What are the Defining Characteristics of Insurgency from Prehistory to Ca.1975?

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ARIJ ELSHELMANI, MAR 31 2016

Contrary to popular perception, insurgency is not a contemporary phenomenon but a constant feature of human history. For thousands of years, groups united around political grievances and ideals have emerged to challenge the established ruling order. Political movements have harnessed feelings of exclusion, discrimination and insecurity with the aim of not only capturing the state but in some cases radical social transformation. As the following historical analysis will demonstrate, the nature of every insurgency is reflective of its own unique socio-economic, political and cultural context. Consequently, it is difficult to form a perfect general theory of insurgency applicable throughout time and place. Nonetheless, certain defining characteristics can be discerned whilst recognising their elasticity.

The first is that insurgency represents the struggle of the weak- an act of desperation against a materially superior ruling power. The asymmetric nature of the internal conflict compels the insurgent movement to use all means available to alter the balance of power in its favour. This generally entails resorting to a protracted campaign of guerrilla warfare, some of the earliest examples of which can be found in the Near East during the Bronze Ages. In the first Jewish Revolt (66-73 B.C.), and the Arab Revolt (1916-18) one finds the same pre-historic form of warfare materialise, albeit with a much clearer ideological element.

However, the insurgents' arsenal is not constricted to the use of violence. Insurgency is not a mode of warfare but primarily a political process. While its political dimension is more difficult to discern in prehistoric times, over the centuries, especially during the twentieth, the battle for popular support comes to dominate insurgency. Elements of Mao Zedong's influential model of "Peoples' Revolutionary War" and their application in Vietnam and Algeria are accordingly examined. What becomes evident is the divergent ways in which the population is conceived, mobilised and controlled in each environment.

The final sections seek to portray insurgency as a form of political communication to targeted constituencies. To win over the populace, insurgents' regularly engage in propaganda. The essay will assess its seminal role in the Christian subversion of the Roman Empire and its more renowned part in the Reformation. Terrorism is considered the final defining characteristic of insurgency. It too can be an act of strategic communication to domestic and international audiences and a weapon for popular mobilisation. First systematically utilised by the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century radical anarchists, it was later revived by many insurgent groups including the FLN during the Battle of Algiers and the PLO in the early 1970s. Throughout, the essay attempts to convey an appreciation of insurgency as an organic, evolving process.

The Struggle of the Weak

One common characteristic of all insurgencies is their significant material inferiority to the counterinsurgent, at least in the early stages of the conflict. Faced with an enemy far superior in economic resources, numbers and organization, the insurgents' first objective is self-preservation. It is this aim that dictates how the insurgent wages war. Direct combat in open spaces, as "noble" as it is often portrayed in Western military discourse would doom a newly born insurgency. Any hope for victory rests in gradually bleeding the enemy to death by employing hit and run tactics, which capitalise on members' mobility, illusiveness, intelligence gathering capabilities, knowledge of local

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terrain and endurance. This strategy of protracted guerrilla warfare is usually never a choice but is dictated by the movement's conditions. It is the war of the desperate through time.

Guerrilla warfare itself was practiced by the most primitive societies in their ambushes and raids on other tribes and neighbouring settlements. The objective, however, rarely transcended banditry or revenge.[1] It is not until the formation of history's first states in the late Neolithic and Bronze Ages that one finds some evidence of insurgency.[2] For example, the Akkadian empire established in 2334 B.C., was a highly administrated agrarian society for its time. With his large and centralised army, Sargon of Akkad expanded his empire until it encompassed the territories between the "Upper Sea" and "Lower Sea".[3] Soon after Sargon's decease, the empire began to disintegrate as disparate city-states rebelled against imperial authority.[4] The nomadic tribes of the highlands delivered its final collapse.[5] However, of these nomadic warriors, it was the Gutians from the Zagros Mountains that would make the transition from raiders into rulers of the city-states of Mesopotamia for almost nine decades after the fall of Akkad in 2154 B.C.[6]

The Achaemenid Empire would face similar challenges when it attempted to conquer lands inhabited by the Scythians who refused subjugation.[7] The Persian king Darius (558- 486 B.C.) was perplexed by the Scythians' unwillingness to stay their ground and engage in open battle, favouring instead surprise ambush, and attacks on supplies.[8] Yet, guerrilla warfare was not necessarily a cultural disposition but the most rational strategy given their circumstances. Unlike their enemy that was tied to the territory it governed, the nomadic tribe did not possess cities to defend. This endowed them with the advantage of mobility and the strategic initiative in battle. They decided when and where to launch the offensive. In contrast, Darius could only respond.

