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# The Revolutionary Catalytic Role of Guerrilla Warfare—Based on Che Guevara’s Guerrilla Warfare Theory

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**Abstract:** Guevara elevated guerrilla warfare to the height of political philosophy, proposing that it serves as a “catalyst” for revolution—a core viewpoint that constitutes the pillar of his guerrilla thought system. This paper systematically elaborates on Guevara’s theoretical framework regarding the “catalytic” role of guerrilla warfare, focusing on three core dimensions: first, analyzing the guerrilla army as the main implementer of the “catalyst”, revealing its multiple roles and inherent characteristics as the vanguard of the people’s armed forces, social reformers, and prototypes of the “new man”; second, sorting out the three developmental stages of guerrilla warfare as a catalytic process—namely the nomadic stage, the honeycomb stage, and the urban stage—demonstrating its dynamic trajectory from germination and expansion to seizing political power; finally, delving into the specific mechanism of action of the “catalyst” in revolution, analyzing how it constructs a bridge between objective conditions and subjective consciousness through the interaction of military and political affairs, catalyzing the maturity of revolutionary conditions and the awakening of the masses. By sorting out and integrating Guevara’s original texts, this paper logically interprets his theory of guerrilla warfare as a “catalyst” layer by layer, so as to reveal its theoretical connotation and practical path.

**Keywords:** Guerrilla Warfare; Che Guevara; Cuban Revolution

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## 1. Introduction

In the wave of national liberation movements in Latin America in the 20th century, Che Guevara’s guerrilla warfare theory was not only a guide to action for military struggles but also a political philosophy paradigm that reshaped the logic of revolution. His core insight lies in defining guerrilla warfare as a “catalyst” for revolution. This assertion is not a simple summary of military strategies but a profound insight into the inherent laws of the occurrence, development, and victory of revolutions, forming the pillar core of Guevara’s revolutionary thought. From Guevara’s perspective, guerrilla warfare is by no means an isolated action of a few people against power, but a key force that drives social changes, awakens the masses’ consciousness, and promotes historical progress.

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## 2. The facilitator of the “Catalyst”—The guerrilla army

### 2.1. The roles played by the guerrilla army

#### 2.1.1. The vanguard of the people’s armed forces

In general, the life and activities of guerrilla fighters require them to possess a series of physical, spiritual, and moral qualities to adapt to the surrounding conditions and complete any assigned tasks. As an armed force, the guerrilla army is the fighting vanguard of the people <sup>[1]</sup>. Its great strength comes precisely from the broad masses of the people themselves. They are stationed at specific locations in a region, armed for only one purpose: to seize political power. This must be supported by the masses of the people in the region and even the entire territory. Guerrilla warfare is not an insignificant war between a few people and a powerful army, but a war of the entire people against dictatorship and oppression.

#### 2.1.2. Guerrilla fighters as social reformers

By analyzing the methods of activity, forms of struggle, and mass base of the guerrilla army, it is not difficult to find that guerrilla fighters are a group of social reformers who take up arms as the embodiment of the people’s angry protest against their oppressors <sup>[1]</sup>.

It was not until the Yan’an Period that the Chinese Revolution led by Mao Zedong gradually stabilized and began to make further progress. At that time, the Chinese Revolution established base areas in rural areas and took land reform as its fundamental goal, thus gaining the support of the peasant masses and ultimately achieving revolutionary victory. Similarly, in the rural areas of Cuba with harsh conditions and sparse population, the people’s struggles for social reform were mostly, and almost exclusively, aimed at changing the form of land ownership. Guevara believed that peasants must be continuously provided with technical, economic, moral, and cultural assistance. Guerrilla fighters should be like guardian angels descending from heaven, always helping the poor <sup>[1]</sup>. Batista’s forces’ brutal repression—constantly murdering civilians, destroying houses, and harboring hostility towards those who had even the slightest contact with our guerrilla army—prompted more peasants to join the guerrilla ranks. Secondly, as social reformers, guerrilla fighters must set an example with their own lives and demonstrate moral behavior. In addition to the detachment and perseverance forged by the harsh conditions of war, guerrilla fighters should also possess simplicity and frugality derived from strict self-control, avoiding any indulgence or laziness. Regardless of the environment, they should be ascetics <sup>[1]</sup>. Although guerrilla fighters come from the peasantry, with changes in the social process, they recognize the need for social change, but have not personally experienced the peasants’ hardships. Thus, in the practice of the Cuban Revolution, a two-way interaction emerged: on the one hand, the leaders of the guerrilla warfare made people understand the importance of armed struggle through their actions; on the other hand, the people themselves rose up in arms, making the leaders aware of the necessity of addressing practical revolutionary issues. The interaction between guerrilla fighters and their people bore fruit, gradually igniting revolutionary passion, which further highlighted the revolutionary nature of the movement and endowed it with a national perspective <sup>[1]</sup>.

