

War and Words

War and Words:

Representations of Military Conflict in Literature and the Media

Edited by

Wojciech Drąg, Jakub Krogulec
and Mateusz Marecki

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FOREWORD: A WORD ON WAR AND WORDS

MATEUSZ MARECKI

War is a universal experience. It has shaped world history and has left a lasting and painful imprint on virtually all nations, societies and communities. Seen thus, it seems inescapable. Although since the end of the Cold War much of the Western world has enjoyed a state of relative peace, with most of its citizens having witnessed various kinds of military conflicts as vicarious recipients of media reports, war is neither temporally nor spatially remote; it is being waged just around the corner. The last two decades alone have seen a disturbingly high number of armed conflicts which have posed a serious threat to the seemingly sustainable neoliberal world order established after the collapse of communism. The 21st century started portentously with the 9/11 attacks and the Bush administration's stern response to them – the so-called War on Terror. Subsequently, the fragile foundations of the status quo have been shaken by the bloodshed in Chechnya, Georgia, Tibet and the Republic of Kosovo; the “pro-democratic international interventions” in Iraq and Afghanistan; the uprisings and revolutionary upheavals against the oppressive political regimes in Northern Africa during the Arab Spring; and, most recently, by the ongoing war in eastern Ukraine and the rise of Islamic State (ISIS) militants. Of all these instances of violence used in the service of ideology, the latter two – the ongoing in-fighting in Ukraine and the systematic and horrifying expansion of ISIS on the doorstep of Europe – in particular seem to be causing concern to Western societies. Faced with the prospect of escalation and uncertain about the potential trajectory of these situations, European Union member states are now confronted with the challenge of providing asylum to millions of refugees from Africa, Syria and Ukraine. As war inches closer to the safe haven of Europe and takes on legions of innocent civilians, the isolationist strategy pursued by the EU will have to give way to some sort of active involvement.

Moreover, far from its battlefields and long after its occurrences, war, like an unhealed wound or scar, remains firmly lodged in people's minds.

Passed from generation to generation through popular stories, personal accounts and cultural scripts, it enters the collective memory both as a therapeutic means of coping with traumatic experiences and as a stark warning that it should never happen again. War cannot be ignored or forgotten; it recurs annually during large-scale communal commemorations of lost generations and their wasted opportunities. Its fragments and victims are enshrined in public memorials, as evidenced by the spectacular installation of poppies surrounding the Tower of London (planted in 2014, the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War), which represents a potent symbol of the futility of war in general and war in the trenches in particular.

Whether in the form of imaginative fiction, writings of documentary value, testimonies or media reports, war has also been a long-standing and extensively exploited theme, concept and metaphor in art, mass media and literature. In the realm of literature, which encompasses all war writing from the epic poems of Homer and Virgil to the comic strips of Art Spiegelman and Marjane Satrapi, it has frequently been a crucial factor in determining the shape of different literary movements. For instance, while the outbreak of the French Revolution is believed to have marked the beginning of Romanticism, the tragic experiences of the Great War arguably influenced the emergence of Modernism. In her introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to War Writing* (2009), Kate McLoughlin notes that every military conflict appears to have its own “poesis,” if not its own genre. Whereas the First World War favoured poetry and the Second the novel, film appeared best suited to depict the horrors of the Vietnam War and the blog best for reporting the War on Terror. Despite this vast body of texts inspired by warfare, war literature seems perpetually haunted by the notions of unrepresentability and inadequacy. Conveying through language the unspeakable atrocities of war without trivialising or sensationalising the experiences of its casualties continues to pose a challenge today.

Indeed, most academic criticism devoted to the complex relationship between war and literature makes that challenge evident by pointing to the inability or difficulty – especially after the Holocaust and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki – of finding an adequate idiom to grasp and speak of what has been deemed unspeakable. The collection of essays *War and Words: Horror and Heroism in the Literature of Warfare* (2004), for example, explores the interplay between literature and language with the aim of underscoring the crucial role literary representations of war may play in framing and reconfiguring both the image of history and the perception of war in the collective imagination. However, in view of

the overbearing influence of mass media, most studies with a similarly linguistic focus – such as Trisha Payne’s analysis of the reporting of the Vietnam War in the Australian press – tend to privilege non-literary platforms as objects of analysis, seeking to identify language and cognitive patterns in media coverage of past and current military conflicts. It comes as a surprise that to date – to the best of our knowledge – there have been so few attempts of a comparable premise (that is, whose goal is to investigate the importance of words in communicating war experiences) in the scholarship clustered around widely conceived war writing. Underestimating the significance of language, this area of research is in the first place concerned with biographical, historical and literary criticism. It has also generated a number of publications that are characteristically narrow in scope, focusing primarily on reassessing the destructive legacy of specific conflicts in the 21st century and/or on addressing one selected war-related issue, such as propaganda, memory and trauma, ideology, unreason, ethics and empathy. These publications, despite their indisputable merits – their analytical thoroughness coupled with illuminating insights into long-debated questions – may strike one as reductive, predictable and somewhat orthodox in their material selection as well as in their methodological choices. A glance at their titles reveals that, generally, they dedicate a disproportionate amount of space to discussing a limited number of the most widely covered military conflicts (e.g., the Great War, WWII and the Holocaust, or the Vietnam War), which are, additionally, viewed through the prism of a fixed repertoire of theoretical perspectives. Simultaneously, they rarely provide windows into other little-researched wars (e.g., the Persian Gulf War or the Balkan War) or venture into hitherto uncharted or under-explored waters of war textualities, such as video games or picture books. In a nutshell, by reason of their selective character, they fail to do justice to and account for the strong, and highly nuanced, nexus between war and words.

