

Rebel archives and the comparative study of insurgent information politics/propaganda

Bert Suykens

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In March 2020 the [History Workshop Journal](#) devoted a special section to a 2018 workshop on 'Insurgency in the archive: the politics and aesthetics of sedition in Colonial India'. Scholars of radical politics (and/or photography and printing) in British India like Kama Maclean or Christopher Pinney have for some time been using an archive of banned publications to not only make sense of colonial reactions to insurgency, but also to better understand insurgent politics itself. In many other cases, when material emerging from radical movements themselves is not available in the archives, historians and historical anthropologists like Ranajit Guha and Ann Laura Stoler have devoted themselves to reading archives against the grain, hunting, and collecting clues within the dominant colonial discourse which might give us access to more subaltern, or subversive knowledges enshrined within.

Undoubtedly, governments across the globe are still continuing this practice of collecting material on radical and violent movement, of rebellion, and through time, transforming them into archives of rebellion. This essay wants to look at the possibilities of not letting state counterinsurgency practices drive which material is collected, how it is stored and when it is released. It is of extreme importance that social scientist and contemporary historians build their own rebel archives, independent from counterinsurgent/government archives on rebellion. This essay wants to explore the benefits and pitfalls of building our (as in conflict researchers) own rebel archives and of collecting and curating them in an independent archival institution. It starts from [my own initial collecting of material](#) related to the Maoist movement in India, but aims towards a research agenda focused on the comparative understanding of insurgent information politics, or if one prefers the term (see below for some discussion) insurgent propaganda. It brings to the table both my interest in in fieldwork driven conflict studies, and the residues of my training as a historian.

People's March and Banned Thought

My first encounter with Maoist propaganda material was the journal People's March. I will use the term propaganda not derogatively (as Cold War simple falsehoods), but rather in a more emic interpretation where propaganda is understood as a necessary tool of warfare to inform populations about the truth about the ongoing insurgency (falsifying government narratives) and to attract them to the movement. While the journal was not directly produced by the Maoist Movement (either the People's War Group (PWG) or after unification with the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC): the Communist Party of India (CPI) (Maoist)), it contained writings by and interviews with the movement members and leaders, sections on international politics, or on revisionism within the Indian communist movement, and for me key sections on martyred Maoists. I thus started collecting all the issues, and after People's March was banned, the issues of follow up publications like People's Truth and the Maoist Information Bulletin. While I am in hindsight aware that some people I met during fieldwork in India could have supplied me with much more material to satiate any appetite for Maoist publications, it was only after a first archive of Maoist material appeared online at [Banned Thought](#) that I started to consider the benefits of archiving rebellion.

Figure 1: Front page of People's March Magazine of October 2007, edited by Govindan Kuttu

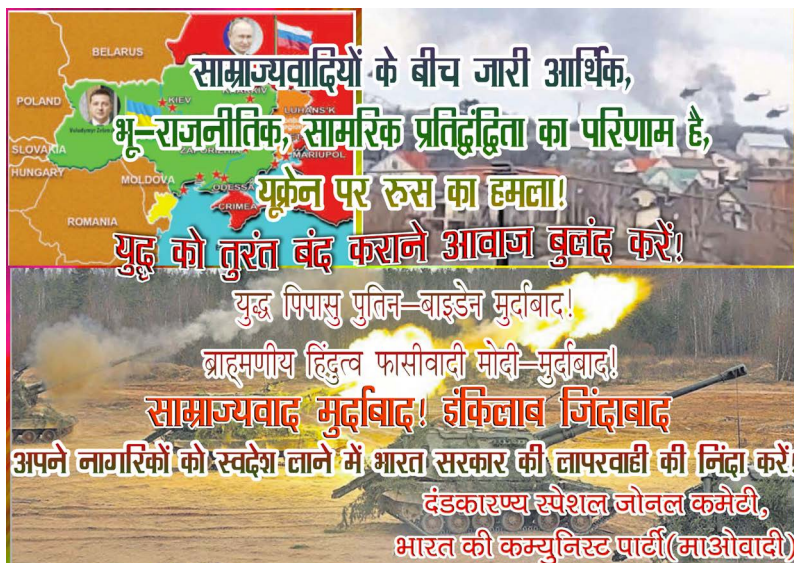


Banned Thought is an interesting animal. Its self-proclaimed aims are to present a:

'web site which is devoted to defending the freedom of speech about progressive ideas, ideas which have been suppressed in one way or another anywhere in the world. Where reactionary governments or their agents suppress such ideas we will attempt to draw attention to that fact, and to strenuously oppose it. And when possible, we will also try to post documents and publications that have been suppressed in some particular country, and make them available on the Internet for the people of that country and for the whole world.'

