

Twelve Essential Irregular Warfare Books to Add to Your Summer Reading List

Description

Spring buds may have only just started to sprout, but with Memorial Day behind us, it's officially summer. As you prepare for some well-deserved R&R, the Irregular Warfare Initiative has you covered with some stellar summer reading recommendations. And what pairs better with relaxation than diving into the complexities of irregular warfare? (Okay, maybe a margarita, too, but who says you can't have both).

We've curated a list of twelve books on irregular warfare sourced from recommendations within the IWI community. From foundational theories of irregular warfare to gripping historical accounts, these books cover it all. We've even thrown in a novel as a palate cleanser from some of the more technical or academic selections. Our goal is to appeal to a broad audience, in line with IWI's mission to bridge the gap between scholars who study irregular warfare and practitioners who implement it on the ground. To that end, all the books listed underscore the case that irregular warfare is a persistent and powerful form of conflict that our adversaries are actively leveraging to undermine US national security interests.

To help you decide where to start, we've organized the list into four categories: Theories of Irregular Warfare, Historical Examples, Modern Manifestations, and Irregular Warfare in Great Power Competition. This way, whether you're lounging on the beach, trekking up a mountain, or stuck in the office, you can find something entertaining and informative.

Theories of Irregular Warfare

[**On Guerilla Warfare**](#), Mao Tse-Tung (Translated and with an introduction by BG Samuel B. Griffith USMC (Ret.))

Recommended by: [Henderson Chandler](#)

Written in 1937, Mao's *On Guerilla Warfare* advocates for an irregular approach to defeating a more powerful enemy. Drawing from Mao's own experience against the Japanese occupation of China, the book outlines principles of successful guerilla campaigns.

Why Read It: I recommend this book because it's a foundational text on guerilla warfare and offers a historical perspective on the ideas that helped shape modern China. The book's principles are still relevant today, influencing China's modern defense strategy and insurgencies in places like Iraq and Afghanistan, with concepts like "People's War" and "Protracted War." Brigadier General Sam Griffith's introduction also provides valuable historical context and reflections on the book's implications for US counterinsurgency strategy.

[Invisible Armies: An Epic History of Guerrilla Warfare from Ancient Times to the Present](#), Max Boot

Recommended by: [Alex Deep](#)

Invisible Armies offers a sweeping view of the history of warfare, tracing military strategy and tactics from Alexander the Great to modern battlefields. It illustrates that irregular warfare, often executed by informally organized partisans or strappy guerillas, represents the most common form of conflict throughout history.

Why Read It: Practitioners will gain a deeper understanding of how their experiences fit into a long tradition of irregular warfare. It is especially useful for those looking to turn those same experiences into professional writing because the book provides a strong theoretical basis for how states and non-state actors use partisan and guerrilla warfare to achieve political ends. This book also demonstrates how our idea of conflict is distorted by the myth of decisive battles and still influences how the Department of Defense prepares for war today.

[The New Rules of War](#), Sean McFate

Recommended by: [Augie Dominguez](#)

The New Rules of War by Sean McFate is a provocative exploration of the evolving nature of warfare in the 21st century. McFate, a seasoned military strategist and former private military contractor, argues that the traditional principles of war are obsolete. Through a series of bold assertions and strategic insights, he outlines the emerging rules that are reshaping global conflicts, emphasizing the rise of unconventional warfare tactics and the shifting power dynamics between state and non-state actors.

Why Read It: McFate's book is essential reading for military professionals, policymakers, and anyone interested in the future of global security. His analysis challenges conventional wisdom and provides a fresh perspective on how to navigate the unpredictable and often chaotic nature of modern

warfare. By understanding these new rules, readers can better anticipate and respond to the challenges posed by hybrid warfare, cyber threats, and other non-traditional forms of conflict.

Historical Examples

[Rise and Kill First](#), Ronen Bergman

Recommended by: [Sam Rosenberg](#)

• *Rise and Kill First* by Ronen Bergman is a detailed exploration of Israel's targeted assassination program from the early 20th century to recent times. The book combines extensive interviews and sensitive documents to reveal the tactics and ethical quandaries behind these operations.

