4 War Metaphors during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Persuasion and Manipulation

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Introduction

The year 2020 can be considered an annus horribilis rather than mirabilis. After the coronavirus pandemic started in the Chinese city of Wuhan and spread to Europe, in some countries politicians and mass media began to use metaphors based on war imagery to represent the sanitary emergency, which forced a great number of governments to impose restrictions on the whole of society. While politicians used war metaphors in their persuasive argumentations, mass media mostly worked as amplifiers to make this argumentation more cogent. However, several authors have argued over the last few months that the pervasive use of war metaphors to talk about the threat represented by the COVID-19 pandemic was not a successful linguistic strategy (Semino 2021; Piredda 2020; Di Paola 2020). Therefore, two questions should be asked: why, among all metaphors, were those based on war used? Were they appropriate to the circumstances?

The metaphor “we are at war” was immediately understandable and easily adaptable to the emergency. It determined, on the one hand, an emotional predisposition to abide by the restrictions, while, on the other hand, it gave birth to a negative general feeling of fear that in turn had psychological and social consequences, such as fear of the other, spying on neighbours, a lack of solidarity and conditions such as anxiety, depression and phobias. If looked at closely, the real focus of the matter appears to rest in emotions. In the case of COVID-19, the war-related metaphors were aimed at triggering the primary emotion that we feel when we think about an armed conflict, which is fear.

In this chapter, I analyse the use of war metaphors that appeared in newspapers and broadcast companies in Italy, France, Germany, Spain, the UK and the United States between March and April 2020.¹ My methodology consists in carrying out theoretical observations about the effects of the so-called primary metaphors. I will start by investigating some theoretical aspects—rhetorical and cognitive—of primary metaphor, namely its form and ability to manipulate emotions, by referring to the Aristotelian theory of metaphor and recent practical cognitive experiments that have

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demonstrated that metaphors affect the formation of opinions and influence practical choices (Cislaru 2012; Lakoff 1996). I will then take into account a number of metaphors that appeared in mass media and public discourses during the first months of the pandemic, to analyse the rhetorical structure and critique the emotional/manipulative effects that such metaphors had on people.

I choose to focus on the first two months of the pandemic because the use of war metaphors reached its peak during those weeks. If we analyse the data collected in the English-speaking countries and gathered in *The Coronavirus Corpus* over the period March–June 2020, we see that the word *war* was used 40,997 times, while in October–December 2020 it appeared 16,476 times, almost 60% fewer. The word *frontline* appeared 5,462 times in the spring of 2020 and 1,149 during the second wave (autumn–winter 2020–2021), almost 80% fewer. The main reason for this radical change is that, as happens with all metaphors, the war metaphors lost their effectiveness due to habituation and the change of context.

