

MILITARY LEADERSHIP IN THE 21ST CENTURY: PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE

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ABSTRACT

The geopolitical context of the 21st century has been marked by a radical transformation in the dynamics of conflicts and the role of the armed forces. The rupture of the traditional pattern of warfare with the rise of information and communication technologies has contributed to the evolution of Psychological Warfare as one of the most powerful strategies in the military arsenal, becoming essential in modern military leadership. In an increasingly digital and interconnected environment, the manipulation of information and psychological influence is not limited to the physical battlefield, but extends to the cyber spheres, establishing new challenges for military leaders.

This research aims to analyse how military leaders have adapted to Psychological Warfare in contemporary conflicts, in an era marked by information and persuasion techniques. As well as the impact of Psychological Warfare on the morale of military forces, on communication strategies, diplomacy and ethical issues and the importance of military leadership adaptable to the complex dimensions of Psychological Warfare and information.

Keywords: Military History; Military Leadership; Psychological Warfare; Propaganda; Contemporary Conflicts.

1. INTRODUCTION

War as a phenomenon of organized violence between two armies – which forms the basis concepts of war, has been undergoing changes due to the constant shift by the emergence of the new wars and new doctrines. In the new warfare contexts, the standard set by classical military literature (Clausewitz and Machiavelli) that war is the continuation of a political objective and that no means should be spared to achieve it, requires some requalification.

Leadership is fundamental to maintaining the balance of civil society in any context, particularly in upholding principles and guidelines that ensure political cohesion and social order. In the military domain, leadership is one of the fundamental pillars, being directly linked to the effectiveness of the armed forces.

According to the Headquarters Department of the Army, "Leadership is the act of influencing people by providing purpose, direction, and motivation to accomplish the mission and improve the organisation." In this sense, the leader and/or military commander play extremely important roles. History has witnessed the military leader not only as a commander and strategist but also as an essential element in management, motivation, and the morale of the troops. However, the leader's mission has evolved in accordance with the development of warfare, science, and technology.

The 20th century experienced firsthand the consequences of scientific and technological advancements and the importance of leadership in these challenges. One substantial change was the emergence of new doctrines of warfare that introduced unconventional conflicts to the world—conflicts that challenge the boundaries of traditional warfare and the physical domains of the battlefield, compelling the leader to adopt different characteristics. That is, an unconventional conflict forces the leader to distance themselves from traditional lines and concepts of leadership (Rosinha & Matias, 2015, p.25).

Unconventional wars raise various issues that spark debates extending beyond the age-old discussion about the legitimacy of war. In this scenario, studies on human violence are introduced, meaning that human behaviour and its relationship with war begin to be analysed with greater relevance, detail, and depth. In this sense, it is impossible to dissociate human behaviour from war, just as from leadership – "command actions involve the ability to influence human behaviour, gaining the trust of soldiers to achieve common and ethically acceptable objectives." (Matias, 2015, p. xiii).

The evolution of conflicts in recent years has shown the increasing use of Psychological Military Warfare – is an important operational tactic for achieving the desired outcome and a complementary strategic tool for leadership in contemporary conflicts. In this sense, what changes does this new context bring to military leadership?

This article explores the intersection between military leadership and psychological warfare, analysing how the effectiveness of military leadership can be amplified using psychological techniques on the battlefield and in managing subordinates. Although there is a growing academic interest in these topics in isolation, there is a significant gap in the literature regarding the integrated approach to these themes. The absence of consolidated theoretical models articulating military leadership and Psychological Warfare and their application highlights the need for conceptual and empirical deepening, justifying the scientific relevance of this research.

2. MILITARY LEADERSHIP AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE

Leadership is a complex concept, and according to Stogdill, "There are as many definitions of leadership as there are people who have attempted to define it." (Rosinha & Matias, 2015, p. 9). According to Borges, this act of commanding "is the process of influencing, beyond what would be possible, through the exclusive use of the invested

authority, human behaviour with a view to fulfilling the purposes, goals, and objectives conceived and prescribed by the designated organisational leader.” (Soares, 2023, p. 4).

Military sciences have dedicated themselves to studying military leadership, analysing the performance and behaviour of the leader—the military leader is the individual who bears the responsibility of motivating and influencing individuals subordinate to their leadership (Soares, 2023, p. 9). This individual must demonstrate a high capacity for decision-making and, consequently, create communication strategies, especially when the environment is adverse, as is the case in a war scenario.

