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History and Theory

In this chapter the author will compare historical processes of the Twentieth and, in perspective, of the Twenty-first century, to place within some specific frames of time the scenarios in which the multilevel dimension of the conduct of conflicts – with the wide presence and relevance of non-military instruments fused together with the kinetic and operational dimension – get a strategic significance. An historical condition that makes the boundaries between the state of war and “peace” indefinite. Historical and, structurally, socio-political phases, in which a dense gray area is created, that sometimes preludes to war, sometimes replaces the open unleashing of the military instrument, pursuing by different means the same goals of open war, which sometimes it introduces, sometimes it accompanies. Phases that solicit, even on the theoretical terrain, an attempt to specifically qualify the new ways of war. History can be the instrument that help us to fix and define this kind of scenarios in which the combination of military and non-military means organised in a system, get the strategic level. Today’s unconsolidated proposal of the “hybrid warfare” category responds, in the laborious and often contradictory attempts at definition, to a transitional phase of this nature and calls political theory and history an interpretative discipline, in the definition of their objects. The scenario of the thirties of the last century, reveals precisely a full deployment of non-linear war structurally based on the perspective of ideological war and on the profound transformation of the world of information with the irruption of new penetrating media and a studied use of propaganda. Kingdom of a political and psychological action that accompanies the properly military dynamic. Nazi Germany politics and non-linear approach to war, as a key and ideologically grounded instrument of its aggressive revisionism, will be the focus in our discussion. Processes that call us to reflect on our time as an analogous age of “revolutionary” change.

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International scenario and communications environment

The starting point must be the Great Transformation between the two world wars. In the heart of the Second Thirty Years' War, the myth of the homeland state and the model of the total state were mixed with the pitfalls of the internal enemy and the paths, of various matrices, of "subversion". A technological threshold of communication and mass politics had been crossed. Radio broadcasts broke boundaries and incorporated the attractive force of ideologies, the messages of the "politics of fear and identity", the charismatic force of the shouted word of dictators in the "Age of Anxiety". International politics and conflicts could absorb, in a new key, the fusion of external and internal threats and the actors could add with new intensity and depth the indirect and "covered" tools to the direct ones, to erode the reaction capacities of the opponents and acquire political or also operational advantages, even before crossing the threshold of military action. The twenties and especially the thirties are, in short, the scenario in which a full transition is condensed that feeds the war as a total and complex confrontation, the ultimate landing place of a friction managed on many different levels and in forms that associate the recognisable "conventionality" of the military dimension with other paths. Thus, even tools already tested in the past, such as deception and propaganda, incorporated elements of erosion of the enemy, of "subversion", that gained greater relevance. Above all, they integrated systematically with other elements, from the diplomatic and economic ones to those properly "kinetic" and operational, in a complex conflictual process, programmatically developed in strategic direction. The "subversive" integration of particular military instruments capable of combining deep penetration and dissolution of the political structure of the enemy's resistance belonged to the Soviet military vision of a potentially international "civil war" since the 1920s.² The vision of Frunze and in particular of Tukhachevskiy of a war "in depth" that would merge the strategic mobility of motorised or airborne troops and political participation of civilians (certainly starting from Soviet soil and as "resistant") was fully placed, in an operational key, in this horizon. It was assumed, on a class basis, the meeting of men in uniform and ideologically similar volunteers even in the conquered foreign territories, all operating according to the modalities proper to a civil war. Moreover, the awareness of the absolute enmity between the two worlds, the capitalist and that of the socialist revolution *in fieri*, made

² RAYCHEV 2019; FRIDMAN 2012; SINOVETS 2016; JONSSON 2019.

perpetually latent, even in non-kinetic phases, the state of war. Sedition and internal revolt prepared and subsequently met with the external military impulse prepared by political action. Interior and exterior met, and the cadres of the armed revolution of each country had to be prepared in the temporary external “island”, the homeland of socialism.³ This approach was also referred to by those German officers and observers who, on the basis of the wide – and secret – cooperation of the military of the two countries in the twenties, reflected on the development of the new specialty of the paratroopers, ready to give, in fact, an interpretation that combined conventional military action with the potential of “political warfare”.⁴ A further point of conjunction between the Russian world, Nazi Germany and non-linear forms of war can also be found in the biographical itinerary of Evgeni Messner, a Russian officer who switched to Nazism to fight the Soviets in the Axis propaganda departments in 1941 and a theorist of the war of subversion and non-linear warfare in the age of total and ideological war.⁵ Intertwined with these shared ideas, however, it was Nazi Germany that fully set in motion, in the perspective of its aggressive revisionism, an integrated political and strategic approach called to exploit all available means to march towards the objectives established, as far as possible, below the threshold of war.

