning, Guevara's distress came from many areas including the combatants' chaotic shooting, their wasting of ammunition, and their lack of following their guerrilla leader's orders:

Of the 160 men, 60 had deserted by the time of the engagement and many others never managed to fire a shot...the Congolese opened fire on the barracks, generally shooting in the air because most of them kept their eyes shut while pressing the triggers of their automatic weapons until the ammunition ran out.
(*Congo* 58)

Towards the end of Guevara's time in The Congo, troops continued to refuse to fight by withdrawing from action on their own initiative, thus deserting the guerrilla band (Guevara, *Congo* 148, 150, 156). Eventually, commanders within the guerrilla movement began to spread rumors about the Cuban combatants questioning their legitimacy, furthering a lack of trust:

The incident with the grenades...was passed by "Radio Bemba" [word of mouth] in a way that suggested the Cubans had placed the devices and that the Congolese had fallen into the trap. Such outrageous stories were the specialty of Commissar Bändera Festón, Commander Huscini...never tired of throwing insults around me. (Guevara, *Congo* 157-158)

Such examples show that Guevara wasn't able to fully develop the principles of *foco* theory within the guerrilla campaign in The Congo (Guevara, *Congo*). The Congolese revolutionaries were not "social reformers" willing to die at any moment for the struggle, as *Guerrilla Warfare* suggests (17, 53; Guevara, *Congo* 49, 54-55, 150, 156), nor were they the bearers of the people's cause and protectors of the masses (50). Instead, Guevara described them as mercenaries (*Congo* 49).

In The Congo, both the guerrilla combatants and the civilian population lacked the necessary political-ideological development for the sustainability of the struggle (G. March 7). They lacked *concientización*, a strong consciousness of the liberation movement as an ideological engagement, necessary for the development of a new society and a "New Man" (G. March 7; Guevara, *Congo* 22; Spicer-Escalante 394; Guevara, *G. Warfare* 20; Guevara, "Socialism" 252, 256, 260). Without the masses as a unified entity, according to "Guerrilla Warfare: A Method," the guerrilla struggle is bound to end in disaster (267). Guevara interpreted his experience in The Congo in this manner: there was no unified group, which led to an overall demoralization and the failure of the revolutionary situation (*Congo* 15-16).

4. Conclusions

Ultimately, Guevara's *Congo Diary* shows that Guevara's ideals and values differed from those of the Congolese. He saw revolution as an international fraternity of man fighting for shared causes against a common enemy, with a focus on the development of socio-economic status awareness—a developed revolutionary consciousness (*Congo* 18-19). The Congolese rebels did not perceive the liberation struggles through this lens. Rather, the main concern of the various liberation movements in The Congo addressed race relations and conflicting geopolitical interests. Revolution for The Congo was a question of race and was for the purpose of ridding their nation of an ever-present European colonialism. Subjective conditions were being addressed instead of the ideologically based socio-economic awareness Guevara emphasized (“United Nations” 326). Thus, Guevara could not represent what the people wanted or what they stood for because of the subjective conditions present in the area. This demonstrates that Guevara didn't fully comprehend the environment he was in, nor did he have deep enough understanding of *the other*. He did not perceive the deep divisions that existed in The Congo due to a person's racial make-up, nor did he realize that he could not lead a revolution in The Congo because of the symbolic meaning of his light skin color. For the Congolese, his white skin was synonymous with European colonial oppression. Guevara was so deeply engaged in his ideology of an international revolution that it limited his realization that the subjective conditions present in The Congo were unfavorable for his purpose and mission in The Congo: to create a guerrilla *foco*, a small and cohesive group that could lead the revolution. The unfavorable subjective factors limited the masses in their ability to engage in the process of developing a revolutionary consciousness required for the development of *foco* theory in The Congo. Guevara's *Congo Diary* exemplifies this point, displaying the fact that the guerrilla combatants in The Congo were

unable to reach an understanding of what it meant to be a revolutionary and, thus, were unable to develop a *foco*—what would have been the vanguard of a revolutionary movement in The Congo.

In the case of Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara’s guerrilla campaign in The Congo, although the objective preconditions were ripe for a revolutionary *foco* to develop, the subjective conditions were the stronger, determining factors of the outcomes in the liberation movement. As liberation movements continue today, the study of Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara’s theoretical ideology and praxis of guerrilla warfare provide a framework that helps analyze the underlying reasons for this type of armed conflict. Such an analysis is imperative to understand how this style of war influences nearly every aspect of society, and how to better progress socially, economically, and politically in those areas of society that the guerrilla band impacts.

The Syrian Rebels exemplify a contemporary guerrilla movement that can be analyzed through Guevara’s works in order to better understand their motives, purpose, and impact on society. For instance, a New York Times article recently stated the following in regards to the nature of the Syrian Rebels fight: “For many of the fighters, the new offensive had an especially emotional character, of a sort played out often in Syria’s displaced population: These were men trying to return to villages from which they had been driven at gunpoint” (Chivers). Such manifestations of rebel warfare prove that these movements still occur, frequently for the same reasons that Guevara’s theory stresses: power, corruption, social justice, and revolutionary ideals. They also exemplify that an ideologically motivated people can triumph (Guevara, *G. Warfare* 13; 15; 20, Taber 188; 190). As C.J. Chivers writes, “[s]everal fighting groups collaborated under a formally unified command; their thrust across the flatlands made progress.” Thus, contrary to popular beliefs Guevara’s *foco* theory did not end with his death, but rather the

rebel strategist's revolutionary ideology and praxis continue to hold relevance well after his death.

While Guevara's *foco* theory provides a revolutionary lens through which we can interpret rebel movements, it is not a fully comprehensive report of irregular war. There are questions left unanswered that may later provide fruitful research, such as looking into Guevara's idea of an ongoing, international revolution. Is the consciousness required for the international revolution Guevara envisioned possible for the majority of humanity? What is necessary to engage with and develop that process of consciousness? Does an international liberation movement currently exist? Another important area of analysis could be to distinguish where the line between guerrilla warfare and terrorism lies. What makes guerrilla warfare different from terrorism? When do characteristics of one mesh with the other? Also, is one more of an ideological engagement than the other? These questions are relevant and necessary queries that both nations where guerrilla movements are present or in development, as well as nations who face potential guerrilla movements, must answer as irregular warfare of this nature is a historical constant throughout human history.

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