The evolution of warfare and the international context defined at the beginning of the 21st century introduced the need to find new leadership strategies; that is, for an unconventional war context, an unconventional leader is required (Rosinha & Matias, 2023, p. 26).

“"With September 11, ethical aspects gained a new perspective—how to deal with an enemy that does not follow the same ethical principles of war, that uses civilians as shields and conducts suicide attacks? It is up to strategic leaders to manage this issue and communicate their type of engagement to society.” (Rosinha & Matias, 2023, p. 17).

During an armed conflict, the military leader is a manager of resources and, to do so effectively, must have both theoretical and practical knowledge of the studies that underpin leadership capacity. Image 1 shows the characteristics associated with leaders.

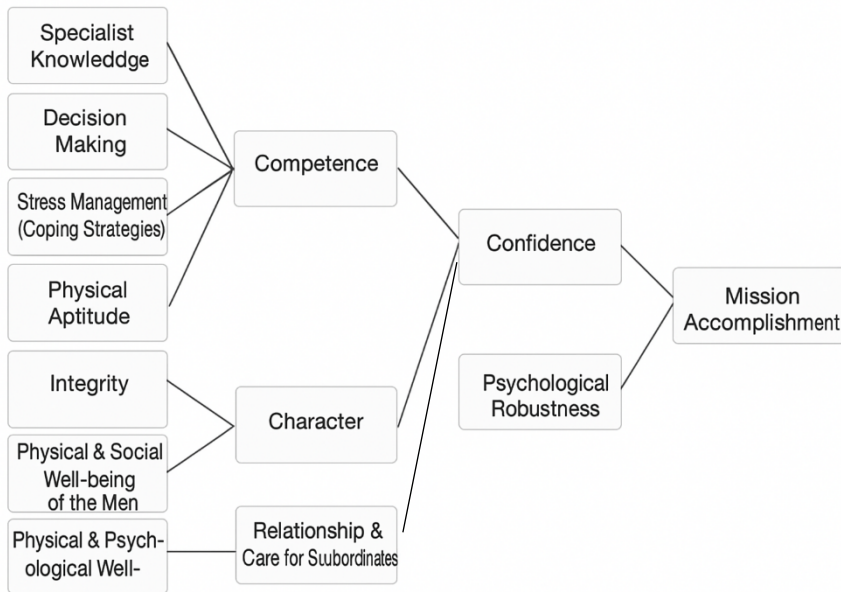


Figure 1: Characteristics of military leaders.

Source: (Rosinha & Matias, 2023, p. 14)

Throughout history, there is no noticeable substantial change (Kirchner & Akdere, 2017, p. 357-359) in the objectives and stages of training to which the leader is subjected – According to the Department of the Army, “Army leader development is achieved through lifelong synthesising of knowledge, skills and abilities from a combination of education, training, and experience.”. (Kirchner & Akdere, 2017, p. 358). However, the introduction of new technologies presents new challenges not only to the individual but also to the leadership doctrine itself. Military training equips a leader with sufficient knowledge to plan missions effectively and achieve the objective, regardless of the scenario (Rosinha & Matias, 2023, p. 25). The leaders must be trained for psychological resilience, and how to respond effectively to

psychological operations. In addition, they should develop a strong digital literacy, enabling them to operate in complex information's environments. In this sense, these individuals "should be the agents of change regarding the cultural literacy of their subordinates" (Rosinha & Matias, 2023, p. 26) and know how to find a balance between the art of war and social science.

Social sciences such as psychology, history, and sociology prove to be essential in the development of training programmes for leaders, particularly in the psychological domain (Soares, 2023, p. 4). Leadership thus presents itself as an interdisciplinary concept, interconnecting military sciences, psychology, and sociology (Rosinha & Matias, 2023, p. 26). The social dimension is of utmost importance in establishing a relationship between the leader and the subordinate – only in this way can successful leadership occur (Gazapo, et al, 2015, p. 183).

The military leader's ability to adapt to problems that arise in austere environments is known as adaptive leadership (Gazapo, et al, 2015, p. 184) – this corresponds to a conflict environment in which five contexts may challenge a leader's capacity to adapt, as shown in Image 2: "temporal location, the magnitude of consequences, the likelihood of consequences, physical and psychosocial proximity, and finally, the nature of the threat." (Gazapo, et al, 2015, p. 184).

