

Planes, Trains, Automobiles, and Bodabodas: Transportation Workers and Irregular Warfare

Description

Movement is political. Whether it's the movement of 190,000 Russian troops across borders in an act of war, the Maduro regime's displacement of more than 6.1 million Venezuelan refugees across South and Central America, or the refusal of four black students to [leave](#) a Woolworth lunch counter in downtown Greensboro, North Carolina, in an act of protest against segregation, the positioning and shifting locations of bodies can send strong political messages. And the politics of everyday movement matters not only at a grand geopolitical scale; it also offers opportunities for irregular warfare.

For many, the buzz of daily movement blends into the background. These actors, networks, and infrastructure move people and goods, sustaining economic and social activity in both formal and informal settings. Within the United States, over [ten percent of all jobs](#) fall into the transportation sector; globally, millions work in [informal transportation](#). In the growing "megacities" of the Global South, informal taxis, couriers, and delivery drivers move vast quantities of people and goods every day.

But they also produce alternative forms of governance that can challenge the status quo. Consider [New York City's rejection of freight transportation](#) infrastructure in the early 20th century. During this period, manufacturing industries remained an important part of New York's urban economy, and as a result heavily relied on thousands of dock workers, truck drivers, and railway workers operating throughout Manhattan. Concerns about anarchist elements in these worker populations led business leaders to push further freight infrastructure development to New Jersey, despite numerous proposed plans for a freight handling subway system within the city. New York City elites feared that these workers, with knowledge of and access to networks that sustained political and economic activity, could subvert the city government or disrupt economic activity by exerting control over the flow of goods into and out of New York.

The transportation sector demands special attention as a potential avenue of influence for irregular warfare and competition. Military literature on transport workers offers a starting point, but insights from researchers in geography and urban planning offer irregular warfare practitioners new lessons on how to compete and win. Far from just a component of nonstandard logistics, these workers and networks represent potent means to achieve US objectives across operational contexts.

Transporters in Unconventional Warfare and Competition

The human networks transporting and distributing goods or services are critical. Typically, discussions regarding irregular warfare and transportation sectors center on [nonstandard logistics](#), or how special operations forces might sustain themselves and their partners through local networks. Additionally, the literature on unconventional warfare generally focuses on transportation infrastructure [sabotage operations](#). Some scholars point to the role that transporters play across various contexts in unconventional warfare, with a [value-chain analysis framework](#) from economics to illuminate how transportation and distribution actors can enable or hinder the provision of essential services.

For example, members of a resistance movement might coopt transportation infrastructure for their own purposes. Iran delivers weapons and equipment to their Houthi allies through the support of Yemeni fishermen who would otherwise continue normal maritime trade. With their specialized maritime knowledge, these mariners successfully traffic weapons and equipment despite the threat of [American interdiction](#). Coopting support from the human networks that conduct this distribution also serves the objectives of the resistance.

In addition to irregular warfare, transport networks and actors are relevant in the ongoing competition between the United States and powers like Russia and China. Across Africa, protests and strikes by [miners](#) and [railway workers](#) against Chinese projects offer insights into efforts to disrupt the Belt and Road Initiative. Similarly, Russia's [plundering of Sudanese gold](#) to offset economic sanctions relies heavily on networks of local truckers to move processed material from mining towns to airports and onto planes. Without the willing support of local workers, Russia and China would be forced to expend additional resources to continue their extraction of mineral wealth from the continent, such as additional funds to meet workers's demands for pay increases or the deployment of more aggressive tactics to gain transporters's compliance. Working with local partners with access to transportation networks therefore offers opportunities to organize workers as part of competition.

Furthermore, urban transport workers cannot be overlooked. Taxi networks in megacities help millions of people navigate traffic, while sustaining an urban area's economic and social flow's a [critical function](#). These networks therefore are ripe for influence or targeting. For example, on September 1, 2022, a loose coalition of pro-Ukrainian hacktivists jammed Moscow's traffic for over an hour through the [coordinated ordering](#) of taxis to the same location. While this specific instance was resolved without major economic damage, it nevertheless demonstrated urban populations's reliance on both digital and physical access to transport workers. Lastly, individual acts of protest, like those of a [Georgian taxi driver](#) who abandoned Russian tourists after they expressed anti-Ukrainian views, can also socially isolate and impose costs on the populations of competing powers. Similar to developing relationships with truckers or railway workers, establishing connections with the networks of urban

transport workers presents new options to disrupt adversarial powers, whether in the everyday activities of their urban populations or in their activities in foreign settings.