Against such a broadly delineated academic background, the present volume, though clearly not exhaustive, seeks to step into the above indicated gaps. Our collection of articles aspires to offer what we think might be missing in the field: a multifocal study that examines verbal (and visual) representations of actual, fictional and metaphorical wars in different cultural contexts to inquire about various ways in which the worlds of warfare and textuality interrelate. Encompassing a wide array of theoretical perspectives (feminism and masculinity studies, trauma studies, spatiality studies, media studies and posthumanism) and bringing together such diverse materials as war veterans’ testimonies, computer games, the GCSE poetry curriculum, imaginative fiction and Al-Qaeda’s propaganda

pieces, our volume rests on the belief that “words” have an immense capacity for commenting on, communicating and promoting war. In the following five chapters of the collection – “Spreading War Propaganda,” “Reconstructing War Spaces,” “Envisioning War,” “Gendering War” and “Teaching War,” readers are invited to consider war as a configuration of mental spaces triggered verbally for multiple reasons. As proposed, war can manifest itself, respectively, as an ideological tool used for propaganda purposes (Chapter One), as a spatial reconstruction performed for the critical reassessment of past conflicts (Chapter Two), as a projection or extrapolation of possible future conflicts and their social repercussions (Chapter Three), as a political statement to deconstruct the oppressive nature of violence (Chapter Four) and, finally, as a didactic tool to foster empathy (Chapter Five).

The two opening essays, by Dorota Ściślewska and Jakub Krogulec, shed new light on the long-standing, and increasingly prolific, enterprise of military propaganda. They expose strategies deployed to create and disseminate powerful narratives that are aimed at boosting pro-war attitudes. With “words” seen as an inseparable component of enduring soft power, Ściślewska tracks the evolution of Al-Qaeda’s propaganda, its toolkit and its changing channels of communication (social networking platforms, fancy e-journals, video games and hip-hop songs), all of which are aimed at discrediting the West alongside aggrandising jihadist ideology and attracting new supporters into the organisation. As the author concludes, Al-Qaeda’s efforts at reinforcing its grand narrative by resorting to “cool” media platforms, which clearly fall far outside the scope of jihadist ideology, seem only partially successful, as they ultimately prove a hindrance to the development of that narrative. Krogulec, in turn, casts a critical eye on a selection of immensely popular video games of the military shooter genre (e.g., *Call of Duty* or *Battlefield*) and their idealised representations of military conflict. Building on the assumption that the world remains in a constant state of emergency, he demonstrates how these games propagate that belief through the incorporation of five myths (of a hero, brothers in arms, technological dominance, just war and war without consequences) that help domesticate war as a romantic endeavour. Against such culturally perpetuated depictions of war, the 2012 game *Spec Ops: the Line*, which skilfully recycles and subverts the aforementioned myths to show a grimmer side of armed conflicts, emerges as a refreshing alternative.

Moving towards more literary portrayals of major wars, specifically – the Great War, WWII and the Vietnam War, the three articles in Chapter Two, written by Aleksandra Kędzierska, Aleksandra Musiał and Joanna

Witkowska, delve into the meaning of spatiality in three different examples of half-imagined, half-historicised (re)constructions of war, or its absence. Having invoked Yuri Lotman's ethical-vertical model of spatial organisation in works of art, whereby the three mythic planes of Heaven, Earth and Hell symbolically reflect the hierarchy of values within the sacred-profane dichotomy, Kędzierska illustrates how this traditional arrangement is violated and reversed in selected poetic recreations of the trench world by some of the most celebrated soldier-poets of the Great War. "With desecrated Heaven and elevated Hell," Earth, which blends the attributes of the celestial and hellish spheres, under the existing circumstances turns into a homogenous space of chaos and doom. It becomes a new Centre that conditions the "perversion of humane ethics" and confines the battlefield to a horizontal plane, thus depriving the soldier-speakers of any possibility of moral ascent. In a similar manner, Musiał reads Michael Herr's widely acclaimed journalistic memoir *Dispatches* (1977) as an artistic reimagining of the Vietnam War which interrogates, and breaks down, the (popular at the time) image of Vietnam as a symbolic American frontier by envisioning a new mythic space, no less American yet disconnected from America, called Landing Zone Loon. Existing outside of any political and historical contexts, this "American neverland" exemplifies a conflation of deconstructed stories embedded in the grand American narrative of the Vietnam War and of the "hellscape the war has turned into in American post-war books and films." As suggested in the article, although Herr's decontextualised re-writing of the war allows a symbolic freeing of the Vietnamese land from the restrictive confines of the American imagination, it also renders the war as "naturalised" and partly stripped of its ethical dimension. Placed at the end of this section, Witkowska's essay – which examines war-free passages in the recollections of Polish combatants stationed in Britain, written long after the end of WWII – marks a peculiar departure in that it attempts to detect the looming presence of mental spaces of war in excerpts where war seems absent but is otherwise hinted at, for example, through the use of certain key words (e.g., food) or through the evocation of certain memories. Even during breaks from war violence, as the author observes, war could "creep into soldiers' minds," reminding them, therefore, of the liminal state (between war and peace) in which they were entrapped during wartime. Intermingling descriptions of the idyllic life in the British countryside with implied fleeting images of WWII, the analysed passages not only bear witness to the soldiers' longing for detachment from the atrocities of the battlefield, but they also show their desperate need to maintain a sense of individuality in light of the dehumanising conflict.

