

Are we at war? Below the threshold, signals without bullets, and the future of peace

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Abstract

Are we at war? While this question was once answered through declarations, troop movements, or kinetic violence, it has become increasingly difficult to resolve. Drawing on Hasselbladh's (2025) concept of the shadow of war, this essay examines how contemporary conflicts are deliberately organized below the threshold of armed violence and how this transformation reshapes sociological understandings of war and peace. It argues that military institutional specificity lies not in visible practices but in a latent potential that structures meaning, authority, and legitimacy even in the absence of war. Extending this logic beyond the military, the essay suggests that many contemporary conflicts are structured to never fully materialize, but instead operate through influence, disruption, and ambiguity, relying on signals rather than events and anticipation rather than resolution. As a result, the question 'are we at war?' becomes structurally irresolvable, uncertainty emerges as an organizing principle, and peace appears not as the stable opposite of war but as a fragile and contested achievement.

Keywords

hybrid threats, below-threshold conflict, shadow of war, institutional anticipation, war and peace, cognitive warfare

Are we at war? In the past, this question could have been easily answered by looking at the official declarations, the movements of troops, or the outbreak of kinetic violence. Nowadays, it has become a question that is structurally irresolvable. The concept of the shadow of war, developed by Hans Hasselbladh (2025), offers an insightful lens on this phenomenon. Instead of focusing on the visible aspects of military life such as hierarchy, discipline, uniforms, and weapons, Hasselbladh argues that we should reconsider the military as an institution by recognizing its latent but still widespread transformative capacity. According to this version, war does not have to happen to provide a framework to organize meaning. Its mere possibility, suspended

yet omnipresent, is enough to influence identities, practices, emotions, and judgment across military organizations.

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This essay extends Hasselbladh's argument further by showing how the shadow of war affects not only military contexts but also different areas of life. Today, conflicts are increasingly being organized to remain below the level of armed fighting, not as preparation for war, but as a completely different way of conflict. Consequently, the shadow of war does not only remain confined to the military but has become a common condition of institutional life. In such an environment, even peace is transformed from a stable and clearly recognizable state to an uncertain, contested, and fragile achievement. This leads to an additional question: what if the goal of the conflict is not to come out of the shadow of war, but to never leave it?

Hasselbladh's intervention is based on the observation that is somewhat counterintuitive: the military, as an institution, is not distinguished by what it does visibly, but by what it is always potentially able to do. The fact that bodies, objects, spaces, and practices could be used as disposable resources for the state is one of the central imaginary significations of military life (Castoriadis, 1988, 2007; Hasselbladh, 2025). This possibility, the shadow of war, is not present constantly, nor is it completely absent. It is, however, very often, although not always, invoked, postponed, disputed, and imagined, thus creating a state of liminality which permeates everyday military organizing.

One implication of this reasoning, however, is largely left unstated. If the threat of war is what gives it power precisely because it is not always actualized, what happens when conflict itself is organized to avoid actualization? What if the strategic horizon of conflict is no longer victory through battle, but influence without escalation, disruption without declaration, and effects without overt violence? This indeed raises a question about a comprehensive change in the way conflict is organized and experienced. The political confrontations between actors are increasingly happening in such areas where the boundary between war and peace is intentionally left ambiguous. The formal declarations are avoided, responsibility is shared, and violence is displaced, delayed, or debatable. In such circumstances, institutions are being rallied not by the inevitability of war, but

by the continual doubt as to whether war is happening at all.

From a sociological perspective, the doubt here is not a miscategorization. Instead, it serves as a generating condition. In his study, Hasselbladh shows how uncertainty can broaden the range of interpretations, enable the justification of hierarchies, and allow practices to be assessed in relation to imagined futures in the military context (Friedland, 2009, 2018; Hasselbladh, 2025). Nevertheless, beneath the threshold, this logic is no longer limited to military organizations.

In this scenario, the question 'are we at war?' is structurally impossible to resolve. One cannot provide a straightforward and unequivocal answer, as the success of a conflict that is below-threshold largely depends on the absence of such clarity. Modern doctrines of influence, operations, and hybrid conflict explicitly conceptualize this as their main area. They aim for effects without escalation, disruption without attribution. Signals operate precisely by sustaining ambiguity and remaining open to interpretations: they are plausible rather than verifiable, indicative rather than decisive, consistent with sociological views that see meaning and power as entities that are interpretively and institutionally constituted (Friedland, 2018; Weber, 1978).

This dynamic deeply echoes Hasselbladh's account of how the shadow of war influences the inner workings of military organizations. In both instances, daily operations are not evaluated based on their immediate outcomes, but on the potential ways they could be significant when 'it' (the imagined day of reckoning that might never come) comes. However, beneath this level, the logic is no longer connected to a future war that would ultimately bring certainty. Instead, uncertainty becomes indefinite and permanent.