Initially they were focused almost exclusively on the Indian Maoists and particularly People's March. Although their best collection of documents is focused on India, they have extended to include writings and publications on revolutionary left-wing organizations of more than thirty countries, covering both contemporary and historical material. Examples range from a poster 'on Russian Aggression on Ukraine, by the spokesperson for the Dandakaranya Special Zonal Committee, CPI (Maoist), March 1, 2022' (figure 2), over 'Documents of the Seventh Plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Indonesia' from 1958 or 'Intensify the Struggle Against the Imperialist Offensive on the Occasion of May 1st', by the Turkish Communist Party/Marxist-Leninist published in 1999.

Figure 2: Poster 'on Russian Aggression on Ukraine, by the spokesperson for the Dandakaranya Special Zonal Committee, CPI (Maoist), March 1, 2022', from Banned Thought



While Banned Thought is in first instance a tool to spread revolutionary Marxism, it is undoubtedly also an interesting resource for academics like myself with an interest in the Maoist movement in India and their information politics more particularly. As such, it forms the basis of an extensive project on Maoist martyrdom I am working on as I write. I would argue that such archives are currently underused and they offer opportunities for many, very different (archival) projects within conflict studies.

There are obvious concerns with Banned Thought as a rebel archive, also highlighting some broader issues with archiving rebellion I will turn to below. Probably for good reasons the owners and editors of the website remain anonymous. Collecting and publishing proscribed material might of course create problems. However, this anonymity also means that their curating practices—the way in which they collect material and how they decide what to include in the archive—remains largely unknown. This secrecy, so well engrained within the logics of revolutionary Marxism, makes it sometimes hard to judge the origins of certain documents and might create doubts with academic users on the verifiability of the published material. Moreover, and this is maybe most important if one wants to build a veritable archive of rebellion, the secrecy and bias might disincline more neutral collectors of insurgent propaganda material to share their collections with Banned Thought, leading to important gaps within the collection.

Jihadology

Jihadology is a much better known and respected repository of material from Jihadi groups across the globe. The website was founded and is still curated by Aaron Y. Zelin. This part of the essay greatly has benefited from Zelin's recent 'auto-ethnographic' [article](#) in Political Violence and Terrorism and it overall provides a good starting point for debating other rebel archives. He writes that he started Jihadology

to better educate the public, but more importantly, to provide a platform for other graduate students [which he was when he founded the website] to gain access to the website information without having to worry about paying for access to such content or more importantly finding the content on password-protected forums or the potential that there could be some bug or virus on such forums (Zelin 2021: 225).

It aims to be a clearinghouse for all material related to global Jihad and includes apart from primary sources also a lot of analysis and opinion. Jihadology in contrast to Banned Thought has a very visible and academically very active owner and curator. Its impact is quite clear

with authors frequently citing Jihadology as the source of (some) of their material, quite unlike Banned Thought. While this obviously has to do with the much more wide-ranging interest in Jihadi groups and the overall demise of revolutionary Marxism, its lack of traction seems also related to its obscurity. Zelin (2021) himself reflects on the benefit of a central and stable repository because

'when researchers published since they could cite my website and therefore provide the sourcing in a safe and stable manner so others in the field could check a source themselves or plausibly have a different interpretation and dispute someone's analysis. Overall, I felt it would bolster the quality of the field and provide much more transparency.'

In my interest in rebel archives, I think this concern is key. Researchers should be able to cite from a credible and transparent source, even while deploying their own critical method in establishing the potential veracity of both text authorship and claims. As Zelin himself outlines, Jihadists themselves maintain (pass-word protected) archives, which, although still substantially different from an open access platform like Banned Thought, suffer from similar difficulties of access, safety and stability.

However, Jihadology's (negative) impact also has been widely debated. In 2019 in fact, the website was repurposed as a password protected website after UK government pressure (Zelin 2021). Even before [debates](#) had been ongoing on whether an open access archive like Jihadology did not foremost support Jihadist themselves looking for easily accessible information. Takedown requests were issued by different countries, most prominently France and Russia, showing of course that although an academically curated, but still private project, countries would be (very) concerned about providing easy access to rebel propaganda material¹. The new policy does not allow just anybody to access the material, but only those with a particular affiliation, either in academia, humanitarian work and government (including direct access for 'mil' (so US military personal) email addresses).

