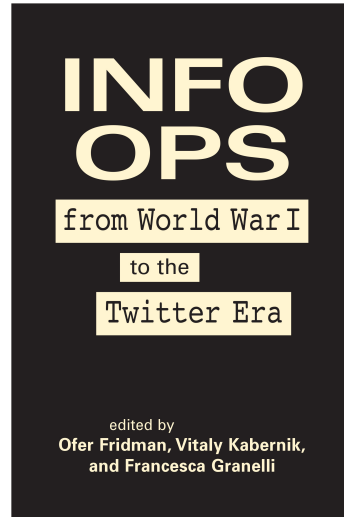


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Info Ops:
From World War I to
the Twitter Era

edited by
Ofer Fridman,
Vitaly Kabernik,
and Francesca Granelli

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1

The Nature of Information Operations

*Ofer Fridman, Vitaly Kabernik,
and Francesca Granelli*

Military activity is never directed against material force alone; it is always aimed simultaneously at the moral forces which give it life, and the two cannot be separated.

Carl von Clausewitz¹

DURING THE PAST DECADE, THE ROLE AND PLACE OF INFORMATION warfare, or information operations, on the battlefield have become a subject of wide academic and professional discussions.² Many of these discussions are rooted in the indisputable fact that following the Information Revolution of the late twentieth century, information and communication technologies (ICTs) have come to dominate the battlefield, shaping the character of contemporary conflict, its aims, means, and ways. It is therefore unsurprising that the role of information in contemporary conflicts is quite often presented and interpreted as something fundamentally new or almost revolutionary. The internet, social networks, and the smartphone fundamentally changed the speed of information, its production and distribution to the targeted audiences, be it enemy troops or the civilian population. While the propagandists of World War I could not even know if their leaflets were picked up and read by the enemy,³ today's ICTs allow one to microtarget audiences with specifically tailored content and trace their subsequent interactions with it. The new Information Age indeed offers revolutionary tools and ways to influence one's adversaries: military and civilian society.

A true student of military history, however, should not be mesmerized by “silver bullets” offered by the advocates of information technology determinism for two reasons. The first is that technological determinism has never promised success on the battlefield. “Technology sets the parameters of the possible,” argues Max Boot in his analysis of the interaction between revolutionary technologies and warfare, “it was how the people responded to technology that produces seismic shifts in warfare.”⁴ The second reason is that influencing people’s minds remains as complex an operation as ever. There is a long way between the moment of exposure to information and the desired behavioral change this information is intended to create—if it is even possible. While contemporary ICTs allow the dissemination of information at unprecedented scale, speed, and accuracy, it does not mean that an exposure to information in the age of Twitter produces any, the same, or better impact than in the era of print or oral stories.

The importance of the informational dimension on the battlefield has been known since antiquity. The history of warfare is full of examples of information manipulations intended to deceive, demoralize, or simply seed fear among enemy troops and populations.⁵ Sun Tzu’s “all warfare is based on deception,”⁶ Niccolò Machiavelli’s “who overcomes the enemy with fraud is praised as much as the one who overcomes it with force,”⁷ and Carl von Clausewitz’s battle that is “more a killing of the enemy’s courage than of the enemy’s soldiers”⁸—all praised the advantages of manipulating or intimidating the “nervous system” of the enemy’s military. However, while in the past this was achieved by military deception on the battlefield, or by spreading rumors intended to demoralize the enemy,⁹ the increased levels of literacy brought about by the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century changed the rules of the game. Mass literacy opened the door to mass communication not only within states but also between states, in times of peace and, more importantly, in times of war. In other words, the development of effective means to communicate information harmful to the enemy marked the birth of modern information operations, which seek to undermine the normal functions of the enemy in an attempt to undermine its capacity to resist.