#### 2.1.3. The prototype of the “New Man”

From Rousseau to Lenin, the dream of all great revolutionaries was not only to transform the “world” but also to transform “people.” For them, revolution is not only a change in social structure, systems, and political power but also a transformation of people’s consciousness, ways of thinking, values, habits, and social relations. A revolution is thorough only when it can create the “new man.” For Rousseau, the key lies in cultivating true citizens who can make the rational general will prevail over narrow individualistic passions. Of course, due to the social connotations and historical limitations of his time, Rousseau’s thought could not break through certain boundaries, especially regarding the specific social conditions necessary to make people true citizens. For Lenin, communism would create new people who would be accustomed to abiding by the basic rules of social public life without the need for violence or obedience, which would disappear with the emergence of the new man <sup>[2]</sup>. Guevara’s thought on the new man belongs to this ideological lineage. For Guevara, the highest and ultimate goal of revolution is also to create the new man, as explicitly stated in his 1965

article “Socialism and Man in Cuba”, published in a Uruguayan magazine: building socialism requires not only a material foundation but also the “new man”<sup>[3]</sup>. In other words, socialism requires highly developed productive forces as its material foundation, but historical reality has not provided a matching material foundation for socialism, so people need to create it for socialism. In the absence of a sufficient material foundation, the human factor plays a crucial role. There is a need for people different from those in the old society to drive history towards socialism—and this is the “new man.” This group will dialectically negate the alienated commodity individuals in capitalist society. Because in a capitalist society, inevitably, objectively, and unavoidably, no matter how much “goodwill” exists, whether among Christians or others, man is man’s enemy<sup>[4]</sup>. Thus, Guevara’s concept of the “new man” refers to builders of socialism distinct from those in capitalist society—that is, communists.

Guerrilla fighters are a vivid embodiment of Guevara’s thought on the new man. Through guerrilla warfare, they accomplished the impossible task of defeating the many with the few and the strong with the weak, withstood severe tests in harsh environments, and made indelible contributions to the cause of socialism and people’s liberation. Guevara also believed that the Cuban people, like guerrilla fighters tempered in guerrilla warfare, could temper themselves in Cuba’s socialist construction. This means that labor is not only a new battlefield for guerrilla fighters but also for the Cuban people. Therefore, in articles such as “A New Attitude Towards Work” (Una actitud nueva frente al trabajo), Guevara repeatedly emphasized the need to cultivate a new attitude towards labor, regarding it as the “highest dignity” of human beings. However, in reality, people often still hold outdated attitudes towards labor and technology, viewing labor as a form of torture and slavery, and machines as a restriction on human freedom. People often have an “intent to flee”, unwilling to work or engage in the slow and arduous process of technological innovation<sup>[5]</sup>. Fundamentally, people still see themselves as “isolated individuals”, viewing freedom as an “escape” and disconnection from others as “liberation.” This isolated, abstract, and socially fleeing individual is the “old man” as opposed to the “new man”<sup>[5]</sup>. Capitalist society is built on the basis of the “old man”, but it is clear that socialism cannot be built relying on the “old man.” Therefore, the construction of a socialist society requires the “new man”—a group of people who are completely opposite to the “old man” and enthusiastically participate in socialist construction. It is evident that Guevara’s thought on the “new man” is not an unfounded whimsy but a requirement of reality.

