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Special Issue:
Close Encounters in Irregular and Asymmetric Warfare

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Introduction

The Close Encounters in War journal is a new independent and peer-reviewed journal aimed at studying war as a human experience, through interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches. The journal studies how war affects the sphere of human relations, which can occur in a number of ways, through direct experience but also through indirect – intellectual – experience. When war is experienced indirectly, language becomes the medium through which people encounter war, for example through literature, journalism, politics or science. Close Encounters in War seeks to explore the condition, meaning and aftermath of both direct and indirect encounters with war and conflict.

The launch issue of the journal will investigate “close encounters” in the specific context of irregular and asymmetric warfare. We see this as a topical aspect that seems particularly apt to frame the changes occurred in warfare over the last decades. What today is referred to as “irregular warfare” is one of the most ancient types of conflict, as opposed to “conventional warfare”, which is a relatively more recent development. The combat strategies and tactics used by tribal warriors, modern guerrillas, resistance fighters and terrorists have been attracting the attention of military historians, strategists and intelligence experts, focusing on resistance, insurgency, counter-insurgency and more recently terrorism. Beside its practical efficacy on the battlefield, irregular war has always stirred popular imagination. But how do human beings experience this particular type of warfare? Does it seem more threatening and scary because it can involve civilians more deeply? Does it blur the traditional idea of war as open confrontation with a recognisable enemy?

The multidisciplinary collection of articles presented in this issue invites a reflection on irregular and asymmetric warfare that goes beyond military strategy and tactical effectiveness, and aims to examine this subject through the lens of “close encounters” in order to explore its impact on human experience. In this perspective, a few recurring elements emerge in all the five articles: irregular warfare involves an unequal fight between unequal enemies. There is no balance of power and this asymmetry between adversaries means that lines get blurred, for example between combatants and non combatants, or between regular and irregular forces. Irregular and asymmetric warfare blurs the lines and rules of conflict, but it also resurfaces the agency of those who are invisible in war.

The first three articles in the collection are more factual and they explore the blurred identities and often divided loyalties of those involved in irregular conflicts. According to their authors, those who fight “from below”, often the less powerful, find agency.

Brad St. Croix explores asymmetric warfare within the context of a wide conflict, focusing on the Pacific theatre of the Second World War. In Hong Kong, the British had to fight an irregular force as they faced a Japanese-inspired fifth column. The
author sees this as having a deeply destabilizing power for the British, even if blurring the lines between regular and irregular forces was a tactic often used by the Japanese. However, the interesting point that emerges from this analysis is that blurred lines and changing loyalties in this context were due to the multiethnic makeup of the colony. In the Battle of Hong Kong invisibility was key for the fifth columnists, who used hiding and disguise as well as tactics such as sniping to conceal their identities and destabilize the enemy. Their invisibility still represents a challenge for historians who want determine their numbers and identity.

María Gómez-Amich offers a study based on interviews with five former conflict zone interpreters who were locally recruited by the Spanish troops deployed in Afghanistan between 2003 and 2014 as part of the NATO ISAF mission. By looking at the narratives of these interviewees in the effort to analyse their agency, his study emphasizes many lines getting blurred, such as the line between east and west, foreign and local, military and civilian, but also those, perhaps less obvious, between trust and mistrust, loyalty and neutrality, which are the key ones for professional interpreters. In this context, locally recruited interpreters are given the role of gatekeepers thanks to their cultural capital and they experience blurred loyalties because they are often seen as traitors by their own group and as outsiders by their employers. Another important point in this analysis is that irregular warfare blurs the fundamental ethical principles of interpreting, as it accentuates the tension between neutrality and agency.

In his article Gian Marco Longoni looks at another contemporary example of irregular warfare: the Houthi insurgency begun in 2004 that ousted the Yemeni government in 2015. In his effort to examine the three reasons for the outcome of this insurgency, Longoni emphasizes once again the asymmetry of the conflict and the agency of the insurgents. They find agency through the use of violence and capitalize on the weakness of the Yemeni regime. But there are also other, more cultural reasons that can explain the outcome of the revolt: the Zaydi insurgents experienced a shared identity and shared narratives which can be dubbed as their cultural identity, which were keys in the context of this conflict. It seems that when cultural identity is not conflictual in itself, but clearly defined as in this instance, loyalty does not represent an issue. Asymmetry has a double impact here because while it is true that the fight is between unequal enemies, it is the insurgents who find strength in their cultural identity, whereas the regular forces are weak, dysfunctional and incapable of adequate counterinsurgency despite being the representatives of the institutions.

The second set of articles is more focused on meaning and representation. The concept of irregular and asymmetric warfare is interpreted in different ways, but both articles agree on one point: asymmetric conflict has the power to transform the individual, affecting the spheres of imagination, self-perception, and cultural reception. What these articles suggest is that asymmetric war almost always implies disequilibrium of forces and a polarisation of conflict as a struggle between “stronger” and “weaker” opponents, in particular women and children. By no
accident, in fact, these articles explore the issue of close encounters in asymmetric war from the standpoint of its cultural interpretation and representation.

In her analysis of the rape scene in Elsa Morante’s novel La storia, Stefania Porcelli talks about a literary encounter with war. The author interprets the concept of asymmetry as lack of balance between the adversaries, who are fragile actors who never win against stronger enemies. In this analysis the lines between victim and oppressor, innocence and evil, become blurred, as the author stresses how Morante insists on the concept of power, and of how the powerful (represented by Gunther, stronger but doomed to succumb to history), become themselves victims. Fear, sometimes terror, is at the core of this particular asymmetric conflict, in which the victim is stripped of agency because rape “is an act of violence against a woman wholly bereft of agency” (Porcelli, p. 72). But here it also represents the loss of innocence that bears a transformative power.

Benjamin Nickl sees asymmetric conflict through the eyes of child warriors in popular fiction. In his analysis of the representation of children in arms Nickl wonders whether they are a way to represent and give meaning to the trauma of war. Child characters invite a shift in the point of view on war, which can lead to a more genuine approach, as “audiences seem willing to suspend their disbelief readily” (Nickl, p. 85) when the narrator is a child. Nickl interprets the concept of irregular and asymmetric warfare very widely, including fictional conflicts against terrible monsters or evil warlords, but what these all have in common is that they all involve a shift in the point of view and the transformational loss of innocence as consequences of the trauma caused by war.

The selected articles range over a number of wars, different from one another in time, space, scale, and context; and their authors consider the topic of “close encounters in irregular and asymmetric war” from the standpoints of different disciplines and methodological approaches, among which, for example, cultural and military history, literary studies, gender studies, oral history, translation studies, and postcolonial studies. This variety reflects the multidisciplinary project of Close Encounters in War journal and will hopefully fuel further interest in the cultural and collateral aspects of war as a fundamental aspect of human evolution and cultural specificity. Irregular and asymmetric warfare blurs the lines and rules of conflict, but it also resurfaces the agency of those who are invisible in war.

The Editors

Simona Tobia and Gianluca Cinelli

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The Omnipresent Threat: Fifth Columnists’ Impact on the Battle of Hong Kong, December 1941

By Bradley St. Croix

Abstract: The battle of Hong Kong forced the British garrison to fight against an irregular force, something they rarely did in the Second World War. Numerous factors contributed to the raising of this fifth column force including British colonial attitudes towards non-white inhabitants of the colony. Japanese coercion was also used to gain information and support from locals. These fifth columnists aided the Japanese attackers by pinning down garrison troops with sniper fire and surprise attacks. They also provided valuable intelligence on garrison positions. The Hong Kong police and criminal gangs played important roles in this battle, the former not adequately suppressing the fifth columnists threat and the latter furthered their own interests while simultaneously aiding the Japanese attackers. The fifth columnists were not a vital part of the Japanese victory at Hong Kong, but they added to the numerous advantages that the attackers already possessed.

Keywords: Fifth Columnist, Hong Kong, Second World War, Hong Kong Police, Colonialism

The British colony of Hong Kong faced a unique situation among the Allied armies during the Second World War when it was attacked by Japanese forces in late 1941: the defending garrison it had to fight an irregular force. This unprecedented circumstance effectively negated the British garrison’s defence plans particularly once the irregular and regular elements of warfare were blended. Irregular warfare was not taken into account for the defence planning of the colony in the interwar years creating a major gap in the garrison’s defence. Questions surrounding the defence of Hong Kong against Japan began after the First World War and had a major impact on the fighting in the colony in 1941. Until 1921, Hong Kong was the main British Empire naval base in the Pacific when it was replaced by Singapore. After this change questions arose as to what to do with Hong Kong as a military base. Historian Kent Fedorowich argued this did not diminish Hong Kong’s strategic importance. Up until 1938 the British Admiralty still recognized Hong Kong as an important forward base in a possible war against Japan (Fedorowich, Cocked Hats and Swords: 117). It was to be used as a staging area for operations. When fighting broke out between China and Japan in 1937 Hong Kong was threatened as war raged near the Hong Kong border with China. When Canton was occupied by Japanese forces in 1938, Hong Kong was surrounded by hostile forces, and despite discussions to the contrary, was not abandoned by the British military. Christopher Bell argued that the demilitarization of Hong Kong in peacetime was rejected due to fears of losing prestige among their allies, enemies, and the colonial population (Bell, Our Most Exposed Outpost: 72). The ad hoc planning negatively affected the defence of Hong Kong in 1941.
As the Second World War began in 1939 the protection of the British Pacific colonies became secondary to fighting Nazi Germany. Resources were stretched thin, and as long as limited resources were used, Hong Kong could continue to be defended. As part of this policy, Hong Kong was classified in 1940 as an outpost to be held against the Japanese for as long as possible (75). The defenders of the colony were drawn from across the British Empire. They consisted of two regiments of the British army, the 1st Battalion, Middlesex Regiment and 2nd Battalion, Royal Scots and two Indian army battalions, 5th Battalion, 7th Rajput Regiment and the 2nd Battalion, 14th Punjab Regiment plus the locally raised Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps (HKVDC) and various Royal Navy personnel and ships. In late November the garrison was reinforced by two Canadian battalions, the Royal Rifles of Canada and the Winnipeg Grenadiers as part of the use of limited resources strategy to defend the colony. Kent Fedorowich argued the sending of two Canadian battalions to Hong Kong was a symbolic reinforcement that was part of a larger strategy designed to re-insure British allies of their commitment to defend their empire and to deter a Japanese attack (Cocked Hats and Swords: 157). These garrison troops were tasked to defend a portion on the Chinese mainland called the New Territories. The city of Kowloon, on the mainland, sat across from the island of Hong Kong. This was the battleground where the Japanese and irregular fought against the minimally supplied and undermanned garrison.

Fifth columnists, plain-clothed Japanese troops, looters, Triad gang members, and the numerous non-uniformed persons who attacked the colony are the focus of this article. The underground elements of the battle will be brought to the forefront. The conventional elements of the battle will only be explained when it is necessary to provide context to the activities and motivations of the fifth columnists and the other groups. Irregular warfare was used by the Japanese to compliment conventional warfare, a practice that often blurred the line between the two types of war in Hong Kong. The Japanese did not direct all of the groups working against the garrison, but the Japanese forces benefitted from it. In order to understand what, if any, impact the irregular forces had, the garrison’s recollections are heavily relied. The impact of the fifth columnists on the battle cannot be easily quantified but a re-examination of their role in the battle is long overdue. Confusion and fear were created by the fifth columnists and irregular forces even while most of their actions were ineffective in their original intentions. While the fifth columnists’ role in the battle was not essential to Japanese victory but their role is far more ambiguous than the lack of impact previously claimed.

The term fifth columnist will be utilized to provide some clarity to this confusing set of events. As the modern term of guerrilla warfare does not well represent the irregular fighting that occurred in Hong Kong. C. N. M. Blair’s study of irregular war created in the aftermath of the Second World War offers a useful explanation of guerrilla, “the official British definition is more limited in its application, for the word ‘guerilla’ is defined as ‘a full-time member of an organised irregular band engaged in open warfare in his own country for a cause

other than personal gain” (Blair, Guerilla Warfare: 2). However, this definition does not fit for the many individuals engaged against the garrison. Many people exploited the deteriorating conditions in Hong Kong to loot and rob, motivated by personal gain rather than political ideals. During the Second World War “fifth columnist” was a fairly new term used to describe an irregular band of fighters. It first appeared during the Spanish Civil War in 1936. Nationalist General Emilio Mola claimed that he was relying on four columns to push on Madrid while another column was waiting inside the city to join the attackers (Carney, Madrid Rounds Up Suspected Rebels: 2). The phrase fifth columnist quickly entered the lexicon to mean a group of people within a given territory that would aid an external enemy during an attack or invasion. It was widely used in the western military circles and media in the lead up to and during the Second World War. The use of fifth columnist for the battle of Hong Kong is still problematic as many of the participants cannot be said to be working for the Japanese directly.

Determining who the members of the garrison thought were fifth columnists is a difficult task. It appears that anyone who attacked the garrison troops and was not in uniform was labelled a fifth columnist. Looters and Triads are sometimes separated in the reports and diaries but the difference between the groups is unclear. Plain clothed Japanese soldiers were often mistaken as fifth columns but some of these soldiers had been in Hong Kong for an extended period thus blurring what the term fifth columnist actually can mean. Some, like Major Evan Stewart of the HKVDC for example, called them saboteurs (Actions of HKVDC: 4). The ambiguity of this term will be addressed. The definition of fifth columnist will be clarified by separating out the different groups and their motivation for fighting. Irregular forces will also be used to describe groups that cannot rightly be called fifth columnists.

Official documents from both British and Japanese sources downplay the role of the fifth columnists. On 29 January 1948 a supplement to the London Gazette was published, written by Major General C. M. Maltby, commander of British garrison at Hong Kong in December 1941. Maltby was one of the few to offer a definitive conclusion on the impact of the fifth columnists but offered a contradictory narrative of the fighting. The irregular forces are barely mentioned as Maltby concluded that the fifth columnists had caused little damage to Hong Kong and its defences and that their only real impact was “... straining the nerves of a number of the men” (Maltby, Operations in Hong Kong: 701). Maltby later contradicted himself in the despatch when he blamed the fifth columnists for denying the defenders the sole possession of the knowledge of the terrain as they led Japanese troops through the hills and around defensive positions. He was cut off from the actual fighting while in the underground headquarters of the garrison on the island. Also, the Japanese army did not include the fifth columnists in a description of the battle. In an American translated Japanese account of the battle, there is no mention of the fifth columnists at Hong Kong. In detailing the decision by Governor Sir Mark Young to surrender the colony, this document highlighted the confusion behind the garrison’s lines as one of the reasons Young had chosen to
capitulate on Christmas Day. But what caused the confusion was left unmentioned. Whatever the reasons for these omissions, the fifth columnists’ absence in Japanese and British accounts highlights the need to re-examine their role in the fighting.

The British colonisers created an environment ripe for Japanese victory and the recruitment of fifth columnists. Hubris among the defenders negatively impacted their preparations. One example is the strong connection between the British and Canadian defenders. Having fought together on the Western Front of the First World War and defeating the Germans led to overconfidence in the next war. Ted Ferguson, a Canadian author, demonstrated this attitude, “other than the shelling and the fifth-columnist snipers, though, he felt there was nothing to sweat about. The Japanese would never set foot on the island. As the Kaiser discovered in World War 1, when the Brits and Canucks got together, they were an unbeatable combination” (Desperate Siege: 110). This overconfidence coupled with the poor defence planning of the colony added to the long list of advantages that the Japanese possessed before the battle even began. British intelligence gathering was also negatively affected by this hubris. Antony Best has argued that British intelligence gathers and military leaders, simply did not believe that the Japanese would attack the British Empire. They believed the Japanese would turn to Thailand instead. Years of British neglect to provide resources to intelligence gathering and infighting caused the failure to predict Japanese intentions in 1941 (Best, British Intelligence and the Japanese Challenge in Asia: 192). Racial stereotyping contributed to this failure as British military commanders believed that the Japanese were poor fighters and not a threat. They were quickly proven wrong.

The attack on Hong Kong was a well-planned and coordinated affair. The Japanese ensured their pre-attack intelligence was as updated as possible by scouting the locations of defensive guns, anti-aircraft batteries, and possible landing spots on Hong Kong island. Major Stewart noted that before the battle there was nothing the officials in Hong Kong could do to stop Japanese nationals from gaining intelligence about the colony’s defensive positions. No acts of sabotage appeared to have been carried out before the battle, but artillery positions may have been established in warehouses before the battle. They were smuggled into the colony and kept hidden until the fighting began. Ken Cambon of the Royal Rifles noted these guns were firing from positions that could have only been prepared before the battle (Guest of Hirohito: 13). Stewart noted the accurate fire of a high calibre gun against the pillboxes on the shore of the island hidden inside a warehouse (Stewart, Actions of HKVDC: 16). Arthur Gomes of the HKVDC claimed these guns where located near the current Cross Harbour Tunnel on the southern tip of Kowloon (A Volunteer in the Battle for Hong Kong: 1). British preparations for the battle, by comparison, did not match Japanese efforts.

A significant change in the defensive strategy of the colony further weakened the garrison. The late Canadian reinforcement altered the original plan to leave a token force on the mainland to carry out demolitions. Maltby’s changes called for three battalions to defend a line of defence dubbed the Gin Drinkers Line, named
after the bay where the line ended. It was to be held for as long as possible. After
the line fell, all battalions were to retreat to the island and resist against the
attacking force. But the garrison lacked any reliable naval or air support, not the
only missing requirements of modern warfare for the garrison. Operational
security was lacking, a mistake exploited by the Japanese. Major A. Goring, who
escaped from Hong Kong at the end of the battle, noted that, “Japanese intelligence
was extraordinarily good. Consular staff, spies, probably Japanese officers and
men in disguise, and possibly fifth columnists, had made an extremely accurate
and comprehensive survey of all our fixed defenses [sic] and vital
communications, and of the role of our troops during ‘morning’ exercises,” before
the battle began. Allowing these exercises to take place without security put the
defenders at a large disadvantage as the Japanese could see troop strength and
organization. Goring also detailed how little was done by the Hong Kong police
and the colonial government to stop Japanese intelligence gathering. One such
occurrence was the failure to remove a Colonel Suzuki from the colony after the
true intention of his mission in Hong Kong was discovered. Japanese and British
officers had often been exchanged in the inter-war years to learn each other’s
language. When it was pointed out that Suzuki had no intention to learn English,
the Japanese Consul-General admitted he was really an Intelligence officer. He was
asked to leave Hong Kong, but no action was taken on his deportation. Fear of
upsetting the Japanese played into these decisions as Oliver Lindsay described:
“During the months before the Japanese invasion, the Hong Kong Government, in
keeping with the War Office’s policy, did not take rigorous action in the face of
blatant Japanese hostile provocation. For example, the Governor, then Geoffrey
Northcote, reported that Formosans were entering the Colony as fifth columnists.
He wanted to deport them, but the Foreign Office cautioned against such action,
fearing reprisals” (The Battle for Hong Kong: 63). Goring noted the extent of this
intelligence work “[…] the Japanese were able to gauge very accurately the exact
minimum force necessary to capture Hong Kong, the most advantageous landings
points, and to destroy or disable our fixed defences and vital communications
piecemeal very rapidly and methodically.” Reports on Japanese strength at the
Hong Kong border where also incorrect. In a report September 1941 it was claimed
that there were only 5,000 Japanese troops along the border: Poor intelligence
gathering and lack of action on the part of the colonial government severely
hampered the garrison’s ability to fight both the Japanese forces and the irregular
forces.

Understanding who the fifth columnists were and why they fought for the
Japanese is a difficult task. Establishing how many took part in the battle is even
more difficult due to the fluid definition used in primary sources. In his memoir of
the battle, Leo Paul Berard of the Winnipeg Grenadiers claimed he later found out
that there were over two thousand fifth columnists. (17 Days Until Christmas: 61.)
James MacMillan of the Royal Rifles claimed that the island “teemed” with fifth
columnists who had been in place on the island for well over a year: Arthur
Gomes did not provide an exact number but said that there were many fifth
columnists: Some fifth columnists were Japanese nationals who were rewarded

and decorated by the Japanese army for their work before and after the battle (Stewart, *Actions of HKVDC*: 4). They were easily able to obtain employment to disguise their true purpose in the colony as no real control measures were put in place at the border (Endacott, *Hong Kong Eclipse*: 64). Despite this, the majority of the fifth columnists where Chinese living in Hong Kong. Over 750,000 people entered Hong Kong in the period from July 1937 to 1938 fleeing the war in southern China. Around 30,000 were forced to sleep in the streets as the colony was not equipped to handle the excess population (11). The poor treatment of these people by the colonial administrators led to many civilians assisting the invaders despite Japanese conduct in the war with China. Historian Gerald Horne cited racism and colonial repression as some reasons why the colony fell and why people chose to fight against the garrison (*Race War*: 31). The lack of recruiting of these same people for defence purposes also contributed to the fall of Hong Kong. Many in the colonial and military administration feared arming the Chinese population as they doubted their loyalty to Hong Kong (31). The large number of Chinese living in the colony could have contributed greatly to defence of the colony especially concerning so many were refugees fleeing Japanese violence on the mainland.

Many of the fifth columnists were identified in garrison documents and recollections as being supporters of Wang Ching-wei, the leader of the puppet government established by the Japanese in 1940 at Nanking. His name is now synonymous with traitor in China for his collaboration. Wang was a member of the Nationalist Chinese government for much of the 1930s (Boorman, *Wang Ching-Wei*: 515-516). Wang became disillusioned with the war against Japan and subsequently left his government position in late 1938. In his new position at Nanking, Wang sought to bring peace between the Nationalist government based at Chungking and Japan. His government shared the pan-Asian and anti-Western views espoused by Japan’s government (519). His supporters used Hong Kong as their headquarters and even published their own newspapers in the early days of the movement. Their ranks continued to grow as some supporters slipped into Hong Kong with the thousands of refugees (Snow, *Fall of Hong Kong*: 46). Certainly these principles were attractive to some of the people living in Hong Kong and China which is why they supported the Japanese attack as fifth columnists. The goal of overthrowing the British colonisers and restoring Asian control of Hong Kong made Europeans who lived through the battle view these supporters as traitors. American journalist Gwen Dew, who was in Hong Kong when Japan attacked, was one holder of this opinion (Dew, *Prisoner of the Japs*: vi). She recounted, “the traitorous Wang Ching-wei Chinese took off their civilian clothes and stood in their true colors [sic], the greenish uniform of Japan” (48). Dew was not the only one to assume the fifth columnists were supporters of Wang. P. A. MacMillian of the Royal Artillery assumed that the fifth columnists shooting at the troops retreating through Kowloon were either Wang supporters or ethnic Chinese from the Japanese colony of Formosa. Benjamin Proulx, a naval reservist living in Hong Kong, claimed that the majority of the fifth columnists were Wang supporters (*Underground from Hong Kong*: 24). The claims of traitorous behaviour were

influenced by the feelings of racial superiority on the part of the Europeans in the colony.

The fifth columnists’ contributions to the battle are subject to many rumours and unconfirmed reports. Some events border on hyperbole but many events are collaborated in numerous accounts. To better understand these events, they will be grouped into four main categories; assistance to Japanese, sniping, sabotage, and signalling. Each will be covered below. Clothing was often used by Japanese troops and irregular forces alike. The Gin Drinkers Line fell in part due to the Japanese use of clothing to confuse the garrison. Japanese troops in civilian clothing had been spotted by the Redoubt’s commander cutting barbed wire and telephone lines around the Shing Mun Redoubt. Elements of irregular warfare, blended with conventional tactics, were well executed by the Japanese leading to the unhinging of the Gin Drinkers Line. Once the wire was cleared, the Japanese troops employed the infiltration tactics they had perfected in the war with China. Once the Gin Drinkers Line fell, the British troops began to fall back to Kowloon for evacuation to Hong Kong island. A. Goring recalled that Japanese troops entered Chinese homes and took all the clothes they could find to disguise themselves. They moved through streets unnoticed and were able to use the air raid tunnel systems to move behind the garrison lines. Captain Everette Denison of the Royal Rifles described his difficulty in telling between the crowds of Chinese refugees and Japanese troops, who had just landed on the island especially during the engagement near the Sai Wan Fort. Benjamin Proulx recalled seeing Air Raid Precaution (ARP) helmets scattered on the road near Repulse Bay and speculated these were disregarded by fifth columnists who had been using them as a part of a civilian disguise (38-39).

The use of surprise attacks on garrison positions further added to the confusion of the battle. One of the more brazen attacks by the fifth columnists struck the police training school. Men were seen making signals in the hills near the Police Training School outside Kowloon on the night of 11th December. As the police fired on signallers, loud explosions were heard near the school as British soldiers were attacked by ‘Chinese’ with grenades. It was later revealed that they were Japanese troops in civilian clothes. The police were ordered to abandon the station and retreat to the waterfront of Kowloon to be evacuated. The Japanese used deception to move closer to the school and to force the retreat of the police from the mainland. Surprise was also used on the island. D. M. McDougall claimed, “there was a definite existence of a Chinese Fifth Column and these were used to guide small Japanese parties, start rumours...” He also noted that ARP tunnels were used by the Japanese troops, guided by fifth columnists move across the island and attack garrison troops on the west side of the island causing confusion and surprise. The Middlesex war diary details the splitting of the garrison on the island: “There is not the slightest doubt that they were assisted by followers of Wang Ching Wei, and fifth columnists, who acted as perfect guides, and by the morning of December 19th [sic] they had nearly reached the crest of JARDINES LOOKOUT [sic], the occupation of which a once threatened the East and West
Communications of the Island, and enabled them to overlook the Wong Nei CHONG GAP [sic].” The splitting of the garrison on the island brought about the fall of the colony and the fifth columnists played an important role in this process.

