

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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