Defining Information Operations

There is much definitional fog surrounding what constitutes *information operations*. The term creates immediate associations with psychological operations (PsyOps), military deception, influence operations,

propaganda, electronic or cyber warfare—all of which represent only a part of the whole picture, leading to much misunderstanding of what information operations are about. As Colonel Mark D. Vertuli of US Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM) puts it, “I am sure that if several Army leaders and soldiers were asked to define information operations in their own words, one would receive several differing—and often conflicting—interpretations.”¹⁰

Different institutions and organizations define information operations differently. For example, the US military defines *information operations* as “the integrated employment, during military operations, of information-related capabilities in concert with other lines of operation to influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp the decision-making of adversaries and potential adversaries while protecting our own.”¹¹

The RAND Corporation, which exists “to help policymakers make decisions that are based on the best available information,”¹² defines *information operations* as “the collection of tactical information about an adversary as well as the dissemination of propaganda in pursuit of a competitive advantage over an opponent.”¹³

Another interesting definition was provided by Facebook in 2017 in its report on false news and disinformation, which likely has a much larger readership than the publications produced by the US military and RAND combined. In an attempt to “understand the different types of abuse that occur on our platform,” Facebook defined *information operations* as “actions taken by organized actors (governments or non-state actors) to distort domestic or foreign political sentiment, most frequently to achieve a strategic and/or geopolitical outcome.”¹⁴

Although all these definitions originate in the West, the term *information operations* has never been in fashion in Russia. The Russian military has no definition for it. Instead, it uses information-psychological struggle (*informatsionno-psikhologicheskoye protivoborstvo*), which is defined as “a system of informational and psychological impacts on the informational resources of the enemy, the consciousness and feelings of its military personnel and the population, as well as a set of measures to protect their own informational and psychological resources.”¹⁵

Framework of the Book

In an attempt to offer valuable analysis, any research must adopt a coherent definition of the phenomenon it examines. This book is no exception. However, after careful consideration, we decided to reject all the listed definitions for two main reasons. First, they all represent a contemporary

understanding of the information environment and its technology. Any attempt to analyze historical cases through a contemporary lens increases the possibility of confirmation bias—seeing what the researchers want to see and not necessarily what happened. This leads directly to the second reason for rejecting contemporary concepts. The understanding of what can be achieved through the information domain has changed over the period covered in this book. The way propaganda was operationalized in the World Wars is different from information activities conducted by NATO in Afghanistan, Russia in Georgia, or Israel in the Gaza Strip. Any analysis of these cases through a unified definitional lens would be tantamount to trying to fit a square peg into a circle. It would either leave the square's edges outside or create blank spaces inside the circle.

Therefore, instead of using a rigid conceptual framework for analysis, we adopted a more flexible approach based on four main characteristics. First, we focus on information operations conducted during open military confrontations. Unlike Facebook's or RAND's definitions, which present information operations as a stand-alone hostile activity in pursuit of political goals, we approach information operations as a coordinated effort in support of military goals on the battlefield.

Second, there are many different military means to inflict information-psychological pressure on the adversary, seeding fear and demoralization, such as extensive bombarding, blockades, military deception, and assassination of leaders. However, this book focuses on information operations as activities conducted in informational, rather than physical, space. While acknowledging that military actions and their information-psychological impact are highly interwoven, this book focuses more on the latter, rather than on the former. For example, in analyzing the British information operations during World War I, we do not discuss the direct psychological effect on the German soldiers of the blockade of Germany or the arrival of the US troops in France. Instead, we focus on how information about these actions was used to undermine the political stability of the Central powers and encourage desertion.

Third, the science of measuring the effect of information operations is still an evolving field,¹⁶ as it is still difficult to separate their impact on the targeted audiences from the cumulative effect of the political, military, and economic factors that shape the behavior of these audiences as well. While each chapter makes an attempt to assess the effectiveness of the conducted information activities, we acknowledge the fact that these are still methodologically uncharted waters.

Finally, this book approaches information operations as operations. The US Department of Defense defines *operation* as “a sequence of tactical actions with a common purpose or unifying theme.”¹⁷ Therefore,

this book analyses *information operations* as a series of information activities conducted against an adversary during military operations with the common purpose of defeating its will. Readers, however, should take this definition with caution. Neither our ambition, nor intention, is to provide a better definition for information operations. Instead, this definition should serve as a theoretical lens through which this book should be read. In this way, we hope, the readers who are kind enough to study our research will get the most out of it, regardless of their own definition of information operations.

Purpose of the Book

Following von Clausewitz's view that "while history yields no formula, it does provide an exercise for judgement,"¹⁸ this book seeks to offer contemporary readers a historical overview of how different actors used information to undermine the will of their adversaries in the past hundred years. While modern information operations are shaped by the internet and other associated technologies, their history begins with the British Royal Army balloons which, by the end of World War I, showered Germans with approximately 5 million leaflets a month. This book offers a critical view into the history of information operations, leaving readers to judge its relevance to contemporary practice.