The actions of the fifth columnists created confusion and fear among the members of the garrison. The fifth columnists struck randomly at numerous points all over the colony seemingly coming out of nowhere. Homemade bombs placed on roadsides and sent through the mail added to the confusion. Several of these bombs went off before the Japanese attack began (Banham, Not the Slightest Chance: 27-28). For example, one bomb killed a civilian and wounded another at a factory in Lo Lung Mei Village in the northeast corner of the New Territories. Most of these bombs did little damage including one placed outside the Kowloon Motor Bus Company where garrison vehicles were stored. Another bomb was discovered on open ground near the Castle Peak Road near the mainland’s coastline, requiring the police’s attention to be removed. These bombs were mostly ineffective, but they demonstrated the extensive operating area of the fifth columnists. Wenzell Brown, an American professor, was present at the battle and described the fear that overcame Canadian troops: “They had been in Hong Kong for only a few weeks and, until the fighting started, had been stationed in Kowloon. For days they had fought in unknown territory against the hardened Japanese troops. They had been outnumbered five to one. Every passing coolie might be a Japanese in disguise. They had come across their own sentries garroted to death. Horror was in their eyes” (Brown, Hong Kong Aftermath: 35). Most of Brown’s account is anti-Japanese propaganda but this description aligns with other accounts of the irregular elements causing fear and panic in the garrison ranks. Conventional battles are confusing on their own, the adding irregular elements further adds to the fog of war.

Another method of disruption was the sending of fake signals to confuse garrison troops. The war diary of the East Infantry Brigade recalls a confusing exchange of orders that no one in the garrison seemed to have made. Rumours of a Japanese landing on Hong Kong island on 15th December was brushed off as a fifth column message. Telephone lines were cut causing communication problems between different military and civilian organizations of the garrison. Japanese leaders were also thought to be listening in on garrison communications by tapping into the communications network. As the Royal Scots war diary mentioned that no telephone line could be treated as secure, steps were taken to encode messages. There were numerous instances of the police investigating reports of fifth column activities like signalling or snipers only to find nothing at the reported location. The 1st Battalion Middlesex were put into danger by the confusion created in the cancelling of orders which were placed again leading to them almost being cut off by snipers and other fifth columnists. The sniping was often random and missed their targets, but the confusion created cannot be discounted.

At different points during the battle there was confusion over who the garrison troops were engaging in combat. “C” Company of the Royal Rifles engaged in a
fire-fight and hand to hand combat with an unidentified force at Sai Wan Fort on the night of 18th December when the regular Japanese landed on the island. The force was thought to be comprised of Chinese coolies as the platoon commander Lieutenant A. B. Scott reported to the Company Headquarters. The Canadians were pushed back from the fort. This setback led to even more confusion as Eastern Brigade Commander Brigadier Wallis argued with Major Bishop of the Royal Rifles about who controlled the fort. Wallis was convinced that Canadians held the fort, while Bishop, who commanded the Canadians in the area, knew this was not the case. A counterattack on the fort revealed the dead bodies of regular Japanese troops and Chinese fifth columnists wearing armbands bearing Japanese symbols. The enemy was cleared from the side of the hill on which the fort stood but the garrison could not retake the fort due to its very high walls. Measures were eventually adopted in an attempt to deal with the confusion caused by the fifth columnists and plain-clothed Japanese soldiers.

As the battle raged, panic over the fifth columnists led to extreme actions by the garrison. In his memoir, Canadian signaller William Allister detailed the order to shoot any suspected fifth columnists on sight. Allister vividly recounted a Canadian officer was questioning a man, but language difficulties precluded the man from answering so he was subsequently was taken behind a building by two Canadian soldiers and shot. Allister’s recollection of this incident shows the psychological toll that the killing of possible civilians could have on the members of the garrison. He notes that the two soldiers returned looking distraught. Allister described the shooting as “cold-blooded murder” and fought back nausea (Where Life and Death Hold Hands: 24). This led Allister to question who was responsible for the man’s death and he recounts being very shaken by the shooting. John Sutcliffe Whitehead, an anti-aircraft gunner during the battle, recalled worrying about sniper fire in houses behind him on the island early in the battle. Squads were despatched to capture anyone with arms and execute those caught with arms whether they were firing them or not. Causing psychological stress to the defenders may not have been the intended consequence of the Japanese use of fifth columnists but stress was caused by these actions and negatively affected the troops’ ability to fight.

Numerous cases of sabotage were reported to be caused by fifth columnists. When the conventional battle commenced many attempts were made at disrupting the garrison. As pre-planned demolitions of bridges and roads were carried out on the mainland by British engineers, fifth columnists undid much of this work. Communication lines were severed early in the battle and the wire leads of the explosives were cut after a British demolition teams had left. (Stewart, Actions of HKVDC: 8). Regular British troops were rushed in their demolition work and continued their retreat to the Gin Drinkers Line. Minor attempts at sabotage were conducted like putting paraffin in fire buckets in hospitals.

Fifth columnists caused disruption to the transportation system of the garrison. Lorries were a frequent target causing delays of ammunition, food, and troops. At one point in the battle, a police car was struck by a truck and some police were
killed. The war diary makes no mention if this was an intended attack on the police. The fifth columnists used numerous methods of attack and therefore this tactic could have been a deliberate attack. Charles Barman of the Royal Artillery provided important insights into the impact the fifth columnists had on the garrison’s logistics. He served as a Battery Quartermaster Sergeant responsible for providing ammunition to the various guns placed throughout Hong Kong moving ammunition from central dumps. When he was evacuating from the mainland, the ship he was on suddenly stopped in the middle of the harbour during an air raid directed at Kowloon. When Barman went to the wheelhouse and ordered the coxswain to get the ship moving, the latter who was trying to make the ship a sitting target for the planes, Barman drew his revolver on the coxswain and got the ship under way again. Upon reaching Hong Kong, Barman arrested the coxswain for being a fifth columnist who had been in the employ of the Japanese from before the battle (Barman, Resist to the End: 23-24).

Sniping and random rifle fire was the most used tactic by the fifth columnists. Numerous accounts of the battle, both civilian and military, detail random rifle fire from odd sources. Arthur Gomes also recalled coming under fire while moving through Kowloon at the beginning of the battle. The firing began early on the island as “C” Company of the Middlesex Regiment reported sniping on motor transport on the island on 9th December. Sniping was directed at troops who were directing the evacuation of the mainland. Denison detailed sporadic sniping behind the lines. Patrols were conducted by the Royal Rifles to locate the snipers but were unsuccessful. Whitehead recounted feeling worried about sniper fire coming from behind him on the island before the Japanese had landed. He claims this fire came from Wang supporters who had buried arms in fake graves in Happy Valley on the island. While it is difficult to determine completely who was behind all the sniper fire, the firing that began on the island before the Japanese landings show that fifth columnists put the garrison on edge. The unskilled nature of the fifth columnist sniping made it no more than a nuisance for the garrison but did strain the nerves of many of its members and epitomized the ambiguous role of the fifth columnists.

Artillery signalling was the main way that the fifth columnists aided the Japanese. At night, any light was used by the Japanese gunners to hit mobile targets on the island. The dangers of light and moving convoys at night gave the fifth columnists an opportunity to strike the transportation of the garrison. Charles Barman faced two such instances of this fifth column activity. When bringing a convoy of trucks along the coast of the island, Barman noticed flashes of light directed at the mainland. He decided to have the convoy push through to a small village and take cover from a suspected impending artillery barrage. The resulting bombardment did no damage to the convoy but the Chinese drivers had run from the trucks from fear of the artillery shells. After a delay, the convoy loaded ammunition with new drivers although one truck was destroyed by artillery fire. When loading another convoy, Barman noted that a Chinese driver had turned on the lights of the truck he was driving. Once the convoy was underway, an artillery
barrage opened up on the convoy but the suspected fifth columnist disappeared before he could be handed over to the police (Barman, Resist to the End: 36, 46). The East Brigade War Diary detailed that when convoys moved by the Canossian Mission near the north shore they came under artillery fire.\(^6\) While most of these artillery barrages did little damage, they did cause delays in moving ammunition to the various guns around the island and causing some Chinese drivers to desert.

The fifth columnists signalled the Japanese troops on the mainland to direct artillery to targets on the island. This crude method of intelligence gathering was used by the Japanese gunners with devastating effect. Garrison anti-aircraft guns, artillery positions, and coastal pillboxes were targeted. The police war diary noted several occurrences of signalling activity.\(^7\) The East Brigade war diary noted that when pillboxes were occupied, they were immediately fired on by Japanese artillery. Events like these made their war diarist claim, “there can be no doubt that the enemy made successful use of Chinese & Indian 5th Columnists.”\(^8\) Multiple methods were used to signal the Japanese gunners including flares, flashing lights, and even waving blankets towards the mainland. When violations of the blackout were noticed by the police towards the battle’s end they opened fire on the offending house or building.\(^9\) Panic and a severe lack of manpower was the cause of this drastic response to the supposed fifth column signalling.

The role of the Hong Kong Police is important to understand as its members most often engaged with the fifth columnists and those civilians aiding the Japanese invaders. The police’s main duty was to prevent fifth column activities and maintain order behind the frontline but were also used in a conventional combat role as infantry.\(^10\) These responsibilities blended elements of conventional and irregular warfare by members of the garrison. In August 1941, the police were officially deemed eligible to become militia by Governor Geoffrey Northcote and Legislative Council if the colony were ever invaded. This was done to give them the protections of international law for combatants.\(^11\) Training with revolvers and rifles took place but it is unclear what types of weapons were used by the regular police.\(^12\) Their military training was quite limited. Before the battle attempts were made by the Japanese to cause police to desert. They distributed pamphlets that encouraged Sikh police to defect to the Japanese while the loyalty of the Chinese detectives was in question (Jones and Vagg, Criminal Justice in Hong Kong: 177). The police force was not ready for the war.

At the beginning of hostilities, the police rounded up enemy aliens and took them to holding areas. The Japanese consulate was sealed off and all diplomatic staff were interned. Responsibility for patrolling urban areas and the waterfront of the island in an anti-sabotage role fell on the police force. When the Japanese landed on the island police acted as regular infantry. The police were also responsible for detaining individuals suspected of being possible fifth columnists. Numerous Chinese people of doubtful loyalty were detained. In one instance numerous suspected fifth columnists were rounded up and shot on a street which later became known as Blood Alley (Snow, Fall of Hong Kong: 61). Maintaining of order often went to extreme measures. Looters were killed to control them at

warehouses along the Kowloon coast. When the police began to lose control of the situation, they decided to let the looting go on instead of letting the material and food fall into the hands of the enemy."

The police sometimes did more harm than good by initiating confusion and panic amongst the garrison, “the Kowloon Police arrived [on the mainland] in a very nervous condition on the 10th and spread fantastic stories of fifth column activity.” The panic sowed on the mainland infected the troops on the island. The pressures of combat took their toll on some men’s mental health. Two separate reports detailed the death of Chief Inspector Albert Baker when he committed suicide after being severely reprimanded for setting a poor example for his subordinate officers. He was found dead with a gun shot wound to the head. The chaos of battle and their lack of training took their toll on the police, severely affecting their ability to maintain order in the rear areas of the battle. In the documents created in the battle’s immediate aftermath, the police were credited with effectively handling the fifth columnist threat. This conclusion does not hold up to scrutiny. Maintaining reputations in the post war period, no doubt, accounted for this situation. The action of the fifth columnists has shown the police were not effective in reducing the impact of irregular war on the Hong Kong garrison.

Criminal organizations in Hong Kong blurred the lines between loyalty and the two sides of the battle. It was often claimed that these groups helped to suppress the fifth column threat, but they often acted in their own interests, further adding to the chaos and confusion of the fighting for their own gain. Yet their exact role in the battle is unclear partly because of a deal struck with the Hong Kong government. A rumour spread that a mass murder of white civilians by Triads was to occur the night of 11th December. Arthur Gomes heard after the war that the plot was designed by the Japanese and they paid the Triads to kill families to demoralize the garrison troops (Lai, Recollections of the Battle of Hong Kong: 31). This resulted in a meeting between police representatives and the leaders of five Triad Societies. Kwong Chi Man and Tsio Yio Lun, Hong Kong historian and author respectively, noted that the Triads demanded a large sum of money far beyond what the British could provide. The negotiations did not go well initially. Representatives from the Chinese Nationalist government were brought in and managed to reach an agreement with the Triad leaders. An agreement was made between the Nationalist Chinese and Triad leaders that these organizations would not assist the Japanese to keep order in the colony (Kwong and Tsioi, Eastern Fortress: 183).

In exchange the Triads could extract “protection” money from the Chinese civilian population after the battle. The agreement was kept secret in the post war years, the war diary of the Hong Kong police was even altered to maintain secrecy. The offending passages describing the events of the meeting were altered, “the cooperation of the Triad Societies was won.” It was followed by the thinly crossed out “at the cost of the substitution of protection racket on Chinese Civilians in lieu of the anti foreign movement.” Documents were not the only sources to hide the
truth. In the official British army history of the Battle of Hong Kong, S. Woodburn Kirby claims that, “in general the Chinese population remained subdued and orderly, unmoved by propaganda leaflets dropped by enemy aircraft. Cases of armed banditry however did occur in the air raid shelter tunnels. These were effectively dealt with by the Chungking Government secret societies, which had been ignored in time of peace, but whose assistance was now sought and freely given” (Kirby, The War Against Japan: I, 127). The last sentence of this passage is simply untrue. Crime was not controlled nor was assistance freely given. The price was extremely high for those civilians left after the surrender. The colonial government traded the safety of the European population for that of the Chinese inhabitants.

The connection between the fifth columnists, criminal organizations, and the Nationalist Chinese government did little to help the colony’s defence. The garrison received some support from the Chinese Nationalist Government, but these representatives provided little intelligence support (Jones and Vagg, Criminal Justice in Hong Kong: 178). The police claimed to have worked with the Nationalist Chinese to stop the fifth columnists and limiting their impact on the battle. The criminal organizations were also part of this, but their role is unclear. While the relationship between the Nationalist government and the criminal organizations is beyond the article’s scope, it is important to understand why the fifth columnist threat was misrepresented by these two groups. P. A. MacMillan claimed that the groups under the control of Admiral Chan Chak and Colonel S. K. Yi of the Nationalist Chinese military helped to keep order. MacMillian escaped Hong Kong with Chak and Yi near the battle’s end and must have learned about the supposed Nationalist contributions straight from them, skewing his take on what had occurred. The Chinese Nationalists’ need to inflate their own importance at British expense cannot be discounted as they relied on British, and American, supplies and financial support to stay in the war against Japan. The Nationalist’s suppression of fifth column activity appears to be heavily inflated for political reasons.

Once the battle began, assistance was offered by the Chinese nationalists to conduct irregular attacks against the Japanese troops on the mainland. These guerrillas would be able to attack the Japanese lines of communication. It was originally agreed that this force would be supplied with one thousand grenades taken from the ammunition magazines of the garrison. Originally there was difficulty in reaching the arms as one of the magazines was under Japanese fire but on the second attempt the grenades were retrieved. Giving the grenades to the Nationalists was ultimately rejected by Governor Young. There is no reason given for this decision in the official files. This resistance to arming the would-be guerrillas was part of the unofficial policy of keeping arms out of the hands of the colony’s ethnic Chinese population. The colonial government distrusted the Chinese and thought the armed guerrillas might be convinced by the fifth columnists to turn the weapons against the British (Horne, Race War: 74). The
colonial government denied the garrison a chance to regain some advantage over the Japanese attackers due to concerns of the criminal gangs turning against them.

The police war diary contains numerous reports of rice riots breaking out with the Triads encouraging civilians to do so. Civilians queued at shops to receive food after rationing had been instituted. The police would respond to reports of violence and bring order back to the distribution of rice. Despite the agreements reached with the Triads to maintain order, they were accused of inciting disorder at rice distribution locations. They used the resulting chaos to loot rice, nearby stores, and warehouses. Some of these claims of criminal activity were rejected by the war diarist for the police. But after the headquarters of the Shaukiwan Triad Society was raided after one such report, the claim was determined to be “groundless”. The police may have avoided making any arrests against this group of Triads as they were supposedly supporting the garrison. Encouraging others to riot was done by the Triads to further their own interests. While their intents may not have been to help the Japanese, Triads’ actions certainly contributed to the Japanese victory in Hong Kong. The criminal groups actions show that the irregular elements in the battle were far from clear as to their loyalties and intentions.

Fifth columnists added to the numerous disadvantages that the British defenders of Hong Kong already faced in December 1941. Prior to the outbreak of hostilities, the British government hoped to avoid war with Japan so little tactical planning was conducted in 1941 and Hong Kong was not prepared for war. The Canadian reinforcement failed to stop the Japanese attack. The British garrison leaders’ hubris came from an overconfidence based on racial stereotypes that the Japanese were poor fighters. The police, the intelligence apparatus, and the Hong Kong government did little to stop the fifth column threat before the battle and could do little once the fighting broke out. The blending of conventional and irregular warfare created many problems for the garrison. Assistance to Japanese such as guiding them along trails, sabotage of vehicles, sniping, and artillery signalling by fifth columnists and other irregular elements advantaged the Japanese attackers over the British garrison. The ineffective work of the Hong Kong police to curb the fifth column threat only compounded the problems while even generating more issues for the garrison defenders. The mishandling of the criminal organizations added to the chaotic fighting. The Japanese victory was not dependent on the fifth columnists, the ambiguous influence by the fifth columnists and other irregular forces can no longer be ignored as an important factor in the battle of Hong Kong.

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Life in Conflict: A Series of Narratives by Locally-Recruited Interpreters from Afghanistan

By María Gómez-Amich

Abstract: Although irregular warfare (IW) is considered the oldest form of warfare, the war scenarios have considerably changed in the 21st century. Nowadays, IW seems to plague much of the non-Western world (White, *Some Thoughts on Irregular Warfare*) and, consequently, new actors, strategies and approaches have been brought into play, resulting into a new balance between State and Non-State organizations. Accordingly, and considering that “winning the war has ceased to mean only the annihilation of the enemy, but also transforming civilians into allies in the theatre of war” (Cumming, *Influencing the Population*: 43) collaborations between civilians and military personnel – based, among others, on new warfare tactics such as Petraeus’ Cultural Awareness concept – have been adopted. This may bring up, however, numerous concerns, including communication challenges when there is no common language. The interpreter in conflict zones (ICZ) funnels two or more realities in such contexts. This paper draws on five narrative interviews with five local ICZs from Afghanistan who supported and worked for the Spanish troops deployed in that country until the end of 2014. The main objective was to explore the life stories of these five locally-recruited interpreters who were born and raised in a war-torn country, and to understand their perceptions regarding a series of aspects that, besides being closely related to their human nature – identity, culture, ideology and loyalty – tend to enhance, as per our initial hypothesis, the danger inherent in the local interpreter’s “otherness”, leading to a number of dilemmas including autonomous vs. heteronymous (see Cronin, *The Empire Talks Back*), civilian interpreter’s involvement vs. mistrust, or traditional enemy vs. irregular actors. The conclusions of this research study highlight a series of regularities among ICZs’ narratives with regard to how they experienced war, loyalty, and role as ICZs, all analysed from both the personal and the professional dimensions.

Keywords: conflict, warfare, interpreting, life stories, Afghanistan

Introduction

War, etymologically deriving from Old High German werran (to confuse), can be understood as a type of social interaction (Greenhouse, *Cultural Perspectives on War*). Some authors, in fact, believe it is the continuation of politics by other means (Von Clausewitz, *On War*) and such means, in conflict scenarios, are characterised by collective and organised violence resulting from a series of very particular socio-political, judicial and economic factors.

The ubiquity that characterizes war makes the concept of conflict a generalized and universal experience for all living beings (Van der Dennen, *The Origin of War*). Since 3600 B.C. it is estimated that more than 13,600 wars have taken place around the world (Rummel, *Understanding Conflict and War*). The 20th century is considered the most murderous in recorded history, with a total estimate of 187 million deaths (Hobsbawm, *War and Peace in the 20th Century*: 25). Conflict continues to be a reality nowadays – the world, at war since 1914, is a planet dominated by unbroken
conflict that even civilization, education, literacy or mushrooming anti-war movements have been unable to abate (Rummel, *Understanding Conflict and War*).

There are, however, certain differences between the wars that took place in the 20th century and those happening in the 21st, including the existence of new actors with enough power to declare war, which means that official Governments have lost the monopoly to that. As a matter of fact, “most military operations since [the Cold War] have been conducted not by conscript armies, but by quite small bodies of regular or irregular troops, in many cases operating high-technology weapons and protected against the risk of incurring casualties” (Hobsbawm, *On Empire*: 18). In other words, the traditional monopoly has changed, and irregular warfare has brought – to all kind of war scenarios – new actors with access to warfare equipment and means of financing non-state warfare (Hobsbawm, *War and Peace*).

As a result, a new balance between State and non-State organizations has been created, resulting in States losing power over certain parts of their territory, because they are unable to eliminate small unofficial armed groups (Hobsbawm, *On Empire*: 36) that are fighting for “legitimacy and influence over the relevant population” (Department of Defense, *Irregular Warfare*: 6), as it is the case in Afghanistan. This conforms to Bernard (*War and its Causes*), who claims that war can be considered a sort of continuous conflict among collectives that may be capable of arming and organizing themselves with the intention of carrying violent struggle for the pursuit of some sort or public or quasi-public objective. The novelty, according to Hobsbawm (*War and Peace*), “may be indicated by the fact that the most powerful state on the planet [USA], having suffered a terrorist attack, feels obliged to launch a formal operation against a small, international, non-governmental organisation or network lacking both a territory and a recognisable army [the Taliban]”.

Such changes in war monopoly have affected the warfare balance in conflict zones, creating what it is known as “irregular warfare” (IW). IW is defined by the US Department of Defense as “form of warfare [that] encompasses insurgency, counterinsurgency, terrorism, and counterterrorism, raising them above the perception that they are somehow a lesser form of conflict below the threshold of warfare” (Department of Defense, *Irregular Warfare*: 6). IW “plague[s] much of the non-Western world, and they will increasingly claim the Intelligence Community’s attention” (White, *Some Thoughts on Irregular Warfare*), as it has been the case in Afghanistan for more than 17 years now. It is, hence, worth to note the fact that IW has brought not only new actors into play, but also strategies, such as NATO comprehensive approach, (see Jeppson and others, *NATO’s Approach to Irregular Warfare*) and new components to the emergent postmodern military culture, allowing for “softer skills” development (Hajjar, *Military Warriors as Peacekeeper-Diplomats*: 652). Consequently, new key cultural tools, such as the cross-cultural competence, have appeared among the military, allowing them to acquire certain “knowledge, attitudes, and behavioural repertoire and skill sets that military members require to accomplish all given tasks and missions in situations marked by cultural diversity” (652). This, in our opinion, should be considered crucial skills among the troops, bearing in mind that “winning the war has ceased to mean only the annihilation of the enemy, but also transforming civilians into allies in the

theatre of war” (Cummings, *Influencing the Population*: 43). As a result, considering that the resolution of 21st century conflicts requires that efforts “go outside of the employment of purely military measures” (Jeppson and others, *NATO’s Approach to Irregular Warfare*: 28), building up communication and rapport with local population – military and civilian – has become one of the key aspect of military stratagem in conflicts. In this vein, new approaches to warfare tactics such as Petraeus’ Cultural Awareness concept have been adopted in order to emphasize how important is for international troops to collaborate with local actors, particularly considering that “effective counter-insurgency, for example, demands an understanding of those cultural environments in which troops are to be deployed” (Kelly, *Languages at War*: 233).

In these lines, when it comes to influencing local population against insurgents and gaining their support, being able to speak the local language is a must. In the case of Afghanistan, gaining the locals’ trust has proved to be a key aspect of certain military missions. For instance, such trust-building relations have allowed the international troops to successfully complete advisory missions with their Afghan counterparts (see Hajjar, *Effectively Working with Military Linguists*), as well as to fight insurgency propaganda (Barrantes Olías de Lima, *David Petraeus*) which, in Afghanistan can be particularly complicated due to high levels of illiteracy, traditional tribalism and religious fanaticism. For military-civilian collaboration, however, the figure of the interpreter in conflict zones (ICZ) is crucial, as international troops and local population rarely share a common language, especially in the case of Afghanistan. The ICZ, hence, is considered to be “the funnel for all coalition interactions with Afghans at all levels” (West, *The Wrong War*: 176), representing the only connection to the Afghan population (Cummings, *Influencing the Population*: 43) characterised for their persistent love for oral traditions (Ruiz Benítez, *Sistemas de lecciones aprendidas*: 12). In these lines, the ICZ will be the figure capable – in principle – of fannelling two or more realities in such contexts, performing an essential role in every aspect of war (Stahuljak, *The Violence of Neutrality*; Baker, M., *Translation and Conflict*; Moser-Mercer and Bali, *Interpreting in Zones of Crisis and War*; Hoedemaekers and Soeters, *Interactions Rituals and Language Mediation during Peace Missions*; Baigorri-Jalón, *Wars, Languages and the Role(s) of Interpreters*; Baker, C., *Civilian Interpreting in Military Conflicts*; Footitt and Tobia, *War Talk*; Alonso-Araguás, *El intérprete en los conflictos bélicos contemporáneos*; Ruiz-Rosendo and Persaud, *Interpreting in Conflict Zones throughout History*).