Nazi Germany: Diplomacy, non-state actors and the fifth column

The examination of the practices of Nazi Germany in accompaniment and premise of military actions⁶ suggests in fact a reflection and a potential generalisation about the paths through which revisionist powers conceal their final objectives through processes of deception and manipulation of the adversary perception. A sequence of increasing complexity aimed at exploiting the weaknesses, real or ideologically hypostatized, of adversaries, fragmenting systems of alliances and collective security in the face of “ambiguous” actions and paralysing their ability to react. Actions that structurally combine total disregard for the system

³ Only one example can be invoked with regard to the Soviet attempt to destabilise Estonia in December 1924, through the use of communist supporters destined, unsuccessfully, to attack the palace of government to pave the way for the Red Army.

⁴ BASSECHES 1945; BASSENCE 1939; SCHUTTEL 1938.

⁵ THOMAS 2016; FRIDMAN 2018.

⁶ WEINBERG 1995.

of norms and international law, a solid determination and a strategic approach in the use of political and non-military instruments to the brink of war (and beyond). We will find in our path a structured and increasingly defined combination of elements that, it seems to us, anticipate many aspects of the dynamics of our age. In particular, we will be able to highlight:

- covert actions and deniability (with the involvement of minorities, local actors and agencies)
- coercive diplomacy
- strategic ambiguity (and opacity of the boundaries of actions between peace and war)
- manipulation of perception and decision-making processes (with coercion at different levels)
- diplomacy of deception and *fait accompli* policy through rapid and decisive military action

A sequence destined to be renewed on the international scene starting from the German rearmament and militarisation of the Rhineland right into the war itself, from the Polish defeat to the collapse of France.⁷ During the Twenties, the creation of the Abwehr and international constraints had certainly fuelled German attention to non-linear methods and unconventional instruments, shared as mentioned with the Soviet world. The Foreign Ministry's institutional tradition of commitment in these fields (through unconventional actions against the British empire during the Great War) was revived in the years of Nazism with the contribution of other agencies. We find the creation, in 1935, of an office specifically dedicated to these operations at the Abwehr and a very extensive commitment abroad of the Nazi Party, crossing every threshold of ethical and operational scruple.⁸ The Nazi policy of influence abroad aimed at expanding in different directions and with aims that far exceeded the usual drive to erode the British Empire (support for Indian, Irish or Arab nationalism)⁹ but aimed to integrate fully with an operational perspective. It now consciously accompanied the itinerary of a diplomatic, informative and political escalation that pursued the demolition of the resistance capacities of the target countries. The age of the "fifth column", these certainly not new as a deception tool but fully

⁷ CRISTADORO 2022.

⁸ MENGEL 2007.

⁹ PERKINS 1991.

reshaped in that radicalised season of total ideological conflict, opened new perspectives to actors and methods that navigated in the gray area of “state deniability”.¹⁰ Means that could anticipate but also, subsequently, accompany a military action, integrating into its operational phases.¹¹ A cycle that fully grew between 1938–1942, in which various German and Nazi organisations activated the collaborations of external actors and minorities, later experiencing a rapid decline linked to the negative course of the war, while an initial multiplicity of agencies was reabsorbed by a central political control service.¹² William Shirer journalist, historian and direct witness of the events, offers us the sequence of passages that mark the revisionist path of Nazi Germany. Starting from the structural construction of the Nazi rule over information, favoured by the monopoly on radio broadcasts (usual in Europe), while press and cinema were, between 1933 and 1934, fully framed in the Nazi control system. Shirer, a political commentator for Universal Service – by the end of 1937 he had switched from the newspaper’s press to radio broadcasts with CBS and its information service from Europe based in Vienna – could grasp over time the ability of the radio medium and its deceptions to penetrate the beliefs of the German public.¹³ At that stage, a modern information space was defined that combined different tools for political manipulation at home and abroad. Between 1933 and 1935: “preaching peace”, “clandestine rearmament” and covert preparation for war avoiding the risk of a preventive intervention by the victors of Versailles constituted the guidelines of Hitler’s policy, aimed at managing a functional communication towards the outside.¹⁴ The occult action of Nazism moved from this framework but opened the ways to create the most of the divisions between democracies and inside their public opinions. The Nazi management of the erosion of the international security system shows, in an exemplary sequence, an authentic model of implementation of revisionism, with an articulation of political instruments and non-military means pushed to the threat of escalation but set to remain below the threshold of war. A dynamic built to make up for an initial military inadequacy with respect to the political objectives but shaped around the awareness and exploitation of the weaknesses of the adversaries that

¹⁰ ORLOW 1999.

