

## On semiotics of war

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Review of *War and Semiotics: Signs, Communication Systems, and the Preparation, Legitimization, and Commemoration of Collective Mass Violence*. (Jacob, Frank, ed.) London, New York: Routledge, 336 pp.

Let us begin with a couple of thoughts from history. In post-revolutionary Russia, the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky described the role of the word in mobilizing the masses: “The word is commander of the human army” (Mayakovsky 2013: 217). The Chinese theorist of war Sun Tzu, who lived in the sixth century B.C., claimed that wars should be won without combat. If the former speaks of the influence of words in actual combat situations and is oriented towards motivating one’s own soldiers, the latter recommends an approach geared towards influencing the enemy in advance of an actual drawing of arms. Even though the starting points, the targets of messages and the goals of activities of the authors differ, both nevertheless underline the force of words in the development of conflict resolution.

Sun Tzu’s thoughts indicate that already the early theorists of war considered it important to persuade enemies in word battles. However, it seems that a paradigmatic shift has taken place in war theory. Today, wars are mostly waged over people’s hearts and the cost of political decision-making processes, rather than controlling territories. In an age of information technology, media representations have become tools in warfare. General Mahmut Gareev, long-time president of the Academy of Military Science in Russia, underlined in 2015 that contemporary “wars should be conducted using not only military, but also cybernetic, informational and other measures...” (Nersisyan 2015<sup>2</sup>). In this context of hybrid warfare where messages are increasingly more important, disciplines studying communication, including semiotics, should play a central role in military studies.

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<sup>2</sup> Nersisyan, Leonid 2015. Mahmut Gareev: Vazhno gotovit’ ves’ narod k zashchite Otechestva i vozrodit’ ideyu Otechestva (Махмут Гареев: Важно готовить весь народ к защите Отечества и возродить идею Отечества.) *Regnum*, 16.02.2015 was accessed at <https://regnum.ru/news/1895775.html>.

These disciplines enable us to identify specific influencing techniques employed in legitimizing policies in the eyes of audiences and in breaking the enemy lines already before engaging in combat.

### **Semiotics of war and war semiotics**

Published in 2021, *War and Semiotics: Signs, Communication Systems, and the Preparation, Legitimization, and Commemoration of Collective Mass Violence* constitutes a welcome contribution to developing the interdisciplinary field which focuses on researching the aspects accompanying the new (informational) warfare. Most of the collection's 13 chapters are authored by historians, there being two exceptions – a linguist and a political scientist. This might indicate the reason why the definition of war employed in the work stems from the traditional paradigm. War is understood as something ordered; as “violence is used in a dosed form against a specifically determined enemy or target to achieve a preset target, it makes sense to study the forces that order it, as well as the rules that war as an ordered event follows” (p. 4).

The book's editor, military historian Frank Jacob writes in the foreword that semiotics could prove useful for military history mostly in two ways: “[I]t can be researched in relation to wars as actual and/or historical events, what should be called war semiotics here. The order of war, however, is reliant on many things, including signs that have been systematized and loaded with meaning to make them understandable by everyone involved” (p. 7). The military domain abounds in just these kinds of signs and codes, from soldiers' combat clothing and military ranks to other identifying insignia for separating the own from the alien (the enemy) in a combat situation. In addition, military conflicts are often related to ideologies used to legitimize wars, or, in other words, to transform a war into a just war, *bellum iustum*. ‘War semiotics’ could here research the ideologies connected to wars and “the way these were advertised, i.e. propaganda as it existed for and during an act of ordered collective violence” (p. 7).

In addition, semiotics can also be used for researching aspects of war in peaceful societies. In this context, Jacobs uses the concept ‘semiotics of war’ with regard to the commemoration of violent struggles of the past, and war memorials are an example here: who, where and for what is being commemorated? From the perspective of semiotics of war, we can observe a renegotiation of remembering; discussions should try to include the semiotic level of remembering of these war-related events (p. 10).

