

The psychology of combat or... what is the strength of Ukrainian fighters?

The whole world is watching with bated breath what is going on in Ukraine. One of the largest and most modern armies in the world conducts an encirclement battle on a country that at first sight seemed chanceless. But the Ukrainians draw courage and drive from Russia's attitude. They cry out in anger and vow to take the last strip of land which they will defend with all their might. Whatever it will cost, like stopping the advancing Russian tanks in the streets with a group of unarmed people and pushing back Russian troops with armed volunteers.

Never underestimate the power of courage on the battlefield, notwithstanding the fear that prevails. This fear is common and is even necessary to mobilize the physical and mental resources needed to survive. However, the fear in the fight shows very different faces depending on the type of battle and the circumstances in which warriors fight. The courage of despair sometimes gives immense strength and encourages heroics.

In combat, there are two basic "survival responses": stimulation and inhibition of instinctive behavior (depending on the human animal brain, but also influenced by the level and type of training). Stimulation when the body calls on all its resources to cope with the danger. Inhibition when fear slows down fighters in their approach to risk. Each of these responses, stimulation and inhibition, can have a normal (adaptive) form and an excessive (maladaptive) form when the tolerable "terror amount" is exceeded (Crocq, 1999).

This excessive shape can, in soldiers of low morale, as already seems to be the case with the soldiers of the Russian army who initially believed the operations to be an exercise, result in a flight (sometimes forward) or in complete paralysis in which the combatant has the impression of losing all his physical and mental strength, even if there is a numerical and material superiority (Goya, 2019).

From the start of the battle on the terrain, a troop of soldiers splits up according to the reactions described above. The division into both categories varies considerably depending on the individual's experience and the confidence he has in his own ability to fight. Patriotism, belief in the chances of defeating the enemy, and the correctness of the case being fought are indispensable (Goya, 2019).

This trust is also reinforced and framed by various factors of the human environment: the quality of command and leadership, the cohesion of the group to which the warrior belongs, the 'esprit de corps', the hope of victory and the justness of the cause.

Confidence in the proper course of a fight can be affected by the wear and tear or surprise such as when the resistance is suddenly much stronger than expected.

History shows that the wear and tear of trust sets in very quickly along both sides of the fight if a front gets stuck. So initiative and movement are important to combatants.

During combat, a psychological structure is superposed on the structure of the armed forces as they appear in the organization tables; in this psychological structure the hierarchy is very different from the formal hierarchy.

The real structure becomes one of "actors", who are more or less active, but many of whom fight on autopilot, and, "extras", who have a more or less passive and even take up a non-combatant role. The whole is always very heterogeneous and of a completely different order and efficiency than what was visible on the training ground.

In this way, outnumbered combatants may be unequal in battle because of their equipment and the degree of training, they may be stronger in combat, and they may even get an illusion of majority or seize victory, much to the surprise of strategists and military or political leaders (Jünger, 1998).

After several days of intense fighting, this is the impression we now get from the Ukrainian combatants, both the members of the regular army and the numerous fellow combatants.

As in the vicinity of a 'black hole' the laws of physics and gravity change, the direct confrontation with death is also an event which triggers definitive changes and transformations in human beings.

To engage in a fight is like entering the "black hole" and wrestle with yourself and your deeds in a universe of violence with its own psychological laws.

Or, like Paul Lintier already described in 1916 (p146):

First, the danger is unknown ... we sweat, we tremble ... the imagination amplifies it. We do not practice reasoning... subsequently we discern. The smoke is then harmless. The whistle of the projectile is used to predict its direction. We no longer stretch our backs in vain; shelter is only there usefully. Danger no longer

dominates us, we dominate it. Everything is here. [...] Every day trains us to courage. To know the same dangers, the human beast rears less. The nerves no longer tremble. Conscious and continuous effort to achieve self-control works in the long run. It's all military bravery. We are not born brave: we become it {in combat}”

Getting out is like waking up from a nightmare. It is the fear on the battlefield, of which the form and effects may vary over time and the permanent handling of the fear and danger that are never expressed in the same way in different people. The fear of dying divides the group of fighters in ways that are often unpredictable, but... this new organic structure of the warring units produces for a certain time highly variable "returns" that every leader must seize to take advantage of in times of combat. Initially, there is the expectation of the first real confrontation with the enemy, coming under fire and acting adequately. The expectations of this confrontation are often obscured. But... the real confrontation with horror and cruelty cannot be disguised. The expectation of the experience of the first encounter with the enemy is often imbued with a kind of "enthusiastic fear", involving many questions. The shock then comes from the gap between the anticipation of the event - what the inexperienced combatant expected - and the violence of reality. Warrior's expectations rarely come true when the battle rages on in fury and all the illusion of expectation is dramatically overturned. Over time, there is a form of habituation and adjustment (Goya, 2019).

