

An analysis of the Jewish-Roman War (66-73 AD) using contemporary insurgency theory

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Abstract: The present article seeks to identify variables that explain the success or failure of insurgent groups by using contemporary theories of insurgency. It then applies those variables to interpret tentatively an insurgency from classical antiquity: the Jewish-Roman War of 66-73 A.D. Although the results of one single empirical case cannot be generalised, they nonetheless constitute a preliminary element for the construction of a broader theoretical framework concerning the existence of elements of continuity in the phenomenon of insurgency.

Keywords: Insurgency, Counter-insurgency, Rebellion, Jewish–Roman War

Introduction

Can the lessons drawn from a war fought in classical antiquity be of relevance for the analysis of present-day reality? Numerous authors have responded to this question in the affirmative.¹ Indeed, strategic studies benefit from the abundant empirical material afforded by military history for contrasting and honing their theories. For its part, military history enjoys a symbiotic relationship with strategic studies, harnessing the latter's concepts and theoretical frameworks to explain past events.

The present article can be viewed within the context of this connection between strategic studies and military history. It seeks to identify elements of continuity in contemporary insurgency theory which might prove valid to understand a case study from classical antiquity. It takes particular care to steer clear of anachronism by avoiding inappropriate comparisons (e.g. equating Jewish religious radicals of the Roman era with 21st-century jihadists). That is not to say, however, that modern-day concepts cannot be used to describe past realities. The fact that neither the Romans nor the Jews of the first century A.D. used words that translate literally as 'insurgency' or 'terrorism' does not mean that they cannot be applied rigorously to events from the period which might be conceptualised in such terms.

The article is structured as follows. It commences with a brief outline of the case study, describing the broad features of the Jewish-Roman War fought between 66 and 73 A.D. It then proceeds to the central aspect of the work, namely, the application to the conflict of eight variables considered key to the success or failure of insurgencies. The eight variables have been drawn from a review of present-day general literature on insurgency (as opposed to the abundant literature on insurgencies in specific countries, which would be beyond the scope of the article). The variables are relevant for the study of contemporary insurgency and are assumed, tentatively, to be valid from a timeless perspective also. This validity will be tested by means of a detailed analysis of this episode from Antiquity.

Two criteria governed the choice of this case study among other possible ones from the Roman period: the relevance of the conflict and the availability of information for a comprehensive analysis. Relevance because ancient Judea was one of the territories of the Roman Empire most likely to witness political-religious uprisings, among other reasons because of the singularity of Jewish identity on the map of religious beliefs of the period. The 66-73 war was not the last war, nor in itself was it the cause of the depopulation of Jews, which was to worsen in subsequent decades (particularly in the aftermath of the Bar Kokhba revolt of 132-135 A.D.). However, it did see the destruction of the Second Temple and the effective demise of Jerusalem as the capital of Judaism, both with consequences still felt today. The second reason for the choice of case study is the ample information available on the circumstances and specifics of the war, thanks to the works of Flavius Josephus and, to a much lesser degree, authors such as Tacitus and Suetonius. Although Flavius Josephus is questionable as a wholly reliable source, there is no disputing that the wealth of information he offers is vastly greater than that available on other insurgencies of Antiquity.²

The Jewish-Roman war of 66-73 A.D.

The socio-political situation in Judea in the decades leading up to the conflict and the actual unfolding of the war have already been explored in detail in various works.³ This section will therefore limit itself to offering a broad picture before turning to a more detailed analysis of the war as an example of insurgency. The war was triggered by a series of incidents in the spring of 66 A.D. between Jews and Gentiles in Caesarea Maritima, and between the Roman governor Gessius Florus and the population of Jerusalem. In themselves, these events were neither particularly serious or new. There had been a long tradition of altercations between the mixed population in Judea and Galilee, as well as precedents of misrule by the Roman procurators. However, as with other uprisings down the ages, a series of fortuitous events sufficed to fan the structural causes of the revolt. A few weeks before the outbreak, the rebels had annihilated the Roman garrisons in the strongholds of Jerusalem (Torre Antonia and the fortified towers of the palace of Herod the Great) and had seized control of much of Judea and Galilee. In parallel, massacres had been perpetrated by both Jews and Gentiles in various mixed-population cities.

The governor of Syria, Cestius Gallus, put together a military force to stifle the revolt. He enjoyed initial success in Galilee and the coast of Judea but failed in his bid to take Jerusalem. During his withdrawal, he was harried by the rebels and the situation became extremely serious in Beth-Horon, where he sustained thousands of fatalities and lost weapons and baggage. Following the Jewish victory, moderates in Jerusalem were forced to support the revolt in order to maintain control. During the winter of 66-67, the rebellion spread throughout the territory, except Samaria where it was more muted. Due to its geographical location, Samaria became wedged between the two core rebel areas: Galilee to the north and Judea/Idumea to the south.

In a bid to unite and centralise the insurgency, the leaders of Jerusalem appointed military commanders for the other rebel territories: Judea, Galilee, part of Perea and Idumea. However, the commanders were not given sufficient resources and their control over their respective jurisdictions was at best precarious. Moreover, the only coordinated attempt to expand the borders of the revolt ended in disaster when three columns Idumea were defeated in open ground by the Roman garrison from Ascalon (in the Gaza strip) in early 67 A.D.⁴

Emperor Nero appointed Vespasian as military commander of the army tasked with putting down the revolt. Vespasian established his forward base in Ptolemais (now Akko) in May 67 with a force of three legions (V Macedonica, X Fretensis and XV Apollinaris, the latter brought in from Alexandria), together with 23 cohorts and 6 *alae* of cavalry. They were supported by soldiers provided by vassal kings of the Roman Empire. The figures offered by Josephus, ranging from 33,500 to 46,000 Roman soldiers and auxiliaries and a further 15,000 supplied by the vassal kings, are not entirely reliable. However, there is no denying that it was a sizeable force which reflected Rome's decision to act with overwhelming superiority.