Hasselbladh argues that military institutional specificity is not defined by specific artifacts or behaviors. For instance, uniforms, leadership ideals, discipline, and even lethality are not something that is inherently military; they only become institutionally specific when they are branded under the shadow of war. This insight raises a very important question: can the shadow of war travel? If the shadow's main organizing power is its anticipatory

and transformative capacity, then there is very little reason to assume that this capacity has to be confined only to military institutions. Most of contemporary institutions are now operating in conditions that are very similar to those described by Hasselbladh. Public administrations, for instance, as well as providers of critical infrastructures, media organizations, educational systems, and humanitarian actors, are all increasingly legitimizing their decisions by referring to diffuse threats, future crises, and hypothetical adversaries. Just like military organizations in times of peace, they are in zones of liminality where relevance, legitimacy, and preparedness are constantly renegotiated. This does not imply that all institutions become military, nor that a singular military logic dominates other institutional logics. Rather, it suggests that anticipatory uncertainty increasingly operates as a shared organizing condition across otherwise distinct institutional fields.

In such contexts, the shadow of war does not manifest as an explicit military logic, but as a generalized mode of organizing under uncertainty. Practices are evaluated against scenarios that cannot be verified; resources are allocated in anticipation of disruptions that may never materialize; authority is exercised through reference to risks that remain fundamentally indeterminate. The military, in this sense, is no longer the only organization that operates under the experience of a future that is on hold. This does not mean that all institutions become military. Rather, it suggests that the form of institutional life Hasselbladh identifies – one governed by anticipation, transformation, and contested meaning – has become increasingly widespread. Military institutional specificity thus functions as a diagnostic case rather than an exceptional condition.

The idea of fighting without firing a single bullet is a common metaphor to describe the new types of conflicts that operate through influence, disruption, and persuasion instead of using physical force. From a sociological perspective, however, what matters is not the means employed, but the transformation of the categories through which conflict and peace are understood. If conflict is designed to be under the threshold of war, then peace can no

longer be defined as its simple opposite. Peace becomes a more fragile and ambiguous notion: a state in which violence has not broken out, but stability cannot be taken for granted. Peace, instead of signifying the end of conflict, becomes similar to a controlled uncertainty which is kept alive through attention, control of the narrative, and the constant decoding of signs.

This change has far-reaching effects. Classical sociological and political theories have often depicted peace as a natural state that follows from war, which is then used as a background to analyze exceptional moments. However, in a below-threshold environment, the situation is reversed: conflict becomes the background condition, while peace appears as a provisional and contested achievement. No more does the absence of violence guarantee trust, and the absence of war does not bring back certainty. Therefore, the contemporary question ‘are we at war?’ is more about social organization than about identifying an enemy. It reflects the general feeling that institutions are reacting to pressures that are difficult to be named, confronted, or resolved by conventional means. Consequently, the fear of war is not only a military imagination, but it has become a broader societal condition.

Discussions of below-threshold conflict often focus on their association with so called ‘post-truth’ environments where factual verification seems increasingly fragile. The perspective proposed here presents the matter differently: the problem is not so much the fading of the truth as the fact that plausibility is becoming the main organizing principle. It is not necessary for signals to be true in order to be effective; they only need to be sufficiently believable to sustain anticipation. By referring to possible threats or by justifying their decisions through the reference to hypothetical scenarios, institutions operate within Hasselbladh’s register of anticipation, where practices are evaluated in relation to an imagined future moment of reckoning that may never arrive with certainty. Institutions are not responding to confirmed realities but to scenarios that could be real, might become real, or are presented as real by the framing of authoritative actors. Hasselbladh demonstrates that

military organizations, for example, have been functioning in this register for a long time. Below the threshold, this mode of organizing is being adopted across different types of organizations.

Sociologically, this implies a shift from governance through knowledge to governance through expectation, as institutions increasingly orient action toward anticipated futures rather than verified realities (Friedland, 2018). The future, rather than the present, becomes the primary reference point for action. Choices are legitimized not by the facts, but by the possibilities. In such contexts, uncertainty is not eliminated but institutionalized.

Hasselbladh's concept of the shadow of war provides a powerful metaphor to understand how institutions derive their shape not so much from what is visible, but from what is possible. The idea, when applied to conflicts below-threshold, implies that war and peace cannot be considered as stable categories anymore, rather they should be seen as fluctuating and contested interpretations of an uncertain present. Sociology, if this is the case, would then be confronted with a set of pressing questions.

How should power be studied when conflict seldom declares itself, given sociology's long-standing concern with domination and authority (Weber, 1978)? What concepts would suffice for understanding institutions that are constantly in a state of anticipation? How could we study legitimacy and authority in those environments where the occurrence of events is replaced by signals, and where certainty is not the norm but the exception? What theoretical perspectives can embody the lived experience of the condition in which the question 'are we at war?' is structurally irresolvable?

This essay, rather than providing definitive answers, invites dialogue. If the shadow of war has indeed become a prevailing condition of institutional life, sociology may need to reconsider not only how it studies conflict, but also how it conceptualizes peace. Hasselbladh's work shifts our attention from looking at visible acts to latent possibilities. In doing so, it not only defies the paradigms of military sociology which are based on visible acts but also prompts a wider rethink of institutions as places where the organization of meaning, authority, and legitimacy happens under

the conditions of perpetual anticipation. Whether this condition represents a temporary historical configuration or a more lasting transformation remains an open sociological question.

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