**March 2020: War Metaphors Break Out**

On 8 March, about ten days after the discovery of the coronavirus outbreak in Lombardy, which later became one of the most disease-stricken regions in Europe, *la Repubblica* reported the words of the first speech given by the former Italian PM Giuseppe Conte, who was obliged to act promptly to tackle the rapid spread of the virus. In the first of a long series of public announcements, Conte said: “In questi giorni ho ripensato a vecchie letture su Churchill, è la nostra ora più buia, ma ce la faremo” [During the last few days, I have thought of old readings on Churchill, it is our darkest hour, but we will make it] (Cappellini 2020). By comparing himself to Churchill and our times to wartime, Conte’s appeal actually sounded like a “call to arms”. Two days later, the paper *il Mattino* reported the words of virologist Roberto Burioni: “Un tiranno ha sconvolto la nostra vita, e si chiama coronavirus. Resisteremo e combatteremo ovunque, nelle case, nei luoghi di lavoro. Aiutando i più deboli e sacrificandoci per un domani migliore. E poi ci rifaremo. Coronavirus, non vincerai. Ne abbiamo cacciati di peggiori” [A tyrant has turned our lives upside down and its name is coronavirus. We shall resist and fight everywhere, in homes, in the workplaces, by helping our fragile fellow citizens and sacrificing us for a better future. Then we’ll be rewarded. Coronavirus, you won’t win. We have chased much worse ones] (Ajello 2020). In this case, Burioni implied that the virus is an evil tyrant who is going to kill us, which therefore forces us to accept restrictions on our freedom in order to be protected. Thus, to restore a “better” free society we must resist, sacrifice and fight the enemy now and remember Burioni’s final words, which warn that the tyrant-virus will not prevail because the Italians have already managed to stave off worse tyrants/viruses (like Mussolini, polio and smallpox).
As Ben Macintyre wrote in his article “Wartime Allusions Are Highly Contagious” (2020), the use of war metaphors can quickly saturate public discourse. On 17 March, France, too, lay in the grip of the epidemic. All French and foreign newspapers reported the war declaration of President Emmanuel Macron, who categorically stated “nous sommes en guerre” [we are at war], implicitly citing Minister of War Georges Clemenceau’s speech of 20 November 1917 before the National Assembly, as several journalists pointed out (Berdah et al. 2020; Chazot 2020; Fressoz 2020). On the same day, British PM Boris Johnson announced at a press conference: “We must act like any wartime government” in order to support the economy. As Macintyre (2020) notes, Johnson solemnly plays “Churchill as he brings in measures ‘unprecedented since World War Two’”. Two days later, on 19 March, with the pandemic in full expansion across Europe and America, the phrase was taken up by US President Donald Trump, who by describing himself as a “wartime president” vowed that the US would achieve “total victory’ over the coronavirus” (BBC 2020c). The meaning of this metaphor is clear: the effort to tackle the pandemic is a war between humans and the virus, a war that would eventually end—in line with the propaganda language typical of American conservatives (Steuter and Wills 2008)—with total victory. British General Sir Nick Carter said on 10 April that “winning the battle against COVID-19 requires national effort—like that shown in the Second World War”, and the day after he continued: “The Armed Forces have world-class skills to help fight coronavirus, an invisible enemy”.

In Germany, on the other hand, where the figures of casualties remained low during the first wave, the media used war metaphors as a means to talk about the pandemic only when reporting the news from other virus-stricken countries. On 4 March, in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, the article “Kampf gegen einen unbekannten Feind” [Fight against an unknown foe] (Rüb 2020b) informed readers about the epidemic in Italy; on 22 March, the RND quoted Giulio Gallera’s announcement about the hospital Papa Giovanni XXIII in Bergamo, which had been renamed “nationalem Schützengraben” [national trench], and about the so-called “Schlacht um Mailand” [battle of Milan] (Straub 2020); on 28 March, the editors of the FAZ reported Trump’s words “war on Coronavirus” (“‘Krieg’ gegen das Coronavirus”) (2020); and finally, on 8 April, the same paper reported one extensive announcement by Domenico Arcuri, who talked about “Schützengräben” [trenches] and “Kampf gegen den ‘unsichtbaren Feind’” [the battle against an ‘invisible enemy’] (Rüb 2020a). The only direct reference to war was made in Germany in an Easter speech, on 12 April, by President Steinmeier, who stated that “die Corona-Pandemie sei kein Krieg” [Coronavirus is no war] but rather a “Prüfung unserer Menschlichkeit” [test of humanity] (FAZ editorial 2020). The exhortation to solidarity came at a critical moment when the European Union was split into two blocks quarrelling about whether and how to provide financial support to those States which the pandemic had struck harder.
Persuasion: The Role of Metaphor in Shaping Opinion

