Psychological Operations in the Great War

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Brief introduction

In recent years, psychological operations have gained prominence in the international agenda for their relevance and for their ability to achieve objectives without relying on direct physical confrontation, as well as for their ability to directly affect the main actors on the battlefield, influencing the international community and shaping the unfolding of the war. Now that one hundred years have passed, the time has come to remember the Great War, which we will endeavour to do by studying and analysing it, even if this might be difficult to do without relying on the preconceived notions of contemporary thinking, as the conflict holds information that could prove instrumental in validating the operationalization of psychological action as a 'weapon of influence'.

The Great War played an important role in the introduction of a 'new' type of military action that became known, accurately or not, as 'mind war', the purpose of which was to influence and affect the behaviour of combatants and third parties. It affected combatants by boosting the morale of the soldiers of one nation while destroying the enemy's. It affected third parties by both advocating for and legitimising the war, as well as by influencing neutral parties.

Due to its nature, the scope of this paper is circumscribed to the time period from 1914 to 1918 and to the locations where battles occurred. It is our belief that examining how military forces were employed in the past will contribute to reducing uncertainty in future conflicts. It is also a way of

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paying tribute to those who fought in the Great War and of acknowledging their bravery and contributions in an attempt to make up for past mistakes.

As our intent is also to contribute to history, and because we are not historians by training or research, our approach to psychological action consisted in presenting conceptual milestones and seeking to identify them in the Great War. This communication is divided into two parts. A conceptual and holistic introduction to the period of the Great War in light of contemporary concepts will be followed by a second part, in which we will endeavour to clarify the purpose of psychological action and present practical examples of how it was used as an influence activity.

A century later, some circumstances may prove hard to ascertain, although we do not mean by this to excuse any mistakes or omissions, but only to broach the subject and pique the interest of the academic community and, if the need arises, to open up new lines of research. A conflict is always a clash of incompatible and antagonistic wills which takes place in the minds of individuals and is especially reflected in the battlefield. The Great War was a large-scale conflict and a significant milestone in the development of propaganda. Its scale was the result of unbridled ambition turned unshakeable desire, a desire which could not be fulfilled by the action of arms alone, but also demanded a battle of words and images.

The unusual complexity and tactical flexibility of psychological operations stem from their informational dimension, which is constrained by their definition and ethical legitimacy, resulting in a difficulty in telling right from wrong, or good from evil, and elevating the term 'psychological operations' to a multiplicity of meanings that results from the combination of its component words. This can be seen in the constant changes the term has undergone over the years (although always retaining the same sense), which we will now list in no specific chronological order: psychological warfare, ideological warfare, brain warfare, psychological operations, inform and influence activities, among others.

Before we continue, we must first contextualise psychological operations within all planned psychological activity that relies on media targeted at previously identified and selected individuals with the aim of influencing their perceptions, attitudes and behaviour, provided this is done to further military objectives.

Sun Tzu himself praised non-kinetic military action, believing that a skilful ruse could subdue an enemy army without fighting. His words, which still ring true today, are related to current-day deception, although that is not their only aspect. Enemy commanders must be confounded, driven to

madness if possible, and affecting enemy morale must be treated as high priority. The consequence of Sun Tzu's words was the escalation of psychological warfare.

Conflict and psychological action

Due to its length, the 1914-1918 conflict known as the Great War required complementary non-combat actions through which countries projected their power by providing just causes for the conflict and by garnering support for the recruitment effort. States were aware of the importance of psychological action.

Psychological action extolled ingenuity and the ability to conquer the enemy, glorifying physical violence and the use of kinetic means. Unlike today, the psychological operations of the past promoted hatred, praised loyalty and provided a justification that legitimised the war. The need to win hearts and influence minds proved that war was a far more complex task than a mere clash of armed men.

When developing an activity that seeks to convey a message, and in order for that message to be understood by a receiver, or receivers, the information environment in which that process occurs is crucially important. It is in this environment that individuals, organizations, or systems receive, process and convey information. It includes the cognitive process, which allows us to interpret a message, as well as the virtual and physical space in which that process occurs. Evidently, the technological advances of the second decade of the 20th century and the means available to act in the information environment were scarce in comparison to today.

