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ROLE OF MILITARY PSYCHOLOGY AND USE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL OPERATIONS IN WARFARE

AUTHORED BY - CHAITANYA SRI KRISHNA & AYUSHI SAINI¹

ABSTRACT

The human mind has become the primary battlefield in modern warfare, with cognitive warfare rising as a critical domain that must be acknowledged. The human intellect serves as a valuable reservoir of insights, strategic foresight, and groundbreaking ideas within the realm of contemporary warfare. Psychological warfare is the form of psychological operation most directly linked to military actions: it aims to weaken the enemy's will to fight before and during engagement, and, afterward, to emphasize the significance of their losses and the hopelessness of their situation.

Military psychology and psychological operations (PSYOP) play critical roles in modern warfare, shaping the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions of conflict. Military psychology focuses on optimizing human performance in high-stress environments, addressing mental health, resilience, and decision-making under pressure. In contrast, psychological operations encompass carefully crafted strategic communication aimed at shaping the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours of target audiences, including adversary forces, civilians, and allied populations. This study explores the interrelationship, historical development, and modern-day applications of these concepts in warfare. Military psychology supports war fighters by addressing mental health challenges such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and moral injury, which are prevalent in combat settings. Through resilience training, cognitive enhancement programs, and stress inoculation, psychologists improve soldiers' adaptability and operational readiness. Psychological operations, as a form of information warfare, leverage media, propaganda, and tailored messaging to achieve strategic objectives. The modernization of tactics, fuelled by technological advancements like social media, has revolutionized traditional methods such as leaflet distribution. PSYOP campaigns aim to demoralize adversaries, encourage defections, or sway neutral populations toward supporting military goals. Historical examples, such as World War II leaflet campaigns and Cold War

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radio broadcasts, demonstrate their efficacy in shaping narratives. Modern PSYOP integrates digital platforms, social media, and data analytics to target specific demographics with precision, exploiting cultural, social, and psychological vulnerabilities.

This study analyses case studies, including Vietnam War PSYOP and recent counterinsurgency operations, to evaluate successes and limitations. It explores how military psychology informs PSYOP by identifying cognitive biases and emotional triggers that enhance message impact. The research highlights the need for interdisciplinary approaches, combining psychology, anthropology, and communication studies to refine strategies. As conflicts increasingly shift to the cognitive domain, military psychology and PSYOP will remain pivotal in shaping outcomes, necessitating ongoing research into their efficacy, ethical boundaries, and technological advancements.

Military psychology and psychological operations are indispensable in modern warfare, enhancing soldier performance and influencing adversarial decision-making. This study underscores their evolving roles, advocating for evidence-based practices and ethical frameworks to maximize their contributions while mitigating risks.

Keywords: Psychological warfare, mental health, social media, propaganda, audience

Introduction: -

According to the British Psychology Society, Psychology is recognized as the scientific exploration of the mind and its role in guiding and shaping human behaviour, from various aspects such as communication and memory to thought and emotion. It is dedicated to understanding the study of human behaviour – and the thoughts, feelings and motivations that drive it – through observation, measurement, and testing, in order to form conclusions that are based on reliable scientific methods.² Further this field has its various branches including biological psychology, cognitive psychology, social psychology and developmental psychology.

These branches of psychology aim to collect data in a systematic way, which can then be organized into knowledge. The goal is to understand and explain how the mind functions and

² *What Is Psychology? And What Does A Psychologist Do?* Available at: <https://www.northumbria.ac.uk/study-at-northumbria/courses/msc-psychology-distance-learning-dtdppy6/what-is-psychology-blog-org/>.

how various mental processes lead to different behaviour's.³ Psychology is a relatively young science, but it is mostly classified as a field within the social sciences, as it revolves around human social and mental behaviour. It aims to understand and influence the mind and behaviours in relation to specific actions, guiding not only what work is done but also how it is carried out.

"To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill." — Sun Tzu, 4th century B.C.

Psychological Operations are planned political, economic, military, and ideological activities directed toward foreign countries, organizations, and individuals in order to create emotions, attitudes, understandings, beliefs, or behaviour favourable. It normally pursues objectives to gain the support and cooperation of friendly and neutral countries and to reduce the will and the capacity of hostile or potentially hostile countries to wage war.⁴ These operations are strategically planned activities designed to gain the support and confidence of friendly and neutral countries, while reducing the likelihood of hostile nations engaging in warfare. They target large audiences and employ specific propaganda to influence thoughts and behaviour. These operations typically aim to shape an environment that directs individuals to act according to the will of others. Psychological operations should not be considered solely military actions, as they often involve the entire political apparatus and economic resources of a country when conducted on a large scale.