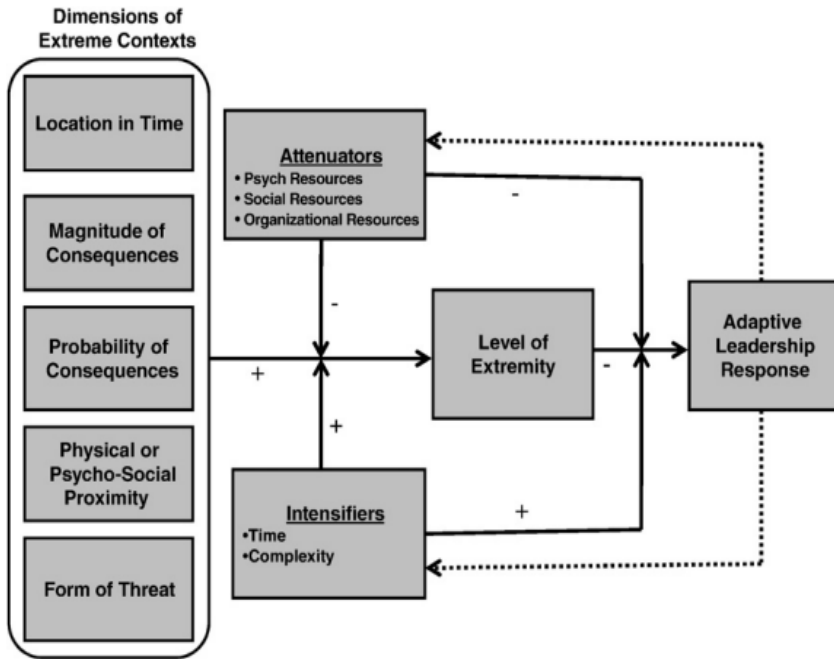


Figure 2: Typology of external contexts.

Source: (Hannah, 2009, p.899)

Ethical leadership is one of the fundamental concepts in studying this theme, that is, "(...) the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct (...) and the promotion of such conduct to followers."(Frescata, et al.,2015, p. 86). Ethics is part of the genesis of military conduct; therefore, it is essential for effective leadership—this concept reinforces the presence of conduct and norms that must be followed, whether during training or in the performance of official duties, such as missions (Soares, 2023, p.9-10).

According to Christopher Barnes and Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Doty, the definition of leadership consists of three main components. The first concerns the leader serving

as an ethical example to subordinates, who constantly observe their actions and decisions. The second involves the leader's ability to communicate the relevance of ethical issues and the norms demanded by military conduct. Lastly, the third component is the creation of ethical command environments, which allow for the successful achievement of desired objectives (Barnes & Doty, 2010, p.90-91).

"Ethical leadership is a two-way process. Ethical leaders must direct attention to ethical issues, enforce ethical standards, and allow subordinates to bring up ethical issues with them. Rewards and punishments should take place in an environment of open two-way communication. Subordinates must inform their leaders about ethical issues they may face (that the leader is unaware of), and ethical leaders must clearly inform followers of ethical standards." (Barnes & Doty, 2010, p.90-91).

In the various studies on leadership, several types of leadership are identified depending on the environment and the military context. One of the most common and important is "Leadership command" (Soares, 2023, p.10), which centres on raising awareness of the mission and its objectives to ensure its success (Soares, 2023, p.10). This stage of leadership corresponds to a more individual domain, which is also fundamental within the military sphere, contributing to the preparation for potential unpredictable situations.

The role of the military leader carries a strong individual connotation, whereby the person in charge must demonstrate psychological preparedness that is as strong—or even stronger—than their physical preparedness (Rosinha & Matias, 2025, p. 126). This is due to the demand for psychological resources (Gazapo, 2015, p. 188). The ongoing use of these resources in training, simulations, and missions leads to a growing focus on the psychological dimension of the leader. Psychological competence is a critical component of military leadership in the 21st century. More than simply serving

as preparatory support for war, it constitutes a fundamental pillar, becoming known as Psychological Warfare

Psychological Military Warfare is intrinsically linked to military leadership, both rely on the ability to influence the behaviour and perceptions of subordinates and the enemy through psychological actions and operations. These are used to motivate, inspire, and boost the morale of troops, whether in times of peace or war. In contrast, when directed at the enemy, the goal is to destabilise and demoralise. Broadly speaking, Psychological Warfare is also tied to a strategic communication approach (Cohen & Bar'el, 2017, p.15).

