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War, Technology and Narrative Hierarchies

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ABSTRACT
This article considers some of the ways communications technologies have shaped narratives of war. It touches on different military cultures and how they contend with imposed and implicit hierarchies. It then goes on to briefly discuss the ways these hierarchies are expressed in various analogue and online media, both as a reflection and a potential subverter of cultural expectations about who participates in conflicts, and how.

Introduction

Carl von Clausewitz's trinity of passion, reason and chance may forever exist in a dynamic balance, forming the basis for conflict, but militaries are, of course, hierarchical institutions.[1] They are also embedded in their particular societies and cultures that, perhaps even more so in times of conflict, engage in formal and informal sorting processes. This in turn is mirrored in the narratives that emerge out of wars. Broadly speaking, war writing creates hierarchies of experience and suffering. At the apex is the soldier and veteran who has experienced active combat, who direct and absorb firepower, and whose accounts of war and sacrifice are so often presented in print and increasingly online across a variety of media as the authentic voice – and face, and the supreme narrator – of war. Depending on the scale of mobilisations, the mass of any given society serving in ancillary roles, however vital these might be to soldiers and civilians alike, sit somewhere beyond or below this elite core, as do those who passively suffer the consequences of violent political interventions.

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[1] See Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Michael Howard and Peter Paret, ed. & transl., (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

And yet something has, perhaps, subtly acted to shift perceptions of military hierarchies and narratives about war over time that has been under-appreciated in debates about political, societal and cultural change and how they inflect conflicts, especially when considering continuities between how war is portrayed off and online as a historical subject and as – for too many – an ongoing, lived reality.

In small, self-contained military units, hierarchies develop in response to technological change. Michael Howard, in considering the rapid shift from shock to fire that occurred in the West from the Renaissance on through the present day, and accelerated from the end of the nineteenth into the twentieth centuries, noted the psychological shift away from 'the display of spectacular individual courage', towards 'professionals…whose standards of behaviour were shaped by his function'.[2] At the institutional level the cultural practices that both create and reinforce military identities in peace and wartime are 'manufactured',[3] for example in the British army through the regimental system, which in the wake of the Second World War faced a conundrum of squaring class assumptions and the resultant cultural and training practices with the need to professionalise the officer corps.[4] Reflecting from a different Western military perspective, Samuel Hynes, the historian and writer who served as a pilot in the Pacific during the Second World War, published his memoir of the same war in 1988. At the same time the racial segregation of the US military was systemic and broadly accepted; in his memoir Hynes writes from a personal perspective about a different form of hierarchical sorting: the informal self-segregation at the micro level that organised people according not only to heroism but skill: 'The pilots in the flight who couldn't fly – who were too stupid, too clumsy, or too frightened – became outsiders and enemies.'[5]

Such dynamics create concentric circles of experience, authenticity and value, with implications for which war narratives are deemed culturally important, and which are shrugged off as peripheral. What is often most valued in war writing is access, as opposed to stylistic innovation (although these are not mutually exclusive): 'proximity to the experiences of war' is what elevates soldiers' and veterans' life writings. They enable the reader to 'achieve the idealised end held out to them',[6] and to comprehend

[2]Michael Howard, 'War and Technology', *The RUSI Journal*, 132, 4 (1987), pp. 17-22 (p. 17).
[3]David French, *Military Identities: The Regimental System, the British Army, & the British People c. 1870-2000*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 6.
[4]French, *Military Identities*, pp. 320-1.
[5]Samuel Hynes, *Flights of Passage: Reflections of a World War II Aviator,* (London: Bloomsbury, 1988), p. 96.
[6]Hope Wolf, "Mediating War: Hot Diaries, Liquid Letters and Vivid Remembrances," *Life Writing* 9, 3 (2012), pp. 327–36 (p. 328).

war as a complex human tragedy that is the result of a breakdown – or to express it within a more positive Clausewitzian framing, an extension – of broader geopolitical systems and social institutions.