As stated by the Department of Military Science at Walden University, Washington, USA, military psychology focuses on counselling and addressing stress and fatigue among military personnel and their families for the treatment of psychological trauma suffered by them as a result of military operations and war.⁵ It is grounded in psychological theories and data gathered from various experiments, with the aim of predicting, countering, and understanding the behaviour of military forces—both allied and adversarial—that present threats, display hostility, or are otherwise detrimental to military operations. Such operations not only endanger military personnel but also significantly affect the civilian population. Military psychology, therefore, focuses on research and developing solutions for the psychological treatment of military personnel affected by prolonged warfare and field operations, as well as providing

³ What is psychology\chapter 1. Available at: <https://ncert.nic.in/textbook/pdf/kepy101.pdf>.

⁴ Glenn Curtis An overview of psychological operations (PSYOP). Available at: <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA302389.pdf>.

⁵ K, S. (2022) Short Note on Military Psychology, *Journal of Defense Management, Longdom*. Available at: <https://www.longdom.org/open-access/short-note-on-military-psychology-89306.html#ai>.

support for their families who are left behind.

Here the role of a military psychologist becomes important as they work in diverse fields, including addressing mental health issues, running counselling clinics for the armed forces, planning strategies for war operations, playing a crucial role in military recruitment, and analysing the grounds for peace negotiations between nations on humanitarian grounds.

Military psychologists are able to evaluate, diagnose, provide treatment, and suggest the most appropriate duty status to ensure the overall well-being of individuals, groups, and organizations.⁶ Military psychologists play a vital role in maintaining the mental and emotional well-being of service members. They are trained to assess psychological conditions, diagnose mental health disorders, provide appropriate treatment interventions, and offer professional recommendations regarding a service member's fitness for duty. These recommendations are made not only with the individual's mental health in mind but also considering the operational efficiency of the unit and the overall goals of the military organization. By doing so, they help ensure that personnel are placed in roles where they can function effectively, safely, and with minimal psychological strain, ultimately supporting both individual well-being and mission success.

Psychological principles applied to military personnel: -

Military psychology is a specialized branch of psychology that applies scientific principles and methods to understand the thoughts, emotions, and behaviours of military personnel. It addresses the unique psychological challenges faced by service members before, during, and after deployment and war operations. This field places a strong emphasis on emotional health, helping individuals cope with the intense stressors associated with combat, long deployments, and separation from family. Military psychologists work on developing strategies for effective stress management and resilience building, enabling service members to maintain mental strength and perform under pressure. In addition to providing ongoing support during active duty, military psychology also plays a critical role in assisting personnel with the often-difficult transition to civilian life. This includes helping them manage post-traumatic stress, adjust to a new identity outside the military operations, and reintegrate into society. Ultimately, military

⁶ *Isaeva Muhabbat Rahmanaliyeva Associate Professor of the department 'Social sciences' of Academy of Armed Forces of Uzbekistan (2020) Military psychology and its importance. Available at: <https://www.idpublications.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Full-Paper-MILITARY-PSYCHOLOGY-AND-ITS-IMPORTANCE.pdf>.*

psychology enhances both the personal well-being of service members and the operational readiness of the armed forces.

With the evolving nature of modern warfare, the responsibilities of military psychologists have significantly broadened. Their role now goes well beyond traditional functions such as counselling, consultation, psychological testing, and assessment. Military psychologists are increasingly required to prepare for complex, multi-role responsibilities, especially when embedded within military units during deployments. They must navigate ethical challenges by balancing their professional duties with the organizational demands of the armed forces, particularly when addressing mental health concerns and offering clinical guidance within operational settings. Additionally, they are expected to serve a diverse, multicultural military population that operates in a wide range of environments and interacts with people from around the world. These demands require military psychologists to be highly adaptable, ethically grounded, and culturally competent.⁷

Military psychologists are increasingly expected to take on multifaceted roles, particularly when they are embedded within military units during deployments. This embedded position places them directly in the operational environment alongside the soldiers they support, allowing for more immediate and context-sensitive mental health care. However, this close proximity also introduces a range of complex responsibilities. They are not only clinicians but also consultants, advisors to commanding officers, and part of the support structure that sustains troop morale and psychological readiness.