The book is divided into three larger sections that attempt to follow the analytic distinction between ‘war semiotics’ and ‘semiotics of war.’ However, this division is rather provisional and serves a heuristic purpose, since several articles integrate the two perspectives. The first section, “War, semiotics, and the questions of interpretation”, deals with interpretations of war and the establishment of relevant sign systems. In my opinion, Erik Holmen’s article “The semiotic of collaboration” provides the most thoroughly elaborated treatment from a semiotic perspective in the first section. Mostly based on the ideas of Peirce and Ricoeur, Holmes shows how the semantic field of the concept of collaborationism transformed during the Second World War.

The second section of the volume, “War, semiotics, and identity constructions”, shows how semiotic systems are used or abused to create antagonistic and other war-related identities. The visual semiotic analyses gathered into this section are perhaps the most successful in applying semiotic methods of analysis. For example, Marta García Cabrera in “The semiotics of British print propaganda in Spain during the Second World War” and Manu Sharma in “Postage stamps, war memory, and commemoration: A case study of the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971” have succeeded in matching the framework of semiotic analysis to the specificity of their material. García Cabrera proceeds from the semiotic approach to propaganda developed by Antonio Pineda Cachero; Sharma’s analysis uses the Peircean trichotomy of icon, index and symbol.

The third section, “War, semiotics, and politics”, focuses on the aspects of ‘war semiotics’ and ‘semiotics of war’ from the perspective of political discourse and investigates how the rhetoric of politicians has used the theme of war. Fredrik Wilhelmsen’s “National decay and national resurrection: The semiotics of Quisling’s conception of history” is the most thoroughly conceptualized contribution in terms of semiotics in this section. Wilhelmsen uses binary oppositions to analyse the view of history embraced by Vidkun Quisling, the head of Norwegian government appointed by Nazi Germany during the occupation in 1942–1945 – the conflict between heroes and villains, good and evil. He shows how Quisling’s view of history adapts “the contents of its palingenetic myth to the unique culture and history of Norway” (p. 229).

Rolf Hugoson’s epilogue, “War semiotics in the post-cold war”, concludes the book, reaching into the 21st century. This chapter shows how the semiotic system of political language changed with the end of the Cold War, and brings us closer to the range of problems that I would like to address in the following.

## The limits of the concept of war

As already noted, the contributors to the collection proceed from the classic definition of war, according to which war is understood as a clearly delimited event. This kind of definition certainly has its positive aspects, especially as concerns research methodology. For instance, it makes it possible to determine the object level under investigation, and delimit the research period and material. However, it also runs the risk of simplifying the actual situation of war: the object level is rigidly delimited in an inevitably distorting manner. To take a contemporary example: determining whether the war in Ukraine began in 2014 or in 2022 depends on political decision-making processes and not so much on the object-level referent.

With regard to this problem, Danish military scholar Thomas Elkjer Nissen has stated that “new wars are not to be understood as an empirical category but rather as a logical framework in which to make sense of contemporary conflicts and their characteristics” (Nissen 2015: 17). Due to the rapid development and relatively low cost of information and communications technology, virtually any one of us can access flows of information in order to interpret and (re)produce them. Nissen characterizes the contemporary complex structure of communication in the following manner: “Effects that support the goals and objectives of the multiple actors ‘fighting’ in the social network media sphere, including influencing perceptions of what is going on, can, in turn, inform decision-making and behaviours of relevant actors” (Nissen 2015: 17). This is the reason why war can no longer be understood as a conventional confrontation between states; rather, war has more to do with identity and ambition for identity: confrontation is based on inclusion and exclusion (Nissen 2015).

Further, as has been underlined by Saara Jantunen, a Finnish expert on information warfare, tactics of hybrid war – e.g. the verbal influencing of the enemy (cf. Sun Tzu) – have always accompanied warfare. Jantunen is of the opinion that contemporary hybrid warfare is mostly characterized by a change in the target: hybrid wars of the 21st century take aim at society as a whole (Jantunen 2018: 52). A fitting example here is the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 when the “little green men” did not even have to pull the trigger in order to successfully occupy the peninsula with the approval of its population that had been strategically controlled by the Kremlin and its television propaganda for around two decades (see Howard, Puhkov 2014; Galeotti 2015).

