
THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF WAR: HOW SOCIETY SHAPES WAR NARRATIVES

Sophiko Metreveli¹

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.61446/ds.3.2024.8482>

Article History:

Received 15 September 2024
Accepted 20 October 2024
Published 25 December 2024

ABSTRACT

This article explores the complex nature of war as a social phenomenon and analyzes how society shapes the narrative of war. Using the theoretical framework of social constructivism, the article demonstrates that war narratives are not merely a collection of objective facts but rather social constructs shaped by various factors.

The study identifies the main factors contributing to the formation of war narratives, such as propaganda and enemy image creation by the political elite, selective coverage and emotional influence by the media, cultural factors (history, religion, traditions), and the influence of various social groups (family, peers, social organizations).

The article examines four main types of war narratives: heroic, victim, just war, and dehumanization narratives. It analyzes how each narrative portrays the parties involved in the war, the causes and consequences of war, and the moral dimension of war. It shows that the type of narrative influences public attitudes towards war, support for it, mobilization, and motivation.

Furthermore, the article discusses in detail the social consequences of war narratives. It demonstrates that narratives can both strengthen and weaken social cohesion, deepen social inequality, normalize violence, and cause psychological trauma.

The research findings emphasize the importance of the critical analysis of war narratives to better understand the social dimension of war, its impact on society, and the prevention of its consequences.

Keywords: war, social construction, narrative, social cohesion, peacebuilding

¹ Assistant Professor of Bachelor's Program in Defense and Security of, LEPL-David Aghmashenebeli National Defence Academy of Georgia, ORCID: 0000-0001-8480-2024

INTRODUCTION

War, an integral part of human history, has always been more than just a physical confrontation; it is a complex social phenomenon. It affects not only states and individuals, but also public consciousness, values, and norms. Social constructivism offers a new framework for understanding war, emphasizing the role of social interaction, language, and culture in shaping war as a reality.²

To fully grasp the multifaceted nature of war, it is essential to move beyond traditional perspectives that focus solely on military strategies and political objectives. This article adopts the lens of social constructivism, a theoretical framework that emphasizes the role of social interaction, language, and culture in shaping our understanding of reality. Social constructivism posits that our perceptions and interpretations of the world, including war, are not simply reflections of an objective truth but are actively constructed through shared meanings, social practices, and discourse.³

Within this framework, the article delves into the intricate ways in which societies construct narratives around war. These narratives, encompassing the stories, interpretations, and meanings attributed to war, play a crucial role in shaping public opinion, justifying actions, and mobilizing support. By examining the social construction of war narratives, we can gain valuable insights into how societies make sense of conflict, attribute blame, and define the roles of heroes, victims, and perpetrators.

This exploration will be guided by the following key research questions:

- What factors contribute to the formation and dissemination of war narratives?
- What distinct types of war narratives emerge in different contexts?
- How do these narratives impact society, influencing attitudes, behaviors, and social relations?

By addressing these questions, this article aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the social dimension of war and its profound impact on public life. It seeks to illuminate how war narratives shape not only our understanding of conflict but also the very fabric of society itself.

MAIN PART

I. The Social Construction of War: How Society Shapes War Narratives

War, an integral part of human history, has always been more than just a physical confrontation; it is a complex social phenomenon. It affects not only states and individuals,

² Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. Anchor Books.

³ Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1998). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. Anchor Books.

but also public consciousness, values, and norms. Social constructivism offers a new framework for understanding war, emphasizing the role of social interaction, language, and culture in shaping war as a reality.⁴ The aim of this study is to identify the factors that influence the formation of war narratives – the stories, interpretations, and meanings about war – and to analyze different types of narratives and their social consequences.

War narratives are not merely a collection of objective facts, but rather social constructs shaped by various factors. These factors determine how society perceives war, who are considered heroes and victims, and what are the causes and consequences of war.