In a war context, the landscape is always complex and extremely intense, where violence becomes the first response. This introduces a psychological component within military sciences, explaining the phenomenon as an impulse—a biological reflex that places man in a counterattack position, driven by emotions such as fear, which the leader must manage with exceptional skill (Mattoso, et al., 2022).

The psychological game embedded in this war strategy elevates the phenomenon beyond traditional violence associated with physical and armed combat, beyond the calculations of a bullet's speed and accuracy or the planning of a strategy that positions army units at key points on the battlefield— According to researcher Nuño Rodríguez, Psychological Warfare carries a strong political component, which is particularly evident using propaganda. (Rodríguez, 2020, p. 90).

Psychological warfare becomes a weapon as powerful as those mentioned previously, possessing something as destructive as a firearm – the word or the phrase. Boris Pasternak once said that a phrase holds tremendous power – "the power of the glittering phrase" (Thompson, 2000, p. 9). The communication elements in psychological warfare simultaneously induce information warfare, through psychological operations conveyed via information technologies and traditional dissemination techniques such

as propaganda. These psychological operations – “a set of techniques used to influence the emotions, behaviours, and perceptions of individuals, groups, or even nations” (Cátedra, 2024) – do not necessarily take place during times of war. They are frequently used in peacetime with various targets – both military and civilian populations (Cohen & Bar’el, 2017, p. 16) – to persuade, manipulate, demoralise, and influence public opinion. This process of manipulating civilian populations is known as the “winning of hearts” and is one of the oldest strategies in Psychological Warfare. It is essential to clarify that psychological warfare and psychological operations/actions are not the same, although they are intrinsically linked:

“Psychological action is the use of a set of resources and techniques to generate emotions, attitudes, predispositions, and behaviours in individuals or groups that are favourable to the attainment of a desired outcome. Psychological warfare is characterised by the planned use of propaganda and its combination with other actions, with the aim of influencing the opinions, emotions, attitudes, and behaviours of opposing or neutral groups in order to support the achievement of national objectives» (Silva, 2007, p 259).

Psychological actions are primarily carried out through propaganda, which is “persuasion by non-violent means” (Silva, 2007, p 259), where the dissemination of information aimed at neutralising the enemy is executed via traditional and/or digital media platforms (television, radio, newspapers, social media, among others), as well as leaflets and posters, most of which are distributed by air forces in enemy-controlled zones (Cátedra, 2024).

Defining propaganda is a complex task, as it is an abstract concept. However, academic research offers several definitions, such as Harold Lasswell’s, who described propaganda as “the management of collective attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols” (Thompson, 2000, p.15). Leonard Doob defined it as “a

systematic attempt by one or more individuals to influence the attitudes of an audience through the use of suggestion, thereby controlling their behaviour” (Thompson, 2000, p.15). In 1937, the Institute for Propaganda Analysis defined it as “the expression of opinions or actions by individuals or groups deliberately designed to influence the opinions or actions of other individuals or groups with reference to predetermined ends” (Thompson, 2000, p.15-16). In this context, Doob’s definition may be the most appropriate, given the characteristics of propaganda in psychological warfare.

Nevertheless, propaganda is not the only component of psychological warfare. Disinformation, cyberattacks, and emotional manipulation are also central elements. In an increasingly digital and technological world, psychological operations are often supported by these platforms, assisting the military leader in identifying “strategic decision-makers” (Silva, 2007, p. 259) so that the mission’s objective can be successfully achieved.

The war phenomenon now requires components that go beyond military science alone. It becomes an interdisciplinary field involving psychology, sociology, philosophy, history, communication, and military sciences. Only by integrating these disciplines can one fully study the war phenomenon and its transformations, and in doing so, provide the leader with the knowledge needed to act effectively.

3. PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE AND THE CONDUCT OF WAR

The war violence that the 20th century brought about the necessity to regulate the conduct of war by imposing ethical and moral limits through laws and norms aimed at preventing the abuse of power during military actions. Psychological Warfare (PW) is framed within a specific context in International Treaties and Conventions; however, none of the defined norms explicitly address the practice of PW. Therefore, a careful interpretation of these norms is required to highlight violations of this type of warfare

according to the established rules of war. By “rules of war”, we refer to a series of laws and norms developed throughout the 19th and 20th centuries—primarily in the aftermath of the Second World War and with the onset of the Cold War. The United Nations is one of the most significant bodies in this regard. With a mandate centred on peacekeeping and conflict mediation through diplomacy as a primary strategic approach, and the use of force only as a last resort—requiring authorisation from the Security Council (Charter of the United Nations 1945, p. 29) — it seeks to regulate and limit armed conflict.

“Art. 44 – When the Security Council has decided to use force, it shall, before calling upon a Member not represented on it to provide armed forces in fulfilment of the obligations assumed under Article 43, invite that Member, if the Member so desires, to participate in the decisions of the Security Council concerning the employment of contingents of that Member’s armed forces.”. (Charter of the United Nations 1945, p. 29)

In addition, the UN works in conjunction with the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols to ensure that international armed conflict unfolds within a more humanitarian framework—especially in a world where the use of weapons of mass destruction, such as chemical, nuclear, and biological weapons, has become something natural.

In this era of technological and scientific advancement, the threat of cyberattacks represents a new front of warfare, necessitating a redefinition of the rules and limits of armed conflict. Parallel to these developments, we witness the rise of asymmetric conflicts such as terrorism and psychological warfare, both of which raise recurring moral and ethical questions, as previously discussed.

In Psychological Warfare, as previously analysed, we are dealing with a psychological game in which disinformation techniques may come into conflict with the standards

established by the Geneva Conventions, which prohibit methods that dehumanise civilian populations. The use of disinformation can create an atmosphere of violence that risks breaching the principle of proportionality, which, according to International Humanitarian Law (IHL), prohibits causing disproportionate collateral damage to civilian populations through military actions.

The boundary between influence and abuse manipulation is narrow, and the challenge is in identify psychological means that can be employed without violating human rights. Psychological warfare must be regulated by clear ethical and legal principles, it is ethical justified when used to reduce violence or to minimise human losses, however when it is employed to cause unnecessary suffering it cross the legal limits.

Ongoing psychological manipulation may be regarded as a form of psychological terror. It is considered morally questionable within the boundaries of warfare and potentially constitutes a violation of the right to human dignity.

War is a phenomenon that cannot be dissociated from Man and his behaviour, and for this reason, it is crucial that we know how to study and interpret it, developing new strategies and tactics that allow us to mitigate the consequences of acts of violence—most of which are extreme. In other words, it is essential to ensure that ethical boundaries are not crossed, regardless of whether the war is waged on a physical battlefield or in the digital realm.

4. CONCLUSION

Military leadership and psychological warfare in contemporary war contexts cannot be separated, as psychological warfare is essential for the success of leadership and the achievement of objectives during times of war.

A military leader bears the responsibility for human lives and must therefore possess the ability to act and adapt in hostile environments, without ever neglecting the social

dimension. The use of psychological strategies by such individuals goes far beyond traditional combat tactics, enemy demoralisation or boosting the morale of subordinates; through the manipulation and control of information, a military leader can construct an environment that is strategically advantageous in achieving their objectives.

A leader must be able to balance strength and intelligence, while maintaining a conscious understanding of the consequences of psychological warfare when making decisions, as the success of a war is undoubtedly linked to psychological warfare and its strategic use—always bearing in mind the power a single word can hold on to the battlefield.

The new dimension of military leadership challenges the norm established by the classical western literature on art of war, as previously mentioned. Today, war is no longer a merely continuation of politics. It is a phenomenon that is deeply connected to all domains of the human condition and the environment in which it takes place, including culture, society, psychology, among others. Modern warfare must adhere to the conduct imposed by a legal system that limits the excessive of force – an extended consideration that military leaders must constantly bear in mind.

In a globalised world without borders, where the internet serves as the primary pastime for nearly everyone, information is easily manipulated, and techniques of psychological dissemination and action are highly visible in military contexts. Nevertheless, this weapon is often regarded as harmless, revealing a significant gap in current legislation concerning the regulation and standardisation of war crimes, given that it can inflict consequences as profound as those of physical confrontation.

In this regard, it is necessary to reflect on why such actions are not considered dangerous weapons in armed conflicts, and to what extent, in a borderless, globalised

world where information flows freely, we are all potential targets of psychological operations—even when not directly involved in military conflicts.

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