

*People's Wars in China, Malaya, and Vietnam*. Marc Opper. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020. ISBN: 9780472131846.

As academic interest in insurgency and counterinsurgency intensified along with the American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, much of the scholarly debate centered on an important question: to what extent was success in these campaigns attributable to the use of coercion and to what extent did winning civilian consent – popularly characterized as “winning hearts and minds” – matter? In Marc Opper’s new book, *People's Wars in China, Malaya, and Vietnam*, he makes a useful intervention in this debate by suggesting that what matters most is the comparative breadth of the political coalition assembled by each side. Focusing on insurgents, he examines the political and military strategies of communist guerrillas in China, Malaya, and Vietnam, and argues that active popular support for insurgent campaigns is not a necessity for victory but some level of voluntary compliance with insurgent governing structures is. This compliance is achieved partly by effective coalition building; the broader the political coalition the insurgency appeals to, the greater the levels of compliance. In recent years, much of the scholarship on civil wars and insurgencies has followed Stathis Kalyvas’s pathbreaking work and focused on questions of violence and coercion, so it is welcome to see a scholar focusing instead on how political coalitions are built and maintained in these conflicts.

At the heart of this book is the story of the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) eventually successful insurgency against the incumbent Kuomintang (KMT) regime. After laying out his theoretical interventions in the first two chapters, Opper offers four chapter-length case studies of how the insurgency played out in different regions and at different times. First, he examines the ill-fated Chinese Soviet Republic in the south of China between 1931 and 1934 before looking at the unsuccessful guerrilla campaign from 1935 to 1937 carried out by the 20,000 or so CCP soldiers left behind in the collapsing Chinese Soviet Republic after the Red Army departed on the Long March. The next two case studies shift

geographical focus and look at the CCP's far more successful campaigns in the northern Shanxi-Chahar-Hebei border region, first against the Japanese between 1937 and 1945, and then against the KMT between 1945 and 1949.

By investigating CCP coalition-building in different regions and at different times, Opper does readers a real service. Often, students of insurgencies are presented with something of a stylized version of the Chinese Civil War, where the CCP under Mao Zedong quickly realized the benefits of mass support and worked assiduously to win it. In fact, as Opper shows, assembling a victorious coalition was a messy business, and the CCP made many mistakes along the way. During the lifetime of the Chinese Soviet Republic, radical CCP policies attracted strong support from poor peasants, but the party made little attempt to attract the support of middle or rich peasants. When confronted with a KMT force that drew support from the beneficiaries of the existing social order, the CCP found that their narrow coalition did not appeal to enough people and civilian compliance in terms of supplying men to fight or paying taxes soon dried up. Essentially, society in southern China was divided between a large group antagonized by the CCP and a smaller group who strongly supported them, and this core cleavage made it vastly more difficult for the CCP to hold up against the KMT's military operations.

Under the influence of Mao, the CCP learned this lesson in later campaigns, where they tended to emphasize "United Front" policies that were more incremental in their approach to land redistribution and social reform. Poor peasants did not support this iteration of the CCP as fervently, but they nonetheless complied with the demands of CCP governing structures. Crucially, Opper shows that this did not mean that CCP had now become a very broad-based coalition – they still persecuted landlords and, depending on internal party politics, the class composition of the party could shift to include greater or fewer numbers of rich peasants – but they did succeed in maintaining a broader political coalition than either

the Japanese or the KMT. Peasants largely did not cooperate with the CCP because they loved them, but because they provided a more viable alternative than their rivals. A high degree of compliance with the demands of CCP local governing structures meant that these institutions were able to provide men and material to the People's Liberation Army. Conversely, the Japanese and KMT had to supply resources to protect their local government structures, which meant that running these structures sapped their strength rather than added to it.

The next two chapters of the book seek to illustrate Opper's theory about political coalitions by examining two other heavily-studied mid-twentieth-century communist insurgencies in Asia: the Malayan Emergency of 1948-60 and the Vietnam War from 1960-75. While these chapters do help to validate Opper's theoretical findings, they will perhaps be of less interest to readers who are already broadly familiar with the historiography of both wars. Opper makes good use of Chinese-language sources to demonstrate how the Malayan Communist Party failed to assemble anything resembling a viable political coalition and thus was doomed to failure, but the fact that this chapter focuses on the national level and on the entire length of the insurgency means that it does not have the space to offer the sort of detailed regional analysis that enlivens the chapters on China.

Opper returns to the province level in his chapter on the Vietnam War, focusing on Dinh Tuong province, which has been the subject of much scholarly attention. Here, though, Opper is essentially attempting to synthesize existing work in order to test his theory rather than contributing anything ground-breaking to our understanding of the insurgency in Vietnam. Indeed, his references in this chapter are dated at times, relying heavily on scholarship from the 1970s and 1980s, work which was largely based on American social science research carried out during the war rather than on the sort of Vietnamese archival sources that have provided much more nuance to our understanding of the conflict since they

began to open up. There is much valuable recent scholarship on the nature of the Southern Vietnamese state that goes uncited here: for instance, the work of historians such as Edward Miller and Jessica Chapman, who have suggested that Diem regime had much more popular support and legitimacy than has previously been understood. Nonetheless, Opper still provides a good illustration of the value of his theory when discussing the fate of South Vietnamese government's "Land to the Tiller" land reform program of 1970-73. He shows that although the program was genuinely redistributive, local elites were still left to control the government and manage the program, which meant that its benefits were never fully felt by the broader population. Peasants who still felt excluded from the political order continued to withhold their compliance from the South Vietnamese regime, who had to spread their troops across a wide area in order to maintain control of the countryside. The unsustainable nature of this arrangement quickly became apparent when it was put under pressure by North Vietnamese offensives, and South Vietnamese control of the countryside quickly melted away.

Insights like this demonstrate the value of Opper's work. While scholars of the Chinese Civil War might find more of interest here than those who specialize in the conflicts in Malaya and Vietnam, his account of how political institutions and coalition-building affect the outcome of these conflicts offers useful new perspectives on the dynamics of insurgency. In addition, Opper makes excellent use of primary sources, including newspapers, memoirs and copious amount of internal party documents to provide the reader with a rich and nuanced discussion of the ebb and flow of the CCP insurgency across two decades, and to give a clear sense of how its political apparatus interacted with the civilian population. *People's Wars in China, Malaya, and Vietnam* is recommended for anyone who is interested in how insurgencies succeed or fail.

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