The campaign began in Galilee. The rebels there were divided into various fortified sites under the command of Flavius Josephus. They lacked a proper campaign army and several major cities in the region –such as Sepphoris and Tiberias– remained loyal to Rome. Vespasian’s army took location after location and, of the nineteen towns under the control of Josephus, only five sites (Jotapata, Jafa, Tarichaea, Gamala and Mount Tabor) put up resistance and were brutally destroyed as an example.⁵

The systematic Roman campaign the following year (68 A.D.) brought much of Judea, Samaria, Idumea and Perea under control, achieving a strategic envelopment of the Jerusalem area. The Roman advance was aided by the intimidatory effect of the overwhelming success enjoyed in Galilee a year earlier. The city of Gadara, capital of Perea, negotiated separately from the rebels and surrendered to Vespasian without fighting.⁶ The Roman legions established their headquarters in Emmaus and Jericho. Only Jerusalem and its neighbouring towns, together with the fortresses of Herodium, Machaerus and Masada, remained in rebel hands.⁷

However, Rome’s attention became distracted by the disputes over the imperial throne. Nero was ousted by the Senate and died in June 68. He was succeeded by Galba who was in turn murdered by Otho, only for the latter to then commit suicide months later after his defeat by Vitellius. Meanwhile, Vespasian joined the fray supported by the eastern legions and those of Ilyria, Pannonia and Moesia. Vitellius was defeated and Vespasian became emperor in July 69, his son Titus assuming control of operations in Judea in search of a victory that would legitimise the new dynasty (Flavian).⁸

The Jerusalem insurgents failed to capitalise on the hiatus of 69. Worse, they squandered their resources on a war between factions which ultimately split the city into two major camps, headed, respectively, by Zealot leader John of Gischala in and around the Temple and by Simon Bar Giora, who controlled the upper city and part of the lower city. Both were warlords with thousands of followers each. The former notables of the city gradually lost control of the revolt and were massacred in purges carried out by the most radical sectors of the uprising.⁹

In the spring of 70 A.D. Titus laid siege to Jerusalem with a large force comprising four legions, backed by detachments –*vexillationes*– from a further two and troops supplied by vassal kings. In all, between thirty and forty thousand soldiers.¹⁰ The battle for Jerusalem lasted four months and saw fierce and relentless fighting. The Romans systematically took various sectors of the city until resistance crumbled in the days that followed the capture and destruction of the Temple in August of that year. Most of the city was razed and the Legio X Fretensis encamped as a permanent garrison.¹¹

The following year, it was the turn of the fortresses at Herodium and Machaerus. After the fall of the latter, a force of three thousand Jews –including some survivors from Jerusalem and Machaerus– was massacred in the Forest of Jarden. Finally, procurator Flavius Silva laid siege to the fortress of Masada near the Dead Sea between the winter of 72 and spring of 73, eventually taking it with a spectacular feat of military engineering, the remains of which can still be seen today.¹² On entering Masada, the Roman soldiers found the bodies of the rebel defenders, who had committed suicide the previous night.¹³

The Jewish revolt viewed from the perspective of contemporary insurgency theory: keys for interpreting the conflict

The Judea of 66 A.D. witnessed a series of preconditions which were shared with other parts of the Roman Empire: foreign domination, serious social inequalities, high taxes, excessive rapacity by some governors, etc. Hence, the Jewish revolt was not the first or the only one of its kind in the first century A.D. Earlier, Rome had had to contend with very dangerous uprisings in Cantabria, German territories east of the Rhine, Illyria, Thrace, Gaul, Britannia and North Africa.¹⁴ However, the aforementioned preconditions alone are insufficient to account for the outbreak, consolidation and evolution of insurgency since they may be similar to those found in other countries, or at other times in the same country, where no such armed conflict occurs.¹⁵

For this reason, the variables selected in this article are not the structural preconditions in themselves nor the direct causes of the insurgency (where the dependent variable would be the outbreak or not of the insurgency). Attention here will focus solely on the causal factors linked to the success/failure of insurgency. A review of contemporary general literature on insurgency has helped identify the following variables, on the assumption that they are, tentatively at least, valid in a case study drawn from Antiquity: 1) the articulation of an attractive cause; 2) the mobilisation and organisation of resources; 3) the cohesion and leadership of the insurgency; 4) the existence of an organisational and operational sanctuary; 5) a sound military strategy; 6) the securing of external support; 7) the capability of the counterinsurgency opponent; 8) the symmetry/asymmetry of the interests of insurgents and counterinsurgents.¹⁶ Clearly, it is possible, using the same literature, to break these variables down into others or even add further ones. However, in constructing any theory it is advisable to select a small number of variables, even at the risk of the theory losing parsimony. In addition, our aim is to identify only those whose relevance is likely to extend across different time periods.

Each of the aforementioned variables will now be applied to the case study.