¹¹ GODSON–WIRTZ 2011.

¹² MENGEL 2007.

¹³ SHIRER 1974; SHIRER 1986.

¹⁴ WEINBERG 1995.

themselves become decisive instruments of a political war. A flexible and pragmatic opportunism accompanies an outlined strategic itinerary. The crisis of July 1934 in Austria was an initial stage revealing the forms and also the dangers inherent in these proceedings. The assassination of Austrian Chancellor Dollfuss and an attempted assault on the Chancellery by the local Nazis highlighted too early the organisational work that the German Nazi Party had activated in the Austrian scenario. Alongside the direct support to sympathisers, with the formation in Bavaria of an Austrian legion ready to cross the border, it was evident in fact the active support for radio propaganda – from Munich – of the local Nazi leader in “exile” Alfred Frauenfeld. Besides, there was no lack of support for terrorist activities in Austria against state structures and members of the government. An international scenario not yet softened and divided and a rapid Italian reaction imposed a hasty withdrawal of the Reich Government, forced to dissociate itself from the political dynamic triggered, denying any involvement in the crisis. From there began an intense activity of disinformation towards the foreign press more willing to confirm the absence of bellicose projects on the German side.¹⁵ A “brake” that corresponded, however, to the hidden start of rearmament in the autumn of 1934, with the first secret expansion of the army personnel and a plan for new shipbuilding. The next phase was openly revisionist in the erosion of the bonds of Versailles, managed by *faits accomplis* (from the official announcement of the rearmament in March 1935 to the reoccupation of the Rhineland in 1936) and public statements oscillating between the demand for “good rights”, victimisation for the legacy of Versailles and solicitations for new fair agreements veiled by allusions to the use of force. At that point, the incipient division between the European main actors (with the Italian attack on Ethiopia) and their substantial unwillingness to act firmly were exploited. The military coup of the reoccupation of the Rhineland, in March 1936, inaugurated a process destined to be repeated, with the construction of a *fait accompli* from which to start peace offers. These offers combined the manipulation of reality and an increasingly firm intimidation as international interlocutors proved divided and irresolute in front of the violation of international agreements. The breaches were followed by the acceptance of the new conditions in search of a possible balance that would temper feared *escalation* towards war and also confirming Hitler’s strategic determination and his confidence in the means adopted. It was precisely the evident lack of determination

¹⁵ SHIRER 1974.

of the democracies, the different perception of the threat by Great Britain and France, that convinced the new Austrian Chancellor Schuschnigg to seek a policy of agreement with Hitler that would safeguard the integrity of Austria even if not full sovereignty. The treaty of 11 July 1936 was one of the diplomatic traps devised by Nazism to undermine the target countries from within. It guaranteed German non-interference in Austrian affairs and the recognition of a sovereignty tempered by the constraint of considering the general interests of the Germans in foreign policy. The document, however, contained secret clauses that, on the operational level, opened the way to a full penetration of the interests of the Reich in Austria, with the guarantee of amnesty for the arrested local Nazis and the constraint of reserving to that political party important positions within the administration. A Trojan horse destined to open in February 1938.¹⁶ When the diplomatic framework appeared mature and relations with Italy redefined with a substantial consensus of Mussolini, the feasibility of the Anschluss became concrete. Hitler's strategy since the end of 1937 was war-oriented but with variable time horizons. The fragility of democracies, the internal political tearing in France and British uncertainties about an effective continental commitment, the unwillingness to use the military instrument as a deterrence, the support now guaranteed by Mussolini, offered the basis for still acting below the threshold of war. The absorption of the Austrian Republic into the Reich was achieved through an exemplary sequence destined to be repeated. This developed from a direct military intimidation that accompanied Hitler's ultimatum to Chancellor Schuschnigg (12 February 1938) to obtain the placement of Austrian pro-Nazis in key government posts, a similar integration of the security forces and a process of economic assimilation. News of German military movements on the borders accompanied the timing of the "negotiation" for the signing of the "agreement". Hitler reinforced the threat with shouted public statements (speech of 20 February to the Reichstag) about the rights of Germans outside the borders of the Reich while the local Nazis unleashed demonstrations and violence in Austria. Military intimidation and subversion paved the way for a "peacemaker" intervention. Arthur Seyss-Inquart and the other Nazis who had become part of the government apparatus undermined even minor attempts at opposition by favouring the internal crumbling of the state. France did not have a government in those weeks and Chamberlain's British Government had no