With time the political dimension of insurgency becomes more potent. The same guerrilla tactics assisted the Jews of Judaea province in their struggle against the Roman Empire. That is, until internal divisions consumed them. Their first revolt against Roman domination and the excessive taxation and repression it entailed occurred in A.D. 66.[9] The governor of Syria, Cestius Gallus, embarked with his legion to Jerusalem only to be met by small rebel units lightly armed with slingshots and Javelins. [10] The rough terrain favoured the latter. As the legion retreated it was caught in a downhill narrow passage near Beth Horon. The rebels surrounded the Syrian legion killing an estimated 5700 soldiers.[11] In the Second Judean Revolt, also known as the Bar Kokhba revolt (A.D. 132-135), insurgents reemployed guerrilla tactics to initial success. Excavated coins inscribed with "For the Freedom of Jerusalem" and other revolutionary symbols indicate the rebels may have carved independently administrated strongholds within the empire before being crushed.[12]

Like the ancient nomads of Mesopotamia and Persia, the Bedouin of the Arabian Peninsula appeared divided, undisciplined and ill equipped to face the professional Turkish forces in direct battle. Their strength resided in embracing their own tradition of war. Deliberately organised in small numbers they attacked the enemy in its most vulnerable points before rapidly retreating into the desert. The Turks' lines of communication were a critical focus for demolition work and looting. Their forces were rooted 'plants' unable to retaliate, the insurgents more akin to a 'vapour' both absent and omnipresent.[13] The constant pace of Arab raids plagued the garrisons' depleting morale and producing a climate of paranoia. It was in the words of T.E. Lawrence 'a war of detachment'.[14]

It is not the aim to romanticise guerrilla warfare. While one of the few effective means for insurgents, they do not guarantee success. Indeed, the majority of asymmetric conflicts end in the insurgent movements' defeat, even if their rate of victory has been increasing overtime.[15] Insurgents are aware, guerrilla tactics will generally fail to fully destroy the enemy's physical means of resistance. Their real value lies in degrading the enemy's will to fight. When this is achieved the insurgent may afford the transition to a regular force. Guerrilla warfare as a temporary stage was a view held by Mao, Giap and Guevara; all believed conventional armies would achieve the final victory.[16]

Insurgency as a Political Process: "Peoples War"

While the military dimension of insurgency cannot be ignored, it remains a smaller element of a political process. To seize and maintain political power, the insurgent must persuade and mobilize the masses in its favour. The contribution of Mao Zedong was to place the population at the centre of the insurgent campaign.[17] The population

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is the source of nourishment to any struggle, providing shelter, supplies, intelligence and recruits. Thus every activity must be geared to achieving its support. It was this model of "people's war" that would deeply influence the character of the following wars of national liberation.

Effective mobilisation of the masses first demands the insurgent adopt a potent, ideological cause capable of appealing to the greatest number. By promising land reform, the Chinese Communists could win over the peasantry who had for long suffered from rising rents.[18] An essential feature of the subsequent nationalist insurgencies from Indochina to Algeria was their successful appeal to dominant grievances and universal values through calls for economic and social justice, emancipation and self-determination. When attempts to address such demands through the existing political system prove futile insurgencies are organised and men and women become willing to bear arms in their name.[19] In contrast, if the government can and is willing to co-opt the cause, then it is not a revolutionary one.