Articulation of an attractive political cause

A cause that appeals to common grievances, speaks to a relevant political identity and offers an attractive political project is a key factor in terms of providing a narrative to an insurgency movement.¹⁷ Moreover, it is precisely the political cause that differentiates insurgency from simple violent crime, an ever-present phenomenon the length and breadth of the Roman Empire.¹⁸

This articulation of an insurgent cause was very much a feature in the Jewish revolt and was facilitated by the following factors:

- a) Political-religious factors. The Jews v. non-Jews identity cleavage had important political potential for questioning both the legitimacy of the Roman government to rule over Judea and the collaboration of the Jewish authorities with the established power. There were a number of precedents in this regard during the decades prior to the rebellion. The death of Herod the Great in 4 B.C. was followed by serious uprisings in Judea, Perea and Galilee. The uprising in Galilee was led by Judas, whose father Hezekiah, leader of a band of thieves/rebels, had been killed by Herod some years before. Those in Perea and Judea were led, respectively, by Simon, the so-called royal slave, and a shepherd called Athrongeus.¹⁹ Both were self-proclaimed messiahs, which gave them political and religious legitimacy. The rebellion was put down by the governor of Syria, Quinctilius Varus (responsible for the famous Teutoburg Forest disaster a few years later), who reconquered Jerusalem with two legions and crucified almost two thousand rebels.²⁰ Sometime later, in 6 A.D., a fresh uprising broke out in Judea coinciding with the removal of Archelaus, son of Herod the Great, and his replacement by a Roman governor with the rank of praetor. Judas the Galilean and a radical Pharisee called Zadok headed this new revolt. According to Josephus, both were the founders of the 'fourth sect', whose members recognised only God's political sovereignty over the people of Israel.²¹ Decades later, further revolts took place under Jacob and Simon (sons of the aforementioned Judas, son of Hezekiah), who were crucified by governor Tiberius Alexander in 45 A.D. Josephus also mentions 'charlatans' who, following the parenthesis of the government of Herod Agrippa I between 41-44 and the subsequent restoration of Roman control, mobilised thousands of followers under the banner of new political-religious causes.²² One of the charlatans was Theudas, who was killed by governor Cuspius Fadus, while another (several years later) was an Egyptian whose movement was thwarted by Felix, governor of the province between 52 and 60 A.D.²³ Josephus attributes greater prominence to the *sicarii* who, from 50 A.D. onwards, began to murder leading figures who collaborated with the Roman authorities, their first victim being the high priest Jonathan, a prime exponent of the sacerdotal aristocracy allied to the Romans.²⁴ As these were selective and highly symbolic assassinations inspired by a political

cause, they can be classified as terrorist without the risk of anachronism.²⁵ Indeed, in contemporary studies on terrorism the *sicarii* are held up as a recurring example of terrorism in Antiquity.²⁶ Thus, even if no clearly organised movement of political-religious protest existed, it is possible to identify a broad narrative of resistance to the Roman power in Judea which included political-religious content. This narrative was accepted and adopted in different ways by various groups in the decades leading up to the rebellion of 66 A.D. The fact that Josephus highlights Eleazar ben Simon's refusal to offer sacrifices in the Temple of Jerusalem on behalf of Caesar—a prerogative granted to the Jews to preserve monotheism, avoiding the offer of sacrifices to the divinity of Caesar—as one of the *casus belli* of the revolt is a further example of the political-religious narrative that articulated the insurgency ideologically.²⁷

- b) Economic and social factors. Like other societies of the day, Jewish society suffered major social inequalities.²⁸ The system of government by Rome was maintained by co-opting local elites through a network of personal relations.²⁹ In the case of the Jewish insurgency, this made it possible to combine the identity cleavage (rejection of the Gentile authority and of those who collaborated with it) and the socio-economic cleavage (revolt against social inequalities). This overlapping narrative was evident at the beginning of the rebellion in Jerusalem when, according to Josephus, followers of the priest Eleazar ben Ananias burnt archives where loan bonds were deposited to encourage the poor to join the revolt against Jewish notables close to Rome.³⁰

Mobilisation of resources

Insurgency requires abundant human and material resources to have any expectation of success against counterinsurgency forces and to defend the territory under its control.³¹ The revolt of 66 A.D. was consolidated by the mobilisation of thousands of individuals from diverse backgrounds. It was a transversal rebellion. It was led initially in Jerusalem by the followers of the priest Eleazar ben Simon, who were joined almost immediately by those of the *sicarii* leader Menahen, a descendant of Judas son of Judas the Galilean (one of the leaders of the uprisings of 6 A.D.). The rebellion also attracted what Josephus called 'bandits' (*lestai* in Greek) who were driven not just by the desire for money but, in many cases also, the anti-Roman cause.³² Others who joined the rebellion included the inhabitants of Idumea, who had a long military tradition but were viewed with suspicion by the Jews due to their relatively recent conversion to Judaism, which was forced on them by the conquests of John Hyrcanus at the end of the 2nd century B.C.³³

Following the defeat of Cestius Gallus and the subsequent consolidation of the revolt, the Jewish authorities were faced with the choice of exile or joining the rebellion in order to control and moderate it. These authorities included the Sadducees and Pharisee notables (among them Josephus).³⁴

Josephus notes in the preface to his work that the rebel leaders were confident that Jewish communities beyond the Euphrates would join the revolt and, in fact, they did secure some support from leading figures in the kingdom of Adiabene, whose governors had converted to Judaism.³⁵ However, the main objective were the Jews living in Greek cities close to Judea. The fact that numerous towns in Galilee and Decapolis were of mixed population contributed indirectly to the mobilisation given that a spate of reprisals was triggered in various locations, with massacres of Jews and Gentiles alike.³⁶ The massacres commenced in Cesarea Maritima against the Jewish population (Josephus speaks of 20,000 dead), sparking a response against Gentile populations in Decapolis and Galilee, which in turn triggered fresh massacres of Jews in Ascalon, Tiro and Ptolemais.³⁷

