

By Brian Martin

The prospects for armed revolution have been declining for many decades due to advances in science and technology. Perhaps in the days of the bow and arrow or the rifle, it was possible for an armed population to defeat soldiers defending a regime. If the revolutionaries could mobilise greater numbers and commitment, then this might overcome the superior training of soldiers.

This approximate parity in weaponry is a thing of the past. Technological developments have led to machine-guns, grenades, bazookas, tanks, radar, aerial bombing, precision-guided missiles, fuel-air explosives and nuclear weapons, among others.

The side with superior weaponry has an enormous advantage. That side is almost always the regime in power. Governments have the resources to manufacture or purchase advanced weapons systems as well as train and support the numerous personnel needed to operate them.

In the face of a powerful arsenal, revolutionaries have little chance in direct combat unless they are similarly armed.

The prospect of matching the deadly force defending the state raises several dilemmas. One is how to obtain the weapons and the fighting force. Another is the question of justifying the use of violence. When is the human cost of fighting greater than the benefits to be gained?

The idea of building barricades and fighting the army with poorly trained volunteers using rifles is no longer relevant. These days, deadly missiles can be purchased and biological weapons manufactured in garage labs, but use of such weapons inevitably causes civilian deaths, sometimes in large numbers.

To match the state in weaponry means being prepared for massive killing. Although there was once some support for the "people's bomb" (socialist nuclear weapons), most leftists now recognise that nuclear weapons are not a useful tool for social liberation.

The state has harnessed not only technology to make more powerful weapons but also the science of psychology to make more soldiers more effective killers.



"The idea of building barricades and fighting the army with poorly trained volunteers using rifles is no longer relevant." Armed detachment of the Bolshevik Red Guards, 1917.

Most people will avoid killing if at all possible. After World War II, S.L.A. Marshall and his team interviewed hundreds of US soldiers. They found, unexpectedly, that only one in five in front-line combat fired their rifles.

The analysis of what it takes to kill in war has been pursued further by Dave Grossman in his recent book, *On Killing*.

There is quite a bit of evidence from various wars that most soldiers avoid killing at all costs, even at the risk of being killed themselves. By reconstructing old battles in which soldiers with muskets fired at each other for hours standing in lines only a few dozen metres apart, analysts have determined that most of them who fired intended to miss (by shooting over the heads of the enemy).

The closer one is to another person, physically and emotionally, the harder it is to kill them, and the greater the psychological trauma from doing so. Most of the killing in infantry battles is caused by artillery and machine-guns, not direct engagement by infantry with rifles.

Western militaries took notice of Marshall's findings and used insights from psychology to improve killing rates, as described in Peter Watson's

book *War on the Mind*. They found that the greatest incentive to kill came not from ideology, hatred of the enemy or fear of being killed, but from loyalty to the immediate fighting group. Relevant factors in military training are recruitment at an impressionable age, training to hate and dehumanise the enemy, training to obey authority and peer pressure.

However, this is still not enough to make most men fire in battle. The extra factor needed is conditioning, again based on insights from psychology. As Grossman puts it, the "procedure of precisely rehearsing and mimicking a killing action is an excellent way of ensuring that the individual is capable of performing the act in combat."

For example, the easiest way to damage someone with one's hand involves sticking one's thumb through the person's eye into the brain and moving the thumb around. This is abhorrent to most people, even to think about. To train soldiers in this killing technique, one karate instructor has students practise using oranges taped over the opponent's eye.

Similarly, rather than shooting at traditional targets, soldiers are trained to shoot at pictures of enemy troops that pop up unexpectedly and destruct realistically when hit. After conditioning of this sort, the soldier performs on "automatic pilot" in the actual combat situation.

Use of these techniques raised the firing rate of US soldiers from 20% in World War II to over 90% in the Vietnam War.

This improvement in training makes a dramatic difference to fighting efficiency. Troops conditioned to kill using modern techniques have an overwhelming advantage over troops trained in the traditional manner, most of whom will not fire or will aim to miss.

Grossman notes that, due to differences in training, British riflemen were far more effective than Argentinean riflemen in the Falklands war. In Rhodesia in the 1970s, the highly trained Rhodesian forces maintained an 8-1 kill ratio against well-armed but poorly trained guerrillas.

There is nothing in principle to stop revolutionaries from learning from psychology and using conditioning techniques to make themselves into killers. In practice, there are several reasons to question taking this step.

Killing and revolution

Why abortion is a woman's right

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"whether a fetus is or is not a person is a question of *value*, not of fact".

What characterises a human being is consciousness. Consciousness is not injected by god at the time of conception, or any other stage of foetal development. Consciousness is a product of *society*, of human beings' existence in relation to each other. There is absolutely no scientific evidence that the fetus is conscious.

A fetus becomes a human being when it is born and begins interacting with other human beings. That is when destroying it becomes murder. Until then, it is simply a potential human being, a collec-

tion of cells like any other organ in the body. As such, a fetus has no rights separate from those of the woman carrying it, and the decision to have it removed is no different from any other operation a woman might have.

All women must be able to exercise the *right* to abortion without qualification, guilt, apology, risk or hassle. Without that right, their freedom in all other spheres of life is severely limited.

For so long as that right is questioned, defending it is of utmost importance for women's health and well-being. If we fail, how any individual woman feels about the rightness or wrongness of an abortion will be irrelevant because she will not have the choice.

It would mean replicating one of the worst aspects of military training, namely blind obedience to authority. It would mean conditioning many more people to kill, with the horrendous psychological consequences for those who do kill.

It is worth going back to the start. Is developing a greater capacity to kill the best way to revolution?

Militaries have devoted billions of

dollars to research and development to produce ever more potent weapons and to learn how to make their troops ever more potent killers.

In contrast, very little money indeed has been spent developing technologies to support nonviolent struggle against repressive regimes and to building psychological insights into how to make populations resist indoctrination and mobilise for beneficial social change.

There is much that could be done: investigations into communication systems that cannot be controlled centrally, into self-reliant food and energy systems, into supportive group processes that foster resistance to domination.

The vast bulk of government research and development for "defence" has been to make military violence more effective. To try to fight states at their strongest point, violence, is a mistake.

Katherine Chorley's classic book *Armies and the Art of Revolution* shows that a successful revolution must involve winning over at least part of the military. This is less and less likely to occur when using force, which will trigger far more deadly and effective force by trained soldiers, who are trained for just such confrontations.

It is far smarter to develop techniques of political organisation and struggle that militaries are not good at, and which undermine rather than directly engage them. ■

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