



The experience of war: the WARFUN project

Antonio De Lauri

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, total global military expenditure increased by 0.7 per cent in 2021, reaching a \$2113 billion historical record. The United States are by far the largest spender, followed by China, India, the United Kingdom and Russia, these five all together accounting for 62 per cent of total expenditure. These figures can be an indication of the global armed governance that characterises geopolitics and international relations. In the past few decades alone, millions of lives have been claimed by wars waged by imperial powers such as the United States, Russia, and the United Kingdom and by conflicts and unrest in contexts such as Darfur, Myanmar, Kivu or Yemen. Of course, a specific conflict's immediate scale and intensity are not the only elements defining the long-term tragedy that war generates. The bombing of Libya by the multi-state NATO-led coalition in 2011, for example, produced widespread national and regional instability that, as of today, is far from being resolved. The military intervention was implemented under the auspices of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973, proposed by France, Lebanon and the United Kingdom (with the declared intention to *protect* civilians) and voted for by several Security Council members, including the United States, then under the administration of Nobel Peace Prize winner Barak Obama. Libyans know how much peace the bombing brought. Indeed, wars always see a high degree of irony.

More recently, the war in Ukraine (which can be divided into two phases, 2014–2022 and 2022–present) resuscitated, in its second phase, a certain dangerous fascination for war. Journalists, analysts and politicians wearing real or symbolic

military helmets have proliferated globally. Notions such as patriotism, defence of democratic values, the right side of history, or a new fight for freedom are mobilised as imperatives for everyone to take a side in this war. It is not surprising, then, that a large number of so-called foreign fighters have been willing to go to Ukraine to join one side or the other. I met a few of them recently at the Poland–Ukraine border where, with a Norwegian film crew, I was conducting interviews with soldiers and foreign fighters who were either entering or exiting the war zone. Some of them never got to fight or be recruited as they lacked military experience or appropriate motivation. The people we met have different backgrounds. Some of them have spent years in the military, while others only did military service. Some have a family at home waiting for them; others have no home to return to. Some have strong ideological motivations; others are just willing to shoot at something or someone.

There is also a big group of former soldiers who transitioned toward 'humanitarian work'. As we were crossing the border to get into Ukraine, a former US soldier told me: "The reason why many retired or former soldiers moved to humanitarian work might easily be the need for excitement." Once you leave the military, the closest activity that can take you to the "fun zone," as another one said, referring to the war zone in Ukraine, is humanitarian work—or, in fact, a series of other businesses mushrooming in the proximity of war, including contractors and criminal activities. "We are adrenaline junkies," the former US soldier said, although he now only wants to help civilians, something he sees as "a part of my process of healing."

What many foreign fighters have in common is the need to find a purpose in life and search for excitement. K, a boy from Scandinavia in his early 20s who decided to join the legion of foreign fighters, believes that "being there" is the right thing to do. He is willing to die and to kill. At the same time, he believes it's an exciting experience and said at least one-third of the foreign fighters he met are there to have fun. The category of "fun" appears to a large extent as an oxymoron when situated in war. And yet, in the stories of soldiers and veterans, we find regular references to ideas such as joy, excitement, allure and fun. The US former soldier mentioned previously said "we would be over-joyous" after a military operation. A former military official I interviewed in Italy told me that being in a combat zone is thrilling, and "you can experience fun, at times with a sense of guilt."

Clearly, fun has every shade of connotation, from the most joyful to the most sinister. In a research project I lead entitled "War and Fun: Reconceptualising Warfare and Its Experience (WARFUN)," funded by the European Research Council, we use war stories related to what soldiers describe as "fun" as an entry point into the realm of war, an angle that allows us to explore the emotional and experiential articulation of war from the perspective of those who fight without forcing them into rigid external categories. The meaning of fun is often taken for granted both in scientific literature and everyday interactions; beyond dictionary definitions, there are few explanations of what fun involves and how to differentiate it from other social experiences. In our project, fun is understood as an expression of both direct and indirect communication, a



manner of public engagement as well as a 'ritual of inversion' in which the proprieties of structure (the declared mandate and rules of war) are lampooned and violated, yet the finalities of the project of war (dominion, control, violence, and so on) remain intact.