In short, by the spring of 67 A.D. –the start of the campaign by Vespasian– the Jewish insurgents had tens of thousands of fighters. Given the tendency of ancient sources to inflate figures and the lack of cohesion of the Jewish rebellion, the exact number is impossible to establish. Regarding the campaign in Galilee, Josephus speaks of 100,000 Jewish combatants, a highly exaggerated figure, but it would be reasonable to assume that

there were at least a few thousand. Three years later, a force of several thousand defended Jerusalem. Beyond the question of the accuracy of the figures, the fact remains that the successful Jewish mobilisation forced Rome to deploy a sizeable army: three full legions and thousands of soldiers supplied by vassal kings in the Galilee campaign; four legions supported by thousands of allied forces (together making up a total of 30,000-40,000) in the siege of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.³⁸

In terms of weapons, the insurgents had captured many from the soldiers of Cestius Gallus, including the entire artillery of the XII Legion which was later used in the defence of Jerusalem.³⁹ Josephus refers also to an arsenal in the fortress of Masada, which the *sicarii* shared with the so-called 'bandits'.⁴⁰ They also had missiles and close-quarter combat weapons, probably made in the months leading up to the Roman offensive, together with other improvised materials to defend the walls of the various towns.⁴¹

Insurgency leadership and cohesion

Effective leadership capable of uniting and organising the diverse rebel factions and persuading followers to bear the high costs of war is essential to the success of insurgency.⁴² If the two previous factors –an attractive cause and the mobilisation of resources– helped the outbreak and consolidation of the Jewish revolt, this third factor was one of the main reasons for its failure. The lack of a unified leadership and, in particular, the deadly internal fighting between the different rebel factions played a significant part in the Roman victory.⁴³

Based on the account provided by Josephus, who is once again the ancient source offering the greatest detail on the make-up of the insurgency, the following main factions can be distinguished:

- a) Belligerent notables. The most important of these was the above-mentioned Eleazar ben Ananias, who was in charge of worship at the Temple and son of the high priest, one of the prime instigators of the Jerusalem revolt. Later, in mid-68, Josephus describes the release by the Idumeans of hundreds of notables from incarceration by the Zealots. These notables subsequently joined the band led by Simon bar Giora. Josephus also refers to his own friends and family –from the same social class– who remained in the city until the end of the siege, further evidencing the commitment of numerous notables to the rebel cause.
- b) Moderate notables, who attempted to take control of the revolt to seek a negotiated surrender. This faction was led by the high priest Ananias (not the father of Eleazar who was murdered by the *sicarius* Menahem at the beginning of the revolt). The faction of notables maintained channels of communication with King Agrippa II and, through him, to the Romans but their influence over the rebellion declined significantly after the succession of setbacks in Galilee and Perea. The moderate notables were eventually decimated by three waves of purges carried out by the more radical sectors in the city of Jerusalem. One of the victims was the high priest Ananias himself. The more fortunate escaped with their lives by giving themselves up to the Romans during the initial phases of the siege of Jerusalem, encouraged by Titus who encouraged desertions.⁴⁴
- c) *Sicarii*. For all the importance accorded to them by Josephus, their numbers and influence over the revolt was relatively small. They played a prominent role at the beginning when Menahem and his followers entered Jerusalem once the uprisings had begun and killed the former high priest Ananias (father of Eleazar) and proclaimed himself king. However, the faction led by Eleazar soon split from them, kidnapped Menahem and tortured him to death.⁴⁵ During these initial moments of confusion, a group of *sicarii* used the element of surprise to seize control of the garrison at Masada on the Dead Sea. However, the group stayed out of the revolt during the war and limited its actions to pillaging neighbouring Jewish towns, the most important being Ein Gedi, where according to Josephus seven hundred settlers were killed.⁴⁶ Their importance was thus largely symbolic in that they represented the last bastion of the rebellion, which came to a tragic end with their collective suicide.

- d) Zealots. Josephus refers to them for the first time when he speaks of the events of the summer of 67 A.D. in Jerusalem. This group was driven by egalitarian principles and a defined political project: they chose a new high priest by lots, not for reasons of dynasty, as had been the case since Hasmonean times. They established a sanhedrin (tribunal of rabbis) which tried and sentenced to death some of Jerusalem's notables, and sought to attract young nobles as future administrators to govern and administer the newly independent Judea. Despite their egalitarian approach, however, they fell foul to personal ambitions. Their first leader, Eleazar ben Simon, was eventually rejected due to his despotic character, and John of Gischala, who had joined forces with him initially and had been close to the party of notables, displaced him and took over the leadership of the zealots until the fall of Jerusalem.⁴⁷ Previously, John of Gischala, originally a member of the Galilean nobility, had vied with Flavius Josephus when the latter commanded the rebel forces in Galilee.⁴⁸
- e) Warlords. The aforementioned John of Gischala might be included in this category also due to his personal agenda and flexible policy of alliances. Another prominent figure was Simon bar Giora, whose leadership grew stronger as the revolt progressed. He had taken part in the defeat of Cestius Gallus at Beth Horon and later gained control in the towns of Judea close to Samaria.⁴⁹ He was expelled from these as a result of the Roman advance and camped with his men outside the walls of Jerusalem. In 69 A.D., the increasingly weak faction of moderate notables facilitated his entrance so he could defend them from John of Gischala.⁵⁰ The city was thus divided into two major rival bands: the Zealots of John of Gischala who controlled the Temple and the fortress of Antonia, and the followers of Simon bar Giora who controlled the upper and part of the lower city. Fighting between the two factions resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem's grain stores shortly before the siege began.⁵¹ They continued fighting even after Titus set up camp outside Jerusalem and launched the siege, and only joined forces and distributed sectors of responsibility once the Romans broke through the third wall and took control of the new city.⁵²
- f) Idumeans. This group features several times in the account given by Josephus. Originally from Idumea, the region south of Jerusalem, they had a long fighting tradition and strongly favoured rebellion against Rome.⁵³ However, during the war Idumeans are said to have fought on opposite sides.⁵⁴ Initially, Eleazar ben Simon –the Zealot leader– invited them to enter Jerusalem to prevent the moderate notables from striking a deal with the Romans after the loss of Galilee. Once inside, they took part in the massacres carried out by the Zealots, including the killings of the priests Ananias and Jesus.⁵⁵ A short time later, however, they abandoned the city after becoming disenchanted by the conduct of the Zealots. The following year, Josephus speaks again of a group of Idumeans in Jerusalem who faced John of Gischala and, along with a faction of notables, helped Simon bar Giora enter the city. As of that point, they joined the latter's forces and accounted for half their numbers, some five thousand fighters.⁵⁶