## **2.2. Characteristics of the guerrilla army**

Guevara advocated the “Hit and Run” tactics of small elite units, believing that the use of lightweight equipment and complex terrain could offset the government army’s equipment advantage, and that frequent surprise attacks themselves could create a psychological deterrence of “unstoppable revolution”, thereby demoralizing the enemy and attracting international attention. This is why Guevara believed that the most fundamental characteristics of the guerrilla army are mobility and flexibility. This mobility and flexibility allow the guerrilla army to constantly change frontlines, avoiding any form of encirclement. The guerrilla army can even turn encirclement into counter-encirclement, which Guevara referred to as the “minuet.” At the same time, guerrilla fighters possess the ability to adapt to any environment and turn all accidents during operations into favorable conditions. However, this logic of mobility implies a key assumption: that military actions can automatically trigger the political awakening of the masses. Unlike Mao Zedong, Guevara did not regard mass support as a prerequisite for mobility but as an inevitable result of military success. This logic accidentally worked in the Cuban Revolution due to special historical conditions (the extreme corruption of the Batista regime and national sentiments aroused by U.S. intervention), but exposed fatal flaws in the Bolivian practice. When the guerrilla army became detached from the local social network and attempted to export the revolution through “transnational mobility”, its actions could neither secure sustained intelligence and supplies nor be transformed into an effective political identity.

## **3. The three stages of guerrilla activities generated by the “catalyst”**

In his book *Guerrilla Warfare*, Guevara summarized the “seven golden rules” of guerrilla warfare. In the last rule,

Guevara discussed the three stages of guerrilla warfare's development: strategic defense; a stalemate between the enemy's actions and the guerrilla army's actions; and the final complete elimination of the enemy<sup>[1]</sup>. In the practice of the Cuban Revolution, these stages were specifically subdivided into the nomadic stage, the honeycomb stage, and the urban stage.

### **3.1. The nomadic stage**

The nomadic stage has two meanings: internally strengthening their own quality and externally strengthening ties with the masses. After the preliminary conditions, organizational structure, and main functions of the guerrilla foco are formed, and all preparations are completed, the guerrilla army, except for leaving a small number of guards, will temporarily depart from the foco to conduct strict physical training. During this period, they need to familiarize themselves with the terrain, read maps, select and mark marching routes, and learn to use guns and ammunition—all in preparation for the third stage of guerrilla warfare. Since guerrilla warfare involves frequent mobile operations that require the absolute cooperation of the people, mass work must be actively carried out in the first stage. In addition to the power of moral example, an effective way to win over the masses is through sustained military victories.

### **3.2. The honeycomb stage**

The honeycomb stage begins when the guerrilla army reaches an impressive level in terms of armed forces—i.e., the number of weapons and personnel—and should proceed to form new columns. Guevara compared this to the situation of a beehive: when a beehive matures, a new queen bee emerges and leads a portion of the swarm to move to another area<sup>[1]</sup>. The most outstanding guerrilla leaders will remain in the mother hive, i.e., areas with less danger, while the newly formed columns will penetrate other enemy-occupied areas following the model described earlier. In the new guerrilla strongholds, liberated areas will be established in accordance with the methods of the first stage, continuously expanding the scope of influence of the liberated areas and forming multiple guerrilla focos. Each mature guerrilla foco will have promulgated laws and newly established schools to continue training and educating new recruits.