Why Read it: This book offers a nuanced portrayal of Israel's covert operations, blending historical rigor with investigative journalism. It provides eye-opening accounts and never-before-seen details, appealing to those interested in military history, intelligence, and international relations without glorifying the acts it describes.

[The Daughters of Kobani: A Story of Rebellion, Courage, and Justice](#), Gayle Tzemach Lemmon

Recommended by: [Jacob Ware](#)

The Daughters of Kobani tells the story of the all-woman Kurdish militia that fought and defeated the Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria in 2014, earning international support and acclaim for their efforts. As ISIS rose to prominence in the Levant by pushing a brutal agenda against women, these Kurdish heroines fought back, in turn redefining their corner of the world to reflect their egalitarian ideals.

Why Read It: Tzemach Lemmon leverages years of intrepid on-the-ground reporting to offer a personal yet comprehensive account of the women in the Kurdish militia who tenaciously fought on the front lines against the repressive organization seeking their subjugation. Readable and analytical, yet hopeful and optimistic, this book offers an important reminder of the crucial role that openness, diversity, and inclusion can play in national security—not as an added bonus, but as an absolutely essential element of counterterrorism success.

[Brothers at Arms: American Independence and the Men of France and Spain Who Saved It](#), Larrie D. Ferreiro

Recommended by: [Augie Dominguez](#)

In *Brothers at Arms*, Ferreiro provides a comprehensive analysis of the political, economic, and military dynamics of the American Revolution to bolster her argument that support from France and Spain were essential to the colonies's success against the British.

Why Read It: Viewed through a contemporary lens, the American Revolution highlights the [2022 National Defense Strategy](#)'s focus on the strategic advantage that allies and partners provide the United States and the prominence of irregular warfare as the predominant [American Way of War](#) since the country's inception. Overall, *Brothers at Arms* is a thorough and thought-provoking examination of the American Revolution and its international implications, offering useful lessons for the United States and its partners on the use of IW in the current strategic environment.

Modern Manifestations

[***Sandworm: A New Era of Cyberwar and the Hunt for the Kremlin's Most Dangerous Hackers*, Andy Greenberg**](#)

Recommended by: [Alexandra Veyne](#)

Sandworm traces the evolution of Russian cyberwarfare from its genesis through the 2017 NotPetya attacks, considered the worst cyberattack in history with over \$10 billion in damages globally. The book details how Ukraine has repeatedly served as a testing ground for Russian cyberwarfare and explains why such capabilities have the potential to be devastating to NATO and the US.

Why Read It: What sets this book apart is that it was written by a journalist for a non-technical audience. As a result, it makes cyber accessible to nonspecialists. *Sandworm* is especially relevant in light of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War as it highlights the threat that an unchecked Russia poses to the West. As destabilizing and insidious as disinformation campaigns or espionage may be, they do not outweigh the immediate dangers—be they physical, financial, or psychological—of a massive attack on critical infrastructure. If any book ought to keep policymakers up at night, it's *Sandworm*.

[***This Is Not Propaganda: Adventures in the War Against Reality*, Peter Pomerantsev**](#)

Recommended by: [Jacob Ware](#)

This Is Not Propaganda assesses the new age of Russian propaganda, determining how information operations on 21st-century digital communications platforms are changing the disinformation space.

Why Read It: The book is both deeply personal and searingly analytical, providing insights into not just the latest developments in Russian information operations, but how they affect people on the ground. It

offers a readable but informative account that will appeal to a broad audience.

[Small Wars, Big Data](#), Eli Berman, Joseph H. Felter, Jacob N. Shapiro

Recommended by: [Kyle Atwell](#)

Small Wars, Big Data is a pathbreaking work that melds cutting-edge data analysis with on-the-ground insights to redefine our understanding of modern conflict. By meticulously analyzing data from insurgencies and counterinsurgency operations worldwide, the authors uncover patterns and strategies that can improve the effectiveness of military and humanitarian efforts. The book not only provides a detailed account of how data-driven approaches can improve outcomes in irregular warfare but also offers valuable lessons for policymakers, military leaders, and researchers focused on conflict resolution.

Why Read It: This book is for those interested in understanding the role of data in shaping military strategy. The case studies span the globe and underscore the importance of leveraging data for more informed decision-making. Whether you're interested in the implications of these findings for current global conflicts or the broader impact on military and civilian policy, *Small Wars, Big Data* offers a compelling and timely analysis that is both enlightening and actionable.