The political elite plays a significant role in shaping war narratives. State leaders, political figures, military officials, and other influential figures use various mechanisms to manipulate public opinion, such as propaganda, nationalism, and the creation of an enemy image. Propaganda, as a means of disseminating information, aims to shape public opinion and behavior. During wartime, propaganda is used to demonize the enemy, glorify the heroic actions of one's own side, and mobilize the public to support war efforts.⁵ Nationalism, which emphasizes national unity and superiority, is used during wartime to unite society against a common enemy and to increase motivation to defend one's own country.⁶ The political elite often creates a negative image of the enemy, portraying them as dangerous, evil, and uncivilized. This facilitates the mobilization of society against the enemy and justifies acts of war.⁷

The media, encompassing television, radio, press, and internet, plays a crucial role in shaping war narratives. It is through the media that information about war is disseminated, influencing public opinion. The main mechanisms of media influence are selective coverage and emotional impact. The media often engages in selective coverage, meaning they focus more on events that align with their interests or ideology. This can manifest in exaggerating the successes of one's own side and concealing defeats, or conversely, emphasizing enemy atrocities while ignoring their achievements.⁸ The media often uses emotive language and visual material to influence public emotions. For example, they may show photos and videos of war victims to evoke sympathy and outrage.⁹ Therefore, it is crucial that war-related issues are covered by the media with complete objectivity, and at the same time, the material should not be exaggerated with visual effects, so as not to destabilize the country internally and frighten the population emotionally.

⁴ Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. Anchor Books.

⁵ Anderson, B. (1991). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso.

⁶ Volkan, V. D. (1997). *Bloodlines: From ethnic pride to ethnic terrorism*. Westview Press.

⁷ Herman, E. S., & Chomsky, N. (2002). *Manufacturing consent: The political economy of the mass media*. Pantheon Books.

⁸ Moeller, S. D. (1999). *Compassion fatigue: How the media sell disease, famine, war and death*. Routledge.

⁹ Herman, E. S., & Chomsky, N. (2002). *Manufacturing consent: The political economy of the mass media*. Pantheon Books.

Culture, which encompasses history, religion, traditions, and values, also plays a significant role in shaping war narratives. Cultural factors influence how a society perceives war, what is acceptable and what is not. A country's history, especially experiences of past wars, affects how society perceives a new war. Past victories can become a source of national pride and increase public support for a new war.¹⁰ While past defeats can become a source of trauma and lead to a fear of war, religion can justify war or, conversely, condemn it. Some religions view war as an evil that must be avoided, while others justify war as a righteous struggle against evil.¹¹ A society's traditions and values influence how it perceives war and what constitutes acceptable behavior during wartime. For example, a society that values pacifism is less likely to support war than one that values heroism and self-sacrifice.

Various social groups, such as family, peers, and social organizations, also influence the formation of war narratives. These groups possess their own values, norms, and beliefs that shape the thinking of their members. The family is the first social group that influences a child's development. The values and beliefs adopted within the family affect how a child perceives war.¹² Peers also play a significant role in the socialization of an individual. The norms and views prevalent within peer groups influence how an individual perceives war.¹³ Various social organizations, such as veterans' organizations, religious organizations, peace organizations, and others, also influence the formation of war narratives. They disseminate information about the war, organize protests, and lobby for their interests. The formation of war narratives is a complex process influenced by many factors. These factors interact with each other and create existing stories, interpretations, and meanings about war. Understanding war narratives is crucial for comprehending the social dimension of war and studying its impact on public life.

II. Types of War Narratives

As noted in the previous chapter, the formation of war narratives is influenced by many factors, including the political elite, the media, cultural factors, and social groups. These factors collectively create prevailing stories, interpretations, and meanings about war, which in turn shape public perception.

In this chapter, we will examine the main types of war narratives that emerge as a result of the interplay of these factors. War narratives are diverse and can be classified according to various criteria. One common classification distinguishes four main types: heroic narratives, victim narratives, just war narratives, and dehumanization narratives. This typology is based

¹⁰ Hobsbawm, E. J. (1990). *Nations and nationalism since 1780: Programme, myth, reality*. Cambridge University Press.

