

The background of the cover is a light yellow-green color with several faint, stylized leaf motifs scattered across it. Each motif consists of a short stem with two leaves pointing upwards and to the right.

# MODERN WARFARE

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A French View of Counterinsurgency

**Roger Trinquier**

The logo features a stylized green leafy branch to the left of the text.

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# Modern Warfare

**PSI Classics of the Counterinsurgency Era**

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*A French View of Counterinsurgency*

Roger Trinquier

Translated from the French by Daniel Lee  
With an Introduction by Bernard B. Fall

Foreword by Eliot A. Cohen

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## FOREWORD

World War II divided the French military and the experience of bitter conflicts in Indochina and Algeria did so again—culminating in one successful and one unsuccessful revolt by the military against the government. Roger Trinquier was no Gaullist: an officer in the colonial infantry, he spent the war first defending the French concession in Shanghai and then in Indochina under the Japanese occupation. Yet although he missed fighting with the Free French in North Africa and Europe or with the *maquis*, he saw plenty of action during the rest of his career. Following his internment by the Japanese in 1945, he continued to serve in Indochina and then in Algeria.

He led counter guerrilla units against the Viet Minh, including thousands of montagnard tribesmen in the climactic battle of Dien Bien Phu; narrowly escaping being purged as a Vichy sympathizer, he rotated between training assignments in France and duty as a paratrooper in Algeria, including with the 10<sup>th</sup> Parachute Division under General Jacques Massu during the Battle of Algiers in 1957. He commanded a regiment on the Tunisian border and after that, luckily for him, was in Greece drawing up plans for operations in the Congo when his friends and former superiors launched an abortive coup against President Charles de Gaulle in 1961. But his days of soldiering were over, and a moderately successful years as a writer began.

*Modern Warfare* is the book which made his mark among English speaking readers, and deservedly so. It is the product of a great deal of experience with counterinsurgency operations. Indeed, it is worth noting that in over a thirty-year career in the army he spent all of it engaged in irregular



warfare. Promotion was not rapid: sixteen years after receiving his commission he was a deputy battalion commander in Indochina; and at its end he was only a regimental commander. But like many of his peers, he acquired a rare depth of experience and perhaps something more: the perspective that comes to those who have waged war in two distinct political eras. Much of the interest in this book comes from his realization that the petty war against bandits and rebels of the pre-1939 period had changed forever as a result of World War II.

For Trinquier, the enemy—here referring primarily to the Algerian insurgents—means a nationalist totalitarian type, utterly different from indigenous enemies of earlier years. What the new insurgent brings to war is not merely ideological zeal or deep felt resentment, but technique and discipline. Trinquier makes dissection of that technique his point of departure. His account of bomb-making cells, compartmentalized hierarchies, and how the use of terror remain as valid as they were half a century ago. Indeed, in some respects the Algerian insurgents, and earlier their Vietnamese counterparts, were more sophisticated than some of the groups active today.

The French theorists of revolutionary war, Trinquier among them, saw these struggles as a contest for the political mobilization of a normally inert populace. Familiar with the work of communist movements in Europe, they understood the role of front organizations, and assigned importance to trade unions and teachers, among others, as well as the establishment of social institutions that would gradually erode legitimacy and efficacy from the government. A parallel insurgent leadership that would undo by night what the authorities could do in daylight. The battlefields were webs of social life, and not just along jungle trails or dried riverbeds.

For this enemy Trinquier has the cold respect of a professional warrior. He describes an enemy who is deeply committed to his cause, and ingenious in its pursuit. One knows, without being aware of Trinquier's combat record, that he would probably give little quarter to an enemy whom he could not turn or exploit in some other way. But there is no cultural condescension here, nor anything but respect for the courage of those he is committed to fight.

What of Trinquier's technique? The book has gained some notoriety for the passage in which he discusses, obliquely but clearly enough, the use of torture. The terrorist "claims the same honors [as the soldier] while rejecting the same obligations." But the forces of order, Trinquier insists, cannot treat the captured terrorist as a criminal (who acts not out of personal motives or greed) nor as a soldier. He must be quickly interrogated and, in several chilling lines, the author describes what ensues:

No lawyer is present for such an interrogation. If the prisoner gives the information requested, the examination is quickly terminated; if not,

specialists must force his secret from him. Then, as a soldier, he must face the suffering, and perhaps the death, he has heretofore managed to avoid. The terrorist must accept this as a condition inherent in his trade and in the methods of warfare that, with full knowledge, his superiors and he himself have chosen.