Irregular Warfare in Great Power Competition

[Cooperating with the Colossus: A social and political history of US Military Bases in World War II Latin America](#), Rebecca Herman

Recommended by: [Matt Kuhlman](#)

Cooperating with the Colossus reconstructs the history of US basing in World War II Latin America and considers how local leaders used basing rights as bargaining chips to advance their nation-building agendas.

Why Read It: This book highlights the impacts of local agency at the tactical and strategic levels. It also underscores the herculean effort that the United States organized across multiple agencies to achieve a national objective; in this sense, it offers a contemporary parallel for understanding China's efforts across several geo-strategic efforts, to include the Belt and Road Initiative.

[Three Dangerous Men: Russia, China, Iran and the Rise of Irregular Warfare](#), Seth G. Jones

Recommended by: [Jacob Ware](#)

Three Dangerous Men uses case studies to assess the irregular warfare strategies developed and employed by Russia, Iran, and China. The book dives deeply into the authors of those strategies, looking at how their own earlier military experiences impacted their views, and arguing that the United States must prepare to similarly compete in the irregular domain.

Why Read It: At a moment of shifting U.S. national security priorities and strategies, *Three Dangerous Men* encourages U.S. policymakers to recenter irregular warfare in their strategic thinking. Ignoring irregular warfare in favor of bombs and battleships, the author argues, will prove detrimental to the US's ability to compete in the new international order.

In part, the book's focus on people and stories makes it approachable; the author's deep dives into adversary strategists allow the reader to clearly trace the emergence of irregular warfare in their thinking.

[The Moon is Down](#), John Steinbeck

Recommended by: [Sam Rosenberg](#)

The Moon is Down by John Steinbeck, published in 1942, is a powerful novel originally crafted as wartime propaganda to inspire resistance movements in Nazi-occupied Europe. The story depicts a small Northern European town occupied by an unnamed army, echoing the German occupation of Norway. Despite being banned, the book was widely distributed by resistance groups in multiple languages and became a symbol of defiance against Nazi rule.

Why Read It: This novel offers insights into how popular resistance movements can take shape under armed occupation. The story is particularly relevant when considering the potential for a Ukrainian insurgency under Russian occupation. Additionally, when viewed through the lens of the post-9/11 wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the book sheds light on how our actions may have inadvertently fueled local opposition. Understanding these dynamics can help us better respect and navigate the will of the people in future conflicts.

Bonus Insight: One of the most compelling aspects of the book for me was the discussions between the villagers and the commander of the occupying army battalion, Colonel Lanser. These dialogues touch on the complexities of human nature and the futility of oppression. For instance, in one powerful exchange, the Mayor tells Colonel Lanser, "You and your government do not understand. In all the world, yours is the only government and people with a record of defeat after defeat for centuries, and every time because you did not understand people." As Lanser begins to grasp the depth of the villagers' resentment, he reflects, "We have taken on a job, haven't we?" To which the

Mayor responds, “Yes, the one impossible job in the world, the one thing that can’t be done.”
Lanser asks, “And that is?” The Mayor answers, “To break man’s spirit permanently.”

Happy Reading!

We hope these recommendations find a place on your summer reading list. We also welcome any recommendations you may have. IWI is always looking to publish book reviews on publications related to irregular warfare; you can submit them [here](#).

Happy reading and “Keep Warfare Irregular!”

Nerea M. Cal is an active duty Army Blackhawk helicopter pilot with overseas assignments in Iraq, Afghanistan, and South Korea. She previously served as an Assistant Professor in the Social Sciences Department at the United States Military Academy and Resident Fellow at the Modern War Institute, teaching courses on international relations theory and conflict negotiation and settlement. She has published work relating to post-conflict reconstruction in Kosovo and the application of international law in cyberspace. She is currently a doctoral student at Yale University studying international relations and comparative politics with a focus on U.S. security cooperation.

Views expressed in this article solely reflect those of the author and do not reflect the official position of the Irregular Warfare Initiative, Princeton University’s Empirical Studies of Conflict Project, the Modern War Institute at West Point, or the United States Government.

Main Image: USAREC Soldier at his local library. (Photo via [DVIDS](#))

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