One of the most significant challenges in this role is managing ethical boundaries. Military psychologists must carefully balance their duty to protect individual confidentiality and provide unbiased mental health care with the overarching organizational goals of the military, which may include maintaining combat readiness or assessing a service member's fitness for duty. This can lead to ethical dilemmas, such as when a psychologist must decide whether to report a mental health issue that might impact mission safety, even if it goes against a service member's wishes for privacy.

Furthermore, working in high-stress, often dangerous environments can test a psychologist's

⁷ Swati Mukherjee, Updesh Kumar, and Manas K. Mandal Defence Institute of Psychological Research, Delhi (2009) *Status of Military Psychology in India: A Review*. Available at: <https://jiaap.in/wp-content/uploads/2009/08/1-1.pdf>.

own resilience and ethical clarity. They must maintain their professional integrity while being seen as part of the military chain of command, often building trust among troops who may be sceptical of mental health support. Navigating these overlapping roles requires strong ethical reasoning, cultural competence, and a deep understanding of both psychological practice and military culture.

PSYOP as a tool for influencing perceptions and behaviours: -

PSYOP is a multistage process that uses a combination of non-coercive devices to gain influence over the actions and attitudes of a targeted group without resorting to the use of force.⁸ It represents a strategic, multistage process designed to influence the perceptions, emotions, and behaviours of specific target audiences—often in foreign populations—through non-coercive means. Rather than relying on physical force or direct confrontation, PSYOP leverages tools such as information dissemination, propaganda, media manipulation, leaflets, broadcasts, social media messaging, and cultural engagement to subtly shape opinions and decisions. The goal is to create favourable conditions for military, political, or strategic objectives by encouraging desired behaviours—such as surrendering, cooperating, or resisting hostile influences—while discouraging actions that may pose a threat. This process is carefully planned and implemented in phases: beginning with audience research and psychological profiling, followed by the development of tailored messaging, and finally, dissemination through appropriate communication channels. The messages are designed to resonate with the target audience's beliefs, values, and cultural context, increasing their credibility and impact.

PSYOP plays a crucial role in modern conflict by weakening enemy morale, influencing key decision-makers, and promoting stability without engaging in kinetic warfare. As such, it complements traditional military operations by achieving strategic effects through psychological influence rather than physical dominance.⁹

To successfully carry out the five core Psychological Operations (PSYOP) missions, PSYOP units are tasked with executing seven essential functions. These functions are designed to ensure that influence operations are both strategically effective and operationally efficient

⁸ Glenn Curtis *Federal Research Division Library of Congress Washington, DC (1989) AN OVERVIEW OF PSYCHOLOGICAL OPERATIONS (PSYOP)*. Available at: <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA302389.pdf>.

⁹ Afkar, A.L.S. and Mohamad, Z.S. (2022) *The application of Psychological Operation (PSYOP): A case study on the siege of sauk*, *Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities (MJSSH)*. Available at: <https://www.msocalsciences.com/index.php/mjssh/article/view/1643>.

across various environments. The seven key functions include:¹⁰

- **Performing Command, Control, Communications, Computers, and Intelligence (C4I) Functions:** This involves integrating PSYOP capabilities into broader military command systems to ensure effective coordination, decision-making, and situational awareness.
- **Developing PSYOP Plans, Programs, Supporting Programs, Series, and Products:** PSYOP specialists design comprehensive influence campaigns, including detailed planning of message content, target audience analysis, and sequencing of operations.
- **Producing PSYOP Media:** This includes the creation of various media forms such as leaflets, radio broadcasts, social media content, and videos that are tailored to specific audiences and psychological goals.
- **Distributing PSYOP Products:** Once developed, materials must be strategically distributed using appropriate channels, whether through digital platforms, air drops, or face-to-face interactions.
- **Disseminating PSYOP Products:** Dissemination refers to the actual delivery and broadcasting of the messages to the target audience, ensuring reach and impact through carefully chosen mediums.
- **Employing Tactical PSYOP:** These are operations conducted at the ground level in support of tactical units, often involving direct interaction with the local population to influence attitudes and behaviour in real-time.
- **Conducting Internment/Resettlement (I/R) Operations:** PSYOP personnel support I/R missions by helping manage the psychological environment within detention facilities, ensuring communication, order, and information control that align with military and humanitarian objectives.