In that environment, psychological action had to rely on the technological advances of the 19th century, such as the dissemination of the printed press, mass printing, the emergence of film, the telegraph, the telephone, and aerial distribution methods such as planes and balloons.

Psychological activities were designed to implement complex operations in which a set of non-kinetic activities were synchronised. All this activity was, in fact, propaganda, that is, intentional communication, an idea designed to influence the opinions, emotions, attitudes and behaviour of an individual, or group of individuals, for the direct or indirect benefit of the entity responsible for disseminating that idea.

Portugal's chief concern in Africa was Angola and Mozambique. The onset of the war brought with it the first German incursions into the territories of Angola and Mozambique, specifically at the military outposts of Maziúa, in Mozambique, and Cuangar and Naulila, in Angola. These incursions

were more than mere border skirmishes. In Portugal, they served to emphasise the power of foreign ideas and wills. The country felt the intensity and violence of the clashes early on.

It became necessary to fully understand the operational and strategic levels of war, as information and influence, once circumstantial elements of warfare, were now at least as important as its physical dimension. The Germans even conducted Influence activities deep in the remote inland territories, where they attempted to hinder the Portuguese efforts by fomenting unrest among the local populations, such as the native peoples of the area between the Cunene River and the south border of Angola, among whom the Kwanhama warriors were particularly fierce.

At the time, information travelled at much less speed than it does today. Nevertheless, the Portuguese people were aware of the goings on in the overseas territories. These were times of upheaval, fuelled by the high casualty and disease rates typical of the African territories.

Germany's declaration of war on Portugal, a little over one hundred years ago, led to the opening of a new European front and signalled the need to begin preparing the 'war machine' and to ready the 'human fabric' for a violent conflict. The country also needed to encourage patriotic sentiment and to justify its motives to the international community.

The importance of graphic communication was officially recognised because it served to convey information and functioned as entertainment, and it was used to translate a set of illustrations into posters, leaflets and postcards containing various messages of national identity, namely the work of Alfredo Moraes, issued by the National Press, and of Captain Menezes Ferreira, who collected his impressions on the Corpo Expedicionário Português in a book published in 1919.

Although the propaganda disseminated in the scientific, social and information community was conceptually different than the propaganda disseminated in the military, we have chosen to focus on their similarities with regard to tactical richness and the capacity to influence certain individuals. However, it is also important to remember that military propaganda is related to psychological actions carried out by enemy forces with the purpose of influencing and affecting a set of individuals, grouped by affinities, known as target audience.

Reducing propaganda to its ingenuity and capacity to influence does not make it an element of peace, nor does it herald an end to violence, quite the contrary; conquering and shaping minds can go beyond encouraging and praising the will to fight and to stand up for one's country. It can destroy an individual's entire moral structure for the rest of their lives, breeding resentment and hatred, factors that have a multiplier effect on the art of violence.

Today, controlling target audiences, individuals or groups of individuals who share similar affinities and values is a delicate matter, one that is difficult to manage in an information age in which high-speed internet allows for the rapid dissemination of messages that are likely to reach target audiences they were not intended for.

Things were much different one hundred years ago, when the main form of propaganda was, as we mentioned above, graphic communication intentionally distributed at predetermined times and places, which made it easier to decide which themes to use and to identify and control target audiences to validate a campaign.

The Great War was a war of attrition, where firepower and protection took precedence over manoeuvre. Great 'masses' were deployed to the front and technological advances in firepower led to seemingly rigid tactical behaviour. The concentration of 'masses' in the front ruled out individual targets, and the target became the 'crowd', that is, the military force as a 'whole'.

With regard to organizational structure, in 1914 the German propaganda machine was operated by two entities in coordination: a press division that answered to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and a policy section under the General Staff of the Army (Ventura, n.d.: 344). Their aim was to manage and destroy the enemy's fighting spirit, to keep the country's morale high and to influence public opinion, as well as to maintain friendly relations with neutral countries and secure their alliance.