¹¹ Juergensmeyer, M. (2000). *Terror in the mind of God: The global rise of religious violence*. University of California Press.

¹² Davies, P. (2012). *The social psychology of war and peace*. Routledge.

¹³ Tajfel, H. (1981). *Human groups and social categories: Studies in social psychology*. Cambridge University Press.

on how the narrative portrays the parties involved in the war, the causes and consequences of the war, and the moral dimension of the war.

The heroic narrative emphasizes the courage, self-sacrifice, and victory of one's own side. It glorifies soldiers as heroes fighting to defend their homeland, for freedom, or other noble causes. In this narrative, the enemy is often presented as an evil force that must be defeated. The heroic narrative is effective in mobilizing public support for war and boosting the morale of soldiers. It is often used by the political elite and the media to stir patriotic feelings and legitimize war.¹⁴ For example, during World War II, a heroic narrative was prevalent in the Soviet Union, which glorified the soldiers of the Red Army as heroes fighting against fascism. This narrative helped mobilize Soviet society to support the war effort and boost the morale of the soldiers.¹⁵

The victim narrative focuses on the suffering and losses of one's own side. It emphasizes the innocence and suffering of war victims caused by enemy aggression. In this narrative, the enemy is presented as a cruel and ruthless force that has harmed innocent people. The victim narrative is effective in evoking public sympathy for the victims of war and increasing hatred towards the enemy. It is often used by the media to highlight the humanitarian consequences of war and gain support from the international community.¹⁶

For instance, during the Rwandan genocide, a victim narrative was prevalent that focused on the suffering and murder of members of the Tutsi ethnic group. This narrative helped evoke sympathy from the international community towards the Rwandan people and intensify hatred towards the Hutu extremists.¹⁷ The just war narrative justifies war as a righteous struggle for higher purposes, such as freedom, democracy, justice, or the preservation of international order. In this narrative, one's own side is presented as a force for good, fighting against evil.

III. Social Consequences of War Narratives

As discussed in the previous chapters, war narratives are not merely a collection of objective facts, but rather social constructs shaped by political, media, cultural, and social factors. These factors collectively create the prevailing stories, interpretations, and meanings about war, which influence public perception. The type of narrative, whether heroic, victim-based, just war, or dehumanizing, determines how society perceives war, identifies heroes and victims, and understands the causes and consequences of war.

¹⁴ Moskos, C. C. (1970). *The American enlisted man*. Russell Sage Foundation.

¹⁵ Overy, R. (2004). *The dictators: Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia*. W. W. Norton & Company.

¹⁶ Lifton, R. J. (1973). *Home from the war: Vietnam veterans: Neither victims nor executioners*. Simon and Schuster.

¹⁷ Gourevitch, P. (1998). *We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families: Stories from Rwanda*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

In this chapter, we will analyze the social consequences of different types of war narratives. These consequences can be both positive and negative, and often depend on the specific social and political context.

Strengthening/Weakening Social Cohesion:

War narratives can either strengthen or weaken social cohesion. For example, a heroic narrative that emphasizes a common enemy and national unity can strengthen social cohesion and solidarity. Within this narrative, soldiers are presented as heroes fighting to defend their homeland and freedom, which unites society around a common goal and ensures their mobilization to support war efforts.¹⁸

On the other hand, narratives that emphasize conflict between internal groups or discrimination against minorities can weaken social cohesion and lead to social polarization. For example, a dehumanizing narrative that characterizes the enemy as an inhuman creature can exacerbate ethnic or religious conflict within society. Such narratives contribute to the reinforcement of stereotypes and prejudices, which lead to mistrust and hostility between different groups.¹⁹

Deepening Social Inequality:

War narratives can contribute to the deepening of social inequality. For instance, a heroic narrative that emphasizes the heroism of soldiers may neglect the suffering and losses of war victims. This can lead to unequal distribution of resources and increased social inequality. On the other hand, a victim narrative that focuses on the suffering of war victims can be used to justify the marginalization and discrimination of certain groups.²⁰