The basic aspects of modern PSYOPS, as employed by the ADF, have been known by many other names, including psychological warfare, political warfare, propaganda and the more recently coined ‘hearts and minds.’¹¹ The core concepts of modern Psychological Operations (PSYOPS), as utilized by the Australian Defence Force (ADF), have evolved over time and have been recognized under various terminologies, each reflecting the strategic intent and methods employed. These terms include psychological warfare, political warfare, propaganda,

¹⁰ HEADQUARTERS DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY (2003) *Psychological operations tactics, techniques, and ...* Available at: <https://irp.fas.org/doddir/army/fm3-05-301.pdf>.

¹¹ Mankowski, M. and Henry, S. *Psychological operations (PSYOPS) within the Australian Intelligence Corps: Should it stay or should it go?* | Australian Army Research Centre (AARC). Available at: <https://researchcentre.army.gov.au/library/australian-army-journal-aaaj/volume-9-number-2-winter/psychological-operations-psyops-within-australian-intelligence-corps-should-it-stay-or-should-it-go>.

and the more contemporary term "hearts and minds". Each of these terms' highlights different facets of the broader objective of influencing and shaping the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours of a target audience.

Psychological operations are implemented across various levels, including tactical, operational, and strategic environments. As a result, military PSYOP can be categorized into three distinct types: strategic, operational, and tactical.¹² Commanders at the corps and division levels are typically responsible for the planning and execution of tactical influence efforts, which are commonly known as psychological operations (PSYOP).¹³

Differences between PSYOP, propaganda, and information warfare: -

Psychological Operations (PSYOP), propaganda, and information warfare are related concepts often used in military and political contexts, but they differ significantly in purpose, methods, and scope. PSYOP refers to organized military efforts aimed at influencing the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours of target audiences—such as enemy forces or civilian populations—in ways that support specific military objectives. These operations are usually grounded in psychological research, follow legal and ethical guidelines, and often use truthful, strategically framed messaging delivered through various media such as leaflets, broadcasts, or social media.¹⁴

Propaganda, on the other hand, is a more general concept that involves the use of biased or deceptive information to support a specific ideology, political objective, or cause. While PSYOP can use elements of propaganda, propaganda itself is not limited to military use and may be employed by governments, political movements, or even media outlets. It often involves emotional appeals, selective presentation of facts, or manipulation of public opinion without the same level of ethical oversight as PSYOP.¹⁵

¹² LtCol Zbigniew Modrzejewski *Psychological operations after the Second World War*. Available at: <https://securityanddefence.pl/pdf-103237-36119?filename=36119.pdf>.

¹³ MAJ Noelle J. Briand *United States Army School of Advanced Military Studies United States Army Command and General Staff College Fort Leavenworth, Kansas (2004) Planning perception management at the division and ...* Available at: <https://scispace.com/pdf/how-to-win-friends-and-influence-people-planning-perception-485nkvyaz1.pdf>

¹⁴ Sunil Narula Manohar Parrikar *Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (2004) Psychological operations (psyops): A conceptual overview - MP, IDSA*. Available at: <https://www.idsa.in/publisher/strategic-analysis/psychological-operations-psyops-a-conceptual-overview/>.

¹⁵ Steffen Rhode, Fabio Ibrahim, Monika Daseking *the Defence Horizon Journal (2023) A systematic review of cognitive and psychological warfare, TDHJ.org*. Available at: <https://tdhj.org/blog/post/cognitive-psychological-warfare/>.

Information warfare, on the other hand, encompasses a much wider range of tactics aimed at disrupting or controlling an adversary's access to information while protecting one's own. It includes cyber-attacks, hacking, data manipulation, electronic warfare, and disinformation campaigns. Unlike PSYOP and propaganda, which focus on shaping perceptions and influencing behaviour, information warfare targets the infrastructure and systems through which information is communicated and processed.¹⁶ Unlike conventional warfare, which targets physical assets and military forces, information warfare focuses on *perception, access, and decision-making*. It involves both offensive and defensive operations across multiple domains—cyber, psychological, electronic, and media. In contrast to conventional warfare, the conflicts in information warfare are typically unseen, taking place in cyberspace, the media, and the realm of public opinion. Its reach extends into peacetime, making it a powerful tool in *hybrid warfare*, where military and non-military tactics blend.¹⁷