Memoirs written for more general audiences that narrate mobilisation and combat often occlude professionalism as it relates to control or mastery of war technologies, instead recounting common tropes: encounters with superiors and the military hierarchy; first reactions to combat and death in war; mental and physical exhaustion; camaraderie and unit cohesion; and strange and surreal encounters with transgressive spaces that evoke past peacetime existences. Sergeant and sniper Bella Isaakovna Epstein, writing about fighting in Belorussia and Germany during the Second World War, addresses these, but she also includes accounts of being warned about sexual promiscuity and rape within the Soviet forces by her commanders.

Describing her first experience of being bombed, she writes that: 'planes flew over, I crouched down and covered my head with my hands, then I thought, and what about my poor hands? I wasn't ready for death yet.' She pays specific attention to the detail of her 'poor hands' as a proxy for fear of bodily injury as well as death. Later, she relates the surreal experience of being billeted in a castle, trying on the beautiful, abandoned clothes, and being so overcome with exhaustion that she and her fellow fighters 'fell asleep at once. I lay in that dress and the robe on top of it.' Coming across an abandoned milliner's shop and sleeping in a hat before putting back on her uniform: 'We never took anything. On the road even a needle is heavy. A spoon tucked into the boot top, that's all.'[7]

While this account is emblematic, the voice delivering the narrative of fractured impressions of military life and combat is, broadly speaking, exceptional. It is included in a composite biography collecting stories about the one million women who served in the Soviet Army. In her introduction to *The Unwomanly Face of War* (1985) author and editor Svetlana Alexievich addresses her approach as a reader as well as a writer and compiler of stories: 'I am writing a book about war...I, who never liked to read military books, although in my childhood and youth this was the favourite reading of everybody. Of all my peers'. She looked around at the 'village of women' she grew up in, which led her to write a women's history of a war whose nationalist memorial narrative was almost entirely masculine.[8] Women were presented as relatively passive participants: they acted as workers, survivors and victims, but not in any recognised way, as professional warriors and national saviours. Often their experience and hence their accounts detailed only limited engagement with military technologies and

[7]Bella Isaakovna Epstein, quoted in Svetlana Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, (London: Penguin, 2017), pp. 191-2.
[8]Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War*, pp. xi-xii

firepower. Note again Epstein's fixing of her war experiences to her vulnerable body – her hands – as well as quotidian, civilian objects: a needle and a spoon.[9]

Alexievich's collected stories complicate and expand upon national narratives that promote the male combat soldier and veteran as the hero and articulator of conflict narratives with all their requisite societal veneration. These are collected in a collected print edition, whereas increasingly such accounts are captured and 'archived' online (see for example Soviet-Afghan War veterans use of social media platforms such as Odnoklassniki[10] to locate one another and recount war experiences); Alexievich's multi-narrator collections were delayed in Russia because the realistic, detail-driven accounts she had included led to accusations that she was a pacifist, even as she celebrated arguably the Soviet patriotic touchstone: military service in the Second World War.[11]

The act of recasting war stories through a gendered lens has occurred off and online for centuries, across cultures, with some notable exceptions. This is what the writer Chimamamda Ngozi Adichie spoke about in her 2014 TED talk, 'The Danger of the Single Story', which relies on repetition achieved through a variety of mediated accounts of war: 'So that is how to create a single story, show a people as one thing, as only one thing, again and again, and that is what they become.'[12]

With respect to narrative tropes, alongside the narrative voice the related representative 'face' of the soldier as presented by organising information technologies remains by default male, even for individuals for whom algorithms should, theoretically, anticipate and cater to an interest in disruptions to this established narrative. For me, for example, among a substantial number that turned up images of male soldiers one exceptional search produced a *Times of Israel* profile by Josefin Dolsten on Debbie Zimelman who, as a photographer, spent five years chronicling the lives of women serving in combat units with the Israeli army, which began integrating women into forward positions in the 1990s.[13]

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[9]Bella Isaakovna Epstein, quoted in Svetlana Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War*, pp. 191-2.

[10]https://mobile.ok.ru. Accessed 25 May 2022.

[11]Meredith Tax, "Introductory Note to Svetlana Alexievich, Keith Hammond and Ludmila Lezhneva, "I Am Loath to Recall': Russian Women Soldiers in World War II'," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 23, 3/4 (1995), pp 78–84 (p. 79)

[12]Chimamamda Ngozi Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story," (March 4, 2014) https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en. Accessed 25 May 2022.