### **3.3. The urban stage**

The third stage is established when the number of “guerrilla focos” has grown to a certain scale and certain conditions necessary for their survival have been created. Under the unified deployment of the largest center, i.e., the general headquarters, guerrilla armies from various focos will engage the government army in fixed-line battles, seizing their heavy weapons. They will transfer from mountainous areas to villages, towns, and suburban areas, launching guerrilla warfare in the suburbs to form an encirclement of cities. The success of urban guerrilla warfare requires several key elements: first, it must be under the direct command of regional leaders and not make arbitrary decisions on actions; second, there must be completely concealed contact points and contacts, with a high degree of caution and discipline among them; third, the location of operations must allow for rapid evacuation, and only small self-defense weapons should be carried to facilitate evacuation; fourth, operations should focus primarily on sabotage rather than independent armed attacks, with their activities coordinating with the overall strategic plan<sup>[1]</sup>.

## **4. The role of the “Catalyst” in guerrilla warfare**

In *Guerrilla Warfare*, Guevara identified the cycle of dictatorial politics as a necessary prerequisite for the development of armed struggle. He pointed out: “As long as a government comes to power through popular elections—regardless of whether there is fraud in the voting—and at least superficially maintains constitutional legitimacy, the guerrilla movement will face great difficulties, because the possibility of peaceful struggle has not yet reached a dead end”<sup>[1]</sup>. As for the subjective conditions, they essentially consist of two mutually complementary elements that deepen in the course of the struggle: the recognition of the necessity of revolutionary political power transformation and the recognition of the possibility of such transformation. The foundation of the oligarchic regime lies precisely in the absence of these

conditions—both the alienation of the masses’ ideological consciousness and their fear of the armed forces of the bourgeois state. The illusion held by the members of the Granma Expedition in December 1956 of quickly overthrowing the rule of the Batista regime stemmed from their failure to fully recognize the second subjective condition: while the Cuban people were aware of the necessity of change, they lacked a firm belief in the feasibility of such change<sup>[6]</sup>. This does not mean that revolutionary parties must wait for all revolutionary conditions to mature. Guevara emphasized that guerrilla focus can catalyze the emergence of revolutionary conditions. For example, the second lesson Guevara drew from the Cuban Revolution: “A revolution does not always have to wait for all conditions to be in place; on the basis of existing objective conditions, the guerrilla foco can develop the subjective conditions”<sup>[11]</sup>. This form of war not only exposes the rulers’ fragility and weakness but also demonstrates the necessity and feasibility of guerrilla warfare. In this way, it stimulates the masses’ revolutionary consciousness and fighting enthusiasm, enabling the second subjective condition to emerge and take root—confidence in defeating the oppressors<sup>[7]</sup>. To establish and consolidate the initial revolutionary strongholds, specific economic, social, political, and ideological conditions must be preliminarily in place—conditions that need to be identified through a concrete analysis of reality<sup>[1]</sup>. Guevara’s stance embodies Marxist dialectics, transcending both the limitations of mechanical materialism (“conditions determine historical progress”) and the shackles of abstract idealism (advocating the absolute power of will): the practice of the revolutionary vanguard is both a product of established conditions and a creator of new conditions.

## 5. Conclusion

Guevara’s theory of guerrilla warfare as a “catalyst” constructs the internal connection between revolutionary actions and social changes through its unique threefold dimension, breaking through the double shackles of mechanical materialism’s “determinism of conditions” and abstract idealism’s “absolute power of will”, and demonstrating the vivid application of Marxist dialectics in revolutionary practice. Within this theoretical framework, the guerrilla army is both the subject of revolutionary action and the carrier for nurturing the “new man”; the evolution of guerrilla stages is both a natural process of military struggle and an inevitable trajectory of the spread of revolutionary influence; and the exertion of the “catalytic” role achieves the dialectical unity of objective revolutionary conditions and the subjective awakening of the masses, providing important ideological resources for the national liberation movements in Latin America.

However, this theory is not flawless. Its tendency towards military centralism and its presupposition of the “natural generation” of mass support led to difficulties in transnational practices divorced from local social networks (such as the Bolivian Revolution), exposing the structural flaw of lacking a solid social foundation. Nevertheless, Guevara’s theory still holds irreplaceable value. It not only answers the core proposition of “how revolutions occur” but also points the ultimate goal of revolution towards the “transformation of people”, highlighting the fundamental significance of nurturing the “new man” in socialist construction.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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