Both state and non-state armed groups are progressively utilizing information and psychological operations to accomplish various strategic objectives. In some cases, these efforts are undertaken to fulfil obligations under international humanitarian law (IHL).¹⁸

PSYOP as a Warfare Tactic in Vietnam War: -

The most recent of instances where PSYOP tools were extensively used in active warfare was that of the U.S. Military used them against the Viet Cong soldiers by taking advantage of their beliefs to weaken their morale and coerce defection and desertion. The 'Operation Wandering Soul'¹⁹ was implemented by the U.S. Military as a part of their psychological warfare where they used an eerie sound recording called 'Ghost Tape Number 10'²⁰ from their helicopters and sometimes even on land by closing in on Viet Cong through speakers. This tape was carefully crafted by the U.S. engineers using echo chambers, distorted sound tracks and broadcasted by the 6th PSYOP battalion and U.S. Navy by specially mounting helicopters with loudspeakers

¹⁶ Choudhary, D. (2025) *Is posting fake news really part of 'information warfare'? here's what experts say*, NewsLaundry. Available at: <https://www.newslaundry.com/2025/05/10/is-posting-fake-news-really-part-of-information-warfare-heres-what-experts-say>.

¹⁷ Norwich University *Historical examples of information warfare: From World War II and the Cold War to today*. Available at: <https://online.norwich.edu/online/about/resource-library/historical-examples-info-warfare>.

¹⁸ Tilman Rodenhäuser (2023) *The legal boundaries of (Digital) information or ...* Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3054&context=ils>.

¹⁹ SGM Herbert A. Friedman (Ret.) (2005) *THE WANDERING SOUL PSYOP TAPE OF VIETNAM*. Available at: <http://pcf45.com/sealords/cuadai/wanderingsoul.html>.

²⁰ Irateradio(2012) *Operation Wandering Soul (Ghost Tape Number 10)*, Youtube. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4d9H_1ygEv8.

for this purpose.²¹

Ghost Tape Number 10 consisted of Buddhist Funeral music, wailing sounds, cries of a child and pleas of a dead soldier asking his comrades to return rather than to die a senseless death like him. Vietnamese society is largely atheist but the dominant religious belief stems from Buddhist principles with ancestor worship, afterlife, in some cases ghosts and souls being stuck in limbo if they are not properly buried. This tape aimed to exploit this superstition and terrorized the minds of Viet Cong soldiers trying to induce them to desert the battlefield. However, Operation Wandering souls was considered a failure as most soldiers were not fooled by the audio as reports of firing on the source of the audio had been recorded but it still appeared to unsettle the soldiers. Even though the audio was fake, it reminded the Viet Cong and Northern Vietnamese that their souls would wander in the South jungles if they died in this war.²²

“To this day, ghosts serve as a metaphor for how past memories continue to haunt Vietnamese people in the present, especially those who have internalized the trauma of conflict. The various rituals, practices, and beliefs related to spirits and the afterlife, offer a way for Vietnamese people to cope with the lasting impacts of the war.”- *Heonik Kwon, the author of Ghosts of War in Vietnam.*²³

Another tactic used in the Vietnam war as a PSYOP tool was ‘Ace of Spades’. It was popularized in this conflict by the American soldiers by leaving ace of spades card on the killed bodies of the Vietnamese as a symbol for victory or they tucked it in their helmets to signify an Anti-peace sign but it was not the first time this was used as a psychological tool in warfare with bigger meaning hidden behind them. It was used as a British Army’s regimental insignia prior to WWII and later to identify troops and as a symbol of good luck.²⁴

The ace of spades was negatively employed as a Death Card in the Vietnam War for the first time for taking advantage of the myth that stemmed from the French occupation of the region

²¹ *Supra Note 19*

²² Sarah Soffer, Carter Matherly, and Robert Stelmack (2020) *Psychology as a Warfighting Domain*. Available at: <file:///C:/Users/IUU/Downloads/27828-psychology-as-a-warfighting-domain.pdf>.

²³ Chris Humphrey (2023) *The Ghostly Legacies of America’s War in Vietnam*. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/09/16/vietnam-war-psyops-ghosts/>.