Beyond these promises, insurgents can only control the population by constantly engaging in political subversion and substitution. The Chinese Red Army was redefined by Mao as a political organization in which military action was superseded by political work, such as: creating a unified consciousness amongst the masses, providing health services and assisting them in their manual labour.[20] In all interactions with the civilian population, Red Army units were to maintain strict discipline, abiding by the rules of behaviour formulated by Mao in his "Three Main Rules of Discipline and Eight Points for Attention."[21] A military doctrine that included such rules as 'do not take a single needle or piece of thread from the masses,' 'speak politely' and 'pay fairly'. [22]

Furthermore, the insurgent seeks to dislocate the population from the government by creating alternative social, political and cultural institutions. Within the urban slums of the Casbah, the Front de Libération Nationale exploited residents' alienation from French imperial rule, and the deficiency of the central government in the provision of security and basic services to establish itself as the new authority. Most importantly, it took responsibility for patrolling the community and dispensing justice by banning the consumption of alcohol, drugs and prostitution. [23] In enforcing the latter, the FLN's form of governance not only out-administered the French but further subverted colonial rule by reviving a sense of Islamic and Arab identity which had been threatened by years of much resented French assimilationist policies.[24] This was an identity that united the populace in their difference from their colonial rulers and therefore empowered resistance. It is the insurgents' strength in forming such political enclaves that can overcome the obvious failures of their military wings.[25]

However, the extent insurgent forces can engage in a "peoples war" is contingent on their practical circumstances. In the second half of the twentieth century insurgencies were increasingly taking place in urban environments.[26] In these spaces, members are restricted in their ability to engage in the direct face-to-face political work presented by Mao. Fearing government detection and infiltration, they adopt clandestine organisational structures that distance them from the masses.[27] To ensure their internal security, urban insurgents are strict in their recruitment process and are continually on the move.[28] Given the proximity of the state's security apparatus, the city can prove stifling. Yet, as the cultural and economic centre it can also create new opportunities. For, in the urban centre the insurgent is at least guaranteed an audience.

One must also be careful when discussing "people's wars" to avoid misrepresenting the population as monolithic. At times of war the population fragments into various segments, with some actively engaging in the insurgency, others expressing dissent, and the majority remaining neutral.[29] According to Thompson, by 1965 the Viet Cong and their active supporters constituted no more than one per cent of the total population of South Vietnam.[30] This precarious support base may explain why political subversion frequently took a violent form. To punish dissent and deter further defection, the Viet Cong engaged in repressive campaigns against "counterrevolutionary elements" amongst the civilian population.[31] Those affiliated with the Nationalist Party of Greater Viet Nam, the Vietnamese Nationalist Party, or others deemed "reactionary", were faced with assassination or public execution.[32] Given its brutal nature, the violence was easy to dismiss as senseless. However, this form of targeted violence can prove to be as strategic as the provision of rewards for many insurgencies. During the middle stage of the war when the level of violence escalates and resources become scare, insurgents are more restricted in their capacity to provide incentives for support, and survival emerges as the most powerful motivation amongst the populace.[33] Previously neutral civilians

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will begin to join whichever side can guarantee their physical security and appears more credible in the delivery of sanctions.[34] In other words, it is still a battle for popular support, but one in which circumstances force insurgents to reconfigure their strategy from persuasion to coercion.

The targeting of Moderates and rival organisations is not unique to the Algerian case but is a common stage in most insurgencies.[35] For example, after seven and half years of war the FLN's internal purges alone had claimed the life of an estimated 12,000 members, and many more Muslim civilians.[36] Ultimately, it derives from an unwillingness to compete for recruits and resources.

Insurgency as a Process of Communication: the Role of Propaganda

Since ancient times, propaganda has proved to be a seminal weapon in the battle for hearts and minds. Successful insurgents use communication mediums to construct and disseminate information in a way that manages the relevant audiences' opinion and behaviour in their favour. It can simultaneously inform, inspire and manipulate the populace as well as delegitimize and demoralize the enemy. Propaganda is also an instrument that tends to favour the insurgent over the ruling power. The government cannot afford to degrade its credibility in the areas it governs and so avoids crafting overtly misleading messages in favour of media censorship, which is a draining process in terms of time and effort.[37] In contrast, the insurgent group free from such responsibility enjoys greater creative freedom when formulating its revolutionary propagandistic messages.[38]