Like Werner Beumelberg (2001) explains in his impressive overview on the behavior of soldiers in WWI:

‘After several days or weeks of intense combat, even the most inexperienced soldier is a sum of money of experience and instinct, a specialist on the battlefield; he now knows everything, his ear instinctively checks all sounds, his nose all smells, which resemble those of chlorine, gas, powder, nitrate, and all nuances that separate them. He knows how to shoot heavy and light machine guns, how he must use the grenade launcher, not to mention the hand grenade and the rifle, which are be 'daily bread'. He knows the dangers of mines, booby traps and snipers, the full range of grenades from 75 to 420mm, straight fire and curved fire, and will quickly know how to deal with tanks’

The fight teaches him to distinguish between the core of the event, which is called “the O-center”, i.e. the center of conscious and focused attention, on the one hand, and, on the other, the periphery where information is automatically integrated, such as someone reading the newspaper while walking, automatically avoiding obstacles in his way. When a soldier first arrives at the frontline, his fear is very great. The fear is violent, conscious and therefore perceived by the “O-center” (Ménard, 1922).

Emotions are not hierarchical. The soldier is almost as afraid of a grenade hitting 100 meters away as if the grenade falls 10 meters away. In this state of exaggerated fear he performs a series of unnecessary and often dangerous actions. Out of inexperience. After expiration with time and gaining experience the fear does not disappear completely, but the fear remains different present, as a partner, subdued and largely unconscious. It becomes the useful fear that keeps the combatant's sensitivity always alert and triggers automatic self-rescue actions while retaining the free use of his higher intellectual faculties, of his "O-center" (Goya, 2019).

Finally, it should be noted that when the new and inexperienced soldiers are especially afraid to behave badly in their first combat situations, it is the fear of mutilation that is among the more experienced soldiers or veterans. After all, they already have a lot of friends seriously get injured or die. For leaders, it is often the fate of their men, the result of their own (and sometimes) wrong decisions, which are the ones that most frighten them.

This concentration on making decisions and taking responsibility is in turn a protection against other forms of fear, in experienced leaders.

During the Six Day War (1967), an Israeli officer believed that "one of the things... that solves all the officer's problems, simply is that you are responsible for your men and their lives" (Holmes, 1989).

However, habituation is not necessarily synonymous with psychological strength, because through it some kind of wear and tear also occurs over time.

The approach of a new battle also evokes the now repressed memories of previous battles and wars and heightens the tension. So it would be a mistake to believe that a soldier in war hardens and becomes braver. What combatants gain technically, in the art of approaching the adversary, the enemy, they lose on the other hand in nervous strength or mental fitness. By the flow of the blood, the sensory overload and the fatigue.

Swank and Marchand's research (1946) shows that after 60 days of continuous fighting, 98% of surviving fighters already have mental health problems. In 1944, after 44 days of continuous operations in Italy, 54% of the evacuees from the 2nd American Armored Division experienced problems.

Two years earlier, in Burma after the disastrous Arakan Offensive, the British 14th Division was considered completely psychologically neutralized.

The energy required at each step to advance under the enemy's fire, the effort to avoid danger at all times as the combatant tries to complete his mission accomplishing it, puts the warrior under extreme psychological pressure. As a result, the end of danger, even temporary, causes decompression when the parasympathetic nervous system takes over. When there's time to take a break from combat, this voltage drop can even be a factor of vulnerability.

The final end of a maneuver or of the battles is a relief, but it is also a delicate phase. Just like when warriors come out of a nightmare, they have great difficulty remembering the entire "movie" of events.

It therefore often takes many years for combatants to recover from their participation in a war.

It is already certain that the war traumas of the fighting in Ukraine will leave deep marks with both the Russian invaders and the Ukrainian defenders.

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