Before analysing the war metaphors, in this section of the chapter, I focus on showing how metaphors can be used in rhetorical argumentation to orientate and manipulate opinions. Amongst different types of metaphors, resemblance metaphors (Gómez-Moreno and Faber 2010, 124) are particularly interesting because their structure "X is Y" ("Achilles is a lion") is the same as in logical propositions (e.g. "the house is white", "London is a city", and so on) that, according to the table of truth, can be either true or false. It is evident that the metaphor does not belong in the table of truth (therefore it cannot be either true or false) insofar as it does not represent a state of affairs (Achilles and the lion are two different objects). However, because the verb *to be* is copula (Piredda 2017) the meaning of the metaphor could be perceived as a pragmatic message that can direct or manipulate opinion through persuasion. This depends on two factors: one is rhetorical and concerns the correctness of the metaphor; the other, which is linked to the former, concerns the relationship between metaphor and emotions. Regarding the rhetorical factor, there is no method to teach how to create and use good metaphors. The correctness of a metaphor depends not only on how it is made but also on the effect it produces, as well as on its clarity. This last aspect depends on many factors including the context in which the metaphor is used and the person who receives it. We can, however, outline the essential features of the metaphor by analysing chapters 21 and 22 of Aristotle’s *Poetics* and Book III of *Rhetoric*, which first provided an analytical description of the metaphor.

For Aristotle, metaphor is “the application of a strange term either transferred from the genus and applied to the species or from the species and applied to the genus, or from one species to another or else by analogy” (1932, i 1457b 6–7): one word is generally considered alien (allotropic) when we use it in an uncommon way. Among the four mentioned modes, the first three are proportions while the latter is an analogy. All four cases, nonetheless, remain adequate ways of using words if the alteration of meaning fits the context in which we use the metaphor—in other words, if a metaphor is properly constructed, i.e. it appropriately connects heterogeneous terms and fittingly with the context.

Aristotle considers appropriateness one of the fundamental qualities of metaphors alongside “perspicuity, pleasure, and a foreign air” (1926, 303§2 1405b). Perspicuity depends on the fact that a metaphor shows connections between two things in an evident way and that its meaning can be apprehended easily and quickly without explanation. The “foreign air” depends on the fact that the metaphorical terms are not used accordingly with their general and usual meaning (in the example of “Achilles is a lion”, the latter term is commonly linked to an animal); and finally, the pleasure is in that we feel happy about achieving new knowledge every time we successfully grasp the meaning of a metaphorical connection.
Aristotle considers a number of different types of metaphor, the best of which is the enthymeme. This is a particular kind of syllogism, and as such it is a deduction that, unlike logical syllogisms, does not rest upon necessary premises (scientific assertions) but rather upon likely assumptions or generally accepted opinions (*endoxa*) (1926, 1357a I.14). One further difference between logical syllogisms and enthymemes is that in the latter the stages of its logical unfolding are not always explicit. Therefore, the enthymeme is shorter and immediate, easy to comprehend and does not require the explanation of its logical process, which makes it suitable for non-specialist audiences; and finally, because it rests on likely common assumptions, it is the most suitable for persuasion amongst all forms of rhetorical argumentation.\(^{12}\)

That a metaphor is properly made rhetorically and adequate to its context is no guarantee, however, that it will be used ethically. This consideration leads us to the second factor, namely the relationship between metaphors and emotions. Generally speaking, language permits us to influence the listener’s opinion, no matter whether we refer to the state of affairs or we alter it. The latter process is quite important. It is called “emotional conjugation” or “Russell conjugation” and was shown by Russell during a BBC interview in 1948. The philosopher demonstrated that we can direct the listener’s moral judgement through a simple combination of short sentences that represent a state of affairs by employing different expressions that arouse different emotions. Russell provided three examples by speaking about someone who does not change their mind: “I am firm”, “you are stubborn” and “he is a stupid pig head” (Russell 2005). The factual content of these three sentences is the same, but the shade of the message changes from that of a neutral or positive assessment to an increasingly derogative judgement.

Many studies in the field of cognitive science demonstrate this theory, which have been known since Plato’s age. The following studies investigate the link amongst the manipulation of emotions, metaphors and moral judgement from philosophical, neurological and linguistic perspectives (Citron and Goldberg 2014): Ferrari (2007) analyses the war metaphors used by Bush after the 9/11 attacks to justify the “preventive war” in Iraq; Cislaru studies the manipulation of anger and fear in rhetorical strategies of political speeches concerning the risk of sanitary disasters and terrorist attacks (Cislaru 2012). Finally, Lakoff demonstrates that the audience’s moral judgement is largely influenced by disgust (Lakoff 1996). In the wake of this research, it has been shown not only that people who are most sensitive to disgust “show stronger activation patterns for disgust-related metaphors” (Aziz-Zadeh and Gamez-Djokic 2016, 276) but that all metaphors of taste activate an emotional response more than literal communication, and that the amygdala activation is connected to the process of understanding such metaphors. As we see in the next section, war metaphors activate a set of emotions, from fear to alert, which influence our moral judgement and resulting actions.
Analysis of the Metaphors of War: Enemy, Battle, Trenches and the Front Line