A similar task of exploring the literary treatment of war, albeit within the bounds of speculative fiction, has been undertaken in the essay by Sławomir Kuźnicki. Looking at Margaret Atwood's post-apocalyptic *The Year of the Flood* (the MaddAddam trilogy's second instalment), this article sets out to unravel and explicate the social message behind an authorial vision of humanity in the aftermath of an imaginary catastrophe. In his reading of Atwood's novel, which provides a scathing critique of a world characterised by the unreflective reliance on scientific advances, Kuźnicki refers to the category of war in a broader, more metaphorical sense, showing how the purely instrumental usage of science and technology for the sake of bolstering the legitimacy of a projected capitalist regime could, in the end, lead to the gradual annihilation of civilisation. Such an explicitly pessimistic scenario, of course, provokes a number of vexing questions, of which those concerning scientific ethics seem to be of paramount importance.

Bringing us back to literary fiction, Chapter Four – which contains essays by Edit Gállá, Robert Kielawski and Angelika Szopa – re-shifts the focus from the social/collective to the political/personal. All three contributors make yet another attempt at revisiting the cross-cultural persistence of gendered war roles; that is, they seek to show how, on the textual level and with the aid of “words,” discourses of gender and war are interwoven and shape each other. While dismantling this seemingly inescapable nexus, the authors call into question the culturally fossilised division into non-violent femininities and violent masculinities, where women, traditionally assigned to the private sphere, are still frequently excluded from combat and where men, traditionally identified with the public sphere, are embroiled in war as a signifier and validation of their masculine identities. Evidently, however, as shown in all three articles, war affects both sexes, and neither women nor men ultimately benefit from it. On the basis of a body of six thoughtfully selected “war poems” by Sylvia Plath, which are labelled thus due to their explicit use of warfare imagery, Gállá suggests that these poems attest to Plath's political stance on the subject of gendered violence which hinges on the assumption that “the existence of two separate spheres – the private ... and the public – is ... directly responsible for all the wars throughout history, and the destructive violence they bring to the world.” Additionally, through her close readings, she points to a multitude of liberating functions against the backdrop of patriarchal oppression that the metaphor of war – with which Plath's poetry abounds – may serve, both as a device employed to protest against the objectification of the female body and the belittling of women's role in warfare and as an expression of the poet's striving to

maintain an individual voice “in the face of an increasingly technocratic mass society.”

Like in Gálla’s reflections, in Kielawski’s analysis of Anthony Neilson’s *Penetrator* – a psychodrama which introduces the intruder’s perspective of a homosexual Gulf War deserter to explore the connections between sexuality and violence in the context of a crisis of masculinity – war is treated metaphorically, as a metonymic extension of the army, or an institutionalised homosocial environment “which both traumatises men and reasserts violence as intrinsically masculine.” Situating his discussion within a psychoanalytic paradigm (Sigmund Freud, Slavoj Žižek and Judith Butler), Kielawski demonstrates how the characters in the play – flatmates Alan and Max, and Tadge (a runaway soldier) – who seem to embody paranoid masculinities troubled by repressed homosexual desires, re-enact violence as a sort of “game, imitation [and] theatre” in a paranoid gesture to minimise their anxiety and recover their unsettled male identities after an experience of emasculation.

The reflection on gender inequality and the underrepresentation of women’s perspective within war discourses returns in Szopa’s essay, which takes a closer look at Vera Brittain’s much celebrated *Testament of Youth*, an autobiographical testimony of a young woman who served as a Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse in France for much of the Great War. While making reference to feminism and trauma theory, this article reads the memoir as a post-war “literary catharsis” that fuses the private and the political realms into an individual experience of anguish, an emotion which seems to pervade the narrative. Brittain’s anguish, as Szopa observes, becomes an expression of her personal grief over the death of loved ones as well as her pronouncement of discontent both with women’s restricted access to active involvement in war and with the insufficient recognition of women’s commitment in WWI.

Comprising the variety of research perspectives on the particulars of the link between war and words, our volume concludes with a chapter by Wojciech Drąg, which scrutinises a selection of fifteen war-related poems included in the current GCSE poetry anthology (*Moon on the Tides*) as a point of departure for re-addressing the question of how to teach about war and violence. To the best of our knowledge, this is one of the very few critical assessments of the secondary school reading list in Britain, which may be surprising in light of the recent heated debates between the British left and right over the issue of the literary canon. After all, the choice of set texts has been crucial for “shaping the national identity and attitudes of British school children” since at least the 19th century. In this context, warfare literature seems to have an especially high status in the

educational process, and Drag makes this clear in his article. Having examined the fifteen anthologised set poems in terms of their thematic foci, their representations of war/military conflict and their ideological aspect, he arrives at the conclusion that the established GCSE canon of war poetry privileges those texts that – in line with the Owenesque ideal of war poetry – promote compassion, “empathy, understanding and lack of prejudice” and, at the same time, dismiss any acts of violence as futile and damaging for humanity.