²⁴ Rosemary Giles (2022) *The Ace of Spades was used by the 101st Airborne before it became the ‘Death Card’*. Available at: <https://www.warhistoryonline.com/vietnam-war/ace-of-spades-origins.html>.

when the fortune tellers predicted death and ill-fortune by the deck of cards. U.S. soldiers would carry the ace of spades symbolizing that wherever they went, death followed too. It became so widely used that the United States Playing Card Company was employed by the 2nd Battalion, 35th Infantry Regiment to custom make and supply the decks of the single Ace of Spades card in bulk. These cards were also deliberately scattered in the jungles and villages to impact the psychology of soldiers as well as common folks and terrify them.²⁵

World War I and II: Leaflets, radio broadcasts, and morale campaigns: -

During World War I and World War II, leaflets, radio broadcasts, and morale campaigns were critical tools used by both the Allies and Axis powers to influence soldiers and civilians. These propaganda efforts aimed to boost morale at home, weaken the enemy's resolve, and shape public opinion.

The main purpose was to undermine enemy morale, spread misinformation, encourage surrender, or promote defection. It was a tool to disintegrate the enemy and through misinformation gain the support of the public. During the WWI leaflets were dropped from balloons or fired in artillery shells in which the messages often depicted the horrors of war or claimed the enemy's leaders were corrupt and losing. Basically, aimed towards targeted audiences to influence their propaganda and Germany and Britain used these to demoralize troops in the trenches. Further during WWII, more advanced techniques, including airplane-dropped leaflets and saturation leaflet bombing were used. The Allies dropped millions of leaflets over Germany and Japan encouraging surrender and The Nazis also used leaflets extensively in Europe to spread anti-Allied messages.²⁶

Radio broadcasts were used to disseminate propaganda, manipulate public opinion, and undermine the enemy's confidence.²⁷ During WWII radio became a major tool of psychological warfare. In Germany broadcasts like "Lord Haw-Haw" (William Joyce) aimed at British audiences to spread Nazi propaganda and in Japan, "Tokyo Rose" was a collective name for English-speaking female broadcasters who tried to demoralize American troops.

²⁵ SGM Herb Friedman (Ret.) (2007) *The Death Card*. Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20071208011334/http://www.newtscards.com/secret_weapon_death_playing_cards.asp.

²⁶ *The role of radio and cinema during the war - keeping up morale - WJEC - GCSE history revision - WJEC - BBC bitesize (2023) BBC News*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zwscng8/revision/2>.

²⁷ *World War II propaganda PBS*. Available at: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/goebbels-propaganda/>.

Along with that Allies used BBC broadcasts and Voice of America to counter Nazi propaganda and maintain morale in occupied territories.

Morale campaigns were organised to keep civilians and soldiers motivated and unified; promote support for the war effort. During WWI Government sponsored posters like ("I Want YOU for U.S. Army") and public speeches, songs and community events aimed at promoting national unity and sacrifice.²⁸ During World War II, artists, writers, illustrators, filmmakers, and other creatives played a pivotal role in shaping public sentiment and mobilizing support for the war effort. Their contributions were instrumental in rallying the home front, promoting government initiatives, and maintaining morale both domestically and among troops abroad.²⁹

Technology and innovation in PSYOP, its challenges and future directions: -

Psychological Operations represent a multifaceted discipline that draws upon various fields, including social sciences, design, Information and Communication Technology (ICT), electronics, broadcasting, and print media. These operations have been integral to military strategy since ancient times. Although the tools and techniques used to deliver these operations have evolved over the centuries, many fundamental principles and methods have remained consistent in achieving desired psychological effects and operational success.³⁰

Modern laws governing warfare, often referred to as International Humanitarian Law (IHL), have consistently aimed to limit armed conflict to the pursuit of military objectives. A fundamental principle of IHL is that the primary and lawful goal of war should be to diminish the enemy's military capabilities, rather than to cause unnecessary suffering or target civilian populations.³¹ A foundational principle of IHL states that the only legitimate purpose of warfare is to weaken the military forces of the enemy. This means that attacks should be limited to military targets and that any action taken during war must be both *necessary* and *proportionate* to achieving a clear military advantage. IHL prohibits the use of excessive force, the targeting of non-combatants, and the use of weapons that cause superfluous injury or suffering.