The development and implementation of propaganda in France was rudimentary until 1916, as at the beginning of the conflict the country did not yet possess structures specifically designed for that effect. That same year, a foreign propaganda commission and a psychological warfare service were created under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Ventura, 2003: 344).

Portugal's ally, England, conducted its propaganda activities through a War Propaganda Bureau established early in the conflict. The organization's initial objective was to distribute printed materials in neutral countries and even in Germany, when possible, with the help of sympathisers who were sent the products by Swiss or Dutch mail. In 1916, with Lloyd George as prime minister, the structure underwent a reorganisation and the Department of Information was established with the mission of conducting psychological actions targeted at the adversary's civilian population, contributing to demoralise their military forces.

When compared to its allies and main enemy, Portugal did not have a propaganda machine and, as an alternative, the country issued decrees to hinder enemy efforts to acquire important information and to prevent enemy propaganda from reaching the Portuguese territory, military personnel and

population. The 1st General Division of the *Secretaria da Guerra* issued various decrees with recommendations on how to safeguard information, which included punitive sanctions for those responsible for security breaches. Mail censorship was one of several preventive actions (Ventura, 2003: 346).

The tool of psychological action - the illustrated postcard

Illustrated postcards played a key role in Portuguese propaganda and several series were issued based on photographs by Arnaldo Garcez Rodrigues, an officer in the Corpo Expedicionário Português. We also consulted different formats such as books and leaflets.

As we shall see, persuasive communications effectively promoted behaviour in soldiers and prepared the Portuguese people for war, contributing to their remarkable selflessness in the fight for survival and to their acceptance of the military intervention, thus aiding the war effort.

Furthermore, we would also like to emphasise that writings describing the activities and consequences of psychological action are not hard to come by and confirm that it has existed since ancient times. Its effects have at times been deemed crucial to the success of a battle or campaign. In the 19th century, Carl Von Clausewitz wrote about this effect in his work *Vom Kriege*, stating that war was no longer influenced by strictly military factors and now included other economic, diplomatic, psychological and social factors capable of interfering with operations. Clausewitz stated, in no uncertain terms, that war is much more than its seemingly predominant warlike characteristics.

However, it was not until the Great War that psychological action became a formal activity conducted by belligerents. Units specialising in propaganda were established in an attempt to influence or change an opponents' perceptions and, on occasion, those of allies. Around this time, airborne leaflet propaganda began being dropped and distributed using balloons and even planes. While a direct relationship cannot be established, reports suggest that psychological action contributed to increase desertions and surrender in the ranks, a testament to the usefulness and importance of this activity.

The British Department of Information was well aware of the effectiveness of postcards and printed over 90,000 postcards using 17 different photographs in 1917 alone, one of the most disseminated messages being the humane treatment of prisoners of war in England. In addition to other materials, such as reproductions of letters written by prisoners of war, leaflets or photographs, these services are estimated to have produced over 25,000,000 copies of psychological action materials.

In Portugal, in a time when the young Republic was struggling to establish itself, it became necessary to conduct campaigns to inform and mobilise the Portuguese people in support of the war

into which the country had entered by interning the German vessels that had sought refuge in the 'neutral' national ports. A postcard of the time depicting the character 'Zé Povinho' [the Portuguese everyman] carrying a soldier on his shoulders, framed by the banners of the allied countries and the slogan 'Long live the Fatherland, Long live the Army' is an example of this campaign.

We must now recall some present-day notions that frame the concept of psychological operations, as this will allow us to understand and analyse the postcards related to Portugal's role in the Great War issued by both national and international institutions. Our goal is then to identify the origins of these postcards, the motivations behind them, the messages they were designed to convey and the intended target audience of those messages, whether they were part of a plan of communications or created at random, whether they had objectives, and whether their goal was to change attitudes, perceptions and/or behaviour.

As mentioned above, the technological advances of the time were evidently rather modest compared to those of today. In spite of this, these postcards played an important role in the information environment of the time, as the use of photography and iconography depicting themes with which the recipients could relate accelerated the cognitive process and made them easier to interpret by a mostly illiterate population.