With his concluding remarks, followed by the resonating rhetorical question by Ihab Hassan of whether “it is possible to teach literature in such a way that people stop killing each other” (qtd. in O’Reilly 109), Drag points to what all the contributors to this volume, to a greater or lesser extent, have stressed – an emphasis on ethical issues in talking about war. As such, our multi-perspectival collection of articles re-acknowledges the centrality and power of “words” for constructing and re-configuring ethical positions on military conflict and violence. Significantly, through (re)considerations of the war and words nexus in numerous contexts, it attempts to delineate a clear-cut distinction between the productive and harmful use of verbal means for awareness-raising purposes, which seems especially pertinent in an era of incessant digital media reports heralding the menace of an impending third world war to attract a wider audience. What is more, contrary to Steven Pinker’s bold argument, advanced in his *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, that our age is less violent and more peaceful than any previous period of human existence – which is partly due to the spread of literacy – we feel that in fact violence in our times has not lessened but has diversified into many novel forms and areas. With the advent of new media platforms, the definition of violence has expanded, and now embraces non-military activities, such as cyberwarfare and verbal violence (also known as hate speech). Against such an increasingly expanding and changing war landscape, all kinds of war accounts, be it poetic outpourings, media reports, fictional re-imaginings, testimonies or academic papers, emerge as sites of resistance, warning and, infrequently, comfort. To paraphrase Alicia Ostriker’s message in her “Poem Sixty Years After Auschwitz,” such writings not only constitute our private “walls” but, more importantly, they also represent a bridge of collective understanding and compassion built to prevent “the holocaust” from occurring again. The present volume also aspires to be such a bridge.

The editors wish to express their thanks to all the contributors who offered their energies and talents to elaborate on the overall theme of this volume. Our special acknowledgments are also due to our reviewers, Dr Robert Kusek from the Jagiellonian University and Dr Tomasz Fisiak from

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PART I:
SPREADING WAR PROPAGANDA

FROM “LADENESE EPISTLE”
TO “JIHAD COSMO”:
THE EVOLUTION OF AL-QAEDA’S
PROPAGANDA ACTIVITY

DOROTA ŚCIŚLEWSKA

“We have entered the third millennium through a gate of fire,” as then-UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan put it during his 2001 Nobel lecture, and our porter undoubtedly was Al-Qaeda (Ar. “the Base”), one of the most notorious extremist groups of all times, up to this day keeping the world leaders awake at night. The organisation that has set new standards for global terrorism, unique not only in the sphere of its destructive potential but also for being the first terrorist group to have fully realised and utilised the power of propaganda, especially that which is spread through the mass media. As the current emir of Al-Qaeda Ayman al-Zawahiri has rightly stated, “[W]e are in a battle, and more than half of it is taking place in the battlefield of the media. And we are in a media battle in a race for the hearts and minds of our Ummah” (Letter to A.M. al-Zarqawi). Contrary to all its predecessors, unable to effectively communicate with society and limiting itself to claiming responsibility for their attacks (White), the Base managed to transcend one of the basic features of asymmetric conflicts, breaking the state adversaries’ monopoly on media coverage and starting to shape its own narrative.

Defining propaganda

The immense propaganda effort undertaken by Al-Qaeda endowed the organisation with a formidable weapon of mass ideological destruction, which can be produced out of anything, as, according to a classical study by Jacques Driencourt, “tout est propagande” (26). However, even more wary definitions of propaganda – Bertrand Russell’s “any attempt, by means of persuasion, to enlist human beings in the service of one party to any dispute” (133) and Randal Marlin’s “the organized attempt through communication to affect belief or action or inculcate attitudes in a large

audience in ways that circumvent or suppress an individual’s adequately informed, rational, reflective judgement” (22),¹ to name a few – perfectly reveal an astoundingly wide array of tools in the propagandist’s toolbox.

Even the acts of terrorism themselves can have an indoctrinating effect, especially while underpinned with obtrusive symbolism. After all, 9/11 did not only take the lives of nearly 3,000 innocent people and cause multi-billion-dollar financial losses. It was also an endeavour to simultaneously destroy the three pillars of American supremacy: money (the World Trade Center), the army (the Pentagon), and governance (presumably the US Capitol or the White House). However, while it would be unwise to underestimate the propaganda effect of the impending doom of a terrorist attack, or of semi-ritual executions of Western captives, what is truly distinctive about Al-Qaeda’s activity is a plethora of methods that does not involve any direct physical violence. The Base’s ability to rise above the mere carrying out and filming of the attacks (as well as airing the beheading videos) and to employ the power of words to create one’s own narrative is gaining more and more importance in the days when the organisation is no longer able to shock and awe to such an extent as it used to. In the context of decreasing hard power capabilities, Al-Qaeda bends over backwards to turn its propaganda efforts into the enduring soft power. Some of its members and affiliates are even eager to make the jihad “cool.”

Different faces, the same struggle

The realisation of the gravity of changes experienced by Al-Qaeda is a *sine qua non* condition of understanding the evolution of its propaganda activity. Since its formation in the late ’80s, the Base has undergone numerous transformations, from a centralised organisation made up of foreign Afghan war veterans to a worldwide network of franchises linked by extremist ideology. Both in military and governance terms, Al-Qaeda’s heyday is over and nowadays the network has nowhere near the power it had back in 2001, which leads to a paradoxical situation in which it “thinks globally but kills locally” (Fernandez), since the ambitious strategic aims stay relatively constant. They include: (1) fighting the ‘near enemy’ aimed at removal of ‘un-Islamic’ rulers and governments of Muslim states; (2) annihilating Israel (‘Little Satan’); (3) defeating the ‘far enemy’ – the US (‘Great Satan’) and their allies, as well as any other state occupying Muslim lands – liberation of *Dar al-Islam*, and ending Western

¹ Both these definitions will serve as a conceptual basis in the present paper.

dominance in global affairs; (4) taking vengeance for the sufferings of the Ummah; (5) establishing a global caliphate guided by a Salafist interpretation of the Islamic doctrine (Gendron 8).