The figure of the ICZ, however, “is as interesting as it is elusive to the rest of the profession and academia” (Ruiz Rosendo and Barea Muñoz, *Towards a Typology of Interpreters in War-Related Scenarios in the Middle East*: 182). The reason is that the figure of the ICZ is a relatively recent one with regard to studies and research. Although the last years have witnessed an increase in the number of studies and publications regarding certain aspects related to interpreting in conflict zones, the literature published to date is not comparable to other interpreting settings. Similarly, there is also a notorious lack of research studies that focus on the ICZs’ lived experiences in the form of life histories/stories, and their resulting narratives. Consequently, and given that “the right to narration is not merely the right to tell

one’s story, it is the right to control representation” (Slaughter, *A Question of Narration*: 430), one cannot help but wonder: why are certain narratives collected and publicly presented with a resounding impact, while others remain hidden and silenced with no manifestation?

This paper, therefore, seeks to provide a much-needed contribution to our knowledge in this particular field. With this in mind, evidence in the form of narratives was collected through a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews with five locally-recruited interpreters that worked for the Spanish troops deployed in Afghanistan between 2003 and the end of 2014. The objective is to explore the testimonies and life stories of five locally-recruited interpreters who were born and raised in a war-torn country, and to understand the perception they might have regarding a series of aspects that, besides being closely related to their human nature – identity, culture, ideology and loyalty – tend to enhance the danger inherent in the local interpreter’s “otherness”, leading to a number of dilemmas resulting from paradoxes such as autonomous vs. heteronymous (see Cronin, *The Empire Talks Back*), civilian interpreter’s involvement vs. mistrust, and interpreter’s agency vs. neutrality, that will be up for discussion in the upcoming pages.

**On the biographical method, the life story and the narrative interview**

All narratives presented in this paper have been extracted from a much larger research project (Gómez-Amich, *Estudio descriptivo de la autopercepción de los intérpretes en zonas de conflicto*) whose main objective was to explore and analyse, from an interpreter-centric vantage, the world of five local interpreters from Afghanistan – with special focus on the perception they have regarding their own role, as well as on any patterns and regularities across the sample with regard to such perception.

As mentioned a few lines earlier, the study sample consisted of five local interpreters from Afghanistan who offered their services to the Spanish troops deployed in such country between 2003 and the end of 2014 as part of the NATO ISAF mission. Although no sampling technique was applied, it is worth noting that all study subjects shared a homogeneous profile: male, Muslim, born and raised in Afghanistan, younger than thirty years of age, able to speak Spanish (at different levels of proficiency) and had previously worked as interpreter for a minimum of one year for the Spanish troops in Afghanistan. In regard to the size of the sample, I hasten to point that my research project is a case study and, as such, never aspired to establish universal truths, but rather to present a descriptive analysis interweaving evidence that would provide some insights and would contribute to a relatively unexplored field. Therefore, the final sample size seems to be appropriate when it comes to in-depth analysis intending to provide detailed data (Mason, *Models and Methods in Dialogue Interpreting Research*: 226).

The collection of narratives took place through semi-structured interviews that were inspired by the social research method known as “biographical method”, which seeks “the collection and analysis of an intensive account of a whole life or

portion of life” (Miller, Biographical Method: 15). This qualitative-research method backs to Thomas and Znaniecki (The Polish Peasant in Europe and America) and emphasises the placement of a particular individual within his life history, i.e. “within a nexus of social connections, historical events and life experiences” (Miller, Biographical Method: 15). This particular sub-stream known as “life history”, which relays not only on interviews but also on supplementary information sources in the shape of personal documents (Bassi-Follari, Hacer una historia de vida: 135), allows researchers to look into the “subject’s world” (Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame, Historias de vida del oficio de panadero: 167) and to explore certain social structures.

This article, however, focuses on a second sub-stream of the biographical method, i.e. the life story whose central task is to naturally collect narratives constructed by the narrator (interviewee) regarding one or more episodes or events from their life (Bassi Follari, Hacer una historia de vida: 152). One of the main concerns to researchers who work with narratives “is the possibility to embellish, distort or make up stories” (Fujii, Shades of Truth and Lies: 234). However, it is worth noting that, according to Fujii, the importance of narratives does not always lie on their accuracy (234). On the contrary it is the value and the meaning that each narrator endows to events or experiences contained in such narratives that is valuable to the researchers intending to understand the speaker’s mind, perception, emotions, essence, aspirations, concerns and desires.

The interviews carried out for this research project were influenced by the post-modernist perspective (Miller, Biographical Method: 16), which elicits an interview through the technique known as “SQUIN”, i.e. Single Question to Induce Narrative (Wengraf, The Biographic-Narrative Interpretive Method). This was, precisely, the technique chosen for my study, due to the fact that the narrative interview, supported by a subsequent semi-structured interview made of conceptual questions in our case, allows for the collection and analysis of spontaneous narratives (Rodríguez, Las historias de vida en la investigación: 122) in regard to, for instance, the perceptions that the study subjects may have about a particular topic. Within Translation and Interpreting Studies, narratives obtained through in-depth interviews are particularly useful when it comes to exploring the perception that interpreters may have regarding a number of aspects (Baker, M. Translation and Conflict; Salama-Carr, Interview).

In these lines, my study, inspired by certain phenomenological concepts such as “lived experience” and “lived meaning”, (see Van Manen, But is it Phenomenology?), seeks to explore the life stories of five local interpreters regarding their perception of certain aspects related to conflict zones, including the concepts of war, conflict, fear, ethnicity, identity, family, education, friendship, ideology, work and loyalty, among others, all contextualised within the protracted Afghan conflict.

The collected data was organised, codified and subsequently analysed with the support of NVivo 11Plus software, a very useful programme that allows for the application of the analysis technique known as “concept mapping” (see Trochim

and Linton, *Conceptualization for Planning and Evaluation*). Following this analysis technique, I processed the input, i.e. the collected data, and generated maps of ideas and concepts, in order to identify the relationships between all the narratives that the interviewees had previously shared with us. In this way, concept-mapping allowed us to create the representation of ideas in the form of thematic clusters (see Jackson and Trochim, *Concept Mapping as an Alternative Approach*: 312) that were named according to the concept contained therein. For instance, some of the clusters created for this study project were named as “ethnicity” “family” “war memories” “trauma” “friendship” “loss” “loyalty” “neutrality” “role perception” “religion”, “values” and “capital”, understood as knowledge and skills in Bourdieu’s sense on the term (Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*). Once the data codification was completed, I compared all details across the sample with the aim to analyse the subjects’ perceptions and opinions regarding a particular issue or concept. Some of the key narratives and results will be shared in the upcoming sections.

**Local interpreters’ life stories – lived experiences in war**

Daoud, Ghous, Karmal, Lemar and Maqsood, whose ages varied from 19 to 29 at the time of the interviews (2015), were born between 1985 and 1995 in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Although all are natives of different provinces (Faryab, Parwan, Kandahar, Badghis and Takhar) the life of each and every one of them has been scared by the protracted conflict in Afghanistan. All five interviewees were born and raised in a war-torn country and suffered through one or more of the conflicts that have devastated their homeland for over the last thirty years, i.e. the Soviet invasion, the Afghan Civil War, the Taliban regime, the US-led war in 2001, and the subsequent international conflict.

When I was born, the situation was awful. Russian troops were around, fighting the jihadists [...]. I was born in the middle of a war, that is why my grandfather chose my name, [real name], which means “there is too much war in our country”. (Maqsood, in Gómez-Amich, *Estudio Descriptivo de la Autopercepción de los Intérpretes en Zonas de Conflicto*)

When I was a child, as far as I remember, Taliban were in control and there was a very bad war that all Afghans have suffered. We are still at war, and we have lost so many things, we have lost too many things... even our friends. I have lost my friends because of the war, my friends are dead, and also some relatives and family friends, all because of the war. (Lemar)

When I was born, Afghanistan was a poor country at war, and people did not enjoy [a good] economy. There were no schools, and the majority of children did not study. I, myself, did not attend school for many years because of the war, the conflicts, and the civil war among different ethnic groups within Afghanistan. And many others as me, many other children, are still uneducated. Economy was very bad and there was no Government, only fighting groups that would control a particular area. (Ghous)

In spite of the common suffering resulting from war – or maybe as one of the consequences of such – the sense of belonging to a very particular ethnic group seems to be recurrent in the narratives of certain interviewees, regardless of their family economic and social status.

As we say, Tajiks in Afghanistan are the good people in Afghanistan. We are a very ancient ethnic group in Afghanistan, formerly called Daria. We used to own many empires, the Persian Empire; the famous Persia with a major history. That is why, all Tajiks living in Afghanistan take pride in being Tajik, in the famous language from Persia that we speak [...]. We also say that Tajiks were the first to settle down in Afghanistan. We are very good people, very educated, we know how to live well, we are open, very well cultured. (Daoud)

The thing is that Tajiks... how can I say this? Many of us... how can I explain this? Tajiks are good people, and in Afghanistan, nowadays, there is a big war, which is what Pashtu population always enjoy. (Maqsood)

Belonging to a particular ethnic group, however, in the case of the five interviewees did not ensure certain economic benefits or social status. The two interpreters quoted in the previous narratives, for instance, are both Tajiks with families that, however, appear to live in completely different economic, cultural and social spheres, at least during the interviewees’ childhood and adolescent years. According to the narratives shared by Daoud, his family belongs to the highest class, attending university and having posts in Court. On the contrary, Maqsood – as well as Ghous – claimed he lived his childhood years in severe financial problems, a common situation in a country that is placed 168 out of 188 on the Human Development Index (UNDP, *Human Development Reports*). Karmal and Lemar also recalled some economic trouble during their life in Afghanistan, especially the latest, who claimed that the death of his father was the reason for his family to suffer financially – a claim that correlates with the reality in Afghanistan, where male adults are the breadwinner in the family.

My full name is [name withdrawn]. I was born in 1988, in Faryab province, in Maymanah, near the famous city known as Mazār-e Sarif, Northern Afghanistan. I was born in a cultured and educated family, with a high social status, a good family. My father used to be the Chief Justice in my province, my mother was a teacher, my whole family holds university degrees, all of them studied, including myself, the youngster. My elder brothers studied Law, my sisters chose their own B.A., and I chose my B.A. in Spanish [because] I enjoyed it. (Daoud)

[…] there was a bad war. We did not have jobs and we were a very poor family. There was always war, the Taliban were attacking us, and so were the Soviets. Life was very bad. It was very bad. [...] When I was little, I used to work with my dad, as a carpenter. [...] And my mom was a housewife, she doesn’t have anything, nor does anything. [...] Two of my sisters studied up to Secondary school but the other two are illiterate. (Maqsood)
Such economical disadvantages experienced by some of the interviewees, however, did not prevent them from acquiring cultural capital, i.e. pursuing education throughout their life, three of them graduating from Kabul University in Spanish language. Before their university years, and despite the fact that conflict zone conditions are not always the most favourable to ensure access to education, the five subjects of our study sample attended school or madrasas over several years. The Taliban’s rise to power, however, further complicated the situation. Nevertheless, and despite the discrepancy among members of the same family with regard to the importance of education (see Maqsood’s narratives), the interest and attitude towards learning displayed by the interviewees is commendable, especially when they recall their childhood years.

I have many bad memories, but the worst one is the year I was unable to attend school. When the Taliban took our city, they closed down all the schools. I was always crying, because I couldn’t go to school. My father, my mother and my family said that the worse memory is the day that our school was set on fire, with everything inside. The children went out and witnessed how our school was on fire. We all were very sad, and said, “they burnt our books, our classroom”. That was the worst day. [...] Then I registered in a school run by the Taliban, called madrasa, with many fundamentalists lessons, very close-minded and strict [...]. You would not think that was a school; it was like a prison. (Daoud)

[My best memory is] my first school day. That was a very special day for me. [...] I will never forget it. My elder brother registered me. My father told me, “go with no stress, no shame, just go”. Because I was scared the first day, I don’t know why. I was registered, and I started my studies until I completed them. I completed them after 12 years. [...] My father taught me many things, how to be a strong man, a good man. [...] I wish I could be like my father, known as a good man, with no flaws. We used to go for walks, to drink coffee and I used to tell him everything, my complaints, my sorrows, and he would give me advice, “You have to be like this, do like that. Study.” (Lemar)

We used to study in tents, full of dust, very noisy, and our teachers were not well trained, they did not know much about Maths and the like. [...] My father did not study much. He did not study Secondary. [...] To be honest, my father did not appreciate that I studied in the school when I was little, he did not like that I would go to school to study. He wanted me to work with him, to be with him at home. [...] But my mother, she wanted me to study, to go to school, to grow my knowledge, to study at the university. [...] My worst memory is the day my father unregistered me and said, “Enough, you are going to work with me, I don’t want you to go to school”. He dragged me home and I missed three years. When my brother, who was studying in a different province, found out, he sent me back to school. I was 12 years old. (Maqsood)

In the context described in Maqsood’s narrative, it is not realistic to expect local interpreters to have the training that is usually required to work as a professional interpreter. In conflict zones, unemployment is ubiquitous, and any work opportunity becomes a social, cultural and economic capital source (see Baker, C., *The Care and Feeding of Linguists*). This may bring along the chance to support yourself and your family, even though your life may be at risk, not only because of
the dangers intrinsic to a conflict, but also, in the case of Afghanistan, because interpreters are considered to be traitors because they are working with the foreigners. This kind of public accusations, according to some authors (Fujii, *Shades of truth and lies*: 232) “can lead to reprisals from neighbours, rejection from family members, or repression by the State” and a number of other vicissitudes resulting from their years of support and work for the international troops.

I worked with the Spanish troops for two years. During this time, I went to my province twice, to visit my relatives. There, many people knew I was working with the Spanish troops, and they have a bad opinion when it comes to Americans, Spaniards, and other foreigners. My life was at risk in my own province. They threaten me, “Why are you working with infidels?” [...] They believe being an interpreter is a bad job, because you are sharing insights with foreigners. [...] I was threatened, they sent me one text message saying, “We will find you, and we will kill you; we will cut your throat”. [...] My brother was also threatened, so I want to take him out of there. His life is also at risk. (Maqsood)

There are certain areas where you do not want to be recognised. You do not feel safe there. They insult you and say that you have become a foreigner. They call you “infidel” and that makes you feel bad. [...] And I would answer that I am not an infidel, I am just working, I am helping. But there are people who doesn’t understand. Some of them still support the Taliban, the bad guys, and do not even accept the Afghan national army. [...] I was just honest and worked, and they called me “traitor” or “collaborator”. I used to get upset at the beginning, but then I realised the bad guys were actually them, they were wrong. My aim is to support and help my country. (Ghous)

Consequently, locals who are able to speak a foreign language and who enjoy certain *wastāh* (contacts), end up working as interpreters for the international troops, even though this kind of job may not be related in any case to their original training and they could have never anticipated that they would end up using the foreign language they once learned (see Baker, *Civilians Interpreting in Military Conflicts*). This adaptation, resulting from tragic situations (see Baigorri-Jalón, *Wars, Languages and the Role(s) of Interpreters*), may be the surviving instinct that characterises the Afghan population, considering that “in a land so hostile from every point of view, these people have developed unthinkable conducts and strategies. [...] You either adapt or you die” (Aguirre, *300 días en Afganistán*: 16).

While studying for my B.A. in Spanish language, the last year, our department contacted the Spanish Embassy in Kabul. They needed translators for their troops in conflict zones. I was introduced to them, I passed the interview, and I was selected. (Ghous)

We used to have a teacher called [name withdrawn] who lives in Madrid now. He used to teach us and one day he came and said, “We need interpreters”. He picked two or three students from our class. (Maqsood)
I was watching TV at night and I saw that the Americans were in need of interpreters. I went for an exam and I was successful. I worked for the Americans for a year, and then I heard that my friends were working for the Spaniards [...]. I went to the Spaniards and they hired me. [...] The Spaniards were in contact with the Americans, who informed them about me and gave them all my details. (Karmal)

The five interviewees that participated in this study underwent different hiring procedures, which is already a contradiction itself, considering that all of them were applying for the same position. All five study subjects, however, were invited to interviews in the target language, in order to explore their personal and family background, as well as to understand their motivations to become an interpreter for the Spanish troops, which can be the result of multiple interests including improving their financial situation, helping their country and practising the foreign language.

I wanted to improve my language skills and learn, and gain some experience, but when I started working as a translator, I got interested in many other things: learning about customs, languages, and other motivations, such as helping my country as a translator between Afghans and Spaniards. I felt I was able to help, with my degree, help my army, my country, and my people. [...] I always took pride in working as an interpreter. (Ghous)

Q: Do you feel that you are helping your people, working as an interpreter?
A: No.
Q: Why not?
A: Because helping is solving the problems of the Afghans and the Spaniards, but I only work for the money. (Karmal)

They [the Afghan population] used to think I was also a foreigner, because in their eyes I did not look like an Afghan translator. They used to say, “Here come the infidels”, in Pashtun. And one day I replied, “I am not an infidel”. To them an “infidel” is anyone who is not a Muslim. And I said, “I am not an infidel”, that was all I said. But they replied, “Look, this infidel can speak Pashtun” and I repeated, “I am not an infidel, I am an Afghan, I am also a Muslim. Do not think I am an infidel”. And they asked, “You are an Afghan? Why are you collaborating with the infidels?” And I replied, “I am helping my country, my people, my national army. You can think whatever you want. Bye”. (Daoud)

In this vein, it is also interesting to analyse what motivations urged the international troops to hire local interpreters instead of military interpreters (military personnel) whose loyalty to the army can be easier to take for granted. The results of this study seem to point at the fact that the capital owned by locally-recruited interpreters, i.e. their inside knowledge about cultural, historical, political, geographical and linguistic aspects of Afghanistan tend to be more valuable than the insights that military interpreters deployed from abroad might be able to share with the troops. Such in-group characteristics that can actually be transformed into economic capital for the ICZs, however, tend to also highlight the
“outsider” nature of the local interpreters, regardless of which, the ICZs interviewed for this study appeared to feel part of the team.

I always felt as a member of the team, on all occasions, in everything. They used to take me along, as a friend, smiling at me, inviting me to all their parties, drinking with me, taking me to the military operations as well. They didn’t think I was an outsider, neither did I feel out of place. (Daoud)

[...] I would always pay attention to the military personnel, always translating accurately, and passing the message – and the troops were happy with me. [...] Our relation was good. I always had the same kind of relation with them. It was a friendly relation. [...] I feel I was a member of the team and they trusted me. [...] The military personnel used to tell us, “you are part of our team”. They always respected us. We are still valuable for them. [...] That is why they helped me to move to Spain. (Ghous)

[The relations with] the Spanish army were good, because they came to Afghanistan to help the Afghans. However, some Afghans did not treat the Spaniards properly, because some of the Spanish advisors did not do anything [for us]. [...] I always felt I was a member of the team. (Lemar)

Regarding training, it is worth to note that the vast majority of local interpreters are not required to have any training or previous experience, which was the case in this particular study. Considering that the living conditions described in the narratives reveal the challenges to receive certain (levels of) training in a conflict zone, the international troops should then offer some training to the interpreters they hire. However, this is not the case, which in my opinion seems particularly alarming, considering that some of the demanding functions assigned to the role of the local ICZs include interpreting during mine-clearance activities and joint military operations against the Taliban, as well as at high-level meetings between foreign commanders and their local counterparts. In addition to this, the presence of danger and fear is a constant, which makes their work even more challenging, if possible.

The international military troops do not know Afghans, how we speak. If we as interpreters see someone suspicious, that something is happening, we tell the troops because we know better than them. These are our customs, our people, and our responsibility is to notice certain things. That is how we used to help. [...] There was about to be an attack and one of our colleagues saw something and said, “Look, that soldier looks suspicious, he is going to attack”. That is our function as translators, as interpreters. Interpreters do not only translate, you have to be many other things, it depends on the job. (Lemar)

My aim is to do my job, to translate, to win the trust, to behave well and to fulfil the aim of the commanders. [...] As a translator, I was a messenger between two nations, two armies. I believe I was a great help for both Spaniards and Afghans. Without me, they wouldn’t be able to share messages, to speak, to communicate. We are a key element of all armies. (Ghous)
We had some issues with fear, security, incidents. When we were out of the base, we were scared because of war, conflict, mines, and so on. I was scared but I made the effort to work efficiently [...]. Conflict zones are very difficult but working as part of a good team makes it easier. Your work is easier because you get support. If you need something, they help you, which makes work easier. But in a conflict zone, with fear and no support, you will find your work very difficult, very tiring. (Daoud)

You do not feel at ease in a conflict zone. You are scared, and you lose your language and interpreting skills, and it is hard to concentrate [...]. In peaceful settings, you only focus on your translation, but in a conflict zone you are thinking of your safety, and then your translation. (Ghous)

They [the Spanish troops] told me that an interpreter must do many things, “When we go out patrolling, you must come with us; when we are fighting, you must fight with us; if we need to go out at night, and you must come with us”. [...] “You must come to the frontline, and patrol with us, and always be with us. You mustn’t tell what we are doing to anyone.” [...] (Maqsood)

The functions assigned to the ICZs, however, were not specified in the contracts analysed for this research project. As a matter of fact, such contracts seem to be considerably vague, expecting interpreters to offer services “in a broad sense [...] as demanded, according to instructions” (genuine contract). But, what instructions? Who gives them? How can a line be drawn and by whom? Consequently, the perception that the interviewees had of their own role as interpreters significantly differed from the role traditionally assigned to interpreters, exceeding all limitations imposed to such.

Who controls the principals? The interpreter, he solves problems. [...] If they [principals] fight, it is the interpreter’s fault. [...] I have seen it with my own eyes, two parties fighting and the interpreter translating. No, no, you must not translate [...]. You must mediate. You must sort things out. (Lemar)

Afghans and Spaniards would say swear words, but I used to omit them, because if I didn’t, a conflict would start, and I always kept the peace between the two groups. Sometimes the commander is upset and says some swear words in person or on the radio, but it is not necessary to translate everything. You must omit those words and explain them that it is not acceptable, that they must treat each other nicely. [...] When the commanders or someone is angry, the translator has to lower the volume, speak very calmly, speak as though he were a friend, not a translator. (Ghous)

Afghans speak too much. For example, they say four or five sentences but one is enough, so we were summarizing one sentence or two, that’s all, because some sentences are no use. If someone speaks too much, you summarise in two or three sentences. You have to cut them short, we have to abbreviate. (Maqsood)

We have to translate so that people feel good, so that they are interested in talking. Some people speak too fast and leave in a rush, but you must translate to make people feel good, so that they are interested in talking to you. [...] We have to be very calm when we interpret. If the person is too serious, we need to fix that. (Lemar)

The above narratives portrait the five interviewees as interpreters who position themselves considerably far from the role proposed by Hale (Controversies over the Role of the Court Interpreter: 114) as “faithful renderer of others’ utterances”. However, after careful consideration, my study results appear to suggest quite the opposite, i.e. these five interpreters seem to perceive their role as that of active agents who are aware of the importance in offering faithful translations, keeping in mind that it is crucial for such translations to be socially and culturally accepted within the Afghan context.

Interpreting is not just about translating, it is many things, it depends on the job. Military work is very complicated. [...] Customs are very different [...] When they said estrange things, I did not translate. [...] because if I do, something bad is going to happen. [...] You have to translate as they want but following our customs. (Lemar)

The ICZ, therefore, is caught between a series of – potentially – divergent expectations resulting from myriad natures of in-group rules, such as west vs. east, foreign vs. local, and military vs. civilian (Hoeedemaekers and Soeters, Interactions Rituals and Language Mediation during Peace Missions: 348). This pressure, therefore, “may cloud the judgment of others” (Beebee, Shoot the Transtraitor: 295) in regard to neutrality, loyalty, expectations, functions, invisibility and a number of other aspects intrinsically related to interpreting as a service. These dilemmas and others closely related to the narratives collected for this research project will be discussed in the next pages.

Discussion of dilemmas around the locally-recruited ICZs

A general taxonomy of the ICZ figure can entail quite a few challenges (Ruiz Rosendo and Barea Muñoz, Towards a typology of interpreters in war-related scenarios in the Middle East: 186) and as a matter of fact, only three publications, to my knowledge, have done the effort to categorize the figure of the interpreter in conflict zones (see Inghilleri, Translation in War Zones; Allen, Interpreting in Conflict Zones; Ruiz Rosendo and Barea Muñoz, Towards a typology of interpreters in war-related scenarios in the Middle East). According to Ruiz Rosendo and Barea Muñoz, myriad aspects are to be taken into consideration when categorising this particular figure, including the stage of the conflict in which they work, the stakeholders involved, the interpreting situations, and the tasks carried out by the interpreters in question. In this case study, the interpreters are categorized as locally-recruited interpreters who carried out a series of tasks within advisory missions, as well as in civil-military operations.