Moreover, the future is a black box, and any attempt to open it would ultimately lead readers down a slippery slope of speculations. This book analyzes the past, focusing on how different countries conducted their information operations during conflicts. Although the last two chapters focus on the recent past, and the overall book might help readers to think about a possible future for information operations, this remains a perilous enterprise.

Throughout its examination of case studies, this book refrains from making any moral, ethical, or legal judgments. The first (and unsuccessful) attempt to portray an adversary's information operations as "a breach of International Law" was conducted by the Germans during World War I.¹⁹ Since then, the legality of information operations has been a subject of many academic and professional discussions. Since this book focuses on information operations during wars, when disseminating leaflets and books (or their twenty-first-century counterparts—posts and tweets) is par for the course, we reserve the job of moral and legal judgment for philosophers and lawyers.

Some of the cases have already made a significant footprint in historical analytical literature. The British information operations during

World War I are well covered by George G. Bruntz's *Allied Propaganda and the Collapse of the German Empire in 1918*²⁰ and Michael L. Sandres and Philip M. Taylor's *British Propaganda During the First World War, 1914–18*.²¹ The US information operations in Vietnam are discussed in detail in *War of Ideas: The US Propaganda Campaign in Vietnam* by Robert W. Chandler²² and *The Psychological War for Vietnam, 1960–1968* by Mervyn Edwin Roberts III.²³ NATO's experience in Afghanistan was already analyzed by Arturo Munoz's *U.S. Military Information Operations in Afghanistan: Effectiveness of Psychological Operations, 2001–2010*²⁴ and Brett Boudreau's *We Have Met the Enemy and He Is Us*.²⁵

Other cases are less known to a Western audience such as the Soviet propaganda on the Eastern Front against Nazi Germany, the Soviet propaganda in Afghanistan, the Russian information operations during the 2008 Russo-Georgian conflict, and the information activities conducted by Hamas and Israel during the most contemporary cases presented in the book. The purpose of this book is to construct a mosaic of historical development of information operations from World War I to the Twitter era.

The Structure of the Book

Andrey Kokoshin, one of the most influential contemporary Russian strategists, states that “in the contemporary environment, all military commanders of all ranks are utterly required to master the skills of information-psychological struggle.”²⁶ Following this observation, this book focuses on the development of the modern information operations from World War I to the present. For the first time, British, American, Canadian, Russian, and Israeli scholars and experts discuss one of the most sensitive topics in military history—the role and the place of information operations in the overall military strategy. The unique academic collaboration presented in this book takes place at a challenging time in international relations, as a confluence of conflict-related insecurities has given rise to a sense of deep crisis. Closely associated with this are concerns relating to the increasing use of the information domain by state and nonstate actors in pursuit of their strategic goals. The current political climate presents challenges to the free academic exchange of views and opinions, yet simultaneously elevates it to one of critical importance. This book offers a dialogue on a controversial topic, tracing the historic development of information operations from World War I to the Israel-Hamas military engagements conducted during the contemporary digital age.

The book consists of three conceptually interconnected parts that trace the development of information operations during the past hun-

dred years. After this introduction, Part 1 of the book focuses on the initial formation of contemporary information operations from World War I to Vietnam. In Chapter 2, Ofer Fridman discusses the birth of modern information operations on the battlefields of World War I. The aim of this chapter is to put the British experience of “front propaganda” into the greater context of this book and to remind contemporary readers that the great lessons of the information operations of World War I are still relevant today. After all, this is how it all began.

This insight into the dawn of information operations is followed by Chapter 3 by Vitaly Kabernik, who sheds light on the Soviet experience in the information domain during World War II. This chapter traces the development of Soviet information operations from ideology-burdened propaganda to highly sophisticated operations that attempted to shape the enemy’s cultural space by using national controversies and captured high-ranking officers to channel messages to the German people and military personnel. After a period of struggle, Soviet information operations evolved significantly after 1942. Relying on the experience of renowned writers, poets, and artists, utilizing contacts with compatriots abroad, and establishing contacts with Jewish anti-fascist movements, the USSR managed to create an excellent opportunity for information warfare to support military effort.

Part 1 is concluded by Aidan Winn in Chapter 4, who investigates how the Chiêu Hồi program in South Vietnam involved a variety of different strategies to induce defection. Focusing on the content and evolution of inducement approaches, this chapter explores three distinct dimensions used by the program officials: the development and distribution of visual propaganda in the form of leaflets, the use of indirect financial incentives known as “third-party inducement,” and the use of face-to-face appeals carried out by the armed propaganda teams (APTs). The evolution of such inducement strategies, based on a better understanding of the insurgent attitudes, provides an important perspective over time into the Chiêu Hồi program’s scope and adaptability.