New Insights from Mobilities Research

Social scientists can offer new insights drawing on a field of studies known as [mobilities research](#). While many geographers and urban planning scholars largely focus on static places and [understanding the factors](#) that give places distinct characters, others emphasize the daily mobilities that connect people to different places. Geographer Jacob Shell, for instance, points to the important role played by elephant transport networks in Burma not just in supplying rebel forces but also in supporting a culture of resistance that Shell refers to as [subversive logistics](#). In a widely-cited article describing the [new mobilities paradigm](#), sociologists Mimi Sheller and John Urry explain how:

mobilities thus entail distinct social spaces that orchestrate new forms of social life! for example stations, hotels, motorways, resorts, airports, leisure complexes, cosmopolitan cities, beaches, galleries, and roadside parks!or connections might be enacted through less privileged spaces, on the street corners!and back alleys where the less privileged! organize illicit exchanges, meetings, political demonstrations, or [underground](#) social gatherings.

By bringing an analytical framework typically employed to understand static locations to these temporary places formed through an assemblage of people and infrastructure, Sheller and Urry demonstrate how banal, everyday movements can profoundly impact human societies. Going beyond a reductive view of social flow as merely a means to an end, mobilities researchers argue that the flow serves as a unique space of exchange. Irregular warfare practitioners can apply these insights by broadening their understanding of where and how resistance movements can grow. Far from popular conceptions of jungle guerilla camps or urban taverns, the temporary assemblies of people through transport can provide an escape from [effective surveillance and monitoring from authorities](#) and allow for a sharing of grievances and establishment of common identities.

Returning to the discussion of how these mobilities affect the daily lives of people and places, other scholars have described the [people as infrastructure](#). This approach pushes analysis beyond the roads, vehicles, and technologies that aid in the movement of people and goods, focusing on those people themselves whose daily actions allow for the function of a city, region, or population. In the context of contentious politics and resistance, other scholars have pointed to [alternative mobilities](#) as a form of challenging a state's prescribed rules for how citizens are to navigate time and space;

examples include the use of [skateboarding](#) or alternative social groups temporarily appropriating public spaces that are typically off-limits. Because of how varied the politics of transportation can be, the examples below demonstrate the value of a mobilities lens for irregular warfare.

Learning from Ireland, Truckers, and Motorcycle Taxis

Transport networks are vital to building robust resistance movements. More than just the routes and vehicles that move goods, networks are also comprised of the people who live and work there. This approach has ramifications for both targeting and for building robust resistance movements. The examples of Northern Ireland during the Troubles, Canadian truckers protesting COVID-19 vaccination requirements, and motorcycle taxi drivers in Uganda demonstrate transporters' utility beyond moving people and goods.

During the Troubles in Northern Ireland, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) relied on numerous sources of support to fund its operations against British forces. One critical stream of financial and political support came from the now famous ["black cabs"](#) of Belfast. In what doubled as a form of nonviolent resistance, Catholics in Belfast created community taxi associations to serve their neighborhoods after city bus services were suspended. The fleet of black cabs from organizations like the [West Belfast Taxi Association](#) often employed former IRA members and supported elements of the IRA's campaign, such as prisoner welfare groups. Certain cab drivers also enjoyed greater mobility across the heavily-divided neighborhoods of Belfast and other cities in Northern Ireland, [earning a "cowboy" status](#) in certain circles. With both Catholic and Protestant militias targeting taxi drivers, those willing to cross unofficial borders between neighborhoods and deliver customers helped the daily lives of civilians while also reporting on sectarian activity to their respective paramilitary organizations.