Seeking legitimacy

Contrary to a common belief, enabling one to question the sanity of Al-Qaeda's ideologists, the aforementioned strategic objectives are not to be reached within a single generation (White). Thus, the most important medium-term task is to create a culture of jihad, the "spread of culture of preparation and training ... by all methods, especially the Internet" (qtd. in Brynjar), as top Base strategist Umar Abd al-Hakim (aka Abu Musab al-Suri) stipulates. Al-Qaeda needs to permanently seek legitimacy and secure the influx of new supporters, because since 9/11 its potential has resided mainly in bottom-up recruitment and self-radicalisation of the Ummah members.

Self-disgracing would lead to a quick and pathetic end of the Base. Therefore, AQ Central leaders tremble at the mere thought of evoking the so-called "Shayma effect," which Al-Zawahiri experienced firsthand when in 1993 his Al-Jihad Group failed to assassinate Egyptian Prime Minister Atef Sidqi, accidentally killing 12-year-old Shayma Abdel-Halim instead. The death of an innocent child proved to be the straw that broke the camel's back for Egyptian society. The subsequent government actions practically put an end to Al-Jihad Group's existence. The fear of antagonising the Ummah resulted, *inter alia*, in hesitation over claiming responsibility for 9/11 up until 2004; it also led to a conflict between AQ Central and the former leader of AQI Abu Musab al-Zarqawi because of his overly brutal methods.

Good guys' fight

The tragic death of Shayma incited much more than a fear of the consequences of disproportionate collateral damage and excessive cruelty. It revealed a deep frustration having its roots in the incapacity to shape one's own narrative. Al-Qaeda was not about to repeat Al-Jihad Group's mistake. Both Osama bin Laden and his aide Ayman al-Zawahiri, as well as their closest collaborators, quickly understood the need to employ the power of words to create a moral justification for their own actions, while simultaneously "unmasking" their adversary. Therefore, several propaganda motives were utilised to underline the jihadists' righteousness and the enemies' wickedness and cowardice.

Firstly, Al-Qaeda’s narrative provides an image of *bellum iustum*, conducted with respect to Islamic law and rules of engagement. The Base observes the obligation to give warnings, as well as to offer a truce (Gendron 12). The latest offer of a 10-year armistice was made in 2012 by Muhammad al-Zawahiri, the brother of the current Al-Qaeda’s leader (Robertson). The Base’s narrative revolves around the restoration of the Caliphate as the establishment of a truly Islamic state in lieu of apostate regimes and jihad as the defence of Islam against its enemies.

The vision of its own virtue and holy mission is juxtaposed with a contrasting image of the US, which Al-Qaeda attempts to discredit even in the eyes of their own citizens. In order to do so, it tries to deal with issues close to Western sensitivity and – at first glance – unexpected in jihadist propaganda, such as ecology. In his Letter to America (2002), Bin Laden writes: “You have destroyed nature with your industrial waste and gases, more than any other nation in history. Despite this, you refuse to sign the Kyoto agreement so that you can secure the profit of your greedy companies and industries.”

From book to Facebook

Al-Qaeda’s propaganda, no matter how elaborated, would not be effective without an appropriate medium of circulation. The choice of the channels of communication has evolved throughout the years and has depended on various factors, including the technological progress and global trends, media attention, counter-terrorism effort of the US and their allies, the Base’s changing structure and capabilities, and the increase of media awareness displayed by its leaders. In the evolution of Al-Qaeda’s propaganda activity, it is possible to distinguish four stages on the basis of the medium chosen to spread the organisation’s ideology. Obviously, these phases may overlap and the employment of new means of communication does not necessarily involve a complete abandonment of the previous ones. The following classification places emphasis on the “dominant” medium – not even in terms of quantity, but rather as the one which sets the tone for other propaganda endeavours in a particular period.

Stage I – hard copies and indirect propaganda (before 11 September)

Beginnings are always difficult. At the dawn of Al-Qaeda’s history, media campaigns were practically non-existent. Up to the mid-1990s the propaganda content was mostly distributed in hard copies to individuals,

thus not reaching out beyond the circle of supporters and sympathisers. What is more, throughout the 1990s Bin Laden tended to avoid revealing Al-Qaeda's true face, using ad-hoc created aliases to vindicate the acts of terrorism committed or supported by the Base (Torres, Jordán and Horsburgh 410).

Raw in form and consisting mainly of talking-head videos and pamphlets based on the charisma of the leader, Al-Qaeda's early propaganda gained little international attention before the issue of Bin Laden's two fatwas – in 1996 and 1998, respectively. The former, first published in a London newspaper *Al-Quds al-Arabi* and entitled "Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places" (also known as the "Ladenese Epistle"), is a multi-page edict bristling with Quranic quotations that legitimises jihad against the US and against their presence in Saudi Arabia. In the document, Bin Laden invokes the sufferings of the Ummah and alludes to his own expulsion from Sudan and the need to seek shelter in Afghanistan, which is once more intended to serve as the cemetery of empires:

[T]oday, in the same peaks of Afghanistan, we work to do away with the injustice that has befallen our Ummah at the hands of the Judeo-Crusader alliance, especially after its occupation of Jerusalem and its appropriation of Saudi Arabia ... I say to our Muslim brothers across the world: your brothers in Saudi Arabia and Palestine are calling for your help and asking you to share with them in the jihad against the enemies of God, your enemies the Israelis and Americans.