There is more to a military operation than the use of lethal means; it is also necessary to understand the stakeholders' motivations, be they leaders, military forces or populations, in order to shape their perceptions, influence their will power and persuade them to accept a desired result. In essence, as Sun Tzu wrote, one must endeavour to defeat the enemy without fighting. This conflict led to the development of psychological operations as a tool to achieve that objective.

Now that we have outlined the concept and definition of psychological operations, we must enrich it by listing its goals: to weaken the enemy's will power, to reinforce friendly sentiment, and to garner the support and cooperation of undecided parties.

When planning a psychological operation, one of the first steps is to identify potential target audiences, taking into account the space where military operations will be carried out and sustained. These target audiences are usually groups of people or individuals selected for their susceptibility to be influenced. They usually have common characteristics and vulnerabilities, and are prone to changing their attitudes, perceptions and behaviour. As for themes and symbols, it would be impossible to identify which to use and which to avoid without a careful analysis of the target audience. This brief analysis of the postcards issued in Portugal focuses on the Portuguese expeditionary troops and on the Portuguese population as preferred target audiences.

Once the target audience of a specific postcard has been identified, we are either simultaneously or concurrently driven to interpret it and to attempt to pinpoint its theme, as well as the categories of persuasion and symbols used in its conception.

In a time when the population was, for the greater part, illiterate, as mentioned before, postcards were a crucial link between soldiers and the homeland and thus helped spread the messages and themes they conveyed. The authors and manufacturers of these postcards were aware of the effectiveness of this simple element of communication, which had been popular since the late 19th century, and used different communication techniques to increase the target audience's receptivity.

The acceptance technique, which aims to establish a pleasant environment and a favourable mood, was used in a large number of postcards. Their ultimate goal was to seduce target audiences by conveying optimistic messages and appealing to individual feelings. This technique can be found in postcards portraying emotions such as love, friendship, dedication and devotion to others, to the homeland or to religion.

The simplification technique was also used, as these messages had to be translated into a language that target audiences with high illiteracy rates could understand. The answer was then to use symbols and iconography that these individuals could recognise. It was also a way of establishing the symbols of the young Republic, and the green and red flag was depicted in a prominent position in the postcards.

Repetition and argumentation can also be identified in several postcards which attempt to explain why it was necessary for Portugal to participate in the war alongside its allies. These techniques used photography and irrefutable evidence and were for that reason widely accepted by the recipients of the message.

The derivation technique, which consists of exploiting an already existing sentiment, is evidenced in postcards with messages based on religious issues, to which the target audiences were especially susceptible.

Heroes and national historical feats were evoked, providing a frame for the hyperbole technique in postcards which sought to exaggerate the importance of the events favourable to Portugal, while minimising or ignoring the country's failures.

Several Portuguese bodies were responsible for producing these postcards. The patriotic messages appealing to support to operations and to the war effort can be easily identified in the various postcards issued by the Corpo Expedicionário Português, by the Portuguese Red Cross Society or by

the *Empresa de Publicações Populares*. Other messages praising the nobility, bravery and courage of Portuguese soldiers can also be found alongside news of the alliance Portugal was a member of, which came out victorious in the conflict.

Brief final reflection

In conclusion, and taking into account the information environment of the time, psychological action contributed to the war effort by changing behaviour, raising troop morale and legitimising the country's participation and permanence in the war, with the psychological operations of the time serving the same purpose as propaganda. Furthermore, this field of action required the use of arguments, concepts and ideas capable of providing justifications and swaying both domestic and international public opinion, thus influencing perceptions on where the line between truth and falsehood was drawn regarding the legitimacy of war in international relations.

These postcards and the messages and symbols they contained acted as a credible, bona fide conduit of information and psychological action for their target audiences, the Portuguese soldiers and the Portuguese population. Produced in an age before electronic communications emerged, they were used as a vehicle of mass communication alongside newspapers, magazines and posters. Their popularity was tied to their low cost of production and the wide audience they were able to reach and, as the war unfolded, these postcards formed a veritable canvas of love, hate, passion, devotion, courage, dedication, patriotism, and a myriad other emotions.

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