Such factionalism had fatal consequences for the effectiveness of the insurgency. To begin with, it deprived the revolt of leadership and strategic initiative. Once the revolt had consolidated, the rebels only undertook one major offensive action –the failed attack on Ascalon in early 67 A.D. When Vespasian launched the Galilee campaign, the authorities in Jerusalem abandoned the forces commanded by Flavius Josephus to their fate and did not even send reinforcements to hamper the Roman sieges. In addition to the lack of effective coordination between the city leaders and regional commanders, it is likely that the fear of losing fighters who were needed to guarantee the former's own safety, not to mention the balance of power with respect to other rebel factions, played an influential role also. Thus, the political core of the rebellion in Jerusalem stood by impassively as rebel territories in Galilee, Perea, Idumea and much of Judea were lost between 67-69 A.D., until it came the turn of the city itself.

In addition, the fratricidal battles inside Jerusalem seriously weakened the defenders' psychological and material capacity to resist. From the counterinsurgency point of view, the year of the Roman civil war, which inevitably affected the pace of operations, was therefore not a lost year. Instead of capitalising on the Romans'

distracted attention to reorganise and retake the initiative, the Jewish insurgents wore themselves out mutually and helped tip the balance further in favour of the forces of Rome.

Control of a territory from which to self-organise and operate

An area of sanctuary is a further critical factor in the consolidation and success of insurgency. A sample study of 89 insurgencies between 1945 and 2006 found that those that lacked such an area had a one in seven chance of victory in cases where success or failure was clearly appreciable. Conversely, insurgencies with a sanctuary emerged victorious in half the conflicts that produced a clear outcome.⁵⁷

The Jewish revolt against the Romans offers interesting lessons in this regard. The insurgents fought on their own territory and did not seek a sanctuary in a neighbouring territory beyond the control of the counterinsurgents. However, unlike the Maccabee insurgents of the 2nd century B.C., they did not hide in the mountains of Judea to wear down the enemy through guerrilla tactics. Instead, the main refuge of the insurgents between 66-73 A.D. were fortified settlements, mostly small towns, some fortresses (Herodium, Machaerus and Masada) and Jerusalem's impressive system of fortifications.

Sound military strategy

The major strategy of any insurgent group goes well beyond the military dimension to take in other areas such as social, political, diplomatic, economic, communications aspects, etc.⁵⁸ That said, the military level is essential to the viability and success of the insurgency and therefore deserves to be addressed specifically here.

In this particular case study, the military strategy factor is closely linked to the previous variable. The rebels possessed no united army fit to oppose the Romans in open battle.⁵⁹ Hence the decision by the rebels to take refuge in fortified settlements conditioned their overall strategy. There were two major drawbacks to this strategic course, although due to the failure of the operation by Cestius Gallus against Jerusalem in the autumn of 66 A.D. they were not immediately apparent.

The first was that, in seeking refuge behind the walls of Jerusalem the insurgents ceded the initiative to the Romans. The sole exception being the aforementioned victory over Cestius Gallus. A few months later, the insurgents undertook their offensive against Ascalon but this ended in disaster and they ceded the initiative definitively to the Romans.⁶⁰ From this point onwards, they opted essentially for a static defence, thus discarding a habitual principle of guerrilla warfare against foreign forces of occupation: waging war defensively on the strategic level but offensively on the tactical level.⁶¹ Moreover, in choosing to forego guerrilla warfare, they opted for a conventional defence against a vastly superior enemy, a strategic interaction that was doomed to failure.⁶²

The second strategic disadvantage, stemming from the withdrawal behind walled fortifications, was that unlike other peoples of the period –the Germanic tribes of central Europe or the Arab tribes neighbouring Judea, for example– who did not possess the means or technical knowledge to take heavily fortified settlements, the Roman legions were more than capable of such a feat. Roman military engineering was peerless in Antiquity, a strategic asset the legions did not share with auxiliary units, and much less with forces supplied by vassal kings.⁶³ Thus, by taking refuge in fortified towns the Jewish insurgents allowed the Romans to fight them 'conventionally', implementing an approach to which they were accustomed and at which they excelled. The military strategy of insurgents down the ages has tended to do the very opposite, namely, reduce the military superiority of the counterinsurgents to hand the advantage to the rebels.⁶⁴

During the operations carried out by Vespasian and, later, by Titus against Jerusalem, the Roman legions deployed their entire repertoire of siege techniques: suppressive artillery against those defending the wall and

the interior of the walled settlement to trigger chaos and terror; large-scale attacks using ladders; surprise attacks to catch defenders unaware; underground mines to weaken walls; and the construction of embankments to move battering rams and assault towers. Ample evidence of all these tactics can be seen not only in the detailed account offered by Josephus but also in the archaeological remains in various settlements in Galilee (Jotapata, Gamala and Gadara, for instance), Machaerus and the even more impressive ones in Masada.⁶⁵