Part 2 of this book focuses on the evolution of information operations from the 1980s to 2000s. This part opens with Chapter 5 by Igor Orlov and Mikhail Mironyuk, who discuss the information operations conducted by the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in 1979–1989. Building on declassified and published documents, the leaflets and posters, and the propaganda officers’ memoirs, this chapter sheds light on the Soviet experience of information operations among the local Afghan population, prisoners of war, and armed opposition groups. Despite some success, Orlov and Mironyuk argue that the Soviet propaganda machine failed to reach its full potential. They analyze the major reasons why information support

was ineffective and the major difficulties facing those conducting information operations among the local population in Afghanistan.

Following the analysis of the Soviet experience in Afghanistan, Chapter 6 by Brett Boudreau focuses on NATO's efforts in the same country two decades later. What began in December 2001 as a limited, almost exclusively US operation to rout the Taliban from power in Afghanistan morphed into a multifaceted campaign lasting longer than World War I, World War II, the Korean War, and the American Civil War combined. Since 2001, Boudreau had worked on the Afghanistan file in several communication-related assignments, including at National Defence Headquarters, and NATO headquarters in Mons, Brussels, and Kabul. Therefore, based on the author's rich personal experience, rather than scholarly rigor, this chapter claims that NATO's Afghanistan-related information operations were considerably better than they have been given credit for, especially when mission aims and operational goals were repeatedly changed. In other words, this chapter aims to demonstrate that successful information operations do not necessarily guarantee a victory, which can be secured only via a systemic strategy that integrates ends, means, and ways. Without this strategy, even the best executed parts of it (information operations) would fail to produce the desired results.

Chapter 7 by Vitaly Kabernik, Igor Orlov, and Mikhail Mironyuk closes Part 2 by focusing on the Russian experience during the 2008 Russo-Georgian conflict. Despite the decisive victory on the battlefield, the general perception in the Russian professional and academic discourse is that Russia lost the information war. However, as this chapter shows, Russian efforts in the information space during this conflict were used to improve Russia's understanding of future information operations.

Part 3 of the book focuses on the adaptation of information operations to the age of the internet and social media. The choice to focus on Hamas and Israel was made due to two main reasons. First, the two chapters in this part not only complement each other in their analysis of two confronting sides, but also they focus on how two confronting sides have adapted and developed their information activities through a series of military confrontations in the context of new media platforms. Interestingly enough, while both sides widely adopted the social media and other digital platforms for the conduct of their information operations, neither rejected more traditional and battle-tested methods and means of distribution such as leaflets and radio.

Second, both chapters are written by professionals, building more on their rich experience than on academic research. The author of Chapter 8, Colonel (ret.) Michael Milstein, served until 2018 as adviser on Palestinian affairs in the Coordinator of Government Activities in the

Territories (COGAT) and head of the Department for Palestinian Affairs in Israeli Military Intelligence (Aman). This experience places him in a unique position to shed light on Hamas's internal thinking on the nature and character of information operations and their place in the organization's overall strategy. The coauthor of Chapter 9 with Roy Schulman, Lieutenant Colonel (reserve) David Siman-Tov, has served in Aman for twenty-five years and is currently a senior research fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) and deputy head of the Institute for the Research of the Methodology of Intelligence (IRMI). Both his personal experience and current positions allowed him to build his analysis on different internal, and still classified, documents as well as on interviews with many officials from the Israeli government and military. Therefore, these chapters work in tandem, complementing each other's insights and shedding light on the important characteristics of information operations in the second decade of the twenty-first century.

The book concludes with Chapter 10 by Francesca Granelli. This chapter has three objectives. First, it examines the main difficulties and challenges faced by those who conducted information operations over the past hundred years. Despite the fact that technological and sociopolitical frameworks have changed and developed throughout this period, Granelli argues that influencing the hearts and minds in the twenty-first century is as complex and challenging as it was in 1914. Second, the chapter maintains that the ultimate challenge is an establishment of trust with the targeted audience since, without trust, neither technological advances nor great creativity would help to achieve the aim of information operations. Third, the chapter provides a glimpse into the future, offering future practitioners several important lessons from the past.

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