²⁸ *The National Archives (2023) Government posters - How did Britain encourage people at home to help win the war? The National Archives. Available at: <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/government-posters/>.*

²⁹ *MarshallV (2018) World War II and popular culture: The National WWII Museum: New Orleans, The National WWII Museum | New Orleans. Available at: <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/world-war-ii-and-popular-culture>.*

³⁰ *F. Mouton, K. Pillay, M. C. Van 't Wout the Technological Evolution of Psychological Operations Throughout History. Available at: <https://researchspace.csir.co.za/server/api/core/bitstreams/5a4d2674-8746-413f-a005-5554d9dfa3d9/content>.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

By codifying these rules in international treaties such as the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols, IHL aims to protect those who are not participating in hostilities—such as civilians, medical personnel, and aid workers—and to ensure a minimum level of humanity even in times of war. In doing so, it reinforces the idea that the conduct of war must remain within the bounds of law and morality.

When a democratic nation engages in Political Warfare (POLWAR) and Psychological Operations (PSYOP), it must contend with a unique and often difficult reality: the transparency that defines democratic systems makes it extremely challenging to keep covert operations truly secret. In the age of instantaneous global communication and real-time media coverage, the line between secrecy and exposure is razor-thin.³²

Modern technologies have empowered journalists, activists, and even adversaries to rapidly disseminate information across borders. Satellite broadcasting, social media, and independent news agencies allow virtually anyone to report from conflict zones or politically sensitive areas. This means that actions taken in the shadows by democratic governments are increasingly likely to be brought into public view, sometimes within hours or even minutes.

A key example that illustrates this challenge is the Hasenfus incident in Nicaragua in 1986³³. Eugene Hasenfus, a U.S. operative involved in a covert operation to supply the Contra rebels, was captured after his plane was shot down. The incident quickly made international headlines and exposed the U.S. government's clandestine activities in Central America. Not only did it lead to domestic political fallout, but it also damaged America's credibility on the world stage and fueled anti-American sentiment.

Furthermore, adversaries of democratic systems are often well-positioned to exploit this openness for their own benefit. They can access free media platforms, participate in open political discourse, and manipulate public opinion within democratic societies—all without facing the same constraints imposed on actors in more authoritarian systems. This gives them an asymmetrical advantage in the information environment. While democracies must adhere to ethical and legal standards, their opponents may spread disinformation, propaganda, or

³² FRANK R. BARNETT CARNES LORD (1989) *Political warfare and psychological operations*. Available at: https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/139664/1989-01_Political_Warfare_8-Chap.pdf.

³³ James Lemoyne (1986) *Hasenfus refers to secret airstrip*. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/10/24/world/hasenfus-refers-to-secret-airstrip.html>.

subversive narratives with few consequences.

This tension places democratic governments in a difficult position. On one hand, they must protect national security and advance strategic interests through information operations. On the other, they must uphold transparency, legal oversight, and public accountability. Striking the right balance is critical. Failing to do so risks not only operational failure but also erosion of public trust and democratic legitimacy.

Ultimately, any democracy that undertakes psychological or political warfare must develop strategies that are both effective and ethically defensible, recognizing that secrecy is increasingly fleeting and that openness can be both a strength and a vulnerability.

Conclusion: -

Military psychology and psychological operations (PSYOP) play a critical and increasingly strategic role in modern warfare. While traditional combat focuses on physical force, psychological operations target the minds and morale of both enemies and allies. Grounded in psychological theory and strategic communication, these tools allow militaries to achieve objectives without relying solely on kinetic force.

However, despite their growing prominence, a significant challenge remains: the lack of robust empirical data to accurately measure (PSYOP) effectiveness. This gap in empirical evidence poses both strategic and ethical concerns. Without solid data, it becomes difficult to assess the real impact of psychological campaigns, to refine tactics based on outcomes, or to justify their use in complex operational environments. Addressing this shortfall requires a multi-disciplinary approach—combining military psychology, data science, and field research—to develop reliable metrics, long-term impact assessments, and feedback loops. Greater investment in controlled studies, after-action reviews, and psychological impact evaluations will help transform (PSYOP) from an art influenced by theory into a science grounded in data. Hence, their use demands a careful ethical framework—particularly within democratic societies—to ensure that the pursuit of strategic advantage does not come at the cost of truth, human rights, or public trust. In essence, military psychology and (PSYOP) represent the silent frontlines of modern conflict—where battles are fought not just on the ground, but in hearts and minds.