[13]Josefin Dolsten, "A Photographer Explores What It's like to Be a Female Combat Soldier in Israel," *Times of Israel*, May 29, 2019: https://www.timesofisrael.com/a-

Offline memoirs offer some expansion of the image that all soldiers are men, that the most compelling and important writers about conflict must be male veterans, and that military professionalism in relation to advancing technologies is purely masculine.[14] However, they still preference a particular military experience: that of the elite combat veteran, who embodies Howard's hero *and* his professional fighter.[15] This figure still dominates across institutional news platforms, which interact with and draw material from mobile technologies and social media as emerging narrative platforms, as well as in offline memoirs. Lauren Katzenberg, editor of the *New York Times 'At War'* forum spoke in 2018 about when, on the day the site featured a story about NATO security forces that were training women to join the Afghan security forces, the *New York Times Magazine* offered the majority of the homepage time to a photo essay on American special forces.[16] The former story offered a new or at least under-reported story, written by a woman who had embedded with female troops, about how the war was shifting ideas about women could do in times of conflict. And yet the *Magazine* focused on the familiar. Katzenberg recalled that 'It was like 17 photos of American bearded dudes with guns, patrolling around the valley of Nangahar and it was like, we haven't seen enough of those yet?'[17]

The extent to which these online examples provide outlets for new stories that can challenge and complicate broader cultural assumptions about who narrates war, or whether the sheer quantitative weight of existing material, reinforced by mysterious, proprietary algorithms and search engines, steers writers and readers down existing paths, remains to be seen. Both may be possible at the same time, on different scales, and scale is the key to success in the digital space, determining findability, relevance, and audiences. The mediatisation performed by platforms in combination with mobile devices incentivises modes of representation built around familiar and established, as opposed to necessarily accurate narratives about war.

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photographer-explores-what-its-like-to-be-a-female-combat-soldier-in-israel/. Accessed 11 July 2022.

[14]For example, Kayla Williams' *Love My Rifle More Than You: Young and Female in the US Army,* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006), which Amazon's 'customers...also viewed' algorithm recommends for purchase along with Gayle Tzemach Lemmon's *Ashley's War: The Untold Story of a Team of Women Soldiers on the Special Opps Battlefield,* (New York: Harper, 2015); Mary Jennings Hegar's *Shoot Like a Girl: One Woman's Dramatic Fight in Afghanistan and on the Home Front,* (New York: Berkley Books, 2017) and Anthony Swofford's *Jarhead: A Marine's Chronicle of the Gulf War and Other Battles,* (New York: Scribner, 2003).

[15]Howard, *War and Technology*, p. 17.

[16]https://www.nytimes.com/spotlight/atwar. Accessed 25 May 2022.

[17]Interview with Lauren Katzenberg, interview by Alisa Miller, 5 December 2018.

Despite social media's futurist and transformative promises, information technologies may actually curtail our understanding of the changing character of war by playing down the relationships between technology and war, and in the example explored above by preselecting gendered narratives that continue to advance the image of the male hero. Ultimately this narrowing poses a challenge to historians to consider new ways of overlaying frames and perspectives – technological, narrative, gendered, etc. – when analysing the changing climate and the enduring nature of warfare. For as David J Lonsdale has observed in considering war, technology and Clausewitz, 'Although it will be shown that certain elements of the climate of war are not always directly in play during any particular conflict, they are always waiting on the side-lines ready to be reintroduced.'[18]

Michael Howard and his collaborators illuminated for the English reader Clausewitz's natural components of warfare, expressed as they are in the humble and considered register of the dialectic. Even as Hew Strachan has noted Howard's achievement in focusing attention on the practice of war, rendered as 'dialogue between one soldier and another', *On War* invites these broader questions about continuities and ruptures, about what changes and what stays the same.[19]

[18]David J. Lonsdale, *The Nature of War in the Information Age,* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 203.
[19]Hew Strachan, 'Michael Howard and Clausewitz', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (2022), pp. 143-60, especially p. 148.