Propaganda tends to carry many negative connotations, but it can be a tool for progressive political and social change. The rise of Christianity, like all other great religions, was characterised by the skilful utilisation of propagandistic techniques. The "sign of the fish", a symbol consisting of two intersecting arcs was painted on walls, carved into bark, and drawn in the sand by the early followers of Christianity.[39] Derived from the Greek acronym Ichthys, which translates to " Jesus Christ, God's Son, Saviour" the symbol of the fish was used to communicate their presence, growing numbers, and persistence against the prosecution of the Roman Empire.[40] The conscious decision to speak in parables when addressing the crowds allowed Jesus to paint vivid and memorable illustrations that, while simple and comprehendible, carried powerful spiritual and moral meaning, which resonated widely amongst the poor, weak and illiterate, and ultimately proved capable of subverting the established order.[41]

Just as propaganda can be discerned in Christianity's rise, it is evident in its later fragmentation. It was the invention of the movable printing press in the 15th century that allowed Martin Luther's works such as his Nighty-Five Theses, The Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation and his German translation of the Bible amongst others, to have such powerful effect on early modern European society. By radically reducing the costs of communication, the printing press facilitated the efficient and rapid circulation of large quantities of his pamphlets and books and, consequently, the erosion of the state and Catholic Church's monopoly on the ownership and distribution of information.[42] By writing in the vernacular and in a humorous manner, sometimes accompanied by visual illustrations, which ridiculed or demonised the papacy, Luther had tailored his propagandistic materials to engage a wider European audience beyond the highly educated elite.[43] Theatre, sermons, and poetry were also targeted at the illiterate audiences.[44] The effect was revolutionary, for the first time, the public sphere was involved in a critical debate over corruption in the Catholic Church, and its role in the relationship between the believer and his or her God; what amounted to the democratisation of religion.

Terrorism as Communication

Terrorism is an extreme and highly effective form of communication with the power to influence the attitudes and behaviour of various audiences. Moreover, it does not require sophisticated weaponry or many recruits, nor must it produce large material and human destruction to have a powerful political and psychological effect. Hence, it is not surprising that terrorism has proved to be an essential feature of almost every modern insurgent campaign.

The origins of the systematic utilisation of terroristic acts as a form of communication can be traced to the concept of "propaganda by the deed" first developed by Carlos Pisacane, and advocated by the likes of Malatesta, Cafiero and other anarchists of late nineteenth century Europe.[45] Alone, conventional mediums of propaganda, mainly the

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written word and direct contact, were perceived as insufficient to fully deliver the anarchist cause to the masses and stimulate them into social revolution.[46] In contrast, the act of violence, whether it was the assassination of heads of state and prominent political and business figures, or the bombing of cafes, opera houses, theatres and other places where the "bourgeoisie" congregated, could provoke the state into indiscriminate retaliation. In theory, the anarchist could then capture the attention of the press and the sympathy of the working classes, mobilising the latter against the instrument of their oppression and exploitation.[47]

Often unable to identify the actual perpetrators the state fulfilled their expectations by responding with a heavy hand and arresting anyone affiliated with the anarchist movement, regardless of their stance on violence.[48] The Spanish government's reaction to the Corpus Christi bombing was particularly cruel. Hundreds of suspected anarchist sympathisers were incarcerated in Montjuich fortress where they were victims of torture.[49] Yet, propaganda by the deed failed. In most cases, the authorities introduced draconian legislation which curbed freedom of speech, assembly and association.[50] Moreover, political and economic elites invested in the existing state of affairs monopolised the channels of mass communication, thereby controlling the narrative and silencing the anarchists' calls for popular insurrection.[51]

At the Soummam Conference in September 1956 the FLN first formally advocated the use of terrorism as a mode of struggle.[52] The FLN's heavy reliance on a campaign of assassinations and bombings during the Battle of Algiers is, at the most fundamental level, a reflection of its military weakness.[53] Yet, like the anarchist attacks they provoked the state into launching a total war against the organisation. A war that ultimately involved repressive measures against civilians. Attacks on the pieds-noires were usually followed with brutal reprisals against the indigenous population, in which security forces either actively participated in, or stood by in passivity.[54] With the aim of isolating the insurgents from the population, the French embarked on a disastrous policy of resettlement in the rural areas that only bore poverty, starvation and discontent.[55] During the course of the Battle of Algiers it is estimated thirty to forty per cent of the male population of the Casbah were victim to illegal arrest and interrogation by the 10th Para Division, which was notorious for its systematic use of torture.[56] Though the French's illiberal response appeared effective in the short-term, extracting sufficient intelligence to break the FLN network and apprehend some of its top leadership, its methods served to erode what little legitimacy it could claim amongst Algiers' Muslims. In pure military terms the French paras had won the Battle of Algiers but at the expense of radicalizing the population and, thus, loosing any hope for a negotiated peace settlement.