Nonetheless –and it is worth emphasising the point–, the Roman forces encountered serious problems in their attempts to operate in urban settings where the defenders continued to offer resistance once the walls were breached. The legions found it difficult to continue to use the closed formations that gave them tactical superiority. The labyrinth of narrow streets, the defenders' greater knowledge of the terrain, and the use of buildings to harass and wear down the attackers seriously deteriorated the effectiveness of the Roman forces. Street fighting had already proven to be a major challenge for the armies of classical Greece (and continues to be so today for armies who are vastly superior technologically). Vespasian and Tito also had to contend with such difficulties, particularly during the fighting in Gamala (Galilee) and inside Jerusalem.⁶⁶

External support

Contemporary literature also identifies external support as one of the variables most closely correlated with the success of an insurgency, and this same importance is seen also in Antiquity.⁶⁷ The Jewish insurgency of the Maccabees against the Seleucids sought precisely such aid from Rome, although the Senate restricted its support to the diplomatic level and offered no economic or military assistance. At the time, Rome was beginning to expand its influence in the East and a key factor in its bid was a weakened Seleucid empire, which did in fact disintegrate in the second half of the 2nd century B.C.⁶⁸

During the revolt of 66 A.D., the insurgents failed to secure any significant support, save for the arrival of several hundred Jewish fighters from Parthia. The rebel territories bordered Roman provinces (Syria and Egypt) or Rome's vassal kingdoms, including the lands of the Jewish King Agrippa II (Batanea, Trachonitis and Gaulonitis, together with some towns in Galilee and Perea) who was staunchly loyal to Rome.⁶⁹ More importantly, the insurgents failed to obtain support from the Parthian empire, Rome's great rival in the region. The Parthians had crushed the Crassus expedition in Carrhae (currently Harran, Turkey) in 53 B.C. They invaded Judea in 40 B.C. but were expelled three years later by the Romans, who installed Herod the Great as king.⁷⁰ Nearer in time to the Jewish revolt, between the years 58 and 63, Rome and Parthia fought a new war over succession to the throne of Armenia, a buffer territory between the two empires. The war ended in Rome's favour and a peace accord was secured that suited its interests. The Temple of Janus in Rome –which remained open in wartime– closed in 66 A.D. as a symbol of the peace between the two empires.⁷¹

Thus, the Jewish revolt broke out just as a window of political opportunity to attract a powerful ally had closed. Moreover, the Parthian empire was embroiled at the time in internal power struggles and did not become involved in conflict again with Rome until the second decade A.D., when Rome was ruled by Emperor Trajan. Neither did Parthia capitalise on the internal problems suffered by its rival during the year of the four emperors, mid-way through the Judea campaign. One of the steps taken by Vespasian to help him seize the imperial throne was to send ambassadors to Armenia and Parthia to consolidate the peace, which he eventually achieved. Following Vespasian's victory in the Roman civil war, King Vologases of Parthia offered a force of forty thousand soldiers to put down the Jewish revolt once and for all.⁷²

The revolt did not receive any help of substance either from the massive Jewish diaspora scattered throughout the Roman Empire. The war years coincided with riots between Jews and Gentiles in Alexandria although these did not impact on the conflict in Judea and did not prevent the Alexandria-based XV *Apollinaris* legion from travelling to join the Galilee campaign in the spring of 67.

The capability and competence of the counterinsurgency opponent

The respective distribution of power between insurgents and counterinsurgents, coupled with the successes and errors of the latter, play a key role in the victory or defeat of insurgency.⁷³ During the early phases of the revolt, the Roman authorities experienced deficits in both variables.

In terms of capability, Judea lacked a garrison able to ensure effective control over the territory and put down a large-scale rebellion swiftly. An auxiliary cohort of five hundred at most was quartered in Jerusalem and a further two cohorts in the provincial capital, Caesarea Maritima. Rome's effective military power was located in the neighbouring Syria, where three legions were based, albeit at least one of them in a dubious state of readiness as was demonstrated by the XII Legion *Fulminata*.

Theoretically, the lack of a major garrison in Judea should not have been sufficient in itself to encourage the rebellion. According to Luttwak, Rome's ability to move and concentrate its legions in any part of the empire was a deterrent fully understood by the sophisticated elites of the eastern territories: one did not have to see the legions physically to fear the power of Rome.⁷⁴ Indeed, this deterrent effect is evident in the words of the high priest Caiaphas concerning Jesus, which appear in the Gospel of St John: 'If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation'.⁷⁵ This notion was at the core also of the speech made by King Agrippa II in Jerusalem during the early stages of the rebellion, as reported by Flavius Josephus: the Romans has defeated warlike peoples such as the Cantabrians, Galls and Germans and would inevitably crush the Jewish rebels.⁷⁶

However, the Roman deterrent failed. Firstly, because according to Josephus personal ambitions and passions impeded rational calculation. The sum total of grievances arising from the abuses committed by the Roman governor Gessius Florus and the constant fighting between Gentiles and Jews precipitated the rebellion without prior planning. Moreover, and probably decisively, the Roman authorities ceded the initiative to the insurgents during the early weeks and months. After lighting the flame of the rebellion in Jerusalem in May 66, Gessius Florus returned to Caesarea Maritima and remained there inactive. Meanwhile the rebellion gathered pace and the garrison of auxiliary soldiers stationed in Jerusalem was massacred in September.