In this last instance we enter difficult, if not the most difficult terrain in the world of rebel archives: who should gain access to an archive of rebellion? My concerns here are slightly different than Zelin's, maybe because I also deal with different types of armed groups. While I fully understand his and governments' concern of providing easy access for wannabee Jihadis, in many cases it might be equally problematic to provide easy access to counterinsurgency

¹ His relations with the US were much better and, and this would be a key point for ethical debate, he did forward emails from potential Jihadi's to the FBI.

forces, in particular those with bad human rights records. I will return to this concern at the end of this essay, as I believe it plays out very differently depending on what kind of information one is archiving and providing access to.

One final aspect to reflect upon in the case of Jihadology is the curating itself. As Zelin indicates Jihadi groups publish too much material (in writing, in video, on twitter, on telegram) for him to be able to put online. The highly brutal violence in the IS era also led him to curate more actively and to censor these images (remember that the website was still open access then). From a personal point of view, he is obviously free and maybe quite right to make such a decision. However, from an archival point of view such censorship might be more problematic. I will return to this and the question of individual (or private) curating also later.

An institutionalized archive of rebellion?

While the two examples I have provided are useful repositories, they both come with serious drawbacks. Banned Thought's secrecy makes its collections more difficult to trace and use; it also is unclear on what is collected and how. While Jihadology is by far more respected and allows to better trace what is collected and why, its curating policy comes down to the gut feeling of one individual. While we should fully appreciate the work Zelin has done, there are limits to such curating. Not only, as he indicates himself, much more material is posted online than he can meaningfully upload, his decision to not put on line (and thus make a part of this repository) very gruesome images can be fully understood from a personal ethical perspective, but might be less straightforward if one wants to build a representative archive of rebellion. Finally, language constraints (with Jihadi movements not producing in English or Arabic; see for instance the many cassette tapes from Afghanistan and Pakistan that fell in the hands of [David B. Edwards](#)) pose problems for individually run projects.

This is why I argue that ideally such an archive should come to rest, extended and curated by archival professionals. They should build on the knowledge about the context in which material is produced (which is I think key in getting your hands on the material) of conflict scholars across the globe. However, a genuine archive of rebellion would however have to go beyond the capacity, goals and interests of individual researchers and create key policies to organize, curate and make accessible such collections. This, I believe, needs not conflict researchers, but a professional institutionalized archive. Looking at this from my position in the Low Countries, a reputed institute like the Amsterdam-based [International Institute of](#)

Social History—which has as one of its key goals ‘preserving the heritage of often oppressed social movements’—could play a key role in hosting a rebel archive. Other examples are of course perfectly possible, keeping in mind that many social historical archives (if not all archives, when they host ‘state secrets’) have experience with treating sensitive material. Important would be of course that this institute has the capacity to also make digitally available the archive, if its aim would be to be a truly global rebel archive.

There are a number of reasons I think an established institute could/should play a role. First, while Banned Thought and Jihadology have now been around for quite some time, we do not know whether Zelin or the team (one gets a sense that it is a team and not an individual) behind Banned Thought will continue to update their repositories, and in fact whether they will not go offline at some point. Keeping this material curated within the context of an institutional archive will ensure the longevity of the collections and that they will continue to get the required attention (for both digital and paper archives) to be accessible in the future.

A second key reason why I believe an established institute is necessary to such an archive work, is that the donation of collections (either fully or on loan to digitize) is key. The extensive private collection of Zelin or Pieter Van Ostaeyen, but also collections accessible through Banned Thought, should be supplemented by (both historical and contemporary) material collected on many other groups, like the PKK in Turkey, which have been very active propagandists, but also material from less ferocious writers e.g. in Eastern DRC where again other forms of communication (whatsapp e.g.) might be prevalent.

Moreover, such a collection could extend to not only propaganda material, which by its nature is public, but could also consist of (digitized) internal archives of rebel movements. I have to be honest: I am agnostic about the extent to which such collections exist. There is some evidence of bureaucratic production in different movements handing out e.g. tax receipts, while some rebel groups like the LTTE of Sri Lanka or the NSCN of Northeast India running ‘shadow’ states might have in fact created such an archive. Such archives are most likely to become accessible only after the end of a (civil) war, but then they might also be quickly destroyed or heavily dispersed; or they might end up with former rebel administrators. Obviously, making accessible such an archive during civil war creates serious ethical issues which I hinted already to above, such as the possibility of providing detailed intel to counter-insurgency forces.