From 8 March to the end of April 2020, the European and North American media described the epidemic by using a metaphor derived from this enthymeme:

The pandemic sanitary crisis is an event with a high mortality rate; war is an event with a high mortality rate; therefore, the pandemic sanitary crisis is a war.

The COVID-19 sanitary crisis is a war was the original resemblance metaphor from which a series of secondary metaphors derived during the first stage of the epidemic. This set of secondary resemblance metaphors aimed to represent every aspect of the COVID-19 pandemic through the domain of war:

1) The virus is an enemy or an invisible enemy
2) Hospitals and intensive care units are trenches on the frontline
3) COVID-19 was an atom bomb in Lombardy
4) Infected people are invisible bullets
5) Healthcare staff are soldiers and heroes

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Upon closer analysis, these metaphors do not appear appropriate. The greatest inadequacy that makes the primary metaphor misleading is the fact that, in war, killing is the rule, while during a pandemic saving lives is the rule. In other words, the essential trait of curing is to preserve life, while that of war is inevitably death. Therefore, thinking that the purpose of medical treatment is to kill the virus is fallacious, yet the chain gives rise to the following misleading secondary metaphors:13
1. The metaphor of the virus as an enemy (or invisible enemy) is quite weak, too, because a virus has nothing to do with a warrior. A virus is a biological form of life whose aim is not killing but rather living (Bandea 1984). The purpose of vaccination is not to kill the virus but to immunise human beings, of which the eventual extinction of the virus is only a consequence.

2. The same fallacy can be recognised in the metaphors of the trenches and the front line, the majority of which referred to hospitals: on 5 April, the Italian newspaper la Repubblica published the article “Coronavirus a Roma, la trincea dei medici di base” [Coronavirus in Rome, the trench of GPs] (Angeli 2020); on the same day, The New York Times reported: “Nurses and doctors treat patients on the front lines” (Stevis-Gridneff 2020); on 11 April, la Repubblica published an article titled “Claudia sola in trincea, costretta a decidere chi poteva salvarsi” [Claudia alone in the trench, forced to decide who to save]. On 20 April, The Guardian published a photographic reportage titled “On the Frontline: Meet the NHS Workers Tackling Coronavirus” (Guardian editorial 2020). Intensive care units and hospitals are not places where lethal weapons are involved, and similarly the stress and the emotional shock that healthcare staff endured cannot be compared with the kind of stress that troops face in a combat zone. Moreover, the technology used to treat patients affected by coronavirus, first of all ventilators, cannot be compared to weaponry because medical tools save lives while weapons kill.

3. The metaphor of the atom bomb, used on 8 April by Giulio Gallera, is inappropriate too. Gallera stated: “Non si può fare alcun paragone tra quello che è successo qui e quello che è successo in Veneto o in Emilia: in Lombardia c’è stata una bomba atomica, il virus ha girato indisturbato per almeno venti giorni prima di essere individuato” [We cannot compare what happened here with things occurred in Veneto or Emilia: in Lombardy an atom bomb deflagrated, the virus has spread unchallenged for at least 20 days before we grew aware of it] (La Repubblica editorial 2020a). An atom bomb is a weapon of mass destruction that unleashes its lethal power in a few instants killing thousands of people at once in a small area. The virus in Lombardy did not act likewise, although it caused a great number of casualties (about 15,600), exceeded only by the death rate in the State of New York.

