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Book Review: Info Ops: From World War I to the Twitter Era

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Given the proliferation of new forms of information and communication technologies within the twenty-first-century operational environment, not a day goes by without newspapers blasting another near-peer competitor’s mis-, dis-, or mal-information campaign on their front pages. *Info Ops: From World War I to the Twitter Era*, by editors Ofer Fridman, Vitaly Kabernik, and Francesca Granelli, is therefore a must-read for any future combatant commander concerned about how our enemies use information and communication technologies within a contested environment to advance their causes and wreak havoc within an increasingly polarized society.

The publisher’s website describes the authors’ credentials as follows: “Ofer Fridman is director of operations at the Centre for Strategic Communications (CSC), King’s College London. Vitaly Kabernik is a division head in the Department of Innovative Development at Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO University). Francesca Granelli is a visiting senior lecturer at King’s College London.”

The publisher’s website also writes, “the authors assess the evolving role and increasing importance of information operations from the leaflet bombardments of World War I to the present digital age.” As the editors write, the purpose of their book is to “construct a mosaic of historical development of information operations from World War I to the Twitter era” (5). The editors define information operations as “a series of information activities conducted against an adversary during military
operations with the common purpose of defeating its will” (5). As Niccoló Machiavelli once stated, the one “who overcomes the enemy with fraud is praised as much as the one who overcomes it with force” (2).

The book is divided into three parts. Part 1, “Formation,” examines the early evolution of information operations, looking at the British during World War I, the Soviets during World War II, and the militaries involved in the Vietnam War as case studies. During World War I, the British were quite effective in their use of propaganda. Fridman, Kabernik, and Granelli define propaganda as “a technique of influencing human action by the manipulation of representations that may take spoken, written, pictorial or musical form” (14). Various British government agencies and organizations relied on propaganda to combat the enemy, with the British Foreign Office establishing the War Propaganda Bureau, its first official propaganda organization, in September 1914 (14). This organization focused on providing publications to “neutral and Allied states” (16).

Like the British, the Soviets and Russians have also relied on propaganda or disinformation campaigns as part of their strategic arsenal. In World War II, the Soviet Union used propaganda primarily to “shape popular opinion and persuade decision-makers to support the USSR’s fight against Germany—politically, materially, and financially” (47). Vladimir Putin continues that tradition today by using strategic disinformation in the Russia-Ukraine War, a strategy that was also employed in Russia’s interference in the 2016 US presidential election.

Part 2, “Evolution,” looks at the development of information operations through the lenses of the Soviet Union during its war fighting in Afghanistan from 1979–89, NATO’s information campaign in Afghanistan from 2003 to 2020, and Russian and Georgian operations in South Ossetia in 2008. Despite being masters of disguise regarding information operations, the Soviet Union was unsuccessful in its propaganda war in Afghanistan in 1979 to 1989, the so-called “war of rumors.”

Part 3, “Adaptation,” addresses the modern transformation of information operations while looking at the conflicts between Israel and Hamas to analyze how Israel’s armed forces and Hamas’s leadership have adapted and adjusted to a new operational environment. In the twenty-first century, war is won on the battlefield and in the public arena of 24/7 cable news networks and X (formerly Twitter) posts. Part 3 remains relevant today, given the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas. Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and Hamas leader Hassan Nasrallah are avid X users and rely on the social media platform to disseminate their conflict narratives.

As Fridman, Kabernik, and Granelli point out, “Hamas is in a continual learning process. It improves and diversifies its capabilities in light of the changing circumstances, turning influence operations into an integral element of its toolbox” (204). An essential element of Hamas’s information campaign is the doctrine of “Muqawama,” which loosely translates to “resistance.” According to this doctrine, militants must “first and foremost strive to deny the enemy victory, while demonstrating fortitude and the ability to wear down the enemy despite the many blows suffered by the Gaza Strip in general and by Hamas in particular” (205). The development of information operations as a means of targeting, misleading, and controlling the enemy lends itself to the goals of Muqawama.

In conclusion, I highly recommend Info Ops to US Army War College students. As they prepare for future combatant command posts, they will need to understand the evolution and value of information operations. This book provides an excellent overview of how different actors have used information in open conflict situations to undermine the resolve and spirit of their adversaries (251). As Bernard Cohen states in his masterpiece The Press and Foreign Policy (Princeton University Press, 1963),
“The press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (Cohen 13).

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