Contrary to the "Ladenese Epistle," the 1998 fatwa "Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders" (again sent to *Al-Quds al-Arabi*) was co-signed by Ayman al-Zawahiri (amir of the Jihad Group), Abu-Yasir Rifai Ahmad Taha (a representative of the Egyptian Islamic Group), Sheikh Mir Hamzah (secretary of the Jamiat-ul-Ulema-e-Pakistan), and Fazlur Rahman (amir of the Jihad Movement in Bangladesh), probably in order to increase the edict's legitimacy. The newly established World Islamic Front exhorted believers "to launch the raid on the soldiers of Satan, the Americans, and whichever devil's supporters are allied with them, to rout those behind them so that they will not forget it" (qtd. in Lawrence 61).

The sudden attention of prominent Western media (CNN, CBS, BBC, etc.) provided an excellent opportunity to promote Al-Qaeda's ideals, and so Bin Laden eagerly agreed to interviews. While months before the 9/11

attacks the Base was still a follower rather than a trendsetter,² its members had already realised the immense potential of mass media propaganda. Its recognition would increase dramatically in the following period. As Philip Seib and Dana M. Janbek mention, “When Al-Qaeda was being driven out of Afghanistan in 2001, an observer watched as what seemed to be every other Al-Qaeda member carried a laptop computer along with his Kalashnikov” (25-26).

Stage II – television (2001-2003)

The dominance of traditional and indirect interview propaganda before 9/11, of course, did not exclude the possibility of experimenting with other means of circulation. Already by 1998 Al-Qaeda had started to use Al-Jazeera (commonly believed to be the most independent and influential among Arabic television channels) to spread its message to the “near enemy” (Gendron 14). However, the symbiosis between the Base and Al-Jazeera’s journalists was not to last long. The Qatari channel and Al-Qaeda remained at odds with regard to several issues, for example, the station’s championing of women’s rights. Moreover, since 2003, Al-Jazeera – dependent on the foreign policy of the ruling dynasty and competing with other rapidly developing and pro-Western-government-controlled Middle Eastern channels (e.g., Dubai TV or Al-Arabiya) – has abandoned much of its anti-American narrative, shifted towards a critical analysis of the content provided by the Base, and even offered a place in the broadcast schedule to Yusuf al-Qaradawi, one of Al-Qaeda’s most prominent opponents among Muslim theologians (White).

Around 2004, as the TV stations quickly proved to be insufficient for its propaganda needs, Bin Laden’s organisation had to turn its focus to the Internet. However, the short period of television dominance endowed Al-Qaeda with instruments that facilitated a smooth shift and enabled it to truly exploit the potential of the World Wide Web, as well as to finally take the position of trendsetter in global jihadi propaganda. Between 2001 and 2003 two out of three major media production and distribution companies were launched – the As-Sahab Foundation for Islamic Media Publication (2001) and Global Islamic Media Front (2003), later joined by Al-Fajr Media Centre (2005). As-Sahab, due to involvement of American convert Adam Yahiyeh Gadahn, aka Azzam al-Amriki, even started to

² E.g., with an over two-hour long documentary on the attack on the USS Cole, it attempted to mimic Chechen mujahedeen videos “from the battlefield” (Torres, Jordán and Horsburgh 412-13).

produce entirely English-language videos, aimed at the recruitment of Western volunteers (White).

Stage III – websites and forums (2004 – ca. 2010/2011)

Al-Qaeda's flirtation with the Internet can be traced back to 1996, when Babar Ahmad, a Palestinian studying in London, created azzam.com, a website linked to extremist forums qoqaz.net and waaqiah.com. The first official webpage, called alneda.com, started to operate in the late 1990s; however, it was shut down in 2002. The golden age of the Base's websites and forums started around 2004. While AQ Central, hiding in the Afghan-Pakistani borderland, remained largely loyal to the more traditional media and preferred to fax statements and send videos directly to the media giants, the increasing decentralisation and emancipation of its affiliates resulted in a soaring interest in Internet communication. Within just a decade the number of websites rose from less than 100 to over 4,800. Moreover, Al-Qaeda eagerly made use of e-mail accounts offered by neutral, commercial web portals to mislead the counter-terrorism efforts. Those practices included, among other activities, creating shared accounts and spreading messages through draft copies (because nothing was sent, nothing could be intercepted), as well as sending hidden contents in alleged spam e-mails (White). The Internet propaganda proved so successful that already in 2008 *The Economist* noted with awe that "Al Qaeda is a terrorist organization, a militant network, and a subculture of rebellion all at the same time" and managed to create a "virtual caliphate" (qtd. in Seib and Janbek 23).

Stage IV – social media (ca. 2011/2012 – present)

The dynamic development of social media and their mobilising potential proven during the Arab Spring could not slip Al-Qaeda's attention. While the terrorists were present on the social platforms much earlier,³ the real focus on them started at the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century and was advocated by prominent figures. In 2012 Umar Patek, the Bali bombings' mastermind, claimed that "for those who do not know how to commit jihad, they should understand that there are several ways of committing jihad ... This is not the Stone Age ... This is the Internet era, there is Facebook, Twitter and others," while in 2013 Adam Gadahn stated

³ E.g., Al-Shabab, since 2012 the Somali branch of Al-Qaeda, was using Facebook for recruitment purposes yet in 2008 (Mastors 105).

that “we must make every effort to reach out to Muslims both through new media like Facebook and Twitter ... and spread our message in an intelligent and educated fashion accessible to all sectors, sections, levels and factions of the Ummah” (both qtd. in “A Major Shift in Online Jihad”).