Such rebel archives could also include correspondence between members of armed groups. Again, collecting this type of information might seem hardly impossible, but this is why an

archive of rebellion should at the same time be a collective effort by individual researchers focusing on specific rebel movements across the globe, and a central, trustworthy node where material collected as part of extensive fieldwork in warzones and with rebel groups can be collected and made accessible (keeping in mind standard archival practices which might put time limits on when material can be accessed).

While I am myself hesitant about repositories of fieldnotes and interview transcripts (and the way they can be used without clear reference to the context in which they were collected, or the intricacies of a researchers individual fieldnote practices), it might be debated whether an archive could also not benefit from fieldnotes of conflict researchers, again to be donated and opened up for further research after considerable time.

I do not have the space to discuss in detail the different types or collections mentioned here as well as all the practical and ethical concerns which would be part and parcel of creating a rebel archive. I just want to propose the idea: a collective endeavor by researchers on armed movements, to first source and trace rebel archives and then bring them to enable a larger group of researchers (but also future historians of conflict) to access the material and benefit from its use.

Towards the comparative understanding of insurgent information politics/propaganda

The two repositories I discussed above, making abstraction of the benefits of and concerns with both, have dealt with a particular type of armed movement: revolutionary Marxist in the case of Banned Thought and Violent Political Islam/Jihadi in the case of Jihadology. To some extent, I think that serious scholars interested in a particular armed group or a particular subspecies of rebellion might be able to source this material, and certainly the more contemporary material. I was able to collect all issues of the interesting journal People's March (and if serious at the time about Maoist rebel archives would have been able to access an offline one). Zelin himself has been sourcing material online, downloading and uploading material present elsewhere (although often on more unstable platforms).

Having a repository of rebel material, irrespective of the ideology of the group or the country they are active in, would enable the advancement of a comparative study of rebel information politics. Rebel propaganda is an understudied field. Propaganda of course, is often equated

with simple falsehood. However, for many rebel movements propaganda can also be about providing proper information, and counterbalancing what according to them are false accounts of the states they are fighting (while of course forming a basis for recruitment). Propaganda can play key roles in making ideological claims, something which, as ideology in the study of violent conflict has become highly suspect, has also remained understudied, excepting maybe for Islamist groups. While the ontological understanding of propaganda is beyond the scope of this essay, understanding rebel propaganda comparatively can provide is key insights in at least three domains:

- Technologies of rebel propaganda: How has technological change impacted on rebel information politics and how different combinations of propaganda media (books, posters, video, audio, messaging) enable different forms of information politics.
- Rebel publics: What can the type of propaganda produced by rebel movements tell us about the audience they want to reach. How can a comparative study of propaganda tell us about the different rebel publics.
- Violence: How do different rebel movements show, share and discuss violence and what does this tell us not only about the role of violence in the movement, but also (in interaction with the previous question) about how violence would be perceived by different audiences.

I believe that studying these questions comparatively can not only provide us with more general conclusions beyond case studies, but also to understand better what is particular about each case by assessing it in relation to other cases.

Conclusion:

Why rebel archives will/might not happen?

A rebel archive is a must if we want to preserve different types of material (propaganda, but also bureaucratic) produced by rebel groups. It ideally should be inclusive, not only containing material from rebel movement independent from their ideological background, but also collecting different types of media (posters, pamphlets, video, audio, text messages). And it should be institutionalized to go beyond the pioneering work done by selected individuals and groups.

While I cannot stress enough the long term benefit of having an institutionally empowered rebel archive, collecting, curating and providing access to rebel material from across the globe, I see serious hurdles to making this happen. Obviously it would be necessary to convince researchers to hand over and make accessible to others material they have painstakingly collected over many years (so that a *desk* conflict researcher can have all the benefit!). It would also need a solid collecting and curating policy, as well as a lot of (ethical) attention to the politics of accessing this type of archive, wherever it is located. Even more so, if an archive located in the North, would curate material mostly coming from rebellions in the South.

Much of the material such an archive would collect is proscribed in one or more states, providing the main pitfall for an institutionalized archive. The name Banned Thought is obviously a reference to this. While the case of Jihadology shows that some western intelligence might be interested to have a say in how the material should be collected, this would become more intricate if the archive would hold material from many different rebel groups, perceived as threatening to as many nations. How to overcome this challenge will necessitate further reflection and discussion. Hopefully this essay can help to open up this discussion on how to archive living rebellion.