Cestius Gallus, legate of Syria, reached Jerusalem with a sizeable Roman force in mid-November. Despite suffering an ambush by rebels in Beth Horon on the journey and losing five hundred man and a substantial part of his supplies, the forces under the command of Gallus managed to enter Jerusalem, set the new city on fire and attack the bastions of the tower of Antonia and palace of Herod the Great. However, six days after commencing, the assault was halted. According to Josephus, the insurgents were still not organised adequately and, during this initial phase, Cestius Gallus could have put the rebellion down and avoided the mass destruction the war was to cause. The proximity of winter (the assault on Jerusalem took place in November), the threat against his supply lines and the impact of the losses in the first Beth Horon ambush may all have influenced his decision to withdraw and hand the initiative back to the insurgents. The campaign of Gallus was an unmitigated disaster, the Romans losing 5,780 men and much material. On the other hand the rebels were given a major victory showing that Rome was not invincible.⁷⁷

The balance of competence, which initially favoured the rebels, tipped definitively in favour of Rome with the decision to place Vespasian in charge of the war effort. He raised the forces required for a methodical and well-designed campaign and, as of that moment, as events were to prove, the fate of the rebellion was sealed, an outcome aided by the lack of leadership and the internal divisions and fighting between the insurgents, as discussed above.

Symmetry/asymmetry of insurgent and counterinsurgent interests and values

Both these aspects are linked to the previous section and are variables that influence the independent variables of capability and competence. Contemporary counterinsurgent campaigns tend to be characterised by the

asymmetry of interests and values between western forces and insurgents. There is much more at stake for the insurgents, who are less reluctant to resort to brutality. This increases their resistance and reduces the constraints on the use of violence. The opposite is true on the western side: the strategic aim of the counterinsurgency mission does not always affect vital interests or is easy to explain to the public. The application of military potential is limited by the rules of engagement and the fear of casualties in their own ranks and even among others.⁷⁸

However, there was little such asymmetry between the respective interests and values in the Jewish-Roman war and Rome could therefore capitalise on its advantage in capability and military competence. The reasons that spurred Roman determination were as follows:

- a) In contrast to the territories situated between the Rhine and Elba rivers, which Rome consciously gave up after the Teutoburg Forest disaster in 9 A.D., the geopolitical position of Judea rendered its loss unthinkable. Judea linked the Roman Egypt and Syria, acting as a bridge between Asia and Africa.
- b) At the same time, Judea was part of the architecture of power in the eastern provinces and vassal kingdoms, several of which bordered the Parthian Empire, the main geopolitical rival of the Roman Empire. A successful revolt and de facto independence would change the balance of power and risk the collapse of Roman order in the region.
- c) An added element mid-way through the campaign was the triumph of Vespasian in the Roman civil war and his ascent to the imperial throne. Roman political tradition attached great importance to a successful military career and the legitimacy of the new emperor –and by extension that of his son Titus in the Flavian dynasty– would therefore be conditioned by victory over the Jewish rebels.⁷⁹
- d) Lastly, and the major difference compared to the present day, Rome’s military and political culture accepted without difficulty the recourse to brutality as an instrument of imperial control. It did so in combination with other incentives, chiefly among them the close-knit network of personal ties between the imperial administration and the political and economic elites in the territories under its control. Nonetheless, in the event of a rebellion, Rome responded with exemplary and implacable violence while also seeking the surrender of moderates and restoration of the status quo.⁸⁰ Flavius Josephus narrates in detail the massacres and enslavement of populations that resisted the Roman advance both in Galilee and in other neighbouring territories. The treatment meted out to the people and defenders of Jerusalem was particularly harsh as the siege tightened. At one particular moment, Titus ordered all who had attempted to flee the siege to be crucified opposite the walls of the city. Once all resistance had been broken, the city was pillaged and destroyed, and survivors were enslaved or sacrificed in games commemorating the victory.⁸¹ Such measures served to send a message of deterrence to other territories in the empire.

Conclusion

The changing nature of warfare is an obvious reality which inspired Clausewitz’s metaphor of war as ‘a true chameleon’. At the same time, however, the history of warfare reveals the existence of certain timeless aspects. The present article has explored how some factors considered key to the success or failure of insurgency –at least the eight variables used in this investigation– can be applicable also to the Jewish-Roman conflict of 66-73 A.D. Based on this finding, further studies may help confirm the presence of the aforementioned elements in other historic cases.

Thus, the Jewish insurgents enjoyed success in articulating an attractive cause and mobilising resources to initiate and continue the insurrection. However, they failed in terms of providing cohesion and leadership, and also in securing the external support which might have helped them combat the massive imbalance in forces compared to Rome. The lack of leadership and cohesion impacted negatively on their military strategy, which saw them hand the initiative to the Roman response and establish an essentially static defence from the

sanctuary afforded by fortified towns. For their part, the Romans lacked capability and competence in the early stages of the rebellion, allowing it to consolidate. However, once they grasped the initiative they exhibited a high level of military competence and capability, which was supported by their considerable political and strategic interest in the defeat of the rebels.

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¹ See Kennedy, “Grand Strategy in War and Peace,” 7; Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*, 1-5; Hanson, ‘Introduction: Makers of Ancient Strategy,’ 3; Boot, *Invisible Armies*, 557-567; and Gaddis, *On Grand Strategy*, 10.

² Extensive academic debate and an abundance of literature exist on the complex figure of Flavius Josephus and bias in his works. However, they fall beyond the scope of the present article. See for example Curran, “The Jewish War,” 76-78; Cotton and Eck, “Josephus’ Roman Audience,” 37-52; and Mason, “Of Audience and Meaning,” 71-100.

³ Sheldon, “Taking on Goliath”; Curran, “The Jewish War”; Faulkner, *Apocalypse*; Sorek, *The Jews against Rome*; Bloom, *The Jewish Revolts against Rome*; and Mason, *A History of the Jewish War*.

⁴ Josephus, *BJ* 3.2.1-2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.6-8; 4.1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.7.3-4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁸ Suetonius, *Vespasian*. 5-7; and Josephus, *BJ* 4.9-11.

⁹ Josephus, *BJ* 4.3-7; 5.1.

¹⁰ Goldsworthy, *In the name of Rome*, 337.