Nowadays, the Base uses various social media, such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and, above all, Twitter. Due to its liberal policy of not banning terrorist organisations or criminals from opening accounts, and only forbidding violent threats and “furtherance of illegal activities” (Shelton), the online platform has recently been infested with extremist organisations, including Syrian Jabhat al-Nusra and Krenaria Islame, various Al-Qaeda local branches, and even the Taliban. To make matters worse, having one account suspended, they quickly re-emerge with another one (under a fictitious name). Twitter’s limited surveillance, however, also leads to quite a hilarious situation when Internet users “enrich” Al-Qaeda’s propaganda either by creating fake accounts or by eagerly responding to requests for suggestions with as innovative ideas as “Deliver unicorn statues to jihadists who deny climate change” (qtd. in Kaczynski).

Something nice for everyone

The evolution in the choice of communication channels and the dramatic progress in propaganda skills, accompanied by the decentralisation of Al-Qaeda and the emancipation of its local branches (often attracting individuals brought up in the West and eager to “improve” the message with some novelties), and, finally, the urgent need to win the hearts and minds (and hands ready to kill) wherever it was possible, must have had a colossal impact on the shape of the Base’s narrative. Some of the innovations were not contrary to Al-Qaeda’s interpretation of Islamic law. This category includes, *inter alia*, digitised editions of jihadist handbooks (e.g., the semi-legendary *Encyclopedia of Afghan Jihad*) or strategy works (e.g., Abu Musab al-Suri’s *The Global Islamic Resistance Call*), as well as an online oath of allegiance to Al-Qaeda leaders (Mastors 97), introduced in 2005. Others, however, while often exhibiting a surprising level of propaganda proficiency, remained either on the verge of – or even turned upside down – the original version of the Base’s ideology.

Among those dubious yet effective propaganda materials were jihadist video games. One such successful example was the *Night of Bush Capturing*, released by the Global Islamic Media Front in 2006 and containing levels like: *Jihad beginning*, *American’s Hell*, *Searching for*

Bush, Bush hunted like a rat (Mastors 103). However, when in 2013 Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb tried to respond to the French Operation Serval with the game *Mali al-Muslima*, the result was far from impressive. According to a *Forbes* commentator, “If Osama bin Laden hadn’t been killed by Navy SEALs, he would have died of embarrassment at his group’s latest exploit” (Peck).

Al-Qaeda also canvasses for supporters through e-journals. While such magazines have quite a rich history in the Base’s propaganda, it was not until 2010, when Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula released *Inspire*, that they reached their current sophistication. Published in English, visually refined, using slang terms, and – to some extent – mimicking Western teenage and young adults’ magazines, the *Inspire* journal provides multidimensional indoctrination through, *inter alia*, journalistic stories, political commentary, edifying stories of role models, eye-catching photos and slogans, and pieces of poetry. Moreover, it strives to create an impression of closeness to the readers and their concerns (problem pages) and openness to new perspectives and ideas (constant appeal for new contributions). However, what gains *Inspire* the biggest notoriety is the Open Source Jihad section, offering detailed do-it-yourself jihadist instructions like “Make a bomb in the kitchen of your mom” (1:33-40), which sounds much less humorous knowing that it actually inspired the Boston marathon bombing, which in the 13th issue of the magazine was likened even to the famous Battle of Marathon, 490 BC (50). The journal’s staff spares no effort in equipping the readers with a terrorist *vademecum*, providing training in such various fields as using a “pickup truck as a mowing machine, not to mow grass but mow down the enemies of Allah” (2:53-54), demolishing buildings (4:39-41), shooting a Kalashnikov (4:42-42; 5:24-25; 6:37-38), making acetone peroxide (6:39-45), large-scale arson (9:30-36; 10:51), causing road accidents (10:52-55), preparing and planting bombs in cars (12:64-71), and finally, blowing up a plane (13:70-111).

Another much-hyped (even endowed with a video teaser) English-language magazine, *Resurgence*, was released in the autumn of 2014 by Al-Sahab. Though visually similar to *Inspire*, the first issue of *Resurgence* can be regarded as targeted at a slightly less extremist audience. The dominant motif of the magazine is not jihad itself but the sufferings of Ummah, expressed in, among others, “Impressions of Victims of Drone Attacks” column (62). The victimisation goes hand in hand with justifications of terrorism, for example, a whole-page poster with the words of Anwar al-Awlaki, “We are not dealing with a global culture that is benign or compassionate. This is a culture that gives you no choice. You

either accept McDonald’s, otherwise McDonnell Douglas will send their F-15s above your head!” accompanied by suggestive images of cargo aircraft bearing the McDonald’s logo and a Coca-Cola-painted tank (37). Moreover, the issue does not provide practical instructions for wannabes, limiting itself to theoretical articles on destroying Western economies by disrupting oil transport (94-104), as well as on guerrilla warfare (106-11) and ethical concerns connected with the interception of enemies’ supplies (112-13).