Beyond the financial aid and information provided by cab drivers during the decades of violence, Belfast's black cabs continue to play a role in the [simmering conflict](#). Today, ["black cab tours"](#) constitute a significant part of the tourism industry in Northern Ireland; the visual and [oral history](#) conveyed to tourists by Catholic or Protestant cab drivers has a [considerable impact](#) on how the story of the Troubles is reproduced and taught to foreign and domestic audiences. Belfast's black cabs show how what started as a grassroots collective action transformed into a robust network of transporters providing economic and political support to an occupied population and resistance movement throughout years of violence. These types of human networks can also come together over more short-term grievances, such as dissatisfaction with strict public health measures.

Such conditions reflect the 2022 ["Freedom Convoy"](#) protests in Canada, highlighting the impacts that collective action by transporters can have on a state. Launched against COVID-19 vaccination mandates, the protests involved not just the movement of people but also hundreds of tractor-trailers in

several key locations. In Ottawa, truckers [positioned their bodies and their vehicles](#) across the capital, shutting down several major avenues and bringing the city almost to a standstill. At other times, truckers created [“rolling blockades”](#) by slowly driving through already high-traffic areas. Outside the city, other protestors made blockades with their trucks at several critical border crossings, disrupting the flow of goods and costing close to [\\$1 billion in losses by some estimates](#). While the history of the protest has primarily been characterized by its appropriation by political fringe groups and [extremists](#), the Freedom Convoy still offers scholars and practitioners a stark case of how the political mobilization of often-unseen transporters can cause significant economic damage. While dramatic instances of collective action like these can garner national or international attention, the potential for influence or contentious politics also exists in everyday movements across urban spaces.

In Uganda, for example, economic activity in Kampala relies on motorcycle taxi operators or [Bodaboda riders](#), as the capital’s population has surged past the capacity of its transportation infrastructure. Riders eventually formed unions, which over time organized collective actions and [protests against municipal regulation](#). Union power led to Uganda’s longtime ruler Yoweri Museveni courting Bodaboda unions for political support, [advocating](#) for their rights and offering guarantees of job security to gain a powerful ally. These highly mobile supporters now serve as a quasi-biker gang for Museveni’s regime. With millions of Ugandans dependent on them to traverse Kampala’s streets, Bodaboda riders can compel support both from average citizens and from [political factions that seek the unions’ alignment](#). As cities like Kampala and larger megacities in Africa and Asia expand and traffic worsens, these informal networks of transport workers will continue to grow in importance. Scholars point to similar struggles in cities like [Bangkok](#) and [Yaoundé, Cameroon](#), as evidence of how critical informal transport worker unions are to urban economic activity and the political viability of local regimes.

Whether behind the wheel of an 18-wheeled tractor trailer or a 2-wheeled motorcycle, these examples of politically mobilized transporters shed light on some of the ideas proposed by mobilities scholars. The organization of these networks for collective action can create paralyzing effects on cities or entire countries through the withholding of movement expected by the state. Alternatively, resistance movements can grow and gain new sources of support through acts of movement prohibited by the state.

Irregular Mobility

Irregular warfare depends on irregular mobility. By studying the nuances of transportation worker communities, irregular warfare scholars will both understand their operating environment better, while also generating new options to resist adversarial powers and compete against the United States’ rivals. Mobilities research offers a new perspective on the everyday movement of people and networks,

and how such movements comprise much more than a daily chore of getting from point A to point B. Expanding education and training opportunities on nonstandard logistics to include these concepts will broaden understandings of how to incorporate transportation networks into irregular warfare campaigns. United States Special Operations Command should therefore consider whether [Training With Industry](#) programs could improve logisticians's understanding of nonstandard logistics.

For current professionals, frameworks such as the [PMESII-PT](#) variables the military uses to understand complex operating environments should revise the idea of infrastructure to include the humans who operate it. This has particular importance when considering the latest *FM 3-0*'s discussion of [contested deployments](#) and how threat actors might target the movement of friendly forces into or through a theater. Deployments of US forces will continue to rely on networks of civilian transporters of various nationalities vulnerable to malign influence. Threat actors might not need to destroy rails or ports to disrupt the movement of US forces; labor strikes or simply work slowdowns at points of debarkation have the potential to frustrate the [deployment](#) of US troops in any theater. With a world grappling with increasing migration, interconnected commodity chains, and rapid urbanization, transportation workers will remain key human terrain.

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The views expressed are those of the authors and do not reflect the official position of the United States Military Academy, Department of the Army, or Department of Defense.

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