¹¹ Josephus, *BJ* 5.2-13; 5.2-13; 6.1-10; 8.1.

¹² The debate on the year of the fall of Masada (73 A.D. or 74 A.D.) is beyond the scope of the present article. For more detailed discussion see for example Cotton “The Date of the Fall of Masada,” 157-162

¹³ Josephus, *BJ* 7.6.8-9.

¹⁴ Mattern, *Rome and the Enemy*, 101-102.

¹⁵ Collier, Hoeffler, and Rohner, “Beyond Greed and Grievance,” 2.

¹⁶ Beckett, *Modern Insurgencies*; Beckett, “The Future of Insurgency,” 22-36; Boot, *Invisible Armies*; Byman, “Understanding Proto-Insurgencies,” 165-200; Metz, ‘Insurgency after the Cold War,’ 63-82; Metz, and Millen, *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency*; Steven Metz, *Rethinking Insurgency*; O’Neill, *Insurgency and Terrorism*; and Connable, and Libicki, *How Insurgencies End?*.

¹⁷ Byman, “Understanding Proto-Insurgencies,” 170; and Metz and Millen, *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency*, 6-7.

¹⁸ Gray, “Irregular Warfare One Nature,” 44; and Shaw, “Bandits in the Roman Empire,” 8-12.

¹⁹ Josephus, *BJ* 2.4.1-3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.4; and Josephus, *AJ* 17.10.9-10.

²¹ *Ibid.*, *BJ* 2.8.1.

²² *Ibid.*, 20.5.5; Faulkner, *Apocalypse*, 120-122; and Curran, “The Long Hesitation,” 92.

²³ Josephus, *AJ* 20.8.6.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.8.5-10; Horsley, “The Sicarii,” 440.

²⁵ Brighton, *The Sicarii in Josephus's Judean War*, 9.

²⁶ Laqueur, *A History of Terrorism*, 7

²⁷ Josephus, *BJ* 2.17.2.

²⁸ Goodman, *The Ruling Class of Judaea*, 51-75.

²⁹ Mattern, “Counterinsurgency and the Enemies of Rome,” 178.

³⁰ Josephus, *BJ* 2.17.6.

³¹ Byman, “Understanding Proto-Insurgencies,” 170.

³² However, Josephus does not always draw a clear distinction between the different groups he calls bandits in some cases and sicarii in others. See Brighton, “The Sicarii in Acts,” 554-555.

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- ³³ Appelbaum, “The Idumaeans,” 10-15.
- ³⁴ Goodman, *The Ruling Class of Judea*, p. 183.
- ³⁵ Josephus, *BJ*, Preface, 2 and Curran, “The Jewish War,” 82-83.
- ³⁶ Goodman, *Rome and Jerusalem*, 408.
- ³⁷ Bloom, *The Jewish Revolts Against Rome*, 68-69.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 100.
- ³⁹ Josephus, *BJ* 2.19.9.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.17.8.
- ⁴¹ Bloom, *The Jewish Revolts Against Rome*, 82.
- ⁴² Metz and Millen, *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency*, 7.
- ⁴³ Goodman, *Ruling Class of Judea*, 199-200.
- ⁴⁴ Josephus, *BJ* 5.10.1-2.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.17.2-9.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.2.2.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.3.10-14.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.21.1.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.19.1.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.1.3.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 5.1.4-6.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, 5.6.3-5.
- ⁵³ Appelbaum, “The Idumaeans,” 10.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 14-15.
- ⁵⁵ Josephus, *BJ* 4.5.1-4.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.6.1.
- ⁵⁷ Connable and Libicki, *How Insurgencies End?*, 36.
- ⁵⁸ Metz and Millen, *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency*, 6; and Kilcullen, ‘Counter-insurgency Redux,’ 112-119.
- ⁵⁹ Goldsworthy, *The Roman Army at War*, 86.
- ⁶⁰ Josephus, *BJ* 2.2.1-2.
- ⁶¹ Kaempf, “Lost through Non-Translation,” 548-573.
- ⁶² Areguin-Toft, “How the Weak Win Wars,” 121-122.
- ⁶³ Starr, *The Roman Empire*, 121.
- ⁶⁴ Boot, *Invisible Armies*, 561.
- ⁶⁵ Aviam, “The Fortified Settlements of Josephus Flavius”; and Davies, “Under Siege,” 65-83.
- ⁶⁶ Lee, “Urban Warfare in the Classical Greek World,” 141.
- ⁶⁷ Boot, *Invisible Armies*, 566; and Connable, and Libicki, *How Insurgencies End?*, 62.
- ⁶⁸ Sherwin-White and Kuhrt, *From Samarkhand to Sardis*, 218-222.
- ⁶⁹ Curran, “The Jewish War,” 82.
- ⁷⁰ Mattern, *Rome and the Enemy*, 35.
- ⁷¹ Goldsworthy, *In the Name of Rome*, 321-323.
- ⁷² Curran, “The Jewish War,” 81; and Suetonius, *Vespasian* 15.6.

⁷³ Paul, Clarke and Grill, *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers*, 85-86; and Sobek, “Master of their Domains,” 267-271.

⁷⁴ Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy*, 33-35; and Ferrill, “The Grand Strategy,” 79-80.

⁷⁵ Jn 11.48.

⁷⁶ Josephus, *BJ* 2.16.4.

⁷⁷ Goldsworthy, *The Roman Army at War*, 88-87.

⁷⁸ Mack, “Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars,” 179.

⁷⁹ Goldsworthy, *In the Name of Rome*, 356.

⁸⁰ Mattern, “Counterinsurgency,” 164-165.

⁸¹ Josephus, *BJ* 6.9; 7.1-2.