The FLN leadership's ingenuity was to also recognise that their struggle for independence was not confined to Algeria's borders. The terror they employed and the reprisals they induced at home, served to internationalize the conflict on an unprecedented level. As the media reported the scale of FLN attacks and their casualties, audiences in metropolitan France that were once either ambivalent, undecided, or even adamantly in favour of a French Algeria, began to increasingly question their presence. Journalistic reports and revelations of the army's atrocities served to distance the weary public from the settlers and the military and fuelled anti-war protest.[57] British and North American audiences also became aware of the conflict and, to the detriment of the French, sympathetic to the Algerian struggle for independence.[58] The violent acts transmitted various messages to these multiple constituencies but, mainly, that the war would be protracted and would involve the degradation of French values as well as economic resources. The insurgents relied on the domestic French and international audiences to then pressure decision makers into an eventual withdrawal from Algeria. The French still maintained the capabilities to fight but they had lost the political will.

Similarly, Palestinian insurgents understood the futility of an asymmetric war against Israel, and that after the outcome of the Six Day War they could no longer rely on their Arab neighbours to fulfil their aspirations. If it were to make any headway, the Palestinian resistance would need to open a new battlefront and mobilise its own community. The international terror campaign by the constituent factions of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation between 1968 and 1973 followed this logic. The series of high profile attacks on civilians, shocked audiences around the globe and were naturally followed by Western condemnation. However, attention quickly moved to the insurgents' motivations: the realities of Israeli occupation, the conditions of Palestinian refugees and their right to return, which had been for long ignored, were now in discussion. On the thirteenth of November 1974, Yasser Arafat was invited to address the United Nations General Assembly on the Palestinian question. He did so to a standing ovation.

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Like the Anarchists and the FLN, the PLO used the violent act to generate a media spectacle, to shock, educate, persuade and mobilise audiences. Only, the communication tools of their time allowed them to do so to greater effect. The 1972 Munich hostage crisis alone was broadcast to an estimated 900 million television viewers around the world.[59] Indeed the insurgents targeted the Olympic event for the amount of media coverage it attracted, but they may have also considered the international theatre's symbolic power. The Olympics was a celebration of statehood as well as sport, a status their nation was excluded from. In this age of accelerated globalisation, of rapid advancement in media and transportation technologies, terror became a potent act of strategic communication, and consequently a valuable insurrectionary weapon.

The images of the attacks were cable of transmitting messages to audiences in Israel, the Arab World and the West, but most importantly to the global Palestinian diaspora. The violent deeds carried specific meanings of statelessness, desperation and prosecution, which resonated with the community's shared historical memories, narratives and grievances, and arousing a unified Palestinian consciousness. [60] Its effect was to stimulate many into action. Thousands of Palestinians responded to Munich by volunteering to join the PLO's militant ranks.[61] Equally important are the many more exposed to the violent act that would subscribe to the PLO's revolutionary doctrine and ideals, embracing it as the legitimate representative of their people.

Conclusion

Every insurgency is reflective of its own unique context, however a number of defining features can be discerned. Firstly, insurgency is the struggle of the weak against a materially superior ruling power. The ultimate act of desperation only organised after attempts at peaceful social change are confronted by resistant elites invested in the status quo. To survive insurgents often engage in guerrilla warfare a particular mode of resistance that can be traced to prehistoric times. The nomadic insurgencies in ancient Mesopotamia illustrate the antiquity of guerrilla tactics. Nonetheless, like most prehistoric insurgencies, they remained primitive in nature, motivated by plunder or self-defence. As history progressed so did the political dimension of insurgency. In the ancient Jewish and inter-war Arab revolts one finds continuity in tactics accompanied by a development of clear ideological goals. By the first half of the twentieth century the seminal roles of political subversion and substitution in modern insurgents' operations suggested a principally political contest for the population in which military strategy and tactics merely played a complementary role.