4. The most inadequate war metaphor was coined by Anthony Almojera, a paramedic in New York’s Emergency Medical Services, who said: “In wars you see the bullet, you know who your enemy is. This is a war with an invisible bullet—everyone you come into contact with is a bullet who could get you” (Cuddy 2020). This metaphor basically states that any person we encounter in daily life is a potential enemy difficult to recognise, who could kill us. In other words, this metaphorical way of speaking implies the risk of starting a dangerous hunt for the
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“infected”, which may develop social distancing into a habitual form of antisocial life imposed through fear.14

One further consequence could be the implementation of social control devices such as the apps designed to trace infected individuals, which a majority of people could welcome in accordance with the nefarious logic that Hobbes already analysed in his *Leviathan*, i.e. the remission of part of one’s own liberty in exchange for protection (Hobbes 1965, chapters 14–16). Finally, the least visible but gravest danger is the undermining of solidarity, which is instead the fundamental feeling capable of making individual sacrifice spontaneous. If solidarity ceases to be the motor of altruistic actions, there is a high risk of conceiving healthcare only as a duty (as in the military domain) and not as free ethical engagement.

The Metaphor of the Medic as a Hero

With regard to healthcare staff, two metaphors were widely used that depicted them as soldiers who fought to win the war (e.g. Suárez 2020; Castaldo 2020) and heroes. The first is an erroneous metaphor because, unlike soldiers, healthcare staff’s training is not aimed at teaching them how to kill. Their job involves saving lives with all the means they possess. Consequently, they do not engage any enemy nor do they use weapons. The second metaphor, conversely, might be adequate per se. Under the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic, considering the professional commitment required to carry out their duties and considering furthermore the high risk of contracting the disease and dying, healthcare staff were immediately and instinctively acknowledged as heroes. The definition was so extensively used that on 24 April the BBC published an article by Josh Sims under the heading “Will Coronavirus Change How We Define Heroes?” (2020). The definition of the hero is basically the same in all dictionaries: “A person who is admired for their courage, outstanding achievements, or noble qualities” (Hero 2020). Considering their efforts and courage in the face of danger and the extraordinary results that healthcare staff have obtained worldwide since the outbreak of the pandemic, the metaphor of the medic as a hero is understandable.

However, although adequate, it also had controversial collateral effects: on the one hand, it fed feelings of profound admiration and gratitude for the medical staff among the population in all the countries examined in this article; on the other hand, it contributed to diverting the public from considering the real state of disarray and disorganisation in which years of expenditure cuts have left the national health systems in such countries as, for example, Italy and UK. This caused healthcare staff to react critically and often reject the comparison with heroes.15 The testimonies of healthcare staff were useful to counterbalance the effect of emotions roused through the war metaphors, as well as to inform the public about the real
circumstances under which healthcare workers had to operate during the crisis.

Healthcare staff testimonies speak against the abstract and mythical image of medics that heroically sacrifice themselves for the nation’s sake, as was proposed by politicians and media. Healthcare staff drew the attention of the public to the real problems of national health systems, often caused by austerity and expenditure cuts. Nonetheless, as soon as the pandemic broke out, the political administrations were prompt to praise healthcare staff as heroes, without mentioning that their own previous political agendas had put them in danger. As to that, we must remember the appalling figures of deaths among healthcare staff in the most affected countries, like Italy and the UK, as well as the case of suicide of a PTSD-affected doctor in New York (Watkins et al. 2020).