One striking element that has emerged from our research to date is that military personnel are often the most critical of what war really is in all its contradictions, beyond rhetorical descriptions. Indeed, one main goal of the project is to challenge the narrative of exception that often accompanies war's brutality. For instance, there is a dominant propaganda that seems to suggest war can be conducted according to a set of acceptable, standardised and abstract rules. It puts forth an idea of a well-behaved war where only military targets are destroyed, force is not used in excess, and right and wrong are clearly defined. This rhetoric is used by governments, the mass media and also scholars to make war more acceptable, even attractive, for the masses. Whatever deviates from this idea of a proper and noble war is considered an exception. US soldiers torturing prisoners in Abu Ghraib: an exception. German soldiers playing with a human skull in Afghanistan: an exception. The US soldier who went on a house-to-house rampage in an Afghan village, killing 16 civilians, including several children, with no reason: an exception. War crimes committed by Australian troops in Afghanistan: an exception. Iraqi prisoners tortured by British troops: an exception. Members of the Stryker Combat Brigade in Afghanistan accused of killing civilians for sport: an exception. French airstrikes at a wedding party in Mali: an exception. The Mahmudiyah rape and murders where US soldiers raped and killed a 14-year-old girl and killed her family: an exception.

Stories of soldiers torturing other soldiers or civilians and troubling news are extensively emerging in the current war in Ukraine too. All exceptions? No. This is exactly what war is. Governments make big efforts to explain that these kinds of episodes don't belong to a *normal war* conducted according to International Humanitarian Law, reiterating the idea of the possibility of a decent war without any excess or extravagance.

In the narrative of the good and decent war, the killing of civilians is recounted with hypocrisy as an evitable side effect, even though systematically targeting civilians is a feature of all contemporary wars; for example, hundreds of thousands of civilians have been directly killed in the US-led 'war(s) on terror', with many more losses due to those wars' reverberating impacts (for an overview, see for example the work of the Costs of War project of the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University). Soldiers and veterans know well that the idea of a clean and efficient war is a lie. War is a chaotic universe of military strategies intertwined with inhumanity, violations, uncertainty, doubts and deceit. In all combat zones, emotions such as fear, shame, joy, excitement, surprise, anger, cruelty and compassion co-exist.

The ongoing production of glorifying representations of war constantly adds to a massive body of films, articles, books, songs and so on that disguise war as something noble that can be encouraged. Social scientists have long explained that, together with understanding the causes and reasons for war (politics, conquest, profit, access to resources, but also liberation and independence), we should understand

the way war is justified or promoted along patterns that often mystify historical processes and misuse specific cultural, religious or social categories and differences. We should constantly question any attempt to beautify war or even create the illusion that war can be just and good. In the WARFUN project, we try to look at war for what it is by addressing the perspective of those who fight in war. We do not hold a pre-established moral position; rather, we delve into the different moralities of war expressed by fighters.

The suffering and hardship that humans endure within war cannot be stressed enough. It is precisely for this reason that we need nuanced understandings of what happens in war. WARFUN aims to unveil the plurality of experiences and emotional articulations that can be easily neglected by the exclusive focus on the normative and institutional aspects of war and soldiering.

PROJECT NAME

War and Fun: Reconceptualizing Warfare and Its Experience (WARFUN)

PROJECT SUMMARY

WARFUN investigates the plurality of experiences and affective grammars that are generally neglected by normative approaches. Anthropological studies have emphasised the ambivalent sentiments that arise as troubles escalate during large-scale violence and the crucial role that social actors have in determining the magnitude and consequences of conflict. War can only be understood through the broadest and the most complex assemblages of emotions and imagination available. By taking the wide array of sensations and emotions into account, we will be equipped to understand how war blurs the boundaries between the extraordinary and the ordinary and foresee the long-term, articulated effects of war on those who practice it.

PROJECT LEAD PROFILE

Antonio De Lauri is a research professor at the Chr. Michelsen Institute. He is the Director of the Norwegian Centre for Humanitarian Studies and the founding editor-in-chief of the journal *Public Anthropologist*. Antonio's research has been supported by national and international grants and fellowships from the European Research Council (ERC Consolidator Grant), the Research Council of Norway, the Forum Transregionale Studien and the Fondation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, among others.

PROJECT CONTACTS

Antonio De Lauri

✉ antonio.delauri@cmi.no

🌐 www.cmi.no/projects/2535-erc-war-and-fun



FUNDING

This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 101001106.