

BALÁZS FORGÁCS<sup>1</sup>Handbook for understanding irregular warfare<sup>2</sup>

## Kézikönyv az irreguláris háború megértéséhez

## Abstract

*Review of Békés, Márton: Gerillaháború, A fegyveres felkelés elmélete és gyakorlata, (Guerrilla War. The Theory and Practice of Armed Insurrection) Közép- és Kelet-Európai Történelem és Társadalom Kutatásáért Közalapítvány, Budapest, 2017., 335 pages*

*Keywords: guerrilla warfare, Hungarian Revolution of 1956, review*

## Absztrakt

*Recenzió Békés Márton: Gerillaháború, A fegyveres felkelés elmélete és gyakorlata, (Közép- és Kelet-Európai Történelem és Társadalom Kutatásáért Közalapítvány, Budapest, 2017., 335 oldal) című könyvéről*

*Kulcsszavak: gerilla hadviselés, 1956-os forradalom és szabadságharc, recenzió*

"If you wish for peace, understand war – particularly the guerrilla and subversive forms of war."<sup>3</sup> said B. H. Liddell Hart, one of the greatest military theoreticians of the 20th century, in 1967. His words are just as relevant today as they were 50 years ago, since the wars of our times are much less regular, not following the standard rules of warfare; in fact they are rather irregular, diverging from these rules. Nowadays the national military forces in the course of their engagement either in war or crisis response operations are more and more often faced with opponents of different status with very differently organised military force, using very different operational tactics, where the traditional use of force is not necessarily the most effective tool to achieve military success.

Guerrilla warfare, the most typical warfare of our age, its theory and – through the 1956 Hungarian (mainly Budapest) events – its practice is presented in the latest book of Békés

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<sup>2</sup> This republished review was supported by the János Bolyai Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. The original Hungarian-language review was published in *Kommentár*, 2018/1, 125–127.o.

<sup>3</sup> Liddell Hart, B. H.: *Strategy. The Indirect Approach*. Faber and Faber Ltd., London, 1967, 373.

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Márton, the Director of Research in the House of Terror Museum. The author had written studies in this topic earlier,<sup>4</sup> but this monography published for the 2017 Book Week adds a practical example to the theory: the events of the 1956 Revolution and Fight for Freedom.

The first chapter of the book, bearing the title *The Artists of Uprising* is divided into four sub-headings, which introduce the history of guerrilla warfare, its beginning and development from the end of the 19th century to the present. The specificity of the theory on one hand is that while the first theorists were exclusively military, since the end of the 19th century, their majority are civilian who strive to serve an ideology with the irregular form of warfare; on the other hand the authors used the books of their predecessors almost as guidebooks when formulating their views. Emphasizing the roles of the left-wing theoreticians (especially Engels and Lenin) is an important element of this chapter, since they had an extraordinary effect on the 20th century history of uprisings. Following the theoretical introduction the author presents the practical side of guerrilla warfare, showing its tactical, operational and strategic levels. Leading up to the central topic of the book Békés Márton devotes a sub-chapter on the urban uprisings, which after the end of the 19th century, returned to the history of war from the mid-20th century due to the growing urbanisation. In connection with the urban uprisings in 1956, it is important to clearly distinguish guerrillas and terrorists, for which the author enlists 6 criteria. This chapter closes with the comparison of two books Carl Schmidt's *The Theory of the Partisan*, a classic in this topic, and Felix Guattari's and Gilles Deleuze's *Mille plateaux*.

The main part of the monography is the chapter titled *City Uprising*, which is the peculiar and so far unprecedented presentation of the 1956 Budapest events. Unprecedented, because according to Békés the Budapest uprising – beside the 1944 Warsaw fights – was a „...crystal clear and very early fully armed” (112.) emergence of the urban guerrilla fight. The parallelisms of these two events are described in 10 points, where „the rebels of a city fighting for its independence rose up against an invading foreign army.” (115.) After the overview of the historical events, on the next 60 pages, through a list of military tactical examples the author proves the main novelty of his book, i.e. the statement that „in the political sense 1956 was undoubtedly a revolution and a fight for freedom, however, in the military sense it should be distinguished from great wars and the so called »small wars« and should be classified as a low intensity conflict, within these as a guerrilla fight, or more precisely, an urban guerrilla fight.” (212)

Békés Márton proves his above statement in 10 points, according to which in Budapest:

- „1. irregular forces engaged in defensive fight and delaying action against an invading army (and in smaller part against the regular government forces);
2. participants organised on a voluntary basis, the command of their forces was ad hoc, decentralised;
3. they fought with saving their own force, but constantly harassing, dissipating, not leaving alone the enemy;

<sup>4</sup> Békés, Márton: A gerilla-hadviselésről (On Guerrilla Warfare). *Kommentár*, 2016/4, 3–32.

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4. they set up the »invisible front lines« flexibly;
5. they attacked in small mobile teams equipped with light weapons;
6. they provided their own weapons and provisions, the former by seizing from the enemy, the latter from the donations of the citizens;
7. they regularly ambushed, they constantly used the element of surprise and deception, they conducted their activities at night, camouflaged and disappearing »into thin air«
8. knowledge of the terrain and the sympathy of the citizens helped them all through;
9. they used weapons to achieve their political goals;
10. they often identified themselves as »partisans«”(213.)

This chapter, beside the literature on 1956, is built on the memoirs of the participants of the freedom fighters i.e. the Pest Boys, so the presentation of the events resembles the view point of John Keegan's: *The Face of the Battle*.<sup>5</sup> In this part the author starts from the sociology of the rebels, but also clarifies the questions of tactics and weapon technology.

The last chapter bears the title *Civil World War*. It consists of four sub-headings, in which Békés Márton updates the question of guerrilla warfare. He points out that „as compared to the last 25 years there is a growing number of conflicts at present, the dominant form of which is internal conflict, and the intensity and number of which is growing.” (287. – highlight by Békés Márton) Concerning the structure and location of the conflicts he proves that local conflicts tend to globalise and global conflicts often appear locally. In addition wars tend to urbanize while cities militarize, which in his opinion „...forecasts a sporadic, city located, by far not conventional civil world war”. (301. – highlight by Békés Márton) The last chapter justifies the sentence of Liddell Hart quoted above: „The conflicts of our days and their most different ways of fighting – in short the not long existing post Westphalian state, then the cyber warfare, the spread of conflicts through infection and the urbanisation of war – gives a special relevance to guerrilla warfare.” (313.)

At the end of his book, Békés Márton briefly explains the meaning of 12 expressions (4th generation warfare, asymmetric warfare, uprising, revolutionary war, guerrilla, hybrid war, irregular, national liberation fight, popular uprising, partisan, civil war, terrorism). This glossary further adds to the value of this easy flowing, very readable book, with precisely used military terminology.

The value of the book is further enhanced by the wide circle of resources, the elements of which appear in 406 footnotes. However, it would have been advisable to arrange these into bibliographies after each chapter. The carefully selected 13 pictures support the message, just as the cover, depicting a bottle bomb (Molotov cocktail) on the front and the emblematic weapons of the uprising (among them a Kalashnikov assault rifle) on the back. In my opinion Békés Márton with this book fulfils the greatest responsibility of the (military) historian defined by John Keegan, i.e. besides presenting the past, in this case the history of the 1956 revolution and fight for freedom, it also helps to understand the events.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Keegan, John: *The Face of Battle*. The Viking Press, New York, 1976.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 35.