The autonomous vs. heteronomous dichotomy proposed by Cronin (*The Empire Talks Back*) for similar contexts comes into play herein, as the troops need to hire an “outsider” and, paradoxically, give them access to sensitive information owned and regulated by their military institution. As briefly mentioned in previous pages, the main reason behind the recruitment of outsiders (i.e. locally-recruited ICZs vs. military interpreters) is what Bourdieu (*Outline of a Theory of Practice*) refers to as the “capital”, i.e. the knowledge, the skills, and the power that a certain person owns in order to move within a particular field of social life. In other words, the knowledge, the skills and the power (in the form of contacts, for example) that local interpreters may possess – and that “qualify” them to work in very particular contexts – is significantly more valuable for the international troops than the capital generally owned by a military interpreter who has been deployed from abroad. In spite of such capital – or maybe as a result of such – international troops tend to draw from the premise that the local interpreter’s loyalty will primarily be with their own communities (see CALL, *Interpreter Ops*: 12). The pervasive sense of mistrust that characterizes interactions in conflict zones tends to accentuate the fact that local interpreters, in fact, belong to the country, and sometimes, the community of the enemy.

Nevertheless, local ICZs are expected to wear the foreign troops’ military uniform (see Gómez-Amich, *Estudio descriptivo de la autopercepción de los intérpretes en zonas de conflicto*), which brings up myriad dilemmas, including the intrinsic link between wearing a uniform and supporting a particular ideology, as well as the discussion in regard to whether local interpreters are safe(r) – or not – wearing the uniform of those international troops that are, precisely, the target of the insurgent groups, especially considering that, at least in the case of this research project, ICZs are not allowed to carry weapons to defend themselves, neither are they trained in survival techniques. However, the uniform is, undoubtedly, a visible symbol of ideology and allegiance, which disconnects the interpreter with the idea of “in-between” that characterises their role. As a matter of fact, wearing a uniform implies the sense of belonging to a particular group. In these lines, the interpreters who participated in this study wore the Spanish military uniform and claimed to feel part of a team, some of them stressing the good and friendly relations that existed between ICZs and the Spanish troops, besides the “outsider” nature that tends to characterise locally-recruited interpreters. This sense of belonging, in their opinion, made their work easier, especially in this kind of contexts in which fear and danger are a constant. This aligns with Hajjar’s claim (*Effectively Working with Military Linguists*) that highlights the importance of good military-interpreter relationships in order to effectively work in certain missions.

Nevertheless, the public narratives on the figure of the ICZ as part of military teams appear to be quite different, as per the articles published about the complex and highly bureaucratic procedures that former interpreters are expected to go through. This seems to be contradicting the ancient “Leave no man behind” warfare motto, especially considering that the local interpreters working for international troops have already passed certain levels of clearance. In spite of that, interpreters in certain parts of the world are potentially perceived by all sides as...
possible traitors, because besides belonging to local communities, they are working with the foreigners who, being their employers, tend to expect the interpreter to be loyal to their cause and avoid any hidden agendas resulting from patriotism, political or religious ideologies, and personal, financial, social or family-related needs. However, conflict zones involve several distinctive features capable of altering the invisibility and neutrality that, in theory, is expected of interpreters, regardless of the context in which they work. In such complex scenarios, where is the interpreter’s loyalty? With their local communities? With their employer? With “the people you are interpreting for [and] are trying to kill you, while others are trying to save your life”? With the “group that is paying you to interpreter [who] bombed a village where your grandmother lived, killing her in the process”? (Kelly and Zetzsche, *Found in Translation*: 39). Maybe with their own personal interests?

It seems, therefore, that in this type of extreme situations “interpreters can scarcely be blamed for pursuing their own interests, no matter how unprofessional or unethical they may seem”. (Pym, *Risk Analysis as a Heuristic Tool in the Historiography of Interpreters*: 255). Consequently, certain theoretical concepts such as neutrality and invisibility seem to be more complex than in other settings of interpretation, especially if survival in these settings is a matter of “life-saving gestures of neighbours, friends and strangers” (Fujii, *Shades of Truth and Lies*: 231) and you are interpreting the atrocities inflicted to the conflict victims (see Stahuljak, *The Violence of Neutrality*; Spahic, *Interpretar en situaciones bélicas y posbélicas*; Gómez-Amich, *Estudio descriptivo de la autopercepción de los intérpretes en zonas de conflicto*) who happen to be your own countrymen, neighbours, friends, or even family (see Hasan Nuhanović during the Srebrenica genocide). Additionally, local interpreters may have suffered such atrocities themselves, leading to post traumatic experiences and stress, being forced to relive such traumas while interpreting and, consequently, altering their neutrality and invisibility, which at times “may actually be more efficient to conflict resolution” (Todorova, *Interpreting Conflict Mediation in Kosovo and Macedonia*: 119). In this vein, some authors have interestingly pointed out to the concept of “posttraumatic growth” in interpreters (Johnson and others, *Non-Western Interpreters’ Experiences of Trauma*) and how trauma resulting from injustice, loss, displacement, and pressing psychosocial needs can actually help interpreters to be in a unique position and reflect on certain aspects affecting all parties involved in the interaction. This may lead interpreters to what some authors considered “the most ethical position” (Crónin, *The Empire Talks Back*: 59), in other words, “to be utterly “unfaithful” in interpreting in the name of another fidelity, a fidelity of resistance [...as a] strategy for survival” (Ibid.) The position that interpreters may take will be the result of their perceptions regarding the parties, the event, and, of course, their own role within the interaction. Sometimes, however, close contact and engagement can be “subsequently perceived as fraternization with the enemy” (Beebee, *Shoot the Transtraitor*: 302), causing trust levels to dramatically plunge if certain decisions and moves by the ICZs are (mis)understood in a particular way.

It is worth to note again that such role, as mentioned in previous pages, is vaguely specified in contracts, which allows clients to “use” their ICZs as
intelligence sources, lie detectors, coordinators, advisors, and subject matter experts (Cummings, *Influencing the Population*). Consequently, interpreters who work in conflict zones, including the subjects that participated in this study, appear to execute considerably higher levels of agency and latitude in comparison with other settings of interpretation. In these lines, our results evidence how these five interpreters played the gatekeeper role on several occasions, resorting to their creativity and intuition, adjusting their “old” habitus into a new one in order to work with foreigners as well as within the military institution, and applying a series of strategies resulting from a context and risk analysis, which was based on myriad conditions including the nature of the interpreted event, the parties, the subject matter, the cultures/religions involved, as well as a number of other features that may influence the interaction in question.

Such strategies – carried out in situations as diverse as intelligence-gathering activities, frontline battles, interactions with the local population, or advising missions with local armies – included among others, summarising the original message, adapting the language register, omitting swear words, explaining cultural aspects, and adding religious references, terms of respect or jokes. All these strategies, according to the interviewees, were carried out in order to fulfil what they thought to be the parties’ expectations, including but not limited to making parties be interested to communicate with each other, creating a relationship of trust between parties, helping their employers fulfil certain aims, and ensuring that each interaction follows the cultural norms applicable to social encounters in Afghanistan. In consequence, following Hajjar’s metaphor for military advisors, we could compare the interpreter in conflict zones with a Swiss Army knife, as this seems to be a fitting symbol for the toolkit that resilient interpreters must deploy in such setting (*Effectively Working with Military Linguists*).

In other words, the features of conflict zones require of interpreters a series of skills, attitudes, open-mindedness and cross-cultural competences that extend beyond linguistic expertise. This role identity has been constructed on the field, through daily experiences, rather than based on the professionalization of a particular job. This, in our opinion, opens a number of research lines that can be quite interesting to pursue, including the design and the creation of opportunities for training programmes aimed at both military personnel and ICZs to efficiently work with one another, studying the sense of professional growth and experience among ICZs and their sense of identity once they stop working as such, re-evaluating the limits traditionally imposed to the interpreter’s role and analysing how applicable those are to interpreting in conflict zones, tackling the discrepancy between prescribed neutrality and real-life needs, and, finally, exploring ways to support the professionalization of this role in order to understand if the figure of ICZ is a role whose main task is not only interpreting but just one of a number of functions.
Conclusions
Interpreting in conflict zones seems to be the result of a random and tragic situation (Baigorri-Jalón, Wars, Languages and the Role(s) of Interpreters), in particular for those locally-recruited interpreters who are suffering the horrors of the war in a country torn by conflict. These interpreters, who usually lack all sort of training in interpreting skills as well as in survival techniques, are locally hired by international troops in need of linguistic and cultural support. The capital of locally-recruited interpreters represents their main value for the international troops, as their insight knowledge regarding the geography, the history and the languages/dialects of the country in conflict, as well as the wastalih (contacts) that they may possess, is, precisely, what will allow the troops to successfully complete their missions while deployed.

Their profile is, however, what distinguishes them from the international troops, and their origin, ethnicity, and religion, as well as other aspects that are intrinsic to their personal nature, will contribute to maintaining the ubiquitous mistrust that characterises conflict zones, especially in the case of interpreters in conflict zones who are potentially perceived by all sides as possible traitors. Paradoxically, the interpreters interviewed for this research project felt as members of a team, and closely worked and lived with the Spanish troops deployed in Afghanistan between 2003 and 2014 as part of the NATO ISAF mission. As a result of that, one would assume, the troops allowed them to have considerably higher levels of agency and latitude in comparison with other settings of interpretation. The results of my study evidence how the five interpreters who participated in this project undertook the role of the gatekeeper, and how they resorted to their creativity and intuition in order to transform their habitus into a new one that would allow them to work with foreigners, in a militarised context, and under challenging conditions with no provision of training in any of the skills required to perform their complex role, and no functions clearly specified in their contracts.

Professionalization and training could empower ICZs to fully contribute with their skills and agency to the process in question. ICZs are the experts in this particular field, some of them having worked in this setting for years, with a number of challenges and their subsequent strategies and solutions. Consequently, I believe they have quite a lot to teach providers, scholars and researchers from other interpreting settings, including how to effectively work in dangerous scenarios, how to stay focused under pressure, how to creatively resort to certain strategies based on contextual risks analysis, how to deal with trauma, and how to balance between mediation and neutrality in extreme situations. Research studies focusing on life stories shared by local interpreters, can, therefore, contribute with first-hand information to our knowledge in a field that offers a number of stimulating aspects to be yet explored.
References


As mentioned in previous lines, the literature published on the figure of the contemporary ICZ, and particularly on its ontological narratives (see Baker, M., *Translation and Conflict*), is considerably inferior in number in comparison with the amount of published work studying other interpreting settings, such as conference interpreting and community interpreting.

The names used in this paper are aliases for the five interpreters, who used Spanish language during the recordings, which were transcribed following the naturalized transcription method (see Bucholtz, *The Politics of Transcription*: 1439).

All the narratives have been extracted from Gómez-Amich, *Estudio descriptivo de la autopercpción de intérpretes en zonas de conflicto*. All of them have been translated by the author from Spanish into English.

My translation.

Certain narratives in this study use the terms interpreter and translator interchangeably.

Contracts analysed for this study are private between each ICZ and the Spanish Army and therefore cannot be included in the Reference List at the end of this paper.

The work of these five interpreters was overseen by the “Leader Interpreter” (the most-skilled and trustworthy local interpreter within the team), who reported to the Captain or Major in charge of each ASPFOR at that particular time [Afghanistan Spanish Force]. There was no relationship whatsoever between the locally-recruited interpreters in Afghanistan and the Translation and Interpretation Section run by the Chief Staff of National Defense in Madrid.
Storming the Palace: The Houthi Insurgency in Yemen
By Gian Marco Longoni

Abstract: In January 2015, a group of rebels known as the “Houthi” toppled the government of Yemen after eleven years of armed struggle. How did the Houthi manage to do so? The article argues that the main variables that explain rebel victory in civil wars, rebel capacity, state (in)capacity, and external support, can explain how this rebel group managed to oust the government of Yemen. The analysis demonstrates that the Houthi high mobilising and military capacity, the external support of the former ruler of Yemen Ali Abdullah Saleh, and, most importantly, the low capacity of the state, resulting from a chronic institutional weakness of Yemen’s regimes, incompetence of the armed forces, and unsoundness of the counterinsurgency strategy, are the factors that can explain why and how the Houthi have managed to wage an effective rebellion that caused the collapse of the government of Yemen.

Keywords: Civil war, insurgency, counterinsurgency, Yemen, Houthi

Over the last fourteen years, Yemen has been ravaged by a brutal civil conflict. The ongoing Saudi-led intervention in Yemen is only the latest phase of a civil strife that began on June 2004, when the government of Yemen reacted to the demonstrations of a group commonly referred to as the “Houthi.” Throughout the following eleven years, this group has waged a fierce insurgency that culminated in the overthrow of the government presided by Abed-Rabbo Mansour Hadi in January 2015. How did the Houthi manage to oust the government of Yemen?

Civil wars are incredibly complex phenomena whose outcome is the result of multiple interacting factors. The literature on civil wars has identified three main variables that can explain rebel victory in these contexts. Firstly, rebel victory depends significantly on their overall capacity, a composite measure that includes their mobilising capacity, offensive capacity, and resource-richness. Secondly, it depends largely on the (in)capacity of the state, a composite measure that comprises its institutional, political, and military capacity. Lastly, rebel victory depends on the external support they receive from third parties. In this article, I argue that these variables, although the civil war in Yemen is far from being over and the rebels are far from achieving a decisive victory, best explain how the Houthi managed to oust the government of Yemen.

Through a cross-examination of sources and evidence, ranging from UN Security Council reports and United States diplomatic cables, to reports and scholarly articles of experts who conducted research in the field, this paper reconstructs the dynamics of the several stages of the Yemeni civil war, up until the ouster of the government at the hand of the Houthi. From the examination of these dynamics, this exploratory article concludes that the Houthi overall capacity, in both mobilising and military terms, the external support they received as of 2013 from the former ruler of Yemen Ali Abdullah Saleh, and most importantly the incapacity of the state, resulting from a chronic

institutional weakness of Yemeni regimes, incompetence of the armed forces, and unsoundness of the counterinsurgency strategy, are the factors that can explain why and how the Houthi have managed to overthrow the government of Yemen.

1. Sine quibus non of rebel victory

Insurgency has always been considered peripheral to conventional, inter-state war. The subordination of insurgency as a minor form of war has motivated the intermittent interest on the topic, both within academia and military circles (Rich and Duyvesteyn, *The Study of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency*: 1). The 9/11 attacks and the outbreak of insurgencies in Afghanistan and Iraq brought the issue back to the fore, stimulating a renewed cross-disciplinary interest on the topic. Today, insurgency is not only a form of warfare likely to continue in the future (Hammes, *War Evolves into the Fourth Generation*: 205-206), but it “is assumed to constitute the likely challenge that the major Western powers will confront in the future” (Smith and Jones, *The Political Impossibility of Modern Counterinsurgency*: 48). Accordingly, insurgencies deserve the utmost attention and this section aims to identify which variables can explain why rebels succeed in civil wars.

In previous studies on civil wars, three variables have been found to be related to a higher likelihood that a civil war terminates in rebel victory: rebel capacity, state capacity, and external support.

1.1. Rebel capacity

The scholarship on civil wars has focused to a large extent on the capacity and characteristics of the regimes involved in these conflicts, giving much less attention to the capacity of their opponents (Cunningham, Gleditsch and Salehyan, *It Takes Two*: 571). Rebels cannot be entirely removed from the conflict equation and it is axiomatic that their overall capacity can have an impact on civil war outcomes that empirical studies cannot afford to overlook. Previous research has established that the stronger the rebels are in relation to the incumbent regimes, or even the closer they are to being at parity with the regime in terms of strength, the more likely they will achieve a decisive victory (Gent, *Going in when it Counts*: 725; and Cunningham, Gleditsch and Salehyan, *It Takes Two*: 590). While these findings are straightforward, “rebel capacity” requires further definition.

The rebel mobilising capacity is certainly one of the most important factors that compound in the composite measure of capacity. Being insurgencies predominantly struggles aimed at undermining the political legitimacy of the incumbent regime, the capacity of the rebels to mobilise the population and produce a shift in its allegiance from the regime to them is vital (Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*: 92). The greater the popular support they manage to attain, the stronger they are vis-à-vis the incumbent regime in the contest for legitimacy. For this reason, rebels strive to captivate the population through the formulation of compelling causes, convincing narratives (Tomes, *Relearning Counterinsurgency Warfare*: 21), appeals to common identities (Byman,
Understanding Proto-Insurgencies: 167), and the creation of efficient systems of governance in the areas under their control (Weinstein, Inside Rebellion: 163-197).

Certainly, an insurgency is not a contest fought entirely on political or ideological grounds and the rebel military capacity is another important component of the overall capacity measure. Rebels that manage to inflict damages to the opponent in a regular manner pose an unsustainable threat to the authority and the very existence of the incumbent regime. Previous research has demonstrated that civil wars are more likely to terminate in a decisive victory for the rebels when they can count on a high military capacity (Cunningham, Gleditsch and Salehyan, It Takes Two: 590; and Sullivan and Karreth, The Conditional Impact of Military Intervention on Internal Armed Conflict Outcomes: 280). Military capacity refers to the ability of the rebels to impose unbearable costs on the incumbent regime, both material by targeting its armed forces and assets, and immaterial by threatening its authority.

The effectiveness of the tactics that the rebels have used to impose such costs has been object of discussion. It is widely maintained that guerrilla warfare is the set of tactics best suited for insurgencies (see for example Nagl, Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam; and Kilcullen, Counterinsurgency). Other scholars, however, have found that rebels are more likely to succeed when they can count on conventional capabilities and fight in a symmetric fashion (Balcells and Kalyvas, Does Warfare Matter?: 1409), or when they use the opposite strategy to the one used by the incumbent, fighting in an unconventional manner when the opponent is fighting in an unconventional manner (Arreguin-Toft, How the Weak Win Wars: 105). This possibility, however, is often precluded to the rebels. Rebels resort to guerrilla warfare out of necessity as they rarely possess the conventional capabilities to fight the incumbent regime in a symmetric manner. This is not necessarily a weakness and rebels that are highly skilled at waging guerrilla warfare can impose intolerable costs on the government in office.

Resource-richness is another important element of the overall capacity of the rebels. Resource-richness allow the rebels to buy weapons, pay their fighters, and more generally sustain their effort. With these means of funding the rebellion, the capacity of the rebels to challenge the incumbent regime increases (Weinstein, Inside Rebellion: 7).

From the literature, thus, it can be inferred that rebels that have a high mobilising and military capacity, and possess the resources to fund their struggle, have greater chances to achieve a decisive victory.

1.2. State capacity

Several studies have shown that state capacity is central to the dynamics of civil wars. A number of studies have concluded that civil wars where one of the belligerents is a high-capacity regime are more likely to terminate in decisive victory for the regime (Mason, Weingarten and Fett, Win, Lose, or Draw: 259; DeRouen and Sobek, The Dynamics of Civil War Duration and Outcome: 311; and Lyall, Do Democracies Make Inferior Counterinsurgents?: 180). But if these findings are not surprising, the concept of state capacity requires further definition. It

has been argued that state capacity must be understood as a multidimensional concept (Sobek, Masters of their Domains: 270; and Hendrix, Measuring State Capacity: 280). In the same vein, I suggest that state capacity must be understood as a composite measure that includes the institutional-political capacity and military capacity of the state.

With regard to the institutional-political capacity of a state, one of the long-standing debates in the literature revolves around whether the type of regime might influence the outcomes of civil wars. A number of studies have postulated that democracies are fundamentally prone to lose intra-state wars, due to the constraints imposed by the typical characteristics of democratic regimes on the measures these could take to counter an insurgency (see Mack, Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars; and Merom, How Democracies Lose Small Wars), whereas authoritarian regimes fare much better because their action is not subject to any constraint (Bapat, Insurgency and the Opening of Peace Processes: 710; and Zhukov, Examining the Authoritarian Model of Counter-insurgency: 458). In contrast, many studies conclude that the type of regime is irrelevant (DeRouen and Sobek, The Dynamics of Civil War: 311; Gent, Going in when it Counts: 725; Lyall, Do Democracies Make Inferior Counterinsurgents?: 179; and Getmansky, You Can't Win if You Don’t Fight: 722). Similarly, I argue that the regime type does not necessarily have an impact on the outcomes of civil wars, but rather it is its institutional-political capacity that counts. In 1974, Gurr introduced the concept of anocracy (Persistence and Change in Political Systems, 1800-1971: 1487). As Hendrix pointed out, contrary to what some studies have assumed, anocracies are not regimes characterised by authoritarian and democratic tendencies, but regimes that lack centralised power and institutionalisation (Measuring State Capacity: 279). Thus, it is not the type of regime per se that affects how well a state fares in counterinsurgency, but rather the lack of fundamental capacities in terms of centralised power and institutionalisation. Due to this crucial deficiency, anocracies can be expected to be incapable of controlling and repressing the internal dissent compared to stable democracies and stable autocracies. They can also be expected to be unable to exercise the power of the state in such a manner that could preserve the regime’s legitimacy. Anocracies are unable or unwilling to implement those virtuous measures that are linked to higher chances of government victory in civil wars, such as the provision of goods to the population (see Keefer, Insurgency and Credible Commitment in Autocracies and Democracies), and practices of good governance aimed at addressing the underlying grievances of the conflict through political reform (Cohen and others, Principles, Imperatives, and Paradoxes of Counterinsurgency: 49; and United States government, US Army, Field Manual FM 3-24: 1-9). Those regimes with low institutional-political capacity, thus, are expected to be deficient vis-à-vis the rebels, increasing the chances of the latter to achieve decisive victory.

The incapacity of the regime to control or repress internal dissent points to another crucial dimension of state capacity: its military capacity. It has been demonstrated that powerful regimes in military terms are more likely to defeat the insurgency compared to regimes with low military capacity (Mason, Weingarten and Fett, Win, Lose, or Draw: 259; and Bapat, Insurgency and the Opening of Peace Processes: 710). Military capacity is not as easy to estimate as it...
might appear. Some authors have used the size of the army as a measure of the military capacity (see for example Mason, Weingarten and Fett, *Win, Lose, or Draw*; DeRouen and Sobek, *The Dynamics of Civil War*; and Brandt and others, *When and how the Fighting Stops*). This measure, however, is not entirely convincing since it does not necessarily capture the effectiveness of the security forces of a state. Effectiveness does not entirely depend on the structural characteristics and material capabilities of the state’s security forces, but it depends also on the way force is employed, especially in the context of asymmetric warfare. A persistent debate in the literature opposes two different approaches to counterinsurgency. A minoritarian view favours enemy-centric approaches to counterinsurgency as opposed to population-centric ones (see Luttwak, *Dead End*), but there is a consensus among scholars and practitioners that the adoption of the latter would benefit the incumbent’s effort. Despite the criticism that the population-centric approach has attracted, either because it is excessively influenced by Maoist conceptualisations of modern insurgencies (Kilcullen, *Countering Global Insurgency*: 606-608; Kilcullen, *Counter-Insurgency Redux*: 111; Hoffman, *Neo-Classical Counterinsurgency*: 71-73; and Metz, *Rethinking Insurgency*: 3) or grounded on misinterpretations of past counterinsurgency operations (see Bennett, *The Other Side of COIN*; and Bennett, *Minimum Force in British Counterinsurgency*), the superior effectiveness of this approach has been demonstrated (Paul, Clarke and Grill, *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers*: 88; and Enterline, Stull and Magagnoli, *Reversal of Fortune*?: 189). Most observers agree that this approach is effective because it prescribes a predominantly political response rather than an exclusively military one. This precept is anchored on the firm assumption that, being insurgencies principally contests of political legitimacy, strategies entirely based on the use of force are not effective (Sepp, *Best Practices in Counterinsurgency*: 10; Petraeus, *Learning Counterinsurgency*: 8; and Lyall and Wilson, *Rage Against the Machines*: 89). The use of indiscriminate coercion is believed to have detrimental effects, as it moves the support of the population away from the incumbent regime (Greenhill and Staniland, *Ten Ways to Lose at Counterinsurgency*: 404-406). Coercion, this approach postulates, must be limited and targeted. The objective is to strike only the rebels while simultaneously attempting to separate and protect the civilian population from them (Sepp, *Best Practices in Counterinsurgency*: 10; Cohen and others, *Principles, Imperatives, and Paradoxes of Counterinsurgency*: 50; United States government, US Army, *Field Manual FM 3-24*: 10-7; and Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla*: 265).

In summary, incumbent regimes with a low military capacity, due to their lack of military capabilities and/or reluctance to take countermeasures of proven efficacy, can be expected to be less effective in countering an insurgency. If low military capacity is complemented with low institutional-political capacity, the difficulties for the regime become insurmountable.

### 1.3. External support

A large volume of studies has demonstrated the important impact of external support on the outcomes of civil wars. External support can come in different forms: indirect if it is limited to the provision of weapons or financial assistance, *Close Encounters in War Journal*, 1: “Close encounters in irregular and asymmetric warfare” (2018)
direct if it entails the involvement in combat. External support can also come from different patrons, both states and non-state actors (Grauer and Tierney, *The Arsenal of Insurrection*: 4). Several studies have concluded that external support in favour of the rebels significantly facilitates their effort, regardless of its form and provenience (Byman, *Trends in Outside Support for Insurgent Movements*: 83-102; Balch-Lindsay, Enterline and Joyce, *Third-Party Intervention and the Civil War Process*: 356; Sullivan and Karreth, *The Conditional Impact of Military Intervention*: 279; and Jones, *Altering Capabilities or Imposing Costs?: 58*). Whilst there is a wide consensus about the impact of rebel-biased external support on the outcomes of civil wars, findings on the impact of regime-biased assistance are contradictory. Some studies have found that regime-biased assistance does not necessarily improve the incumbent regime’s chances to defeat the insurgency (Connable and Libicki, *How Insurgencies End*: 50), whilst others claim exactly the opposite (Balch-Lindsay, Enterline and Joyce, *Third-Party Intervention*: 356). Gent argues that regime-biased direct support does not necessarily translate in increased chances of government victory because third parties tend to intervene in the toughest situations, once realised that the regime is unable to resist autonomously (Gent, *Going in when it Counts*: 724). Despite these contradicting findings, no study has indicated external support as detrimental to the regime’s effort. Accordingly, regimes are expected to be better off when they can count on some sort of external support rather than nothing. From the existing literature, it can be inferred that rebels’ chances to defeat the government increase when they are the recipients of external support, especially when the regime is not as fortunate.