This kind of blurring of the boundaries of the military domain has left both active military personnel and researchers of military science, conflict studies and strategic communication at a loss to explain the situation. The problem is not merely rhetorical, since naming has real consequences in the military domain. Let

us again recall the situation in Ukraine and the way Russia vehemently attempted to frame its 2022 invasion as a “special military operation”. This labelling is anything but innocent: an official declaration of war brings into force the laws of the state of emergency; furthermore, declaring a war requires justification both on the international arena and to the internal audience; a war would bring about a different international reaction; a “special military operation” does not allow for calling for a general mobilization, etc. To give an event the name of ‘war’ is always a semiotic problem.

Consequently, we can pose the critical question whether delimiting the research object of ‘war semiotics’ on the basis of symbols, uniforms, military insignia and codes, etc. takes advantage of the full potential that semiotics has to offer. It should be noted that conflicts require strong legal justification in the context of contemporary hybrid and information warfare. When, if at all, is it legitimate to intervene in the politics of another sovereign state? How to determine this? These questions should not be answered solely by the political and military elite amongst themselves; an appropriate justification should increasingly more be articulated in view of the new actor in contemporary conflicts – the audience. Thus, a major part of warfare is already being conducted in the phase preceding an actual military intervention, while the latter is something to be avoided if it is possible to achieve one’s goals with informational means. Russia’s aggression against Ukraine in February 2022 started much earlier in the media space. The Kremlin-produced mediatized pseudo-reality was a key component in the preparation for an attack against Ukraine. Russian propaganda has heavily invested in symbolic imagery largely based on retrospective understandings of security grounded in the narratives of the 20th century. The audience is being influenced not so much on the basis of verifiable arguments, but “representational force”. Researcher of international relations Janice Mattern (2005: 586) understands this as a form of power that is purposefully targeted in order to sow fear in an audience with unimaginable dangers and irreparable consequences that threaten to actualize, provided the audience does not accept the speaker’s position (on semiotics of fear in the context of strategically influencing and deterring the audience, see Madisson, Ventsel 2021 and Ventsel *et al.* 2021).

## Semiotics of war and history

A second range of problems emerges in conceptualizing ‘semiotics of war’. The authors stress that one possible research problem in this approach could be the conflicts accompanying the remembering of war. It seems to me that remembering of war could be understood as a sub-problem of the semiotics of history. Most conflicts of memory are, in one way or another, related to larger historical narratives in which the events of war are situated. This is why, as a reader, I was expecting the perspective of the semiotics of history to be more clearly conceptualized: what is it that makes writing history – always balancing in the (un)conscious grey zone between remembering and forgetting – a semiotic phenomenon? Unfortunately, apart from Ricoeur, no semioticians of history or scholars of memory studies have been referred to in the book, although their work could undoubtedly have helped frame ‘semiotics of war’. I would have expected to find references to Aleida Assmann’s highly and widely acclaimed work *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit: Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik* (2006), in which the author – mostly based on Juri Lotman’s semiotics of culture – semiotically demonstrates the problems involved in remembering the war in post-Second-World-War Germany and the related generational conflicts. Federico Bellentani’s monograph *The Meanings of the Built Environment: A Semiotic and Geographical Approach to Monuments in the Post-Soviet Era* (2021) may be too recent to have been available for consultation, but I would certainly recommend it on the topic of war on monuments.

And, finally, what comes into view when we take a look at the list of cited authors representing the discipline of semiotics is the manifest underrepresentation of semiotics in the collection, the main work cited being Daniel Chandler’s overview *Semiotics: The Basics* (2017). On the one hand, this is understandable, since the collection was published in the Routledge Studies in Modern History series and is mostly authored by historians. The main strength of the book is, consequently, a thorough knowledge of historical material. On the other hand, however, explicating the mechanisms of meaning-making based on this material remains superficial in several cases, and the title of the book, *War and Semiotics*, seems somewhat over-ambitious and misleading.

In spite of the above points of criticism, I still fully agree with the editor, who hopes that this first attempt “will stimulate research and help to import further theoretical and semiotic approaches into military history” (p. 12). In these troubling times it is more than appropriate for semioticians to make their own contribution and aid the cause for peace with their academic work. To follow Sun Tzu: win the war without going to battle. That is, with words...

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