To detach the population from the state, the insurgent employs psychological, as well as military and political means. The use of propaganda, devoid of its negative connotations, can be discerned in the beginnings of one of the world's most influential Abrahamic religions, as well as playing a central part in its fragmentation. The late nineteenth century Anarchist concept of propaganda by the deed exemplifies the potential power of the violent act to mobilise the masses in support of the revolutionary struggle. Its revival by the FLN and PLO also reflect its evolving nature. The two organisations used acts of terror as a strategy of provocation, but they also adapted to the developments of their time exploiting innovations in communication technologies to internationalise their struggles, and in the case of the PLO to effectively mobilise the globally dispersed audiences of the Palestinian diaspora. Thus the essay has presented four interrelated characteristics: the use of "irregular" warfare, the primacy of political mobilisation, and the connected reliance on propaganda and terrorism as forms of political communication. All derive from the asymmetry between the insurgents' grand political aims and limited material capabilities.

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Footnotes

[1] Keeley (1996), pp.44-46. & p.108

[2] Ibid. p. 38.

[3] Heinz (2007), p. 67-68 &72

[4] Hamblin (2006), p.102

[5] Boot (2013), p.14

[6] Hamblin (2006), p. 103.

[7] Asprey (1994), pp.3-5.

[8] Ibid., p.5.

[9] Horsley (1981)

[10] Ibid.,p. 430.

[11] Jackson (1997), p.130.

[12] Eck (1999), p. 76.

[13] Lawrence (1920), p.8.

[14] Ibid., p. 10.

[15] Arreguín -Toft (2001), p. 96; Van-Creveld (2002), p.204 & Byman (2007), p.1

[16] Laqueur (1977a), p. 240 & Taber (1969), p.60 & p. 29

[17] Mao's works were not entirely innovative in the guerrilla tactics they described, much was borrowed from Sun Tzu's treatise The Art of War and indeed can be discerned in all guerrilla wars throughout time. Mao's contribution was to powerfully shift the emphasis from military strategy and tactics to politics.

[18] Zarrow (2005), p.73.

[19] Mackinlay (2009), p.5.

[20] Mao Tse-Tung (1966), p. 134.

[21] Mao Tse-Tong (1963), p. 341.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Crenshaw (1995), p. 484.

[24] Heggoy (1973).

[25] Millen (2008), p.28

[26] Graham (2010), p. 1.

[27] Beckett (2001), p.154.

[28] Marighella (2002), p. 34-36.

[29] Galula (1964), p.12; Merari (2007), p. 235.

[30] Thompson cited in Hamilton (1998), p.21.

[31] Merari (2007), p.216.

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[32] Ibid.

[33] Galula (1964)

[34] See Kalyvas (1999)

[35] Byman (2007), p. 8.

[36] Horne (1987), pp. 538.

[37] Marighella (2002), p. 31.

[38] Galula (1964), p.9.

[39] Jowett and O'Donnell (2006), p.61.

[40] Ibid., p.61.

[41] Herzog (1994).

[42] Briggs and Burke (2009) & Dunn (1972).

[43] Jowett and O'Donnell (2006), p. 67. See also Scribner (1987), pp. 279-282 for illustrations produced during the Reformation depicting the papacy as the "Antichrist"

[44] Ibid. 71.

[45] Laqueur (1977b), p. 49

[46] Fleming (2008), p.4.

[47] Bolt (2012).

[48] Jenson (2013a)

[49] Jenson (2013b), p.148.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Bolt (2012), pp. 31-32.

[52] Horne (1987), p.184.

[53] Moran (2008),p.2.

[54] Horne (1987), p. 208-209.

[55] Ibid., p. 220-221.

[56] Moran (2008), p.4; Horne (1987), pp.198-199

[57] Horne (1987), p. 232-234.

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[58] Beckett (2001), p. 165.

[59] Hoffman (2006), p. 69.

[60] Bolt (2012), p.19.

[61] Hoffman (2006), p. 70.

Written by: Arij Elshelmani
Written at: King's College London
Written for: Dr. Neville Bolt
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