¹⁶ SHIRER 1974.

intention of intervening in the “internal relations between the two states”.¹⁷ International response for the protection of small states was inexistent. The coup was completed with Hitler’s triumphant visit to his native country. The defence of the Germans, a “question of minorities”, could be consolidated as an instrument for the next steps to achieve a “reflexive control” on democracies and legitimise the Reich’s “reasonable” demands. The strategic scope of the project remained hidden. Even the planning of the crushing of Czechoslovakia, (the “Fall Grün” originally traced in the summer of 1937), included, in its definition of April 1938,¹⁸ a complete section dedicated to “propaganda” in addition to political and military measures.¹⁹ It was necessary to support and feed the action of the Sudeten German Party, directly financed by Berlin and capable of animating the chauvinism of a large part of the local German minority (about 3 million).²⁰ It was up to them to undermine, with deliberately unacceptable political petitions, the stability of the country’s government and its credibility with the allies, who were annoyed by the Czechs’ unwillingness to compromise. The result was to be a contrast between sovereignty and “justice” aimed at making the horizon of law opaque and international support for the attacked country friable. All the more so if in the background and with ever greater determination Hitler could wave the threat of war. A new *fait accompli* had to be made possible, that would paralyse and empty any possible will to react by the international community. Hitler had systematised this perspective, transforming it into a political paradigm, already in the meeting of 21 April 1938 with the leaders of the armed forces: “Politically speaking, the first four days of military action are decisive. Without significant military successes, a European crisis will certainly erupt. The *fait accompli* must convince foreign powers of the futility of military intervention.”²¹ It had to be “a lightning strike, the consequence of some serious incident which for Germany represents an intolerable provocation and which, at least in the face of a part of public opinion, offers a moral justification for military measures”. In short, the necessary premises of military action were systematically built on a political and propaganda basis that condition its implementation and success. Manipulating international public opinion and dividing it by providing it with

¹⁷ SHIRER 1974.

¹⁸ The absorption of Austria had made the defensive position of the Czechs very difficult.

¹⁹ SHIRER 1974.

²⁰ KOUTEK 1964.

²¹ SHIRER 1974.

formal anchors for disengagement was one of the preliminary tools of the action, which will count on the substantial isolation of the victims. Military action will have to find support, up to the operational level, from the fallout of propaganda itself and the pressures of economic warfare:

- “The propaganda war must, on the one hand, intimidate the Czechs by means of threats and wear down their resistance force; on the other hand, it must give national minorities instructions on how to support our military operations and influence the neutrals on our behalf.
- The economic war has the task of using all available economic resources to accelerate the final collapse of the Czechs [...].”²²

Coercion becoming “cross domain”

The intensification of the subversion activity of the Sudeten Germans and the rupture of these with the Prague Government for the management of autonomy were the background to the growing German military and diplomatic pressure “to protect the minority” and its good right on those territories. Faced with the threat of war, we were witnessing the gradual slide of diplomacy, especially British, towards openness to the demands of the Reich. While the *decalage* of Western guarantees developed rapidly in September, the diplomatic action of the Reich urged the push on all minorities, Hungarians and Poles and their countries to crumble Czechoslovakia. On the ground, units of Sudeten volunteers flanked by SS units militarily occupied cities on the border along the lines of a substantially planned “gray” sedition. The dissolving outcomes of Munich represented at that point the full success of “a new strategy and technique of political warfare that made effective war superfluous”.²³ The acquiescence of the democracies would be quickly followed, at the beginning of 1939, by a further, hasty and impudent fait accompli, with the political “emptying” of what remained of the attacked country. The rapid military occupations of Bohemia and Moravia followed the disengagement of Slovakia. By similar means, a few weeks later, once again combining diplomatic intimidation and organised intemperance of local Germans, the Memel district was absorbed by Lithuania. The Bohemian case consolidated a practice that was now taking on systematic features. Political

²² SHIRER 1974: 561.

