Invisible Armies: An epic history of guerilla warfare from ancient times to the present by Max Boot Reviewed by Sonia Rothwell This is an impressive book. In its scale (592 pages without footnotes) its ambition (to provide an "epic" history of guerrilla warfare from antiquity until the present day) and in the breadth of the conflicts covered. But I wonder if it would have been more impressive had it been scaled back either into a more compact but thorough work, or expanded into a series of books in the manner of Eric Hobsbawm's majestic
The Age of...
tetralogy.

The thread which runs through the book is the argument that irregular warfare is the norm while so-called regular conflicts form the minority of clashes throughout history. That much is hard to argue with. But while the prologue seeks to clarify Boot's intentions for this book, it is "intended to serve as a one-stop destination ... for a general reading public ... but I had no intention of producing an encyclopaedia," why the subtitle, "an epic history of guerrilla warfare" then, one might ask? And for a book which hopes to be a one-stop destination, there are a number of oversights. Apart from the Boer War, there is a glaring dearth of sub-Saharan Africa coverage, except in passing. For example, if Caroline Elkins can win a Pulitzer Prize with an excellently-researched book on the Mau Mau emergency (
Imperial Reckoning
) it is puzzling why Boot does not think the uprising deserves more than, literally, a few short sentences in this behemoth of a book. There is also next to nothing on Congo/Zaire or Rwanda. Mr Boot may want to read Gerard Prunier's exhaustive
Africa's World War
as a primer
if he cares to rectify that omission in the next edition of this work.

The problem with the simultaneous claim to have written a one stop destination on this fascinating topic and yet then to stand back and say you do not intend it to be encyclopaedic is that the claim then does not really stack up. How can a one stop destination not include Mau Mau? The Maquis of France from WW II? This is the first problem I have with this book.

The second is linked to the first in that the content is overwhelmingly US-centric. Far too much time is spent describing in painstaking detail the guerrilla tactics used during the US war of independence and against native Americans for example. I was also uncomfortable with sentences such as the following: "By manufacturing and distributing all over the world countless weapons, from TNT to the AK-47, Europeans would ensure that in the 20th century resisters to their rule would be far better armed than their predecessors had been". A bold, partial-picture claim emanating from a nation which is notorious for using these European-originated arms to

equip groups antagonistic to governments it considers harmful to its interests (eg the Taliban, the Contras in Nicaragua). Boot also appears to show little empathy for other states which have suffered from the threat of terror attacks such as the UK, preferring to consider the US' relatively recent exposure terrorism as somehow different to that endured by say Northern Ireland.

It is such a pity that this book is not better than it is (I certainly do not concur with Senator John McCain's dust-jacket testimony). It seems like a work in progress which needs a good editor and consequently it is a book which does not feel trustworthy. In fairness, Boot has set himself a very difficult task not least because there is no widely-accepted definition of terrorism so the decision as to who are the terrorists and who are the freedom fighters rests with the author and on this subject particularly, that is dangerous territory. It's not necessarily a book to avoid but is certainly one to read with a critical eye.