As for all complex social phenomena, none of these variables can individually explain why a civil war terminates in a victory for the rebels. Rather, it is their cumulative impact that produces this particular civil war outcome. In the following pages, although the Yemeni civil war is far from being over and the rebels are far from achieving a decisive victory, I will demonstrate that these variables can explain how and why the Houthi have managed to oust the government of Yemen. Before moving onto the analysis, a brief historical overview of the Houthi insurgency is in order.

2. Historical overview of the Houthi insurgency

The civil war in Yemen began in June 2004 and initially opposed the Houthi and the regime presided by Ali Abdullah Saleh. The conflict between the Houthi and Saleh’s regime is commonly divided in six phases. The first phase began when the regime ordered the arrest of hundreds of worshippers that were shouting anti-US and anti-Israel chants in Saada. The initial skirmishes caused by this response escalated in a three-month open confrontation between the regime and the Houthi. During this first phase, the regime killed the leader of the Houthi, Hussein al-Houthi (Winter, *Conflict in Yemen*: 103). The parties agreed to resort to mediation but to no avail and, on March 2005, the hostilities broke out again. During this second phase, the Yemeni regime attempted to dismantle the Houthi leadership and focused its operations on the areas of North Yemen where it was believed these leaders were hiding (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen*: 134). The same operational
pattern was followed during the third phase of the conflict, started on December 2005. In the fourth phase, Saleh’s regime “appeared unrestrained, mercilessly attacking Huthi locations and staying on the offensive throughout the conflict’s duration” (143). Only in 2008, the parties agreed to a ceasefire. This ceasefire, however, collapsed following the abduction of nine foreign aid workers in Saada. The kidnapping, of which the Houthi were accused, reignited the hostilities and provoked Saleh’s overreaction (Hill, Yemen Endures: 192). In the sixth round of conflict, the most brutal until that moment, Saudi Arabia decided to join the conflict against the Houthi with air forces, artillery, and ground forces (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, Regime and Periphery: 156). Despite the considerable deployment of forces, the Houthi managed to resist and, by the time the ceasefire was reached in February 2011, the “Arab spring” broke out.

Yemen was part of the wave of protests that shook North Africa and the Middle East in 2011. After two months of demonstrations, the regime’s overreaction to the protests brought it to collapse. The disintegration of the regime was facilitated by the mutiny of the General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar and part of the military loyal to him, who sided with the protestors (Carapico, Yemen between Revolution and Counter-Terrorism: 37). Support for Saleh was on decline and the US too, traditionally supportive of his rule, began contemplating the option of regime change (Hill, Yemen Endures: 210). This idea gathered momentum and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) prepared a proposal that would grant immunity to Saleh in exchange for his resignation (Brehony, Yemen and the Huthis: 238). Only after strenuous resistance and an assassination attempt, Saleh finally agreed to resign (Hill, Yemen Endures: 241).

Following the demotion of Saleh, the vice-president Abed-Rabbo Mansour Hadi was appointed as interim president for a period of two years. In this period, a national dialogue conference (NDC) was supposed to bring the various parties and Yemeni elites to the round table to discuss a new constitutional framework (Brehony, Yemen and the Huthis: 238). During this transition period, the Houthi managed to exploit the power vacuum and consolidate their control on the northern regions of Yemen, at the expenses of the most influential actors that were emerging in the post-Saleh era, Ali Mohsen and the Ahmar tribal network (Winter, The Ansar of Yemen). Ali Mohsen and the Ahmar tribal network happened to be Saleh’s sworn opponents too. Following ten years of bitter opposition, Saleh and the Houthi now shared common enemies and the former president, whose power base and network had remained intact, used his influence to facilitate the Houthi’s effort. Hadi’s lack of authority contributed to further weaken the regime vis-à-vis the powerful elites of the country. Emboldened by the alliance with Saleh, the Houthi placed Hadi under house arrest and assumed control of the government.

3. Rebel capacity: Houthi’s mobilising and military capacity

Previous studies have suggested that the capacity of the rebels is one of the crucial variables that can explain rebel victory. In this section, the crucial impact that the Houthi’s capacity had on their effort and the way it culminated in the ouster of the Yemeni government are examined.

3.1. Houthi’s mobilising capacity: identity, causes, narratives

The Houthi have demonstrated to be quite skilled at attracting the support of significant portions of the Yemeni population. From the analysis, it emerges that three main factors can explain how the Houthi managed to mobilise the population behind their insurgent effort: the appeals to a common Zaydi identity, the formulation of compelling causes, and the promulgation of captivating narratives.

The confessional identity of the Houthi has played an important role in attracting the support of the North-Yemen population. The Houthi depicted themselves as the doctrinal and ethical essence of Zaydism (Winter, Conflict in Yemen: 113). Such self-representation is grounded on the Houthi’s claims of being direct descendants of the Zaydi imams. The connection between the Houthi and Yemen’s imams is important in terms of identity definition. The imams derived their legitimacy from their status of “sayyid”, a status that only who is direct descendant of the prophet can claim. The Houthi regard themselves as sayyids and, accordingly, to be descendant of Muhammad (International Crisis Group, Defusing the Saada Time Bomb: 2). The possession of said status had clear influence on the level of support the Houthi could gather and it can be considered as the main driver of their religious authority. Despite the attempts of the ruling echelons to delegitimise the sayyids after the fall of Yemen’s imamate (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, Regime and Periphery: 24), this status still grants their possessors the popular recognition of their religious authority. The religious identity of the Houthi had a significant role in mobilising the population of North Yemen, as demonstrated by the large numbers of individuals that were involved in the “Believing Youth” (BY), a network of social mobilisation founded by the Houthi (Winter, Conflict in Yemen: 106).

The causes put forward by the Houthi are not self-evident. The rebels have never produced a manifesto in which goals or inspiring principles were clearly specified. Despite this lack of clarity, their activity does suggest that the Houthi had a set of causes at heart: the defence of Zaydism from the Wahhabi encroachment and the reaction to the long-standing neglect of North Yemen. The opposition to the Wahhabi infiltration in Zaydi regions has been a recurring theme in Houthi’s discourse. The Zaydi population perceived the Wahhabi encroachment as a threat to the integrity of traditional Zaydism and calls to react to this infiltration were a leitmotif of Hussein al-Houthi’s religious discourse (Albloshi, Ideological Roots of the Ḥūthī Movement in Yemen: 156). During the 1990s, the spread of Wahhabism was facilitated by Saleh, who co-opted the Wahhabi preachers into his patronage network with the aim of undermining the position of prominence of the Zaydi elites (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, Regime and Periphery: 24). Through the BY and the religious revival it set in motion, the Houthi could react to the Saleh-backed Wahhabi intrusion and create inter-tribal and inter-generational networks of popular support (Winter, Conflict in Yemen: 106; and Brandt, Sufyān’s “Hybrid” War: 125).

The reaction to the long-standing neglect of the poorest area of North Yemen was another cause that resonated with the disenfranchised population of North Yemen. Saleh always favoured some tribes at the expenses of others. While
certain tribes were always or intermittently part of his patronage network, others, like the Houthi, were constantly excluded from the redistribution of the spoils (Jones, *The Tribes that Bind*: 906). This policy further aggravated the pre-existing condition of socio-economic neglect of the Northern regions and generated popular resentment (Brehony, *Yemen and the Huthis*: 237). The Houthi exploited this resentment to exert pressure on the regime for increased political and economic inclusion (Juneau, *Yemen*: 139). If initially the Houthi demands were limited to greater political inclusion, as the conflict progressed, their cause evolved from a reaction to the long-standing neglect to an open opposition to the government that entailed direct calls for the demotion of Saleh (International Crisis Group, *Defusing the Saada Time Bomb*: 5; King, *Zaydī Revival in a Hostile Republic*: 442). Towards the end of the conflict with Saleh’s regime, the opposition to the government was the primary cause put forward by the Houthi (Boucek, *War in Saada*: 4). By playing on the local resentment resulting from years of social and economic marginalisation, the Houthi managed to attract significant support from the tribes that had been excluded from Saleh’s patronage system, reaching also those segments of the population beyond their immediate confessional circle of supporters (Phillips, *Cracks in the Yemeni System*: 1).

The attractive potential of these causes was enhanced by a compelling two-pronged narrative, carefully crafted to depict the Houthi as acting in self-defence and the regime as pro-American, pro-Saudi, and enemy of the Yemenis. In order to depict the insurgency as an act of self-defence, the Houthi have stressed the regime’s corrupt nature and heavy-handedness. According to this narrative, the regime had long been repressing the Zaydi religious practices and targeted the existence of the Zaydi community (International Crisis Group, *Defusing the Saada Time Bomb*: 12). By framing the conflict with the government as defensive, this narrative portrayed the insurgency as a necessary act to protect the population’s confessional and constitutional rights, and as a legitimate resistance to the regime’s aggression (Hamidi, *Inscriptions of Violence in Northern Yemen*: 171; and Granzow, *Violent vs. Non-Violent Struggle*: 171). By doing so, the Houthi deflected any characterisation of them as a militant armed group and depicted themselves as ‘a dedicated group of locals who are merely defending their rights’ (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, *Regime and Periphery*: 229). The narrative was coupled with the representation of the government as an American and Saudi puppet that persistently acted against the interest of the Yemenis (International Crisis Group, *Defusing the Saada Time Bomb*: 12). This representation is consistent with the Houthi’s intention to exploit the post-Iraq invasion resentment against the US. The Houthi perceived that this hostility could be used to arouse the population and attract the support to the insurgency at the expenses of the regime following its involvement and cooperation in the American-led war on terror (Freeman, *The al Houthi Insurgency in the North of Yemen*: 1009; and Hill, *Yemen Endures*: 180). The captivating power of this narrative resides in its capacity to channel shared feelings of resentment into an interpretive framework in which the insurgency is portrayed as a legitimate act in response to persistent injustices perpetrated by the government.
The appeals to the Zaydi identity and the compelling causes and narratives have enabled the Houthi to attract the support of various segments of the population. Their support base, however, included also segments of the population that sided with the rebels to maximise their own interests at the expenses of other tribes (United Nations Security Council, Final Report of the Panel Experts on Yemen S/2016/73: 15). Thus, it was also opportunism that contributed to the mobilisation of the population. This political opportunism, however, does not overshadow the crucial role that the rebels’ confessional identity, causes, and narratives had in attracting the support of the population and contributing to the armed struggle that eventually led to the ouster of the Yemeni regime.

3.2. Houthi’s military capacity: from guerrilla to hybrid warfare

The Houthi displayed their military prowess since the outbreak of the insurgency. During the conflict against Saleh’s regime, the Houthi resorted to an extensive range of guerrilla tactics. The operations were conducted by small squads that usually attacked army units of almost equivalent size (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, Regime and Periphery: 209). Through a large use of ambushes, the rebels managed to harass army officers, seize their equipment and weapons, and gain control of the areas that the military outposts were supposed to guard. The Houthi also resorted to harassment fire against military barracks and outposts, exploiting the elevated terrain of Saada for this purpose, and proved to be skilled at producing Improvised Explosive Devices (IED). With IEDs and snipers, the rebels targeted military officials, government representatives, and local tribal leaders who were siding with the regime (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, Regime and Periphery: 204-207; and Freeman, The al Houthi Insurgency: 1013). Through the use of these tactics, the Houthi could inflict considerable damages to the armed forces, which struggled to withstand the attacks of the rebels.

The decision of the former ruler Saleh to coalize boosted the rebels’ military capacity. Once the coalition was formed, the rebels could count on the assistance of the Republican guards and other defectors from the armed forces that Saleh controlled even after his demotion. The presence of former officers, who possessed specialist knowledge on how to use medium and heavy weaponry, resulted in a shift from mere guerrilla warfare to a more effective hybrid warfare that skilfully blended guerrilla with conventional tactics (United Nations Security Council, Final Report of the Panel Experts on Yemen S/2016/73: 16).

From the analysis, it emerges that the military ability of the rebels allowed them to impose unbearable costs to the regime in a consistent and incremental manner. If initially, when the balance of power was largely in favour of the regime, regular ambushes and harassment contributed to the enfeeblement and demoralisation of the regime’s armed forces, once the coalition with Saleh was formed, the rebels could carry out large-scale operations and cripple the regime’s armed forces and opposing militias.
4. State capacity: regime weakness and dysfunctional armed forces

From the discussion on state capacity, it emerged that low-capacity states, in political-institutional and/or military terms, are particularly weak vis-à-vis the rebels and, compared to high-capacity states, much more likely to be defeated. Yemen, with its chronic institutional weakness and incompetent armed forces, can certainly be considered a low-capacity state. The lack of capacity of the state has largely facilitated the effort of the rebels.

Yemen has been the first country in the Arabian Peninsula to adopt a democratic system of government based on universal suffrage (Phillips, *Yemen’s Democracy Experiment in Regional Perspective*: 47; and Phillips, *Yemen and the Politics of Permanent Crisis*: 39). However, it has long been a façade democracy. During the three decades of presidency of Saleh, the peculiar prerogatives of a parliamentary democracy were weakened by an uneven distribution of power, a widespread corruption, and an extensive patronage network managed by the president himself. Saleh’s regime has been described as neopatrimonial, a kind of regime in which the informal patrimonial loyalties between the patron and client permeate into formal political institutions and “political parties, civil society organizations, and parliaments [...] are used in conjunction with traditional informal organizations by the leaders to expand their patron-client networks” (Phillips, *Yemen’s Democracy Experiment*: 4; and Phillips, *Yemen and the Politics of Permanent Crisis*: 55). Since the beginning of his rule, Saleh co-opted relatives and tribal leaders in his patronage network (Alley, *The Rules of the Game*: 387). This network was inclusive and almost any elite could expect to be included if its activity or characteristics fit in Saleh’s political calculations. The inclusiveness of this network ensured that the diverse factions within the Yemeni social strata were kept in check, guaranteeing the regime’s longevity (393; and Juneau, *Yemen*: 135). When Yemen fell into an economic crisis, this patronage network became untenable (Alley, *Yemen Changes Everything... and Nothing*: 77; and Brehony, *Yemen and the Huthis*: 234). As soon as Saleh reduced the number of clients included in the network and concentrated the redistribution of spoils to his relatives, the former clients had no more reasons to be loyal to the regime, which became increasingly vulnerable to local uprisings.

When Hadi was appointed president following Saleh’s demotion, he could not count on any of the elements that ensured the longevity of the previous regime. He inherited a hollowed-out state, whose institutions had been depredated of any decisional power, and he could not count on the patronage network that had enabled Saleh to stay in power. With Saleh working against the transition of power, the regime, having lost its central institutional power and the monopoly of violence, was too weak to respond to the attacks to its authority. The regime was absent from the theatre of operations and, with exception of the part of armed forces aligned with Ali Mohsen and the Ahmar tribal network - which fought for their own political interests more than the state’s - no one was standing in the Houthi’s way, who could exploit the power vacuum and proceed with the takeover of the government (United Nations Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel Experts on Yemen S/2015/125*: 21; and Hill, *Yemen Endures*: 271).

Yemen was deficient not only in terms of institutional-political capacity, but also in terms of military capacity. Its military apparatus has always been a highly dysfunctional entity built for internal rather than external security (Cordesman and Al-Rodhan, *Gulf Military Forces in an Era of Asymmetric Wars*: 518). Its efficiency has been impaired by internal divisions, personal interests, and ineptitude. As much as any other institution in Yemen, the security apparatus was part of Saleh’s patronage network. Since the beginning of his rule, Saleh attempted to coup-proof his regime by extending his dominance to the military through the appointment of relatives and members of his tribe in high-rank military positions (Noman and Sorenson, *Reforming the Yemen Security Sector*: 11). To ensure his position of safety and avoid a concentration of power on single corps, Saleh created parallel militaries, at the head of which he appointed close relatives. Many of them covered positions of high prestige whilst the remaining high-rank posts were allocated to influential tribesmen loyal to the president (Knights, *The Military Role in Yemen’s Protests*: 274). This distribution of power generated internal tensions within the military and competition among the different corps. The appointment of inexperienced relatives in positions of prominence, such as Saleh’s son Ahmed Ali Saleh, has been a very divisive issue within the security apparatus (275). These internal tensions have hindered the efficiency and the operational capabilities of Yemen’s security forces, as the internecine between Ahmed Ali Saleh and Ali Mohsen shows. The corps under their command, respectively the Republican guards and the first armoured division of the Yemeni army, were both deployed in Saada during the hostilities between the rebels and Saleh’s regime. This hostility directly favoured the Houthi since the two commanders have exploited the battlefield and the forces under their command to fight one another in a parallel war (Jane’s Information Group, *Changed Dynamics of Yemen’s Northern Houthi-Salafist Conflict*: 2). For this reason, the security forces that were supposed to fight the rebels did not act as a unified and cohesive front, limiting their operational efficiency and chances to suppress the insurgency (Winter, *Conflict in Yemen*: 109; and Hill, *Yemen Endures*: 190). The split between these two opposing camps within the military had a significant role in the collapse of Saleh’s regime because, as soon as the Arab spring started, Ali Mohsen and the large portion of the army he commanded sided with the protestors (Knights, *The Military Role*: 278; and International Crisis Group, *Is Peace Possible?:* 1).

When Hadi became president, he inherited a security apparatus divided along these lines of loyalty. Saleh maintained a firm grip over a large part of the security forces, including the entire air forces (United Nations Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel Experts on Yemen S/2015/125*: 19). Despite Hadi’s strenuous attempts, the dismantlement of Saleh’s patronage network proved to be a Herculean task and these attempts resulted in the fragmentation of the security forces (Hill, *Reforming Yemen’s Military*; Simonsen, *Haunting Past*: 5; and Seitz, *Ties that Bind and Divide*: 65). Despite the support of Ali Mohsen, Hadi had a weak control over the security apparatus, certainly not enough to mount a campaign to defeat the Saleh-Houthi alliance (United Nations Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel Experts on Yemen S/2015/125*: 13).
Lack of cohesion was not the only factor that explains Yemen’s military ineffectiveness. Since the outbreak of the insurgency, the regime manifested a reticence to address the underlying popular grievances and the desire to suppress the uprising with iron-fist. The regime never showed any intention to address these popular grievances or engage with the political and social dimension of the insurgency (Novak, *Comparative Counterinsurgency in Yemen*). Rather, reckless repression was the chosen course of action. Although the resort to coercive methods has been interpreted as instrumental for reasserting the regime’s territorial sovereignty in Saada (Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions*: 179), it is more plausible that the regime regarded the insurgency as an unacceptable challenge to its authority. According to Alley, moderate attempts of the elites to reposition themselves within Saleh’s patronage network or to reform the political system were circumscribed by red lines that the regime set (*The Rules of the Game*: 400). The Houthi insurgency clearly crossed these red lines and the decision of the regime to suppress the rebellion forcefully is not surprising.

At the beginning of the operations, the regime tried to pursue a decapitation strategy. As the regime could not count on cutting-edge intelligence and surveillance systems to surgically enact this strategy, it resorted to a large use of artillery, tanks, and helicopters (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, *Regime and Periphery*: 136). When the conflict progressed, the regime increased the use of indirect fire with mortars and artillery against Houthi positions (Novak, *Comparative Counterinsurgency*). Although these methods proved to be ineffective, the regime did not amend its strategy for the entire length of the confrontation against the rebels. By 2009, the government was still making large use of indirect fire and air forces, and had deployed ten armoured brigades, amounting to half of Yemen’s available forces (Knights, *The Military Role*: 270). The results were still poor. These kinetic operations were complemented with other punitive measures, such as road-blocks to prevent the movement of people and goods, and induced starvation (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, *Regime and Periphery*: 188). The indifference displayed by the government to the discrimination between combatants and non-combatants and the minimisation of the collateral damages resulting from this excessive use of force significantly increased the hostility of the locals, inducing them to join the insurgency (Boucek, *War in Saada*: 9; Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, *Regime and Periphery*: 168; and Winter, *Conflict in Yemen*: 109). The choice of the government to use an iron-fist approach to suppress the insurgency proved to be particularly detrimental as it did not only motivate the participation of sympathetic tribes to the insurgency, but also the adjunction of all those segments of the population that initially did not sympathise with the Houthi’s causes (International Crisis Group, *Defusing the Saada Time Bomb*: 13; and Alley, *Yemen Changes Everything*: 76). In sum, the rebellious effort of the Houthi was greatly facilitated not only by the weakness of the armed forces but also by a deeply flawed counterinsurgency approach.

**5. External support: Iranian influences and Saleh’s support**

The vital impact of external support on the likelihood of rebel victory is widely documented. In the case under analysis, the support of two actors that can be deemed external to the Houthi group, a state actor, Iran, and a non-state actor,
the former president Saleh, and the impact it had on the conflict process is examined.

Since the outbreak of the insurgency, the Houthi have been accused of receiving support from Iran but, at least for the period under consideration in this article, evidence to back these accusations is contradictory. According to some sources, the support in terms of money, weapons, and training that Iran and Hezbollah have allegedly provided to the rebels has not been proved (Embassy of Sana’a, Al-Houthi Rebellion; and Boucek, War in Saada: 11). Other sources suggest that these allegations have been used by the regime to discredit the rebels and as a justification for its inability to counter the insurgency (Freeman, The al Houthi Insurgency: 1014; and Hill, Yemen Endures: 194). Conversely, more recent reports seem to indicate that Iran provided material support to the Houthi at least during the final stage of the insurgency and in the current conflict against the Saudi-led coalition (United Nations Security Council, Final Report of the Panel Experts on Yemen S/2015/125: 15; and United Nations Security Council, Final Report of the Panel Experts on Yemen S/2016/73: 24).

Whilst from the evidence available no conclusion can be drawn regarding the contribution of the Iranian support to the Houthi struggle, it can be firmly argued that the support of Saleh has been crucial in this respect. Saleh can be considered an external actor for two main reasons: first, as ruler of Yemen, he has been the primary enemy of the Houthi for almost the entire duration of the insurgency, until he was forced to step down; second, the two actors have not merged in a unitary entity, but rather their coalition has always been a mere alliance of convenience. This alliance was formed in 2013. The rebels shared with Saleh the desire to undermine the political framework that emerged from the post-2011 transition period, which largely favoured their common political opponents (International Crisis Group, Is Peace Possible?: 7). If initially Saleh’s support was limited to mere non-belligerence and non-resistance (United Nations Security Council, Final Report of the Panel Experts on Yemen S/2015/125: 21; and Hill, Yemen Endures: 269), in 2014 the level of support increased, entailing the provision of funds, the military expertise of the Republican guards, and the direct involvement in the fight (International Crisis Group, The Huthis: 3; United Nations Security Council, Final Report of the Panel Experts on Yemen S/2015/125: 33; and International Crisis Group, Is Peace Possible?: 7). Although the Houthi had already the upper hand by the time the coalition was formed, Saleh’s support shuffled the cards on the deck in their favour.

Concluding remarks

Yemen has been ravaged by a civil war almost uninterruptedly for the last 14 years. Compared to other on-going civil wars, the conflict in Yemen has not received much attention, both in the media and in academia. The intent of this article was to shed light on an under researched civil war and explain why and how the Houthi have succeeded in ousting the government of Yemen.

The literature on civil wars indicates three variables that are related to a higher likelihood that a civil war terminates in rebel victory: rebel capacity, state capacity, and external support. Rebels are more likely to achieve their

objectives when they can stimulate the supportive mobilisation of the population and have enough military capability to inflict damages to and withstand the countermeasures of the government; when the government that they fight is deficient both in political-institutional and military terms; and when they receive support from third parties. The analysis demonstrated that, although the civil war in Yemen is not over and the Houthi have not achieved a decisive victory, these variables can largely explain why and how the Houthi have managed to overthrow the government. About the capacity of the rebels, it has been shown that their ability to mobilise a significant popular support and impose unsustainable costs to the regime through violent action have had a central importance. It has also been shown that the external assistance of the former ruler of Yemen, Ali Abdullah Saleh, has indeed further increased the capacity of the rebels. It was also thanks to his assistance that the Houthi could inflict a decisive blow to the regime.

Certainly, no matter how strong the rebels are, functioning states are always more likely to emerge as winners in civil wars. The Houthi have demonstrated to be skilled both politically, through the construction of compelling causes and narratives, and militarily, through the sapient use of tactics of guerrilla first and of hybrid warfare later on. However, their insurgency has been a very localised phenomenon for several years, especially during their struggle against Saleh’s regime. A capable and functioning state could have isolated and annihilated their uprising before it could gain momentum. Yemen however, neither during Saleh’s era nor during Abed-Rabbo Mansour Hadi’s inter-reign was governed by a capable and functioning regime. The government could have taken advantage of its large military superiority relative to the rebels to quell the insurgency, but the internecine within the armed forces and unsoundness of the countermeasures taken led the government to squander this advantage. This military incapacity was coupled with an endemic weakness of the state’s political institutions. Such a chronic weakness resulted in the total inability of the government not only to exert control over its security apparatus, but also to keep the Yemeni elites in check and secure the support of the urban and southern population. With that extent of political delegitimization, especially during the Hadi’s administration, it is no wonder that the state struggled to respond effectively to a well-organised uprising such as the one mounted by the Houthi. In conclusion, it is evident that the main reason why the Houthi have been able to overthrow the government of Yemen is its lack of military and political-institutional capacity.