While there is no English-language magazine designed exclusively for females, in 2004 Arabic-speaking ladies were offered *Al-Khansa*, in 2010 *Hafidat Al-Khansa (Granddaughters of Al-Khansa)*, and starting in 2011 they could enjoy *Al-Shamikha (The Majestic Woman)*, a glossy jihadist response to *Elle* and *Cosmopolitan*, successfully mixing beauty tips with ideological brainwashing. The cover of the first issue of *Al-Shamikha* (out of two as of December 2014) shows a woman with a machine gun, clad entirely in black. Inside, the reader can find pieces of friendly advice on marrying a mujahedeen, wearing *niqab* for protection from the sun, using honey masks, and not towelling the skin too strongly, and – at the same time – can come across some edifying statements like “From martyrdom, the believer will gain security, safety and happiness” (Cavendish).

The most paradoxical phenomenon of contemporary Al-Qaeda propaganda is, however, the thriving jihadist hip-hop scene. Despite Bin Laden’s explicit contempt for music, which he considered un-Islamic, some of his followers exhibit a great dedication to spreading the message through rap lyrics. Among them it is worth mentioning American-born Omar Hammami, aka Abu Mansoor al-Amriki (“Blow By Blow,” “Make Jihad with Me,” “First Stop Addis,” “Send Me a Cruise”) from Al-Shabab (killed in 2013), in his songs trying to depict waging jihad not only as a sacred duty but also as a great, yet risky adventure:

Make jihad with me
 Allahu Akbar give some more bounty
 Attack America now!
 Martyrdom or victory

You finally made it here after the long wait
 You enter the training camp and study the din [path]
 You officially join the Mujahidin
 You attack the kuffar [infidels] where they oppress and stand
 And the allies too to free the Muslim land
 And implement Shariah – that’s our goal
 To spread Allah’s word to every home

With you or without you Islam will succeed
 Take part in the reward – make jihad with me! (“Make Jihad with Me”)

A different strategy is adopted by his compatriot Emerson Begolly (arrested in 2011), publishing jihadi contents under the pseudonym Asadaullah Alshishani, who – with his voice completely distorted by Auto-Tune – expresses his immense admiration and love for Bin Laden, portrayed as a commander of the defenders of Islam:

Amir of the Ansar⁴
 How beautiful you are!
 Your sword gleams in the sun
 Like a shining star

You fight AmeriKKKa
 And terrorize the Jews
 You slay the murtadeen [apostates]
 And blow up the Hindus

Osama bin Ladin
 O, how I love you!
 You sold your soul for Jannah [paradise]
 To Allah you are true
 They call us “terrorists”
 And terrorists we are!
 Allah commands us to
 Terrorize the kuffar. (“Amir of the Ansar”)

Spreading the message through hip-hop lyrics, of course, is not the domain of English-speaking performers alone. A highly interesting representative of the genre is undoubtedly German rapper Denis Mamadou Cuspert, formerly known as Deso Dogg, who after converting to Islam abandoned a gangsta rap career in order to join the jihadist movement under the name Abou Maleeq/Abu Talha Al-Almani. Besides standard extremist tracks (Sheikh Usama,” “Fürchtet Allah,” “Mujahid lauf, Mujahid kämpf,” “Wofür wir stehen”), his output also includes a song addressed to children – an altered version of a carol “Lasst uns froh und munter sein” usually sung on the eve of the feast of Saint Nicholas and beginning with the words:

⁴ Ar. “the Helpers,” originally the term denoting Medinan citizens who helped Muhammad and his followers after Hijrah in 622, embraced Islam and fought in its cause. Also a class of warriors indispensable during the Arabic expansion of 7th-9th centuries.

Lasst uns froh und munter sein	Let us be happy and cheerful
und uns recht von Herzen freun!	And really be happy in our hearts!
Lustig, lustig, tra lera lera,	Jolly, jolly, tra la la la la
bald ist Nikolausabend da,	Soon Nicholas Eve is here,
bald ist Nikolausabend da!	Soon Nicholas Eve is here!

In Abou Maleeq’s “Lustig, lustig, tra la la la la, hochleben die Taliban!!!” the young audience then receives extremist content mimicking the well-known childish chant:

Lasst uns froh und munter sein
 und uns recht von Herzen freun!
 Lustig, lustig, la ilaha ilallah
 bald ist der Dschihadist wieder da,
 bald ist der Dschihadist wieder da!

None of the above-mentioned performers, however, approximated the success of British sympathisers Sheikh Terra and the Soul Salah Crew, whose “Dirty Kuffar” has attracted much attention from the mainstream media since its release in 2004. A fusion of rap and dancehall underpinned by a catchy “riddim” strikingly resembles Sean Paul’s hit “Get Busy.” The MTV-style video conflates a number of images: an Iraqi civilian killed by the Marines, explosions, marching jihadists, a parade of “infidel” world leaders (some of them turning into pigs, devils and vampires), Al-Zawahiri transforming into a lion, and even the Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazis. It ends with the collapse of the World Trade Center and is followed by a “list of the victims of US violence since 1945.” Sheikh Terra appears in a balaclava and *kufiyyeh* (Arabic men’s headscarf), holding the Quran and a gun, standing against the jihadist and Syrian (probably intended to be Iraqi) flags, alternately, and sings:

We’re gonna be taking over like we took over the Shah;
 From Kandahar to Ramallah we’re coming like stars.
 Peace to Hamas and the Hizbollah.
 OBL crew be like a shiny star,
 Like the way we destroyed them two towers ha-ha.

Conclusion

Diverse, often very innovative, exhibiting a huge flexibility in the choice of communication channels, and surprisingly accessible, Al-Qaeda’s propaganda proves very effective at the operational and tactical levels, thus creating an opportunity to communicate with the masses and