In the most affected European nations (France, Italy, Spain and the UK), healthcare staff denounced the scarcity of equipment, from the basics (PPE) to technical supplies (ventilators), and generally blamed politicians for the poor condition of hospitals. In France, Le Quotidien du médecin published on 21 March a number of medics’ testimonies, including: “Merci M. Macron mais je ne suis pas un héros, je veux juste pouvoir me protéger et protéger ma famille avec des masques adaptés” [Thank you, Mr Macron, but I am no hero. I just want to protect myself and my family with appropriate masks] (Long 2020); on 2 April, la Repubblica published the testimony of a freshly graduated medic who had just started his career as a “COVID-19 medic” and said: “Siamo tutti d’accordo e abbiamo un messaggio: non vogliamo essere chiamati eroi” [We all agree and have a message: we don’t want to be called heroes] (Strippoli 2020). On 10 April, La Stampa devoted the article “Coronavirus and the Anti-Hero Doctor” to the testimony of a physician who stated: “Credo di essere un buon medico. Ma senza alcuna attitudine all’eroismo” [I think I’m a good doctor, but without any attitude for heroism] (Ercole 2020). Over the whole month of March, several Italian papers denounced the fact that healthcare staff were not receiving an adequate number of swabs to check if they had contracted the virus (La Stampa, 17 March; “In Piemonte tamponi a politici e calciatori ma non ai medici” [In Piedmont Tests for Politicians and Footballers but not for Medics] (Zanotti 2020); Il Messaggero, 24 March: “Coronavirus, il dramma dei medici infettati: ‘Tamponi ai calciatori, a noi no’” [Coronavirus, the Ordeal of the Infected Doctors: ‘Tests for Footballers, Not for Us’] (Evangelisti 2020); la Repubblica, 27 March, on the working conditions of GPs: “Siamo entrati in contatto con pazienti infetti e non siamo stati sottoposti a tampone con l’ordine di continuare a lavorare” [We have been in close contact with infected patients but received no swabs and were ordered to keep on working] (Pucciarelli 2020) and, eventually, several papers focused on the shocking news from the Milanese retirement home Pio Albergo Trivulzio, where dozens of senior guests died and the caring staff were forced to “Togliere le mascherine per non
spaventare i pazienti” [remove their masks not to frighten the patients] (Repubblica editorial 2020b).

In France, Le Monde denounced on 22 March the scarcity of basic medical equipment: “La colère va encore monter … car il y a un grand ras-le-bol face au manque de masques et de tests. Il faudrait des masques pour tout le monde et des tests pour tous les soignants et toutes les personnes hospitalisées” [Anger builds … because everyone is disappointed with the lack of masks and swabs. Masks should be available for everybody and tests for healthcare staff as well as for patients] (Mandard 2020). In the UK, the BBC published on 21 April the article “Coronavirus: NHS and Care Staff Struggling to Access Tests” (Schraer 2020). On 21 March, Le Quotidien du médecin had reported the reactions of French medics who took part in an inquiry: “La profession est très en colère. Les médecins sont nombreux à partager ce sentiment et à mettre en cause la responsabilité du gouvernement dans la pénurie de masques de protection” [The profession is outraged. A great deal of medical staff share the feeling and blame the government for the scarcity of protective masks] (Long 2020). The BBC (2020b) denounced the same situation in the UK on 14 April, in connection with the death of Mrs Roberts, a nurse in Cardiff, in the video called “Coronavirus: “Nurse’s PPE ‘Like Soldier without Combat Gear’”. Again on 28 April, the BBC published two articles: the former read “The Son of an NHS Doctor Who Died with Coronavirus Has Called on Health Secretary Matt Hancock to Say Sorry for Mistakes in the Government’s Response” (BBC 2020a); and the other was a report called “UK Failed to Buy Crucial Protective Equipment to Cope with a Pandemic, a BBC Investigation Has Found” (BBC 2020d). In the meantime, la Repubblica had published on 7 April the article “Noi medici precari in prima linea per senso del dovere” [We precarious doctors on the front line of duty] (ANSA 2020), denouncing some of the main issues of the Italian national health system, i.e. precariousness and lack of funding. The pressure put on the system by the epidemic brought into the open all the damage caused by years of cuts.16

The same situation was denounced in Spain on 25 April, when the Redacción médica published the article “We are no heroes, we are precarious workers as we were before Covid”, whose author exposed the dire conditions of the Spanish health system and stated that “Y con la matraca del heroísmo se está romantizando una precariedad asistencial y profesional que nunca fue normal” [the bass drum of heroism is romanticising the forever abnormal precariousness of the professional health system] (Redacción Médica 2020). This series of testimonies, of which I have reported only a few examples here, has been fundamental in (1) counterbalancing the emotional effect of war metaphors; (2) refocusing public attention on the scarcity of investments in public health in the countries I analysed; (3) permitting the activation of the rational critical process by bringing public attention back to the real situation of hospitals and the working conditions of health workers.
Conclusions