²³ SHIRER 1974: 651.

dismemberment through the use of local actors was a necessary premise for the decisive effectiveness of the military occupation. This was directly requested only at the end of the path and in the form of “protection” of German minorities exposed to the “massacre” and victimised through internal unrest provoked artfully and transformed into imperative and suggestive messages in international communication. The direction was fully defined on the strategic level but assumed an “opportunistic” trend, tactically seizing all the opportunities to deepen the blows to the stability of the victim State and international support for it. Diplomatic deceptions were realised through “peace offers” that incorporated, in strategic ambiguity, both the implicit and coercive threat of a military escalation and the promise, each time repeated, of guarantees against any further claim. All this transformed the international arena of communication into a pulsating ground of tension. It was to amplify the weaknesses of democracies and the frailty of their permeable public opinions. In the Czech case, the result was an effective manipulation of the perception of danger through a renewed and extreme *bluff*, also making the scenario of a blatant aggression confusing – and ultimately acceptable. In the Polish case, immediately following, all this would have recurred with a more intense diplomatic and communication manipulation, passing from the mere sphere of propaganda to that of interference in cognitive and decision-making processes and on the determination to act of democracies in front of uncertainty. Among the tools adopted, the “fog of war” passed from the tactical level to settle also on the strategic one. Even the planning of the attack on Poland, the “Fall Weiss” that began to take shape in the aftermath of Munich, was nourished by a fundamental political approach. In those weeks, in fact, it was envisaged “a semi-revolutionary action in Danzig to take advantage of a favourable political situation, not a war against Poland”.²⁴ It was the last hypothesis that did not foresee an open armed conflict and was destined to fade in the light of the hardening of the line of democracies in front of the “fait accompli” against what remained of Czechoslovakia, of January 1939. At that point, however, the indications to the military still aimed to circumscribe the war scenario, on the basis of the certain political crisis of democracies and in particular of France, operating around the non-inevitability of their intervention. On the one hand, faced with the now defined line of Franco–British guarantees to Poland, democracies were accused of warmongering, trying to

²⁴ SHIRER 1974: 706; BERGEN 2008.

influence the determination of public opinion²⁵ (after all, the traditional congress of the Nazi Party that was to be held the following August, was to be called, almost mockingly, “Peace Congress”). On the other hand, the directives for military action incorporated a series of eminent political activities with a significant institutional interweaving between the actors, political and military, of the Nazi machine. Alongside the growing diplomatic intimidation through the exaltation of the power of German weapons,²⁶ an operational organisation developed in order to exhaust the Polish resistance very quickly, hypothetically in just two weeks.²⁷ A series of “surprise attacks” was to paralyse the mobilisation of Warsaw, while inside Danzig would have been immediately declared German territory and defended by local militias. The Nazi party, anticipating the action of the Wehrmacht, had in those months brought in arms and officers through East Prussia to train the local defence militia. A typical model of *ambiguous warfare* that mixed the action of non-state actors with the coverage and execution of properly state directives. Similarly, the Party’s action became central to the organisation of an “incident” which, according to Hitler’s precise and calculated directives, was supposed to justify the German September attack in the eyes of a hesitant international community. The SS-held “Operation Himmler” involved a fake Polish attack on the Gleiwitz border radio station, employing concentration camp inmates wearing Polish uniforms.²⁸ Actions that could hope to convince above all the internal front in Germany²⁹ but that certainly aimed to make confused, for the public opinion of democracies, even the scenario of a blatant aggression.³⁰ Mixed with a dense tissue of “last minute” negotiations aimed at nailing Poles to responsibility for a rejection of peace offers, these operations moved from the mere sphere of propaganda to that of interference in decision-making processes and the determination of democracies to act in front

²⁵ SHIRER 1974.

²⁶ SHIRER 1974.

²⁷ SHIRER 1974.

²⁸ SHIRER 1974.

²⁹ It was substantially isolated and invulnerable to propaganda from the outside since the materialisation of the *Gleichschaltung*, fully aligned, according to Shirer’s solid testimony, with the idea of the threat of Polish criminal aggression towards the German people. In this dynamic, the typical asymmetry between authoritarian states and democratic societies, intrinsically exposed to the divisions and destabilising influences induced by the former, took fully shape.