Unsurprisingly, this and similar passages have given Trinquier a reputation for justifying the use of torture. There is much to criticize: he does not reflect on what using such methods do to those who inflict as well as those who undergo torture nor consider the doubtful validity of information extracted under physical duress. He assumes torture can be applied clinically and with restraint, and he seems oblivious to the political damage done by widespread use of these means. Perhaps the best that what can said is that he considers—albeit not thoroughly—a horrible issue.

On the other hand, Trinquier is quick to add that after interrogation terrorists should be treated like normal prisoners of war, and he compares modern insurgents to members of the French resistance accepting the risks of fighting the Germans outside the laws of war, tacitly ceding considerable moral stature to insurgents. He repeatedly insists on the importance of treating the population who constitute the battleground of irregular warfare with consideration and respect. And perhaps most importantly of all, physical coercion is quite clearly only a part of what he thinks counterinsurgency is all about.

Indeed, Trinquier's justification of torture has caused much of what is valuable or at least interesting about this book to be ignored—in particular his discussion of the need for what today is called clear-and-hold operations, for countermobilization of the local population to conduct espionage as well as resistance, for the comparison of counterinsurgency in urban and rural environments. On all these points he is instructive, and one can only wish that, for example, American commanders going to Iraq would have understood as he did the importance of such measures as the use of national identity cards or, conversely, the futility of such measures as large-scale sweeps through insurgent areas, inaccurate aerial bombing, or hunkering down in fortified bases separated from the population they are seeking to protect.

*Modern Warfare* is not a detached treatise—or rather only in part. It boldly challenged complacent senior military leaders who the author believed did not fully understand the threat. Trinquier's indictment of the French army is severe: he believes that conventional soldiers are uninterested and uninformed about a form of warfare in which tactical problems are limited, in which force is a small proportion of effective action, and in which local political considerations play the dominant role. He and other

French officers with similar experience knew how costly such attitudes could prove.

The U.S. military, both wrongly and unprofessionally, expressed contempt toward their French counterparts in the 1950s and 1960s. They themselves stumbled no less badly on many of the same battlefields in Southeast Asia. Americans turned aside from thinking about this kind of conflict after Vietnam, preparing for the war they preferred—massive, violent, and utterly conventional. For them, and not only for his own comrades, Trinquier's final warning bears reflection: "The nation does not ask the army to define problems, but to win the war it is engaged in." His path through the counterinsurgency era may not be ours, but this concentrated reflection on his travels and those of his comrades are well worth reading.

Eliot A. Cohen

*May 2006*

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## INTRODUCTION: A PORTRAIT OF THE “CENTURION”

In a book that became one of France’s greatest best sellers since World War II, Jean Lartéguy gave the name of “centurion” to the hard-bitten French regular who had survived the Indochina war, had learned his Mao Tse-tung the hard way, and later had sought to apply his lessons in Algeria or even in mainland France.<sup>1</sup>

Of that centurion—as the reader no doubt knows, this was the title of the company commanders who formed the backbone of the Roman Legions—Lartéguy says: “I shall always feel attached to those men, even if I should ever disagree with the course they choose to follow, [and] dedicate this book to the memory of all the centurions who perished so that Rome might survive.”

Rome, of course, did *not* survive in its ancient splendor in spite of the incredible sacrifices of the centurions, nor did France survive as a world-wide empire. But in the case of France, the centurion exists as a live human being; right at this moment, he is either emerging from colonelcy to general’s rank, or being placed on the compulsory retirement list—or, perhaps, being sentenced to the jails of the French Republic for Secret Army activities. For at least another decade, he and his kind are likely to exert a strong influence upon French military thinking and planning and, therefore, upon the Western alliance as a whole.

The French Army officer, to a far greater extent than his British-American counterpart, has spent the last quarter of a century fighting desperate rear-guard actions against highly politicized irregulars. In addition, the lack of coherent political leadership from Paris in the chaotic years