The history of war is usually told as the history of national or imperial armies and the great battles – from Carthage to Waterloo and Stalingrad – that changed the course of history. In this course we will take up a different, although related, topic and that is the history of what is often called unconventional or irregular warfare, and those who fight it. These fighters are assigned (or assign themselves) many names; bandit, mercenary and warlord are among the most common. Ranging across the Eurasian world from (roughly) the sixteenth century onwards, we will consider, among others, Japanese warlords, Kurdish militias, Balkan bandits and the Cossacks of southern Russia.

Certain key questions will help us compare the books we are reading, which will range widely across time and space. These questions will include: How has the line between regular and irregular warfare been drawn in history? What are the bonds of solidarity when fighting outside of a national framework? What is the relationship between states and unconventional fighting forces? Are there warrior societies? The bandit, the mercenary and the warlord have proved to be very enduring historical phenomena. By the end of the course you will understand the history of these perennial figures, an understanding which can help you better grasp their iterations in today’s world.

During the course of this seminar you will write a 25-30 page junior paper, based on original research, on a selected topic in the history of unconventional warfare. That paper will:

a) Ask a good historical question.
b) Be based on primary sources.
c) Explain how its interpretation connects to previous work by other historians.
d) Offer a persuasive thesis of its own.
e) Be a polished piece of writing.

This is, of course, a lot to achieve in a semester, and the pace is unavoidably intense. We will proceed through a close examination of published works in the field that are models for us as researchers and writers. In addition, the course is structured around a series of small, building block assignments that will help you write your final paper. A willingness to hit the ground running, to attend all course meetings, and to participate in and help foster a mutually supportive environment are all essential.