³⁰ In this case too, Hitler would have peppered the last diplomatic and propaganda exchanges with the democracies with references to the martyrdom of the *Volksdeutsche* in Poland.

of uncertainty. The lightning nature of the military action could also make it possible to arrive at a new *fait accompli* by “isolating” the “Weiss Fall”, while the Ribbentrop–Molotov pact helped to push France and the United Kingdom again – guided, in Hitler’s vision, by “little worms” – towards the precipice of an unruly and paralysing “wisdom”.³¹ In the military conference of 22 August, Hitler gave as absolutely unlikely an attack from the West even in front of the now certain aggression against Poland and, around 25 August, imagined at most a possible “fake war” by Chamberlain, desperately looking for a way out of a concrete and general war. The Fuhrer postponed the attack, originally scheduled for 26 August, precisely in order to influence public opinion (the French in particular) and democratic governments, proposing a political “solution” to cling to. Possibly provoking a Polish rejection of “reasonable” proposals to anchor the abandonment, by democracies, of the commitments undertaken.³² Moreover, right on the threshold of the war, Hitler himself confirmed that he had consciously achieved the long list of successes and annexations of previous years with the “political bluff”.³³ We could say, with today’s eyes, that deception and *reflexive control*, although not codified in a doctrine, dominated the scenario and accompanied the properly military action. Peace offers would arrive again from Hitler at the end of September with the last steps of the very rapid triumph in Poland to further survey and challenge the fragility of the opponents, whose operational immobility was eloquent. And reviving the exhausting factor of political action while in fact planning the military attack on the West. The season of the lightning spring offensives of 1940 would incorporate a “sensible integration between penetrating military action, diplomatic deception and³⁴ jamming operations built on the disguise and spread of chaos, as in the case of German soldiers disguised as Belgian and Dutch border guards in May 1940.³⁵ In this case there was, in coordination with military operations on the ground, an integrated form of *ambiguous warfare*, through the masked deployment of units, or even the simple looming possibility of infiltrating units or agents behind the lines. The use of airborne troops or paratroopers represented at that point one of the tools of psychological disintegration of the opposing front, even for the mere suspicion that these new

³¹ SHIRER 1974.

³² SHIRER 1974.

³³ SHIRER 1974.

³⁴ SHIRER 1974.

³⁵ SHIRER 1974.

troops and tools, acted alongside elusive “accomplices” and local supporters, on a political-ideological, ethnic or corrupting basis.³⁶ State and non-State crossed each other, breaking solid fences and inaugurating the season of a “war without fronts”.³⁷ Precisely this type of action became the stimulatory and coordinated ground for an intense activity of information accompaniment, of *white* or *black* propaganda, which strongly characterised the *psyops* character of many military operations. The unexpected and rapid capture by airborne units on gliders of the Belgian fort of Eben Emael, considered a modern and insurmountable defensive jewel, stood out as an enigma in the eyes of the allies and populations, both uncertain whether to attribute it to the betrayal of a fifth column or to the actual irresistibility of “new means of war” as a pounding German campaign deliberately leaked. Precisely the pounding scenario of the German advance and successes favoured a generalised collapse of the reaction capacity of the allies to which the dense tissue of propaganda and deception that accompanied them contributed. In fact, at that stage the activities of clandestine or “open” radio stations began. Sometimes mounted on trucks they were able to move along the borders or along the French and Belgian front to deceive with their propaganda populations and troops in retreat.³⁸ Radio broadcasts would increasingly turn into a direct terrain of war and its action would interfere with operational situations and their planning. The impact of “news” could become an immediate weapon and contribute directly to success. It was the starting point of that dense tissue of radio activities that took shape in the following weeks on the German side to prepare and accompany, with the poisonous suggestions of “English” voices, the attack on the British Isles.³⁹ Voices that were to amplify the sense of defeat and bewilderment as an expression of the authentic opinion of the English people, in front of the recalcitrant ruling classes who claimed to continue a war destined to become unsustainable and terrible, even when Hitler offered “generous” peace offers (in the impressive speech to the Reichstag of 19 July 1940). Not only flowed the open propaganda of William Joyce, a fugitive in Berlin and voice known as Lord Haw-Haw, but also the covert and insidious voice of the broadcaster “Concordia” after the success of similar operations in the French context. Three stations dedicated to different social segments and engaged both in the strategic

³⁶ SHIRER 1974; LAGROU 2004; VLAEMYNK 1977.

³⁷ DI GIOVANNI 1991.

³⁸ SALATA 2020; KOESTLER 1989.