References


1 Insurgency is defined as “a struggle to control a contested political space, between a state (or a group of states or occupying powers), and one or more popularly based, non-state challengers” (Kilcullen, *Counter-Insurgency Redux* 112).

2 Despite the slightly different conceptualisation of anocracy, Tilly reaches very similar conclusions (*The Politics of Collective Violence*: 49).

3 Zaydism is a branch of Shi’a Islam, separate from the dominant branch of the “Twelver” Shi’a. This distinct branch, also referred to as “Fiver” Shi’a, originated from the dispute among the Shi’ites over who, between the two great-grandsons of Ali ibn Abi Talib, the prophet’s son-in-law and first Imam, had to be considered the fifth Imam.
“As if He Wanted to Murder Her”: Fear, Disgust, and Anger in *La Storia’s* Rape Scene

By Stefania Porcelli

**Abstract:** In this paper, the episode of Ida’s rape in Elsa Morante’s *La Storia* is read as the intersection of three asymmetrical and intertwined conflicts – social, sexual, and racial – that permeates the entire novel. Ida’s fear and shame are inherited from her mother’s obsession with the racial laws and are inextricably linked to the disgust that knots Jewishness and nakedness. Ida’s emotional history shows that the power relations between her and Gunther pre-exist their encounter and is pre-determined by gender, class, and race. I argue that the sets of emotions the two characters experience in the scene under scrutiny depend on such hierarchy. While Ida is petrified by fear, Gunther wavers between the desire for love and anger, which in this scene appears as a one-sided emotion entailing an asymmetrical power, triggered by what he perceives as an offence from a subject that he considers inferior.

**Keywords:** Elsa Morante, Rape in Literature, Asymmetrical emotions, Affect

In the first chapter of Elsa Morante’s *La Storia* (1974), the German soldier Gunther walks the streets of the San Lorenzo neighbourhood in Rome, torn between the nostalgia for his home with his mother in Dachau and the desire for the warm body of a woman – any woman – in which to find comfort. The year is 1941, Italy and Germany are still war allies; but, despite the desperate expression in his eyes and his palpable loneliness and sadness, the soldier is not welcome in the neighbourhood. In Remo’s tavern, the owner’s hostility along with that of the waiter leads him to drink too much wine “while his anger tempted him to knock over the counter and the tables and to behave not like an ally but like an invader and a murderer” (*History*: 18). Gunther leaves the tavern feeling both nostalgic and frustrated. And when he sees Ida at her front door, he decides to climb the stairs with her and enter her apartment. There, he rapes her twice, while the woman’s mind drifts away, probably due to an epileptic attack.

Ida’s rape is not only one of the most powerful scenes in *La Storia*, but also the episode that triggers the plot. The two characters experience intense emotional states and provoke unwanted reactions in each other, which are intensified by their lack of a shared language, until the situation eventually escalates into sexual violence. In this article, I will read this scene as a close encounter in wartime and as the point of intersection of three asymmetrical and intertwined conflicts – sexual, social, and racial – that permeate not only the time span of the novel (1941-1947), but also the years before and after the story. Although depicted as innocent and immature, Gunther – the man, the soldier, and the Nazi – is undoubtedly the stronger party in this encounter, since Ida is a timid woman, with an undeveloped sexuality. She is an elementary-school teacher afraid of all forms of authority, and a Jew by matrilineal descent. Morante’s humble characters never win against more...
powerful enemies. Gunther, indeed, changes from an ally into an oppressor, although of a different kind than that imagined by Ida.

An analysis of Ida’s fear, shame and subjection throughout the novel suggests that these emotions do not arise in the moments leading up to the rape, but are initially inherited from her mother Nora, who was obsessed with the racial laws. Ida’s emotional history, in other words, shows that the power dynamics between her and Gunther pre-exist their encounter and are pre-determined by gender, class, and race. I would like to suggest that the sets of emotions the two characters experience in the scene under scrutiny are also dependent on the social, racial, and sexual hierarchy depicted in the novel.

During this encounter, Ida is petrified by fear and disgust, while Gunther wavers between his desire for love and his anger. Hence, like the power relations between them, the characters’ emotional and affective reactions are also asymmetrical. Anger, for example, seems to arise both in the tavern and from Gunther’s perception that Ida disrespects him, which he sees as an offence. But it is only against Ida that he becomes violent. Consequently, the question as to whether Gunther feels more offended by a woman than by a man can be raised. Moreover, Ida never feels anger: it would probably constitute an act of rebellion against authority which would be impossible for her. Therefore, both status and gender are at stake in the emotion of anger.

Anger has been studied since the beginning of Western culture and two approaches have emerged: anger is either a rational and just emotion, unless it becomes uncontrolled rage; or it is akin to madness and therefore a feeling to be suppressed (see Bodei, *Ira*: 13). According to Aristotle, who insisted on the cognitive aspect of anger, this emotion derives from the perception of an offence or wrongdoing and is complemented by a desire for retaliation: “Anger may be defined as an impulse, accompanied by pain, to a conspicuous revenge for a conspicuous slight directed without justification towards what concerns oneself or towards what concerns one’s friend” (*Rhetoric*: 70-71). Aristotle also links the emotional reaction to the social hierarchy: “The world implied by Aristotle’s account of anger is hierarchical, consisting of people who are superior or inferior in regard to strength, wealth, status, and the like” (Konstan, *Aristotle on Anger and the Emotions*: 112). Importantly, anger is directed at someone who was expected to pay respect to the offended person: “The ruler demands the respect of the ruled, and the man who thinks he ought to be a ruler demands the respect of the man whom he thinks he ought to be ruling. Hence it has been said *Great is the wrath of kings* […], their great resentment being due to their great superiority” (Aristotle, *Rhetoric*: 62, emphasis in the original).

The idea that anger is just when it defends one’s status in society allowed for legitimate anger on the part of men, but “there was almost no legitimate place for women’s anger in the classical city” (Harris, *The Rage of Women*: 137). However, the stereotype that anger is not appropriate for women has long existed and is still reflected in the role played by gender in the socialization of emotions. It has also been suggested that the social control of anger is instrumental in preserving male dominance over women. Although we do not think of anger today in terms of

class, and women are (re)claiming the right to be angry (a right which subtends the
feminist movement), for a long time anger did not belong to them or to those who
were either deemed inferior by others or considered themselves to be inferior in
the social ladder. The ancient “asymmetrical power” of anger (Gross, The Secret
History of Emotion: 3) seems more pertinent to the vision of history as “a scandal
that has lasted for ten thousand years,” as the original subtitle of La Storia reads.

Gunther is not a “ruler” in absolute terms. He and Ida are both on the same side
in the large-scale war between those that Morante calls “Powers” with a capital P
(History: 6), “the landowners” (6), or “the usual powerful forces” (8) and the weak
and powerless, who are all doomed to succumb. Ida’s oppressor is in his turn
oppressed and annihilated in his own asymmetrical war against history. Thus, he
joins the multitudes of history’s victims, further complicating his representation as
a violent rapist. However, the emotions activated in the interaction between
Gunther and Ida reveal the inequality between the two characters. Gunther is a
character who is certainly stronger than Ida. He demands her respect and
submission, while Ida’s specific emotions are fear and shame.

A History of Fear and Shame

Ida first appears in the novel as she returns home with her shopping bags; she is
described as a shy woman. Gunther, who has just left the tavern, calls out to her
with no apparent reason: “She, however, seeing him confront her, stared at him
with an absolutely inhuman gaze, as if confronted by the true and recognizable
face of horror” (History: 19). These first lines about Ida position her outside of the
human realm (“inhuman gaze”) and start a long series of similes that both
compare her mostly to female animals, and contribute to the construction of her
character as Other. Her reaction at this point is barely understandable, but the
following digression about her childhood and her last years in Rome explains the
origin of that horror: she fears that her son, Nino, might not be considered Aryan
enough. According to the recent racial laws approved by the Fascist regime,
indeed, Ida herself is a “half Jew,” because her mother Nora was a Jew, though she
decided to keep this detail secret. Ida’s father, Giuseppe, instead, was an anarchist,
which also had to be hidden in Fascist Italy. Apart from these family secrets, the
epileptic attacks Ida suffered when she was a child were another “scandal.”

Ida, 37 years old when the story begins, is also said to have remained a little girl,
“because her chief attitude toward the world had always been and still was
(consciously or not) one of frightened awe” (History: 21). Not only is Ida still a
child, but she is also unaware of her own attitude toward the world (“consciously
or not”), a condition that pushes her toward the limits of what can be defined as
human:

[In her great dark almond eyes there was the passive sweetness of a very profound and
incurable barbarism, which resembled foreknowledge.

Foreknowledge, actually, is not the best word, because knowledge had nothing to do with
it. Rather, the strangeness of those eyes recalled the mysterious idiocy of animals, who, not

with their mind, but with a sense in their vulnerable bodies, “know” the past and the future of every destiny. I would call that sense – which is common in them, a part of the other bodily senses – *the sense of the sacred*: meaning by *sacred*, in their case, the universal power that can devour them and annihilate them, for their guilt in being born. (21, emphasis in the original)

This passage, elaborating on Ida’s “animal nature” so to speak, is very dense with philosophical implications, mentioning concepts such as guilt, the sacred, the vulnerability of the body, and the boundaries between the human and the animal. It is not surprising that Giorgio Agamben, friend and critic of Morante, wrote about “Elsa’s tenacious philosophical convictions” (*The End of the Poem*: 102). Ida’s sensations connect her – in the same way as they connect animals – to a superior power that has given her life and can take it back in any moment, as if she were guilty and in debt, as per Agamben’s equation “being-in-debt: *in culpa esse*” (*Homo Sacer*: 28). Ida is outside – we do not know whether below or beyond, given that animal dignity in Morante’s work – the human and cognitive understanding of the world, and therefore she is vulnerable, as she is exposed to the universal power that can reclaim her life in any moment.

Ida’s vulnerability appeared as a mysterious disease, probably epilepsy, when she was a child: “Toward the age of five, for a whole summer Iduzza was subject to attacks of an unnamed disease [...]. In the midst of her games and her childish prattle, she would suddenly fall silent, turn pale, with the impression that the world was spinning and dissolving around her” (*History*: 29). At the inception of these episodes of vertigo, Ida would only emit a “little animal lament” (29). Soon after them, however, she would enjoy “sweet, seemly repose” (29), while her parents would bend their heads over her, resembling a sheepdog and a goat respectively. The animal imagery, positing the question of what is human (Umberto Saba and Primo Levi come to mind), already suggests the issue of race and exclusion. Ida, the little beast, protected metaphorically by those two animals, lives her childhood removed from society, inheriting her parents’ sense of exclusion, especially her mother’s: “As for her Jewish secret, she had explained to her daughter, from early childhood, that the Jews are a people destined, since time began, to suffer the indictive hatred of all other peoples; and that even during apparent periods of truce, persecution will always dog them, eternally recurring, as their prescribed destiny” (23). Nora is obsessed with and frightened by the history of oppression of the Jewish people and is “the first victim of that obscure and negative entity incarnated by history that is always present throughout the novel” (*Moretti, Crises, Suffering and Breakdowns*: 423).

However, even before her mother’s death, Ida has already lost her sense of protection. She starts to feel vulnerable when first her father and then her husband die: “After losing Giuseppe and Alfio one after the other, she found herself definitely exposed to fear; hers was the typical case of someone who had always remained a child, and was now fatherless” (*History*: 45). According to Adriana Cavarero, the vulnerable person is always part of an asymmetrical relationship, in which the other can decide over her life or death, giving care or killing (*Horrorism*: 23). However, while Cavarero attributes this role to the mother, Ida’s sense of

protection seems to come from the only two men that do not scare her, which confirms the character’s dependence and men’s power over her.

Ida’s relationship to the world remains one of inferiority throughout her life, because she never establishes any reciprocal rapport with anybody, continuing to live in a state of fear and awe. She is especially afraid of authority; for example, she fears the kind of power represented by three pictures hanging in the classroom where she teaches: Christ, Mussolini, and the King. Although the narrator uses irony to describe them, all three figures are awe-inspiring abstractions for Ida (History: 46). The tirade against Mussolini and Hitler, “two ill-starred counterfeiters” (46), expresses the narrator’s opinion and indignation and is totally external to Ida’s consciousness: she, in fact, sees them as the symbol of absolute authority, the same authority which is also represented by Gunther’s uniform. This contrast makes Ida’s reaction even more conspicuous. Although for the narrator and for the reader Gunther is only a boy, as we will see, his aspect is enough to trigger in the woman the fear that is part of her emotional history.

Ida is afraid not so much for herself but for her son. Studies of fear have highlighted the temporal dimension of this emotion, “since fear is caused by an object that is approaching and involves an anticipation of pain in the future” (Ahmed, The Cultural Politics of Emotions: 65). Ida’s fear, however, is both anticipation and repetition. Nora was afraid for herself and for her daughter, whom she wanted to be baptized a Catholic, even before the racial laws were introduced. Ida inherits the same fear that her own son will be persecuted, as it is made clear in the scene in which she traces Nino’s family tree in order to measure his Aryan part against the Jewish one (History: 67). Sara Ahmed also focuses on how emotions impress themselves on people’s bodies and connect the future to the present: “Fear presses us into that future as an intense bodily experience in the present” (The Cultural Politics of Emotions: 65). The impression of fear on Ida’s body is “an imperceptible but constant trembling of her hands” (History: 45). Moreover, fear is a force that sometimes involves “taking flight, and other times may involve paralysis” (Ahmed, The Cultural Politics of Emotions: 65). Here is the difference between Ida and Nora: instead of attempting to hide or escape as Nora did, Ida tends to comply with the law. For example, she reports herself for the census, donates her wedding ring to the homeland (unlike her mother, who never wanted to part from hers), and teaches her pupils according to the Fascist scholastic programs (see, for example, History: 46 and 95). Moreover, although she is baptized Catholic, which gives her the legal right to work, she feels guilty for being a Jew that teaches in a public school: “Particularly at school, where she, a clandestine half-Jew, enjoyed the rights and functions due Aryans, she felt guilty, a usurper, a counterfeiter” (62 emphasis in the original). It is worth noting that the word “counterfeiter” has already appeared with reference to Mussolini and Hitler, but rather than reporting Ida’s thought it expressed the judgment of the narrative voice. Unlike the narrator, the character can only judge (and condemn) herself, while respecting and fearing authority.

Thus, although fear and guilt are different emotions, in Ida they coexist, and even intertwine with shame. When she has to report herself for the census, she

goes to the city offices “as timid and stunned as if she were on trial at the Palace of Justice” (58), providing all the documents for her maternal and Jewish side and for her paternal and “Aryan” side:

Not a thing was lacking. And since she was ashamed even to open her mouth, along with this dossier, she also handed the clerk a page from a notebook where, in her own hand, she had written out her personal data. But a kind of repugnance, tantamount to a final little tribute, had made her omit any accent on her mother’s maiden name. (58-59, emphasis mine)

While shame can be considered the failure of a subject to keep up with expectations, it also brings “the fear of abandonment by society, of being left to starve outside the boundaries of humankind” (Probyn, Blush: 3). This kind of fear leads Nora to escape (and maybe to commit suicide), precisely because she feels that “for her, in the entire globe, there was no place” (History: 52). Ida, instead, is too passive to escape and does not fail to admit to her Jewish heritage, when she is directly asked about it.

However, the fact that Ida also feels “repugnance” perhaps requires a different reflection on shame that also considers disgust or revulsion. In Remnants of Auschwitz, in which he analyses the literature of the survivors of Auschwitz, Giorgio Agamben dedicates a chapter (“Shame, or On the Subject”) to the inseparability of shame and sense of guilt and touches upon the link between shame and repugnance:

[S]hame does not derive, as the moral philosophers maintain, from the consciousness of an imperfection or a lack in our being from which we take distance. On the contrary, shame is grounded in our being’s incapacity to move away and break from itself. If we experience shame in nudity, it is because we cannot hide what we would like to remove from the field of vision. (Agamben, Remnants: 105)

The reference to nudity is relevant to my analysis, because in La Storia the problem of race overlaps with the issues of the body and sexuality. As Katja Liimatta observes: “Like her Jewish heritage, the protagonist keeps her body in secrecy, because similar to the maternal name it represents something shameful that has to be hidden” (Rape, Body, and Identity: 222). This shameful attitude toward sexuality seems also to have been inherited from Ida’s parents:

Iduzza was a virgin not only in her body but also in her thoughts. She had never seen an adult naked, because her parents never undressed in her presence; and she was extremely modest also about her own body, even when she was alone. Nora had informed her only that to procreate babies the man’s body had to enter the woman’s. It’s a necessary operation, to which you had to submit dutifully, and it doesn’t hurt too much. (History: 37)
While the body’s nudity is a shame to always keep hidden, in this passage the sexual intercourse is presented as an obligation, thereby depicting women as victims of institutionalized rapes and relegating them in their role as mothers.

Ida’s body “had grown up with her like an outsider” (91). However, as Agamben argues, the impossibility of fully removing what is in oneself, this very intimacy with oneself, causes revulsion: “The predominant feeling in disgust is the fear of being recognized by what repulses us” (Remnants: 106). In Ida, this feeling concerns her own body (for which she feels ashamed to the point that she never even looks at herself naked), as well as her mother’s name, in which an accent becomes a linguistic index, directly pointing, that is, to her Jewish origin:

“Almàgia or ALMAGIÀ?” the clerk inquired, examining her with an inquisitorial eye, authoritative and threatening.

She flushed, worse than a pupil caught copying an answer. “Almagià,” she murmured hastily, “my mother was Jewish.” (History: 59, emphasis in the original)

Therefore, the object of Ida’s revulsion – which will play a significant role in the rape scene – is her own Jewishness, which is as intimate as her own nudity. Shame, guilt and disgust – even abjection in Julia Kristeva’s sense – are one thing for her, who feels more and more impure as she learns the word “Aryan”:

Ida learned that the Jews were different not only because they were Jews, but also because they were non-Aryans. […] in her concept the Jews were opposed to the Aryans much as the plebeians to the patricians (she had studied history!). However, obviously, the non-Aryans, for the Authorities, were the most plebeian of the plebeians! For example, the baker’s apprentice, plebeian by class, compared to a Jew was as good as a patrician, because he was Aryan! And if, in the social order, the plebeians were already like scabies, the plebeians of the plebeians must have been leprosy! (61, emphasis in the original)

In her attempt at understanding her own identity, Ida resembles Morante herself, who was the daughter of a Jewish mother, and who later wrote: “I should be grateful to Mussolini. In 1938, by introducing the German racist laws he made me realize that I myself was a Jew […] when the Germans took over Rome in 1943, I learned a great lesson, I learned terror” (quoted in Popoff, Once Upon a Time: 25).

Stefania Lucamante has argued that in La Storia Morante addresses “the destiny of the disenfranchised,” but “an intensely private aim was tied to her general intentions: by bringing together literary paths she had previously followed in intellectual isolation, she sought to investigate the roots of her own Jewishness” (Forging Shoah Memories: 154). In order to do that, Morante creates a character that possesses “the mysterious idiocy of animals” (History 21) and is excluded from humankind, but capable of “knowing” more and of identifying herself – later in the novel – with the Jewish community of Rome.
As the above quotation from *La Storia* shows, it is only through the naïve and dichotomic language of elementary school pupils that Ida manages to conceptualize the anti-Semitic laws approved by Hitler and Mussolini, establishing a hierarchy of valuable lives (Aryan, non-Aryan, Jews), in which the bottom positions are occupied by the most powerless and vulnerable (“the plebeians of the plebeians”). In addition, it is worth noting that in the same passage Morante temporarily abandons the animal metaphors, which she uses to convey Ida’s Otherness, and employs the metaphor of the disease (scabies, leprosy), selecting images that provoke revulsion and call for the Jews’ exclusion from society.

After Ida realizes that Jews are like diseases in the social order, the idea that Nora’s emotions can inhabit Ida’s body reappears, and so does the animal imagery: at this point, indeed, “it was as if Nora’s obsessions, swarming in disorder after her death, had returned to nest inside her daughter” (61). This explains her horror and defencelessness in the rape scene, when the two parties remain engrossed in their emotional states without the possibility of negotiating them.

**Repulsion and Revenge**

Critics have grappled with the interpretation of *La Storia*’s rape scene, especially because the narrator seems at times to sympathize with Gunther – defined as a nostalgic “humble soldier” (68) and “a beggar rather than an assassin” (69) – and because of Ida’s smile after the rape – explained as her body’s response to an epileptic attack – that may add ambiguity to the scene. Given the representation of Gunther as a “sympathetic character” and the visionary language of the scene, for Lydia Oram, “Morante’s representation transcends both a conventional reading of rape in the context of war as male violence against helpless female victims and an orthodox feminist reading of rape as an act of violence against a woman wholly bereft of agency” (*Rape, Rapture and Revision*: 412). I would agree that Ida’s rape is very different from the representation, for example, of the rape of Mariulina and her mother, perpetrated by German soldiers later in the novel as an act of retaliation against members of the resistance, and the rape of Rosetta in Alberto Moravia’s *La ciociara* (1957, translated as *Two Women*), committed by a gang of Moroccan soldiers depicted as brutal mass rapists. However, precisely the inclusion of other episodes of sexual violence in the novel and the abovementioned representation of both Nora’s and Ida’s sexuality testify to “Morante’s concern for male sexual dominance,” as Liimatta puts it (*Rape, Body and Identity*: 220).

One interpreter who has looked specifically at the emotions at stake in this scene is Amoz Oz. In his book on beginnings in literature, *The Story Begins*, Oz dedicates a chapter to *La Storia*, in which he carries out a close reading aimed at understanding how hatred and violence can spring out from a young man’s nostalgia and need for love. He outlines Gunther’s trajectory from melancholy to murderous anger and then to a sort of childish tenderness. It is the confusion of languages, emotions and gestures characterizing the scene, according to Oz, that leads to an outburst of violence and to the rape in this “tragedy of errors” (*The Story Begins*: 80), where evil is born from innocence.
Like Oram, Oz insists on Gunther’s innocence, but while Oram considers the rape as a way to represent history as “both subjective/individual and collective” (Rape, Rapture and Revision: 412), Oz argues that the evil of the rape does not depend on external, historical factors, but it comes, instead, from the inside:

The horrors of history and the cruelty of establishment may be the remote cause for the characters’ suffering, but the root of evil is not “external,” it is not in the fat cigar-smoking capitalists and their fascist warmongering lackeys. A deep, ahistorical level of evil is revealed in the scene of the rape. It is a scene with only two characters in the room, a man and a woman, both of them good and simple souls. But one good soul suddenly inflicts pain and humiliation on the other good soul. (The Story Begins: 74)

I suggest that the complexity of this scene is the result of a combination of conflicts that are embedded in the emotional history of the two characters, especially Ida’s. However, I insist that this history can never be decoupled from History, the collective history, which is an endless spiral of oppression, whose victims are the weakest: children, animal, Jews, and women (although men also are victims, besides being oppressors). Precisely because of the imbalance between Ida and Gunther, the affective possibilities of the two characters point toward opposite directions: while Ida’s fear and disgust cause immobility and unconsciousness, Gunther’s need for love turns into violent anger and revenge that take the shape of sexual assault. Moreover, although he is unaware of Ida’s Jewish identity, Gunther is a Nazi that rapes a Jewish woman and Jewish women were vulnerable to rape and sexual exploitation during the Holocaust. Therefore, History cannot be considered only a “remote” cause for this encounter. The rape, in its turn, illuminates the power relations at the basis of the mechanism of collective History.

The emotional intensity of the scene is accentuated by the excursus in Ida’s life prior to her encounter with Gunther, immediately after their eyes meet in the first chapter of the book, leaving them frozen in that moment until the account is resumed in Chapter 4. The instant in which the two characters first see each other is, in other words, separate from the scene in which the soldier accompanies Ida to her apartment. In the digression, the story of Ida’s fearful and shameful existence and the story of her family are intertwined with the political history of the first half of the twentieth century, and especially of the war, as I have argued in the previous section of this article. Ida’s fear is linked to the historical events of the racial persecutions, besides being inherent to her personality, which resembles that of a child.

The episode of the rape is an asymmetrical encounter in war in which the characters do not see each other for who and what they really are, but as the personification of their own fears or frustrations. The freeze frame, to use a cinematic term, of Ida staring at the soldier is particularly relevant for the development of the events: in the entire episode, her vision appears flawed, as Ida fails to see not only the young nostalgic man in need of some maternal comfort, but also the potential rapist who emerges when his emotional state changes. Throughout the scene, she only sees the soldier, metonymically represented by his
uniform: “The fears besieging her prevented her from seeing anything of him except a German army uniform” (History: 68). Even the body of the young man seems to disappear from her sight, obscured by the uniform, “which seemed stationed there, waiting for her” (68). Ida will never see a person in Gunther, but only “a copy of the thousands of similar faces that multiplied to infinity the sole, incomprehensible face of her persecution” (68); a symbol, in other words, of Germany, Nazism and the racial laws.