The COVID-19 crisis is no war but rather a sanitary emergency. Health systems should have been better equipped to deal with it. However, due to years of spending cuts, these health systems found themselves under-equipped and were put under pressure by the high number of admissions. We can now see that one of the negative effects of using war metaphors was to overshadow (as far as possible) the structural deficiencies of the health systems. Fear, moreover, initially caused people to freeze and isolate themselves, subsequently producing an enormous amount of illnesses including anxiety, depression, sleep loss and nightmares. Through war metaphors, the political discourse reduced the concept of health to the mere absence of physical symptoms of COVID-19 infection, which openly contradicts the definition of health given by the Constitution of WHO: “health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”. Today, it is undeniable that in both Italy and the UK health systems almost collapsed in 2020 because they could not provide adequate medical care for all citizens where the pressure of new hospitalisations in intensive care units was too high. Consequently, the staff were forced to discern which patients should receive treatment from those who could not be saved, which traumatised many of them profoundly.

War metaphors, it turns out, are inappropriate to talk about the pandemic but had, nonetheless, some practical although highly questionable effects. From an emotional point of view, fear and the call to brace society under the aegis of “sacred” and “perennial” values—such as, for example, patriotism—showed some efficacy in terms of mobilising and strengthening collective consensus. However, the only potentially adequate war metaphor, viz. “doctors are heroes”, in combination with the critical testimonies of healthcare staff, allowed for resistance to the misleading use of the war metaphors and efforts to counterbalance the emotional storm-effect caused by fear, as well as informing the public about the real circumstances under which healthcare workers had to operate during the crisis.

Notes

1 War metaphors appeared also in other broadcast companies and papers such as CNN, El Pais and the Süddeutsche Zeitung, although I do not mention them here due to space limits. All translations of non-English articles are mine.
2 https://www.english-corpora.org/corona/
3 https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1940-the-finest-hour/we-shall-fight-on-the-beaches/
4 http://www2.assemblee-nationale.fr/decouvrir-l-assemblee/histoire/grands-discours-parlementaires/georges-clemenceau-8-mars-1918
5 https://www.bbc.com/news/av/uk-51936760
6 The formula “total victory” gloomily recalls the Nazi slogan Endsieg.
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8 https://www.telegraph.co.uk/opinion/2020/04/10/armed-forces-have-world-class-skills-help-fight-coronavirus/
9 Chair of the Welfare Department in Lombardy County Council.
11 Chair of the COVID-19 national emergency cabinet from 16 March.
12 To Aristotle, persuasion depends on three factors: the speaker’s character (1926, II.1, 1378a § 5–7), the audience’s emotional state (II.1, 1378a §8–9) and the kind of argumentation, namely the enthymeme.
13 On the meaning of war metaphor see also Nerlich 2020.
14 On 20 March, la Repubblica reported the appeal of the Mayor of Turin, seriously affected by the epidemic: “attenti torinesi a non subire un altro virus: quello della rabbia” [Beware, citizens, not to get infected by another virus, that of anger] (La Repubblica editorial 2020b).
15 See Piredda 2020.
16 In March 2020 the French government provided the members of healthcare staff who were deployed to contrast with the epidemic benefit payment worth 1500 Euro (https://solidarites-sante.gouv.fr/actualites/presse/communiques-de-presse/article/prime-soignants). In Italy, the Region of Emilia Romagna did the same with benefit payment worth 1000 Euro (https://www.regione.emilia-romagna.it/notizie/2020/aprile/coronavirus-riconoscimento-a-chi-lavora-nella-sanita-pubblica-regionale-1000-euro-a-testa-a-medici-infermieri-operatori).

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Suárez, Gonzalo. 2020. “Soldados de esta guerra: ancianos con miedo ante un enemigo que no se ve.” El Mundo, 5 April. https://www.elmundo.es/papel/historias/2020/04/05/5e88a806fc6c83b75e8b456f.html  