Normalization of Violence War narratives, especially those that glorify violence and characterize the enemy as an inhuman creature, can contribute to the normalization of violence in society. This can manifest in an increase in aggressive behavior, the justification of violence, or the use of violent methods to resolve conflicts. The dehumanization narrative prevalent during wartime, which demonizes the enemy, can reduce people's sensitivity to violence and increase their tolerance of it.²¹

Psychological Trauma:

War narratives, especially those that focus on the horrors and suffering of war, can cause psychological trauma in both war participants and other members of society. This can manifest

¹⁸ Bar-Tal, D. (2000). *Shared beliefs in a society: Social psychological analysis*. Sage.

¹⁹ Staub, E. (1989). *The roots of evil: The origins of genocide and other group violence*. Cambridge University Press.

²⁰ Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Harvard University Press.

²¹ Huesmann, L. R. (1986). Psychological processes promoting the relation between exposure to media violence and aggressive behavior by the viewer. *Journal of Social Issues*, 1 42(3), 125-139.

as fear, anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, or other mental health problems. The victim narrative, which emphasizes the suffering of war victims, can lead to feelings of fear and helplessness in society.²²

The social consequences of war narratives are diverse and complex. They depend on the type of narrative, the social context, and individual characteristics. Studying war narratives is important for understanding the social dimension of war and mitigating its impact on society.

CONCLUSION

The study of war as a social phenomenon reveals that war narratives play a crucial role in shaping public opinion. These narratives, created through the interaction of the political elite, the media, cultural factors, and social groups, not only reflect the existing reality of war but also actively participate in its construction. The article identifies four main types of war narratives: heroic, victim, just war, and dehumanization narratives. Each type presents a different perspective on the parties involved in the war, the causes and consequences of the war, and its ethical and moral aspects. This diversity of war narratives contributes to its complex and multifaceted impact on society.

The research highlights the significant social consequences of war narratives. Narratives can contribute to both the strengthening and erosion of social cohesion, the deepening of social inequality, the normalization of violence, and the infliction of psychological trauma. These diverse consequences clearly demonstrate that war narratives are not neutral and can significantly influence social dynamics.

The findings underscore the necessity of critical analysis of war narratives. A deeper understanding of narratives not only helps us better comprehend the social dimension of war but also enables us to mitigate its negative impact on society and promote peaceful development.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anderson, B. (1991). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso.
- Bar-Tal, D. (2000). *Shared beliefs in a society: Social psychological analysis*. Sage.
- Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. Anchor Books.
- Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1998). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. Anchor Books.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Harvard University Press.

²² Herman, J. L. (1992). *Trauma and recovery*. Basic Books.

-
- Davies, P. (2012). *The social psychology of war and peace*. Routledge.
- Gourevitch, P. (1998). *We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families: Stories from Rwanda*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Herman, E. S., & Chomsky, N. (2002). *Manufacturing consent: The political economy of the mass media*. Pantheon Books.
- Herman, J. L. (1992). *Trauma and recovery*. Basic Books.
- Hobsbawm, E. J. (1990). *Nations and nationalism since 1780: Programme, myth, reality*. Cambridge University Press.
- Huesmann, L. R. (1986). Psychological processes promoting the relation between exposure to media violence and aggressive behavior by the viewer.
- Juergensmeyer, M. (2000). *Terror in the mind of God: The global rise of religious violence*. University of California Press.
- Lifton, R. J. (1973). *Home from the war: Vietnam veterans: Neither victims nor executioners*. Simon and Schuster.
- Moeller, S. D. (1999). *Compassion fatigue: How the media sell disease, famine, war and death*. Routledge.
- Moskos, C. C. (1970). *The American enlisted man*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Overy, R. (2004). *The dictators: Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Staub, E. (1989). *The roots of evil: The origins of genocide and other group violence*. Cambridge University Press.
- Tajfel, H. (1981). *Human groups and social categories: Studies in social psychology*. Cambridge University Press.
- Volkan, V. D. (1997). *Bloodlines: From ethnic pride to ethnic terrorism*. Westview Press.