Because of the metonymic significance of his uniform, Ida reacts to the sight of Gunther not simply with diffidence (like Remo and the waiter in the tavern), but with revulsion (ribrezzo in Italian), a lexical variation for disgust (disgusto), which takes the soldier by surprise: “The soldier was offended, feeling the unknown lady’s evident and extraordinary disgust was an injustice. He wasn’t accustomed to inspiring disgust in women, and furthermore he knew (despite his earlier little disappointments) he was in an allied, not an enemy country” (68). Disgust becomes a much worse offence than Remo’s aloofness and suspicion, especially because it comes from a woman, who must occupy a lower level in the social hierarchy for Gunther. Indeed, the following simile compares him and Ida respectively to a kid and a persecuted cat. Expanding the metaphor, the narrator reports that even before meeting Ida, Gunther had desired the warm body not of a woman, but of “the first female creature who happened to come into that doorway (we don’t mean just an ordinary girl or some little neighborhood whore, but any female animal: a mare, a cow, a she-ass!)” (18-19). This attitude is profoundly ambiguous, because the young man would be ready to call “Mutter” any animal “with a barely human gaze” (19). Instead, ironically, he meets a woman who looks at him “with an absolutely inhuman gaze” (19).

Gunther only expects respect from the animal/woman Ida, and her expression of disgust offends him deeply. It is significant that disgust has been linked with the corporeal and animal parts of human beings. An aphorism by Walter Benjamin – discussed by Agamben in the aforementioned pages on shame and disgust – shows such awareness: “In an aversion to animals the predominant feeling is fear of being recognized by them through contact. The horror that stirs deep in man is an obscure awareness that in him something lives so akin to the animal that it might be recognized” (Benjamin, One-Way Street: 59; see also Agamben, Remnants: 106). Similarly, Martha Nussbaum emphasizes how “disgust is a strong aversion to aspects of the body that are seen as ‘animal reminders’ – that is, aspects of ourselves that remind us that we are mortal and animal” (Anger and Forgiveness: 48). However, Ida’s conceptualization of her Jewish identity, as we have seen, deploys a metaphor of disease. To quote again from Nussbaum:

Disgust […] concerns an idea of contamination: it expresses an anxiety that the self will be contaminated by taking in something that is defiling. “You are what you eat,” as the saying goes. And the “primary objects” of disgust are all “animal reminders”: our own bodily excretions (sweat, urine, faeces, semen, snot, blood), which remind us of our commonality with nonhuman animals, and corpses, which remind us of our mortality and fragility. (Political Emotions: 183)
While disgust implies boundaries, and issues of exclusion and inclusion (what one decides to eat), the image of leprosy summoned by Ida suggests fear of contamination brought about by her own Jewishness. It is no surprise, then, that she “did not see him so much as, in splitting of her personality, she saw herself, stripped now of every disguise, down to her private, half-Jewish heart, there before him” (History: 69). Again, shame connected to revulsion evokes an image of nudity and unbearable intimacy with herself (“stripped now of every disguise”): the more Ida sees Gunther as an empty uniform, the more she feels her own nakedness.

As theories of emotion and affect have shown, no object is inherently fearful or disgusting. It is Ida’s history of fear that justifies her inhuman first look at the soldier, who is metonymically the “face of horror” or a uniform that in its turn becomes a symbol of oppression: “The fear opens up past histories of associations (in the very rehearsal of childhood phantasies)” (Ahmed, The Cultural Politics of Emotion: 63). Since she had interiorized her mother’s fear and shame, as we have seen, Ida’s revulsion presupposes the disgust for a part of herself, that she feels as “impure” when she looks at her Jewish identity from the perspective of the racial laws.

Unlike Ida’s, Gunther’s emotional history does not involve the destiny of an entire people, but a history of male sexual domination. His nostalgia for two women – his mother and his prostitute – turns into anger at Remo’s tavern, where he feels offended by the men’s “distrustful, listless chill” (History: 17); however, he decides to leave without seeking revenge for his offence. When slighted by Ida, his reaction is totally different: “In his mortification, instead of giving up, he insisted” (17). Gunther’s experience of Ida’s apartment, with all the signs of Nino’s energy, is a circus of emotions that range from “thirst for love” (Oz, The Story Begins: 72) to surprise and envy:

And in the meanwhile, the German’s drunken thoughts did not concern races or religions or nations, but only ages. He was mad with envy and, to himself, he argued and silently stammered: “God-damn-it, the luck-y ones are still un-der the draft age – and – and they can enjoy their belong-ings at home – with their mothers! and the football! and the screw-ing and every-thing – everything! as if the war was on the moon and the planet Mars... grow-ing up in the worst luck... where am I any-way? What am I doing here? How did I get here?” (History: 72-73)

Here the exclusion of History from the picture is more a wish than the depiction of reality. Gunther’s envy is all but unrelated to the war. His very language and his hometown – together with his uniform – are the very symbols of the Holocaust. Thus, the next intense affective reaction in Ida occurs when she hears the name Dachau, which she does not know (at least not in a cognitive way), but her body somehow recognizes anyway: “However, at that innocuous and indifferent name, that wild, transitory migrant, now identified with her heart, leaped inside her. And flattering horribly in the distorted space of her little room, it begun to slam, in

chirping tumult, against the walls that had no exit” (73). The fears that had “nested” in Ida are now breaking loose.

Although the animal imagery extends here to Gunther, who resembles “a three-month-old kitten” (73) while showing Ida a family picture taken in Dachau, this is not how the woman perceives him and her reaction is again one of disgust, an affective response to a name (Dachau) that will soon become inextricably associated with the Shoah. This is yet another element that reinforces the image of the soldier as the personification of the racial laws, hence Ida’s repulsion, “as if she were facing a monster” (74). In this moment, “to those eyes her gaze seemed the definitive insult. And instantaneously a tempest of anger clouded them” (73). Neither gaze yields an accurate picture here, but they are both tainted by the characters’ own beliefs. Thus, while Ida feels the inception of an epileptic attack similar to those she used to have as a child, her “No! No! No!” sounds like the ultimate rejection and offence to Gunther: “Without even taking off his uniform, caring nothing that she was old, he hurled himself on top of her, throwing her on that disheveled daybed, and raping her with rage as if he wanted to murder her” (74).

Making “the living and the dead equal”

Immediately after the violence, the gazes of Ida and Gunther finally meet: “Spontaneously, the boy raised his eyes toward Ida. And she met his tormented gaze, of an infinite ignorance and of a total awareness: both lost, the one and the other, in begging a single, impossible charity, vague also for him who asked it” (79). Ultimately, “infinite ignorance” and “total awareness” coexist both in Ida and in Gunther, both childlike figures and both compared to animals in various moments of the narration. Finally, Gunther is also a victim of events larger than his private story. He is sent to Africa and dies three days after he has raped Ida leaving her pregnant. The latter will give birth to Useppe, embrace her Jewishness and survive the war. But the great evil of History will eventually kill the child and make her decide that “she no longer wanted to belong to the human race” (724). From a “distance which makes the living and the dead equal” (522) in the narration, Ida and Gunther appear to be on the same part in the asymmetrical war against History – that of the victims.

The two characters’ shared destiny is apparent at the level of the novel’s macro structure. In La Storia, the narrative of the rape is preceded not only by an excursus into Ida’s life, but also by a number of paratextual elements. In the first epigraph of the novel, WWII is identified as an attack of governments on people (“There is no word in the human language capable of consoling the guinea pigs who do not know the reason for their death”). The second epigraph derives from the New Testament, one of the most important sources for Morante, and establishes that children are closer to God than adults (“… thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes…”). Moreover, in the chronicles that introduce each narrative segment, History is depicted as a struggle between the powerful and the powerless. Since a beginning is the establishment of a
contract between writer and reader (Oz, The Story Begins: 7), the many beginnings in La Storia may be considered, according to Oz, as several contracts between Morante and her readers. In the strictly narrative part, however, the struggle concerns only the poor and the oppressed: the young soldier, a boy more than a soldier, becomes the oppressor of the elementary school teacher.

Ida’s vulnerability, the “idiocy” that makes her more similar to animals than to humans, the sense of guilt and shame deriving from her Jewish heritage, with the ensuing sense of disgust, and her undeveloped sexuality mark her as Other. Although her rape is different from the typical wartime rape, and the rapist is just another victim of history, the hierarchies of domination based on race and gender are very much at work in the scene. La Storia is, indeed, both “one of the most emblematic texts for the literary representation of the Shoah” (Lucamante, Forging Shoah Memories: 15) and the exposure of women’s submission and men’s supremacy.

References


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The novel was translated into English in 1977. All references to the English translation will appear in parenthesis in the text, while I will give the original version in the notes.

“Mentre una rabbia lo tentava a buttare all’aria il banco e i tavoli, e a comportarsi non più da alleato, ma da invasore e da assassino” (La Storia: 19).

“Another thing wrong with anger was that it was feminine. Such was the stereotype throughout classical antiquity. Anger was prominent among the passions that women and goddesses could not resist – though occasionally a fictional heroine succeeded in doing so. The critique of anger thus came to be, among other things, an instrument of male domination, and virtually no one is known to have stood up in any way for the possible justice of a woman’s rage” (Harris, Restraining Rage: 406).

“Potenze” (La Storia: 8), “padroni della terra” (8-9) and “soliti poteri” (10).

“Colei però, al vedersi affrontata da lui, lo fissò con occhio assolutamente disumano, come davanti all’apparizione propria e riconoscibile dell’orrore” (La Storia: 20).

“[N]ei suoi grandi occhi a mandorla scuri c’era una dolcezza passiva, di una barbarie profondissima e incurabile, che somigliava a una precognizione. Precognizione, invero, non è la parola più adatta perché la conoscenza ne era esclusa. Piuttosto, la stranezza di quegli occhi ricordava l’idiozia misteriosa degli animali, i quali non con la mente, ma con un senso dei loro corpi vulnerabili, “sanno” il passato e il futuro di ogni destino. Chiameri quel senso – che in loro è comune, e confuso negli altri sensi corporei – il senso del sacro: intendendosi, da loro, per sacro, il potere universale che può mangiarli e annientarli, per la sola colpa di essere nati” (La Storia: 21).

For analyses of animal imagery in La Storia, see at least Concetta D’Angeli, Leggere Elsa Morante, especially chapter 4; Giuseppina Mecchia, Elsa Morante at the Biopolitical Turn; Christina Vani, Talking Animals; and Saskia Ziolkowski, Morante and Kafka. I would like to thank my reviewer for suggesting that Morante might have been inspired by the images of female animals in Umberto Saba’s poetry.

Verso il quinto anno di età, Iduzza fu soggetta per tutta una estate agli insulti di un male innominato [...]. Nel mezzo dei suoi giochi e delle sue chiacchiere infantili, le capitava all'improvviso di ammutolire impallidendo, con l'impressione che il mondo le si dissolvesse intorno in una vertigine (La Storia: 28).

“Dopo la sparizione successive di Giuseppe e di Alfio, essa si trovava esposta definitivamente alla paura, perché il suo era il caso di una rimasta sempre bambina, senza più nessun padre” (La Storia: 43).

Al ready Aristotle, in his account of the individual emotions and their objects that I quoted above, defines fear as “a pain or disturbance due to a mental picture of some destructive or painful evil in the future” (Rhetoric: 81).

We should here also recall Cavarero’s distinction between fear and horror. “In horror,” says Cavarero, “there is no instinctive movement of flight in order to survive, much less the contagious turmoil of panic. Rather, movement is blocked in total paralysis, and each victim is affected on its own” (Horrorism: 8).

“Due sventurati falsari” (La Storia: 45).
“As if he Wanted to Murder Her”

Stefania Porcelli

Abyssinian conquest” (*History*: 54). “E lei (diversamente dalla sua timida figlia Ida) nonostante il suo conformismo patriottico non aveva voluto separarsene neppure quando il governo aveva invitato la popolazione a ‘dare oro alla patria’ per aiutare l’impresa abissina” (*La Storia*: 52).

“Specie a scuola, nell’esercitare, lei, mezza ebreo clandestina, i diritti e le funzioni dovuti agli Ariani, si sentiva in colpa, come un’abussiva o una farsaria” (*La Storia*: 58).

Martha Nussbaum, for example, writes that “guilt is a negative emotion directed at oneself on the basis of a wrongful act or acts that one thinks one has caused, or at least wished to cause. It is to be distinguished from shame, a negative reaction to oneself that has a characteristic, or trait, as a focus” (*Anger and Forgiveness*: 128). Despite this distinction, however, guilt and shame often appear connected, probably precisely because they are directed at oneself.


“Non ci mancava proprio nulla. E in più (vergognandosi fino d’aprir bocca) insieme con questo incartamento essa presentò all’impiegato un foglio di quaderno, sul quale per una identificazione immediata e muta aveva trascritto di sua mano i propri dati anagrafici personali. Ma una specie di ripugnanza, che valeva quale un piccolo omaggio estremo, le aveva fatto tralasciare ogni segno di accentuazione sul cognome della madre” (*La Storia*: 55).

“Per lei, nell’intero globo, non c’era nessun posto” (*La Storia*: 49).

“I'duzza era vergine non soltanto nel corpo, ma anche nei suoi pensieri. Non aveva mai veduto nessun adulto nudo perché i suoi genitori non si spogliavano mai in presenza sua; e perfino del proprio corpo sentiva un pudore estremo, anche sola con se stessa. Nora l’aveva avvertita soltanto che per generare bambini l’uomo deve entrare col suo corpo nel corpo della donna. È un’operazione necessaria, a cui bisogna sottoporsi docilmente, e che non fa troppo male” (*La Storia*: 36).

“Il suo corpo era cresciuto con lei come un estraneo” (*La Storia*: 83).


Kristeva defines abjection as the feeling of the subject for something that is not totally other, that repulses but at the same time attracts: “Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object [...] It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (*Powers of Horror*: 3).

“Ida imparava che gli ebrei erano diversi non solo perché ebrei, ma anche perché non ariani. […] Nel suo concetto gli ebrei vennero a contrapporsi agli ariani, più o meno, come i plebei ai patrizi (essa aveva studiato la storia!) Però, evidentemente, i non ariani, per l’Autorità, erano i plebei dei plebei! Per esempio, il garzone del panettiere, plebeo di classe, di fronte a un ebreo valeva un patrizio, in quanto ariano! E se già i plebei nell’ordine sociale erano una roagna, i plebei dei plebei dovevano essere una lebbra!” (*La Storia*: 57).

“Fu come se le ossessioni di Nora, sciamando in tumulto alla sua morte, fossero venute a nidificare dentro la figlia” (*La Storia*: 57).

“Soldatuccio” (*La Storia*: 63), “un mendicante piuttosto che di uno sgherro” (64).

Liimatta notes that “all of Morante’s female characters in this novel are subject to male power; [...] all of them [...] have all been subject to male violence in the form of rape” (*Rape, Body and Identity*: 220).

Although Gunther is immature and not sure about his political belief, he is serving the Nazi regime: “At times he vowed he would perform superheroic acts, in honor of his Führer; and at the same time, he suspected the war was a vague algebra, thought up by the General Staff, which had nothing to do with him. At times he felt ready for any bloodthirsty brutality; at other times, during the journey, he brooded constantly, in bitter compassion, about his prostitute in Munich” (*History*: 16). “‘Un po’, si prometteva di compiere azioni ultraeroiche, da fare onore al suo Führer; e, un altro po’, sospettava che la guerra fosse un’algebra sconclusionata, combinata dagli Stati Maggiori, ma che a lui non lo riguardava per niente. Un po’, si sentiva pronto a qualsiasi brutalità sanguinosa; e un altro po’, durante il viaggio, ruminava continuamente un’amara compassionella della sua prostituta di Monaco” (*La Storia*: 17).
See, for example, Hedgepeth and Saidel (eds.), *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust*. On the abuse suffered by women in the camps, see also Lucamante, *Forging Shoah Memories*.

“Le paura che la stringevano d’assedio non le lasciavano scorgere in colui nient’altro che una uniforme militare tedesca” (La Storia: 63).

“Uniforme che pareva appostata là in sua attesa” (La Storia: 63).

“Una copia delle migliaia di figure conformi che moltiplicavano all’infinito l’unica figura incomprensibile della sua persecuzione” (La Storia: 63).

“Il soldato risentì come un’ingiustizia quel ribrezzo evidente e straordinario della sconosciuta signora. Non era abituato a suscitare ribrezzo nelle donne, e d’altra parte sapeva (a dispetto delle sue piccole delusioni precedenti) di trovarsi in un paese alleato, non nemico” (La Storia: 63).

“Qualsiasi creatura femminile capitata per prima su quel portone (non diciamo una comune ragazza o puttana di quartiere, ma qualsiasi animale femmina: una cavalla, una mucca, un’asina) che lo avrebbe guardato con occhio appena umano” (La Storia: 20).

This is because in Ida’s view, as in Morante’s, animal imagery is never diminishing. However, in the racial discourse Jewish people were often compared to animals, as shown by Primo Levi, among others.

“Più che vedere lui, essa, sdoppiandosi, vedeva davanti a lui se stessa: come denudata di ogni travestimento, fino al suo cuore geloso di mezza ebrea” (La Storia: 63).

However, Ida also feels a deep attraction to and connection with the Jewish community in other sections of the book.

“Freddezza svogliata e diffidente” (La Storia: 19).

“Mortificato, invece di desistere si accanì” (La Storia: 63).


“Però a quel nome innocuo e indifferente, il forastiero migratore in transito, che ora s’identificava col suo cuore, senza spiegazione sobbalzò dentro di lei. E svolazzando atrocemente nello spazio snaturato della stanzetta prese a sbattere fra un tumulto vociferante senza uscita” (La Storia: 68).

“Un gattino di tre mesi” (La Storia: 68).

“Come davanti a un mostro” (La Storia: 68).

“Lo sguardo di lei parve a questi occhi, un insulto definitivo. E istantaneamente una bufera di rabbia li oscurò” (La Storia: 68).

“E senza neanche togliersi la cintura della divisa, incurante che costei fosse vecchia, si butto sopra di lei, rovesciandola su quel divanoletto arruffato, e la violentò con tanta rabbia, come se volesse assassinarla” (La Storia: 69).

“Spontaneamente, il ragazzo li levo [gli occhi] verso Ida. E lei ne incontrò lo sguardo straziato, di una ignoranza infinita ed una consapevolezza totale: sparduta insieme, l’una e l’altra, a mendicare una carità unica, impossibile e confusa anche per chi la chiedeva” (La Storia: 73).

“Non voleva più appartenere alla specie umana” (La Storia: 647).

“Distanza che pareggiava i vivi e i morti (La Storia: 464).

“Non c’è parola, in nessun linguaggio umano, capace di consolare le cavie che non sanno il perché della loro morte” (La Storia: 1).

“… hai nascosto queste cose ai dotti e ai savi e le hai rivelate ai piccoli…” (La Storia: 1).
Through the Eyes of Child Soldiers: On War, Violence, and Trauma in Popular Entertainment Fictions

By Benjamin Nickl

Abstract: The involvement of child soldiers in war has attracted global outrage through social awareness campaigns in the new century. An increasingly visible topic in a worldwide discourse on popular culture, the recruitment, use, and exploitation of children by armed forces and military leaders also features heavily in contemporary literature, popular television, and film productions. The status of the child soldier is that of the reluctant combatant, and, according to UNICEF’s 2016 peace report, a sign of the rise of extreme violence around the world. This paper uses a popular culture studies paradigm to highlight the damaging physical and emotional trauma of child soldier characters such as Melody Pond in Dr Who and Naruto Uzumaki in Naruto. From Katniss Everdeen in The Hunger Games to Dumbledore’s Army in Harry Potter, child soldiers who take up arms against the enemy triumph over evil warlords, insane despots and corrupt regimes. Yet it is the adult world around them which profits from the child soldiers’ mutilation, posttraumatic stress disorders, and, oftentimes, deaths. The ingenuity of children and their simplified sense of justice and retribution also serve to foreground as a narrative device the moral politics and discursive appropriation of unconventional warfare combatants. The award-winning story of nine-year-old commander general Ender Wiggin in Ender’s Game suggests that genocide in today’s world is equivalent to child’s play, while female child soldiers have become synonymous with emancipatory, feminist identities. However, the reintegration of these children into post-war society features only infrequently in popular stories about child soldiers, which this paper suggests in its concluding remarks is an undervalued concept to further debates about asymmetrical warfare.

Keywords: child soldier, popular culture, violence and trauma, nationalism, entertainment

Child characters in war fictions

The forced recruitment of child soldiers in transnational war groups like ISIS and LRA has an estimated 300,000 child soldiers currently fighting in armed conflicts around the world. Their visibility as active participants in the atrocities of war has opened up new debates about childhood and child soldiers, specifically social reintegration and society’s acceptance of the erosion of childhood. There is concern that societies sacrifice child soldiers for nationalist purposes, that the children receive no support to deal with the trauma of war after the violent conflict has ended, and that these children could pose an uncontrollable threat to the broader population. In contemporary popular culture, a great number of mass entertainment fictions gives voice to such concerns. Yet, while the essay at hand considers these fictions as productive arenas for public dissemination of war, it also questions their contribution to the construction of war experiences. The danger is to express child soldiers’ war trauma in essentialist terms with universal applicability, or to reproduce reductive discourses about war. At the end of the second decade of the new century, child characters in mass-mediated war fictions seem to signal an uncertainty in societies about how to make sense of the complex realities of war.
A brief survey of the war story genre suggests profound changes in the fictional positioning of children under arms. David Rosen’s account of child soldiers in Western literatures details an almost exclusive focus on the “celebration of victory over the enemy, often depicted as captured, defeated, or killed [before] the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” (Child Soldiers in World War: II, 103). Much of this trend disappeared by the time of World War I, according to Rosen, and “the focus of popular culture became the commemoration of the dead and heroic sacrifice and suffering” (103). The trauma of war, its tremendous rupturing of most aspects of social life, ended with the death and sacrifice of child soldiers in funerary rituals of communal and national grief. It is only in the aftermath of World War I, argues Rosen, that academic fields involved in the study of children and childhood, such as history, anthropology, and psychology, drew clear distinctions between adult and child and their attending rights, needs, and abilities to cope with war (175). With this change, Adrienne Gavin argues, also came a change in the notion of war trauma fictions’ constructedness (Gavin, The Child in British Literature: 2). The repercussions of the Holocaust during World War II and the death of millions of Jewish children were another catalyst for discursive revisions. At a time when adult writers, and by extension their adult protagonists, were lost for words in the face of modern warfare’s unspeakable horrors, a child’s inability to express an experience adequately with adult vocabulary or with any verbal language appeared to writers “less realistic but more deeply expressive” (2). As an imaginary position, the child’s experience of war did not lay claim to reality but claimed childhood as the most potent perspective from which to narrate war trauma. Gavin writes that

literary children often carry substantial weight in texts, and, in envisioning the child, writers have constructed images and characters that serve various functions: instruction, allegory, pathos, escapism, satire, identification, demonization, or idealization. Childhood sometimes reflects a desire to return to a world without responsibility, of freedom and unsullied imagination where magic lies behind the coal scuttle or in the nursery walls. At other times, it represents a state thankfully escaped from. (2)

That child combatants share immediate truth about core existential experiences during war as imperfect narrators holds further implications. Claire Gorrara sees in child perspectives on wartime societies a remobilisation of civic memory. In the case of France’s complicity with the Nazi regime’s extinction of Jews during World War II, she argues that child narrators are helpful in the post-war “refiguring of memory which allowed a more plural set of war memories to gain public prominence” (Gorrara, French Crime Fiction and the Second World War: 109). Gorrara explains that a child’s viewpoint offers a more sincere forum for cultural transition of war trauma from one generation to the next, because the child intuitively wants to know more about the world, while the adult filters experiences into a preconceived system of categories. Above all, the child narrator conveys that curiosity about past and present events leading up to war should be encouraged to probe questions of ethical responsibility (112-115). The pervasive anxiety of adult narrators about reflecting on war trauma or crimes, in contrast, indicates that adult perspectives on war experiences can be of limited representative value to public or transgenerational war memories. As David Stahl and Mark Williams assert in their discussion of
popular post-World War II trauma fictions in Asian countries, child soldier characters deserve more attention and acknowledgement for their pivotal contribution to unearth buried realities of war trauma from adults’ hidden or tabooed experiences (Imag(in)ing the War in Japan: 2).

The elements in children’s accounts of war are oftentimes at odds with one another, hinting at the physical and psychological cost associated with the collapse of a pre-pubescent’s pre-war reality. Indeed, Andrew Butler suggests, through symbols and motifs of silence and failed communication, unelaborated ways of understanding and expression, the child in a wartime story stands in for the traumatic figuring of erratic cognition (Solar Flares: 168). Butler explains that the notion of the child’s fragmented processing abilities was “effectively conceived during the Enlightenment by authors such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Sigmund Freud” (168). The proposition is that the child is closer to affect than to language, effectively moving the child as subject closer to the object of war than is possible for an adult. And, unlike the self-aware adult narrator, the child soldier’s perspective is without anxiety over complete representation. In general, a child is not aware of any need for a truthful paradigm, as best illustrated in the child characters of Mark Twain’s classic childhood adventure story, Huckleberry Finn; neither, as the children in Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird show, do child characters think in moral absolutes. Such use of childlike perspective evokes an intuitive interpretative agency, which Freud posits as the condition for understanding the acute anxiety related to war as an interruption of everyday life outside of an individual’s lived environment (170).