³⁹ DOHERTY 1994.

dissociation of the British people from their government, as well as in the tactical spread of panic and chaos. That summer thus became the scene of a campaign of rumours about widespread sabotage, actions of the fifth column and landings of paratroopers, growing up to the exhortation to revolt and escape in the psychological urgency of an impending invasion. Manipulate events to the point of paroxysm and urge listeners to disseminate their “authentic”, catastrophic meaning. A dynamic that places us fully in the “revolutionary” circuit opened by the great transformation of information and that at the time prompted a series of initiatives from the British side, also on the basis of the weight attributed to German propaganda in the collapse of France. In May, the Political Committee at the Ministry of Information evaluated the information disseminated on German paratroopers and subsequently the fear spread that the broadcasts would dialogue directly with a fifth column on the territory. The result would be an “anti-rumour” campaign called “Silent Column”.⁴⁰ At that stage an observation service was activated by the BBC to combat false news (the so-called “Anti-Lie Section”, BBC Monitoring Service). In the growing German difficulty of preparing a complex operation like “Sea Lion”, the propaganda and internal disintegration of the British could still appear to General Jodl, second at the top of the OKW, a tool to amplify the physical and moral effects of the bombings, opening the way to a possible solution without invasion of the island.⁴¹ From then on, however, the domination of arms and the policy of occupation would define other priorities in the strategic complex of the instruments of war.

World War II and the non-linear legacies of the Cold War

The scenario was no longer in a single direction and even the British information and military structures had begun to move, although they would have tended to characterise themselves in a decidedly different way.⁴² The transformation of the war into a long-lasting total conflict placed the whole and the combination of the “new” instruments tested in a secondary and subsidiary position with respect to the dominant kinetic dimension. The Allies declined some of the instruments matured in that season according to the conduct of a war that had to rest, on

⁴⁰ DOHERTY 1994.

⁴¹ SHIRER 1974.

⁴² PLOCK 2020.

the strategic level, on an overwhelming military superiority. However, that war developed the relationship with the populations of occupied Europe and collaboration with resistance movements, with an intrinsic political dimension. Therefore, the external activities of the BBC⁴³ and a specific declination of propaganda grew, while agencies were born aimed precisely at developing the integration between information action and kinetic operations and the development of tools specifically dedicated to *psyops*. They combined (according to a British model of “unorthodox warfare”) different paths and activities that included, in addition to the acquisition of information, *Political Warfare* oriented to propaganda and deception or to the activation of subversion in local areas, sabotage and direct action, up to the organisation of close operational combinations between special forces and Resistances, as happened on the occasion of Overlord.⁴⁴ In the British context with the SOE and in the USA with the Coordinator of Information and later with the OSS, there were organisational and doctrinal developments that institutionalised the experience in progress.⁴⁵ The path would continue even after the end of the war but confirming a clear sign, especially in the American context: the strategic dimension belonged to other sectors, and the Army favoured a fully conventional vision of the military instrument.⁴⁶ It was the pressure of the Cold War (Korea) that forcefully re-proposed the political dimension of the war and led to the creation of a new agency in the USA, the Office of the Chief of Psychological Warfare in 1951. From here the 10th Special Forces Group was born to train “indigenous” personnel who acted behind the lines of territories invaded by the USSR. A position distinct from the elite units of the Army, wary of unconventional scenarios. It was an area also disputed by other “political” agencies. The consolidation came with the creation in Fort Bragg of a Psychological Warfare Center (1952) which collected under a specific doctrinal profile both *the psyops* and Unconventional Warfare, doctrinally reserved for direct action or combined with external actors of the Special Forces.⁴⁷ The Cold War scenario, therefore, included an intense recourse by military actors to specific tools more or less “covered” and operating in a gray area. For the USSR, military intimidation, covert operations and incitement to political dissent, the general information war

⁴³ PRONAY–TAYLOR 1984; TAYLOR 2007; GRAHAM 2019.

⁴⁴ KILCULLEN 2019.

⁴⁵ PADDOCK 1980.

⁴⁶ PADDOCK 1980.

⁴⁷ PADDOCK 1980.

of subversion that was part of the “active measures”⁴⁸ represented some of the areas of the “gray zone” destined to remain doctrinal heritage until today’s Russian Federation.⁴⁹ Both actors also defined a strong propaganda action, with dedicated radio broadcasts behind the “curtain” and other diversified forms of influence, but in the framework of a confrontation that, despite the many peripheral declinations, gravitated around other strategic priorities and did not make the gray area the systemic pivot of its perspective.