To make a child ostensibly the lens for a fictional interpretation of war as large-scale caesura in modern life is an increasingly common feature in stories with mass entertainment appeal. Alan Gibbs suggests that war trauma narratives constitute perhaps the principal genre of twentieth-century culture due to nation-states’ constant involvement in modern, large-scale warfare (Contemporary American Trauma Narratives: 45-46). That reports on ethnic cleansing, drone-aided killings, and attempts at genocide have become the norm in non-stop news cycles also explains, according to Gibbs, the rise of the child soldier’s compelling perspective. “There emerges”, writes Gibbs, “in the twentieth and the twenty-first century a preoccupation with formal devices that become established methods of depicting trauma, including fragmentation, dislocation, and repetition” (47). The application of the child’s point of view to mark profound rupture is exemplary of these three qualities in all the texts discussed in this essay; not least, to refer to Gibbs’ criticism of texts about war, as there has transpired an inundation of literature, cinema, and television with formulaic versions of war trauma fictions. Because of their often-unassuming depictions of war trauma and a gender, ethnic, or ideological bias, critics have labelled the reductive fictions in related studies on 9/11 or on the wars in Syria, Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan as trauma kitsch (48). Sabine Silke gives a detailed explanation for such “trauma troping” (Why 9/11 Is (Not) Unique, or: Troping Trauma: 385). Her, and Rosen’s, work on the reproduction of Africa’s postcolonial war discourse in the Hollywood imaginary reverberates in later studies on trauma communication by Karolyn Steffens (Communicating Trauma: 2014) and a circumspect review of trauma discourse in Latin American literature by Julia Dickson-Gómez (One Who Doesn’t Know War, Doesn’t Know Anything: 2004). Suffice it to say that the texts analysed here are not part of the
trauma kitsch genre, although there is a delineable line of enquiry in trauma fiction more concerned with literary works in the new century (for example Markus Zusak’s *The Book Thief*, 2007; Bernhard Schlink’s *The Reader*, 2008; Richard Ford’s *Canada*, 2013; and, most famously, Kahled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner*, 2003) than with mainstream entertainment cinema or television.

Finally, there is the matter of credibility. Audiences seem willing to suspend their disbelief readily despite the obvious fact that an adult author or group of screenwriters uses the child narrator in their stead. The child protagonists in Stephen’s King’s 1986 horror novel, *It*, and the 2017 film adaption, must navigate appalling horrors in their fight against an evil monster. This scenario, of course, is not related to any real-life war. Rather, a metaphor for fighting one’s primal fears, a group of misfit children must band together to battle a supernatural entity who feeds on trauma. However, millions of audiences aligned their gaze with that of the children, posting online fan fictions about the defeat of the fantasy warlord by a victorious band of youngsters. King purposefully tells the story through the eyes of the children, thus magnifying both primary (for example, shock) and secondary traumatic effects (for example, post-traumatic stress disorder). Maria Nikolajeva interprets this displaced subject position as the figurative unity of experiencer and experience. She argues that contemporary audiences tend to perceive adult narrators as complicit in the postmodern separation of subject and object through language, which makes the initiation of the child protagonist into the adult world through heightened forms of empathic suffering so compelling (Nikolajeva, *The Changing Aesthetics of Character in Children’s Fiction*: 433). Any child protagonist, even if disagreeable when committing a crime or act of violence during war, can gain the viewer’s or reader’s sympathy as a focalising character of emotional affect. With “subjectivities recognizably equal to one’s own” (440), posits Nikolajeva, the child is not a war hero to admire or a villain to hate, but an identificatory insight into human nature’s embattled virtues and vices.

**A child to critique the war collective**

The most noticeable trend in contemporary war fictions from the child’s point of view explores the uneasy alignment of individual and society. What Jean Luc Nancy calls “violent relatedness” (*Being Singular Plural*: xvii) defines humanity’s shared experience of war as community-building. National cultures, as described by Benedict Anderson, have a habit of connecting war experiences to national history to create a sense of collective. Nation states commemorate war trauma, for instance, to formulate a common identity (Anderson, *Imagined Communities*: 2-8). Traditional war fictions with adult soldiers play a major part in this discourse on imagined communities. The narratives can serve to position the combatants in struggles for selfhood, which is the ethical justification for the need to commit acts of violence against the enemy Other. One nation suffers at the hands of a hostile nation, which in turn tells its own war stories from a competing perspective. Nationalising discourses on war narratives are thus dehumanising the enemy collectively while simultaneously championing humanity among one’s own group of war heroes or victims. Claire Seiler points to Japanese post-war fiction after 1945 to illustrate a need for academic vigilance because of such purposeful reductivism. The efforts of academic engagement with war stories of children must be to re-articulate the human rights discourse

in war fictions as unequivocally human and not contingent on ethno-national communality (Seiler, Fictions of the Human in Postwar Japan: 176-178). She writes: “War stories about occupied Japan could be told from an American viewpoint in reference to humanitarianism, fundamental human rights, and democratic freedoms, [while a Japanese novel like] The Great Fire, despite an otherwise dated portrayal of postwar Japan, offers a subtle, humanised critique of the US rhetoric of humanitarianism at Hiroshima” (Fictions of the Human in Postwar Japan: 176). Contemporary mass entertainment fictions about war reflect Seiler’s idea of reading or viewing books, films, and television series with greater moral nuance. That the child soldiers in these fictions reclaim the individual’s suffering from “the [adult] collective trauma of the nation means to bring a human rights oriented reading practice” (177) to tales enshrined in the national tradition of community formation. In the paradigm of critical transnational discourse and primary texts in this essay, the child’s individual war trauma opposes the normalisation of war with the aim of creating a collective. This aspect is crucial because it adds to Seiler’s reading practice an awareness for both war memorialisation’s and war celebration’s dehumanising effect on society.

The intersection of narrative style and function may increase in importance with portrayals of the bereavement of war children. Exposure to initial trauma and associated aftereffects are hardly new emplotments in the genre of war fiction. But their popularity in recent iterations of trauma and war calls into question humans’ acceptance of war in the psychosocial development of society at large. Roderick McGillis argues that the horrors of war put an end to the child as a free individual. The child narrator’s participation in armed conflict introduces him or her to traumatised adult collectives, thus serving author and reader both as restorative fantasy and cautionary tale (McGillis, Irony and Performance: 104). J.K. Rowling makes extensive use of this feature in the Harry Potter series, which, as McGillis notes, “doesn’t sidestep the issue of systemic violence and encapsulates a host of tropes of child soldiers’ exploitation and abuse” (104). The titular hero, Harry Potter, is a child soldier who was orphaned as a baby through the acts of an evil warlord. Harry bears his trauma outwardly as a lightning scar, and inwardly as a determination to kill the warmonger, the self-proclaimed Lord Voldemort. And while the people around Harry dare not even speak Lord Voldemort’s name, they revere the boy who survived for reintroducing peace and normalcy after he-who-must-not-be-named’s supposed downfall in the attempt to kill an innocent child. Fast-forward sixteen years, Harry recruits his best friends from boarding school to a private militia group called Dumbledore’s Army. The group of teenagers is instrumental in the final battle against Voldemort in the second Great Wizard’s War, while incurring several fatalities during heavy shelling and brutal, direct attacks. In the end, though, Harry’s prosocial behaviour wins out over his desire to enact revenge. The vicious cycle of war ends with Harry’s intended self-sacrifice and Voldemort’s inability to comprehend Harry’s childlike faith in humanity. Yet Rowling makes it clear that Harry is no longer an innocent child at the end of the story. The film adaptation makes this even clearer than the book series, as Harry snaps the Elder Wand in two and discards the formidable armament Voldemort had used. The astonishment of Harry’s friend Ron implies that without his war trauma, Harry may not have made the decision to abandon the most powerful weapon of war in the series’ universe, for “no one

should have it”. It is the traumatised child warrior who rejects yet another reformulation of the adult war society and its continuous return to warfare. The reversible figure of the child at war is “then, both a sign of life and death; it is ironic in that it represents a wholeness that contains its own separation, its own discontinuity” (104).

It is important to stress that children at war highlight uneven forms of power in fictional accounts of societies at war. In the new century, a growing number of mainstream entertainment fictions about the experience of war turn on Harry’s radical rejection of repetitive mechanisms in adult war collectives. Peter Burkholder and David Rosen comment that elements of fantasy and science fiction also enable audiences to focus on emotional and psychological authenticity of the war trauma depicted, rather than historical accuracy: “In these settings [...] children can also be rendered capable of bravery, personal transformation, and moral decision-making. They are clearly endowed with the ability to play out the sometimes heroic, sometimes brutal and bloody aspects of the warrior’s role” (Burkholder and Rosen, Child Soldiers in Medieval(esque) Cinema: 178). The moral thrust of such considerations is that adult rationales for war are incongruent with children’s thinking and that the audience should re-evaluate the justification for irregular warfare. At some point in current mass entertainment war stories, the child combatant seeks to reconstruct in his or her mind the logic for their actions as prescribed by adult society. The Hunger Games trilogy’s main character, Katniss Everdeen, does so when told by the adult regime around her to kill girls and boys between the ages of twelve and eighteen for the benefit of her community. This mandate presents Katniss with conflicting emotions. Adults hold authority of a higher, collective order of nation or ethnic group over her. Primary attachments to family, friends, and peers, however, subvert the adult order because they appear more natural and authentic to the child (McGillis, Irony and Performance: 105). It should come as no surprise that Katniss repeatedly chooses her younger sister, her mother, her friends, her lover, and her humanity, over the ruling regime’s claims to her identity before and after war erupts in the regime’s centre, the Capitol. The anime movie Grave of the Fireflies consolidates these aspects in a larger cultural current of mainstream war fiction in the 1980s in a subversive rewriting of the genre. The film also turns on Seiler’s insistence upon an expanded notion of the human cost of war. The popular adaption of the semi-autobiographical novel of the same name by Akiyuki Nosaka tells the story of two orphaned children from the Japanese port city of Kobe. Made homeless by American bombings of their town during World War II, the older sibling, Seito, is charged with the care of his younger sister, Setsuko. Initially, Seito’s viewpoint is aligned with that of his father, an adult Japanese man. Young Seito proudly wears a military bonnet, gifted to him by a random solider during a military parade, and parrots well-rehearsed propaganda slogans. The traumatic loss of parents and home, however, forces Seito to confront the nationalistic viewpoint. Ultimately, after Japanese society and the military refuse to care for the siblings, and Seito’s sister dies of starvation, he passes away, too; the child under arms perishes alone and abandoned in a public space. The adults, who were happy to recruit only slightly older boys to fight in their war, hardly take notice of the tragedy. It is in a series of flashbacks that Seito, at the moment of his passing in a dark railway station, tells the viewer about overwhelming pain that a child could not possibly be equipped to handle. The trauma of war manifests in the innocent
narrator’s death amidst a crowd of complicit adults, which makes the film emblematic of the advocacy for the individual’s traumatic war experience.

Benjamin Cooper concludes that the reading of child characters in war culture has come to a point where the battlefield converges with and is largely dependent on a revisionist worldview. The trauma of the adult soldier is frequently appropriated by national discourse and communal history, whereas the child soldier’s experience reifies alternative understandings of war (Cooper, In This War But Not of It: 211-214). George Bonanno brings social trauma models as productive additions to this argument. With the possibility of nuclear wars, the presence of ethno-social collectives in war fictions becomes a balancing act between societies attending to the idea of total war and the “drastically uneven positions of individuals’ experience within the events of a war” (Bonanno, Loss, Trauma, and Human Resilience: 23). There is also a generational issue. Gorrara adds that younger authors and producers of popular war fictions are less hesitant to confront society with the “duty to assume knowledge of the past, not with the intention of judging others but in order to live with (and not against) the past” (French Crime Fiction and the Second World War: 118). One can interpret the surge of opposing child-view narratives to monolithic accounts of war and war trauma as newer generations’ desire to extend their knowledge about their own cultures’ and others’ war traumas. Rosen suggests that the patriotic child soldier is virtually non-existent in current mainstream war fictions anymore, for its function is clearly that of wilful bias against exposure of war history to broader truths about economic incentives or nationalistic colonialism. He writes that “novels such as Song for Night by Chris Abani, Beasts of No Nation by Uzodinma Iwuala, Moses, Citizen and Me by Delia Jarrett-Macauley, and finally Johnny Mad Dog by Emmanual Dongala, exemplify this trend” (Rosen, Child Soldiers in World War: II, 111). Indeed, one can argue that most contemporary war fictions told from a child’s point of view have tipped from a reliance on patriotic rationalisations of war into an uneasy discourse of unanswered questions about the isolation and abandonment of soldiers as victims of war trauma. The responsibility of societies and complicity of nation-states have also added nuances of culpability to interdisciplinary research studies like the ones cited in this essay.

**Recruiting child soldiers for war in time and space**

It would seem only logical to ground the child’s experience of war in an expansive critique of human suffering; hence, it is important to recognise that the war fictions discussed in this essay compellingly illustrate the presence of individual and universal war trauma in the extensive imagination of their authors, screenwriters, and producers. Hardly any other genre in popular television or cinema appears to test the ethical boundaries of child solider recruitment more imaginatively than that of science fiction. To determine the futuristic place of underage combatants in war scenarios resonates readily with audiences, as the genre’s ahistorical premise keeps the images of real child soldiers “with abused and exploited children at a safe mental and moral distance” (Burkholder and Rosen, Child Soldiers in Medieval(esque) Cinema: 149). For instance, in the fourth season of the popular science fiction and time travel series, Doctor Who in 2008, head writer Steffen Moffat created the character River Song, born Melody Pond. Raised by an aggregation of The Doctor’s

*Close Encounters in War Journal, 1: “Close encounters in irregular and asymmetric warfare” (2018)*
enemies, Melody’s sole purpose for existence is to kill the series’ hero for his alleged war crimes in a future yet to transpire. The enemy collective, referred to as The Silence, abducts Melody’s mother and jails Amy Pond until she gives birth to Melody. Because she is a Timelord-human hybrid, Melody can regenerate at the moment of death, changing age, race, and physical appearance with each shift. This plot point is crucial. Moffat introduces a baby with the ability to die repeatedly as the greatest weapon in an intergalactic army’s war against The Doctor. The childlike Melody in her first life, played by an eleven-year-old actress, is brainwashed by The Silence’s Madame Kovarian to kill The Doctor. Melody’s mental conditioning takes place over the course of several years, with the child growing up inside a retrofitted spacesuit which feeds and sustains her. Melody kills The Doctor with a rare poison in a later regeneration, after starving and freezing to death in her previous, child-like form. The more adult version of Melody, though, succeeds in breaking The Silence’s mental conditioning, and she gives up her remaining regenerations to revive The Doctor’s corpse. With Melody’s first words being “kill The Doctor”, it seems that the intrusion of warfare into her existence is critical to the conceptualisation of war trauma in a child soldier’s adult life. The character goes through the horrors experienced by almost all child soldiers: abandonment, isolation, desensitisation, and training to obey, hate, and kill. Bred only for warfare, the child soldier grows up in her own moral world. She is taught that killing is excused by the events occurring around her. Yet the series allows for Melody’s redemption. Adult Melody transitions into the character of River Song, who travels the universe and wants nothing more than to reunite with The Doctor and live out the remainder of her life peacefully with children and a family. It is telling that River’s final act is to save The Doctor once more, along with four thousand other people. Moffat proposes the character’s maturation from infant solider to heroic defender of human life. Nikolajeva as well as Rosen argue that this development conforms to the abusive recruitment trope of children in war fictions and heightens for audiences the clash between redeeming righteousness and involuntary malevolence (Nikolajeva, The Changing Aesthetics of Character in Children’s Fiction: 441; Rosen, Child Soldiers in Medieval(esque) Cinema: 97-98).

The topic of underage conscription also appears as a challenge to ideals of human evolution in Gavin Hood’s science fiction film Ender’s Game. Based on Orson Scott Card’s novel of the same title, the military regime of Earth tricks the child protagonist, Andrew “Ender” Wiggin, into thinking that the interstellar genocide he commits against an alien race, the Formics, is only a dry run for actual combat. Hood associates the visual style of Ender’s Game with utopian science fiction images via a barrage of CGI projections, and sets the story in a future world in which all humans live in peace. The threat to this peace posed by a race of insectoid aliens leads the viewer to believe that all of mankind could perish. The danger for the collective makes it permissible to enlist children. Whereas magic and fantasy genres such as Harry Potter still operate within the boundaries of legal age discourse, as Rowling’s wizards and witches come of age at seventeen, the space war with hostile aliens suspends these definitions. If anything, the survival of the planet trumps the survival of specific cultural values, which negates the self-imposed rules of traditional warfare among humans. Ender trains from the age of nine – in the book from the age of six – to become a master of screen-mediated combat. His role is to operate battleships and give commands to Earth’s space fleet from a remote location. To
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win the alleged final simulation of his training, Ender launches a massive bomb, nicknamed Little Doctor, at the aliens’ home world. While the adult soldiers cheer, fully aware of the situation, Ender is devastated to learn that he committed genocide in the name of humanity. The revelation deprives Ender of his child-like innocence, and he cannot overcome his feelings of guilt. The adults have turned him into a monster and deprived him of the capacity to act as an independent moral agent. Ender’s reaction is to question whether such humans deserve to survive. More importantly, though, his role as child soldier presents the idea of a guiltless mentality towards sophisticated means of warfare. Unlike River Song, Ender cannot take back the killing of his victims. The death of millions at the hands of a God-like child happens in seconds. There should be, according to Chris Hables Gray, more post-humanist stories like Ender’s Game or Doctor Who, where the experience of war trauma is connected to accountability and an abhorrent cult of militarism (Posthuman Soldiers in Postmodern War, 225).

Transgenerational and redemptive war fictions

Progressive aspects in popular fictions about child soldiers remain the most underexplored area in the study of mediated mass entertainment. One reason for this could be the fact that researchers have shown hesitation to combine content analysis with historical and archival research practices in the field of cartoon culture. Yet the increased emergence of animation studies as an academic discipline has engendered a tremendous amount of interest in Japan’s anime world, which offers the viewer multifaceted stories about such topics as warfare through the eyes of children. The number of relevant productions in the Japanese anime universe is staggering, due to the medium’s multiple uses and functions in Japanese culture. Grave of the Fireflies is one prominent example of this. Among the most popular format of televised war fictions with child solider protagonists are Fullmetal Alchemist, an anime series adapted from the manga of the same name by Hiromu Arakawa; Mobile Suit Gundam, a series produced and animated by Sunrise Studios, created and directed by Yoshiyuki Tomino; Neon Genesis Evangelion, produced by Gainax and Tatsunoko Productions and directed by Hideaki Anno both as a popular series and feature film releases; and, possibly the most successful war fiction franchise of all in Japan and abroad, the Naruto and Naruto Shippuden series, adapted from Masashi Kishimoto’s manga series by the same name and directed by Hayato Date.

Naruto and Naruto Shippuden tell the story of Naruto Uzumaki, aged twelve in the first part of the series and fifteen in the second. The plot is set in a fictional world of warring ninja nations, the Ninja World. With the nations constantly battling each other, society relies on skilled warriors to defend resources and secure peace with neighbouring settlements. The so-called Shinobi, a class of high-skilled ninjas, determine the fate of the lands. The military structures encoded in these characters, such as the Hokage/lord commander or the Shinobi Academy/military recruitment camp, are pervasive. Twelve-year-old Naruto features in this context as the outsider, a child soldier orphaned by the preceding Great Ninja War. Unbeknownst to him, Naruto carries a weapon of mass destruction, a fantastical beast, inside his body, which any other resident of Naruto’s village is forbidden to discuss. The fact that Naruto’s father, a great ninja warrior, has placed the beast in his son’s body,
and that the mother was also a ninja and the previous carrier of the beast, the Nine-Tailed Fox, are revealed only later in the series. Initially, Naruto’s status as outsider others him from the rest of the community. Only his acceptance into the Shinobi Academy as a child soldier validates Naruto’s proper place in the village. Naruto is quick to catch on. He guesses that higher rank in the ninja structure also means greater social integration. Most of the plot turns on Naruto’s desire to belong. The child soldier’s fascination with the memorial cult of his village’s Hokage, mountain-carved face sculptures like Mount Rushmore National Memorial in the United States, motivates him to take over leadership as Hokage in future. Naruto achieves his goal after experiencing decades of fights, genocide, loss of limb in a battle with his arch-rival Sasuke, and a vast array of tactics by hostile ninja nations to topple local governments and assume supreme power. Naruto faces the destruction of his nation several times. In fact, *Naruto Shippuden*’s final Great Ninja War threatens to destroy the whole world. In a very real sense, the series blurs with an original run of fifteen years the line between fiction and reality in countries with large military tradition like America. One could argue that Naruto attends a junior version of the Reserve Officers’ Training Corps at school only to enlist fully as an adult later. Acts of bravery explain his meteoric rise through the ranks in several service tours.

The *Naruto* franchise’s similarities with the cult of the military seem evident. However, the series makes it clear that there is nothing heroic about war at all. Naruto’s early admiration for Shinobi warriors conveys the sense that pro-war sentiments are positive, for they sustain the development of the collective. The series, though, is quick to stress the impact of war on previous generations, especially on children like Naruto. Almost every season confronts Naruto and his fellow child combatants with hard-won truths about armed conflict. The soldiers in training learn that war undermines people’s common humanity and that only war criminals present war crimes as a superior solution to diplomacy and non-violent negotiations. Central to Naruto’s character is his ability to learn these lessons almost intuitively, which explains why empathy and a drive to bring people together is his explicit strength as a ninja. It has become the hallmark of the series that Naruto objects to moral ambiguity. A line frequently quoted by the character as “My ninja way” points to Naruto’s mental as well as emotional competence, which matures with each incident of war in the five hundred episodes of the series. To locate such moral nuance in mass entertainment texts produced for consumption by millions affirms Seiler’s point about the complex relationship between war and memory in contemporary Japanese entertainment culture. It is not surprising that the spin-off series, *Boruto*, which premiered in 2017 and centres on Naruto’s first-born son, has inherited and continues to move forward a child soldier’s iconic resistance to war. To date, critical reception of the *Boruto* series has been largely positive, in the main with praise for the complicated relationship between father and son. Boruto deconstructs the war idol that is his father by humanising the relationship with the leader of a post-war community. Reminiscent of the uneasy father-son dynamic in *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, Boruto struggles to define his own ninja way. Indeed, the overpowering legacy of his father’s heroism implies that Boruto cannot inhabit the same values or an identical position towards war. So even with the benefit of the previous generation’s diverse experiences of war, the makers of *Boruto* retain the idea that each
generation and each child soldier must find their own reasons to reject the phenomenon of war.

The grounding of war fictions in individual responsibility and human agency regardless of age, however explicitly stated in *Naruto* and *Boruto*, is inherent in all the child soldiers’ accounts of warfare discussed in this essay. The fictions I have analysed are part of an evolving genre of popular transnational culture which spans across different media types and national cultures. Though two of the texts detailed here as examples of child soldiers’ perception of war stand out for the social reintegration of their underage combatants. The characters of Naruto and Melody Pond are embedded in a transgenerational storyline, which highlights the evolution from child solider to adult. The audience does not witness this transition with Ender, Seito, Katniss Everdeen, or Harry Potter. Those characters only reappear in brief, single-scene snapshots at the end of their stories, while Seito’s untimely death precludes any chance of an adult life. Ender sets out by himself to repopulate the alien species he killed. Katniss lives with fellow Hunger Games survivor Peeta Mellark in a secluded house to raise their child. Harry Potter sends off his son, Albus, to start school at Hogwarts. Seemingly left to their own devices in dealing with trauma, the audience is denied detailed knowledge about the child soldiers’ process of resocialisation. Yet the adult version of Naruto appears in *Boruto* as a thirty-something Hokage, leading his village through a prolonged period of peace. Father to three children, the story of Naruto’s post-war adolescence resembles the traditional war hero’s coming of age narrative. He dated and married a fellow child soldier named Hinata, with whom he started a family. The home of the Uzumakis is shown to be an ordinary family residence in the heart of the village. Home-made dinners, family excursions, and domestic game nights hint at Naruto’s successful resocialisation process, as do a host of rituals of commemoration and public grieving for the last Great Ninja War’s fallen soldiers. The change in Naruto’s character from loner to community leader is markedly positive. It is highlighted even more by the fact that other characters like Sasuke failed to rejoin everyday life in the village, leaving behind his child to grow up without a father. Similarly, *Dr Who* thematises the possibility of a child soldier’s resocialisation with Melody Pond’s extended storyline as River Song. Born in an active combat zone as a weapon, Melody’s parents go to great lengths to ensure the child’s childhood trauma does not determine the rest of her life. That Rory and Amy, father and mother to Melody, grow up alongside their daughter without knowing so is a time-travel twist revealed to viewers only later in the series. Her future parents model prosocial behaviour for Melody. She learns from Amy about unconditional love, while Rory demonstrates numerous acts of self-sacrifice. It is only through the positive influence of Rory and Amy that Melody’s character matures into a person willing to give up her future regenerations for The Doctor. As River Song, an adult woman, she repeatedly puts love for family and friends first, which allows her to re-join her family and live out decades of romance in marriage to The Doctor. River saves lives even as she dies. The series rewards this by placing her in a virtual reality paradise without violence or war, and by giving her two perfect children to raise in peace. One would hope that academic engagement with war fictions in mass entertainment grows in number to highlight more of these resocialisation processes and to put them in larger dialogues about the abusive employment of child soldiers in uneven warfare.
References


1 For an extensive report about children at war and the recruitment of child soldiers see the UNICEF report on warfare and child combatants.

2 See Siddharth Chatterjee’s informative, albeit confronting, report about the real-world abuse of children as child soldiers in active combat zones in countries all over the world.
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