Conclusion

The arrival of our path is placed in front of the effects of the new and extraordinary transition of the communication and information environment inaugurated in the new millennium. A complex scenario of which we only seek to indicating some aspects connected to the strategic opportunities that open up in the confrontation between different political systems. A picture that brings us back to the great strategic transformation we have been dealing with. The appearance, in the second decade of our Century, of aggressive revisionist actors, Russia and China in particular, can be linked to many factors, but certainly among these must be counted the growing vulnerability of open societies with a democratic character, what, in a general sense, we call “the West”. New technologies make non-linear instruments in the Gray Zone more effective and place them strategically at the forefront of the military dimension. That is, it opens up a field of action that lies below and alongside the technological and military superiority of the West. The technological environment in transformation multiplies the friction surfaces and seems to welcome in its widest folds spaces for actions not easily attributable, areas of plausible deniability. A situation that fully favours the deployment of aggressive operations in the gray area and their strategic importance. A transformation that enables the democratisation of operational capacities up to very reduced organisational levels, through the potential weaponisation of ordinarily civilian instruments. Nevertheless, it also feeds the combination from above, and on the platform of the State, of a set of activities potentially integrated, opaque and not recognisable in the actors and intentions. Tools and methods so effective in their joint action that they can produce the erosion at various levels of the

⁴⁸ CRISTADORO 2022.

⁴⁹ MORRIS et al. 2019.

compactness and resilience of the target country, finalising to the maximum the opportunities offered by this renewed and deep Gray Zone, configuring it as a new area of war.⁵⁰ The revisionist powers seem in fact particularly structured to make use of it, slipping under the constraints apparently imposed by the superiority of the West and emphasising the substantial asymmetry in the penetrability of “information”, in the control of internal political dynamics, in the internal and external relevance of legal *pivots*. Not only explicit propaganda, but the structured practice of intoxicating information, delegitimising institutions and the authority of the State, simply creating uncertainty and chaos. These are elements that converge strategically in shaping a socio-political environment incapable of responding when concrete challenges arise. Specific political processes active in modern post-ideological and social-media oriented democracies, such as institutional disintermediation and accreditation of populist policies, have exalted the destructive permeability to these threats. “Reflexive control” and the sequential violations of rules (*slicing salami*)⁵¹ therefore articulate revisionist itineraries that feed on ideological conviction and concrete and continually solicited manifestation of the fragility and vulnerability of the West.⁵² Not simply War but War. The action of the Russian Federation is extremely eloquent and disturbing. The threshold crossed on 24 February 2022 calls us to recognise the cognitive biases that had conditioned our perception of the ideological determination of the Russian actor, and the actual maturation, in his perspective, of the decadence of the West. Confusing once again for “pragmatism” an opportunism nourished by a precise ideological and strategic vision that was able to feed, failed yet another *fait accompli*, a war of the “colonial” type that brings the hands of history back to where all this began. Hitler operated according to a project in which pragmatism had a place in a purely tactical perspective. Planning on an ideological basis determined the direction of the march consciously destined to lead to war as the political-military annihilation of the adversary. The ideological approach and political determination made it possible to identify and exploit a set of tools – typical of that age in transformation – capable of plunging into the systemic fragility of opponents, strategically building the foundations of the final military deployment. A threshold used in a coercive perspective and crossed, in Hitler’s expectations, to complete the work of erosion of the enemy long started

⁵⁰ MATISEK 2017; JONSSON 2019.

⁵¹ ADAMSKY 2015.

⁵² ADAMSKY 2018.

by operating at various levels on its vulnerabilities. The great transformation of information, networks, and of what is integrated with them, which increasingly characterises the new millennium, opens the space for a wide and deep Gray Zone in which non-state and, in particular, state actors, can act in the midst of plausible deniability and/or with predominantly non-military instruments to erode the stability of target countries. Democracies appear particularly vulnerable to this type of disruption. The new revisionist and autocratic powers, guided by an approach ideologically based on the conviction of the irreversible decline of the West and the weakness of democracies, exert on this sphere an articulated and multilevel erosive action, organic on the strategic level. This erosive action today appears not only substitutive, but potentially preparatory and preliminary to the full deployment of military actions.

Questions

1. Which are the main features of the Non-Linear Warfare in the nineteen-thirties?
2. How do revisionism and NLW connect? Think about it.
3. What are the fragilities, yesterday and today, of democracies in the face of non-linear threats?
4. What are past and present examples of the abuse of the claims of national minorities in internal subversion?

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