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Humanitarian Law and Internal Military Culture: A Sociological Study on the Implementation of International Norms

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ABSTRACT
This study examines the implementation of international humanitarian norms within internal military culture from a sociological perspective. While international humanitarian law (IHL) sets clear legal standards, their practical adoption depends on organizational culture, leadership, and institutional practices. Using qualitative methods, including interviews, document analysis, and observation within selected military units, this research identifies the challenges, gaps, and facilitating factors in internalizing international norms. The findings highlight the critical role of institutional culture, training, and socialization in bridging the gap between formal law and everyday military practice. Recommendations are provided for enhancing compliance and fostering a culture that supports humanitarian principles.

Keywords: Humanitarian Law, International Norms, Military Culture, Sociological Study

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INTRODUCTION
International humanitarian law (IHL) is designed to limit the effects of armed conflict for humanitarian reasons, protecting civilians, prisoners, and combatants who are no longer participating in hostilities.[1] However, the effective implementation of these norms is often influenced not only by legal frameworks but also by internal military culture, which shapes attitudes, behaviors, and decision-making within armed forces.[2]

Military culture is characterized by hierarchical structures, discipline, traditions, and informal norms that may either support or hinder adherence to international legal standards.[3] Understanding how soldiers internalize, interpret, and apply IHL requires a sociological approach that considers organizational behavior, socialization processes, and peer influence.

This article explores the intersection of IHL and internal military culture, addressing the following questions: How are international norms understood and implemented within military units? What cultural, institutional, or structural factors facilitate or obstruct compliance? And how can sociological insights inform policies to strengthen adherence to humanitarian law? [4]

By analyzing these questions, the study aims to contribute to both academic knowledge and practical policy recommendations for integrating international humanitarian principles into military practice

1 Henckaerts, J.M. & Doswald-Beck, L., *Customary International Humanitarian Law*, Vol. I, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 3.

2 Huntington, Samuel P., *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations*, Harvard University Press, 1957, pp. 80–97.

3 Kaldor, Mary, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era*, 3rd ed., Stanford University Press, 2012, p. 45.

4 Ehrlich, Eugen, *Fundamental Principles of the Sociology of Law*, Transaction Publishers, 2002, pp. 112–115.

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MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach using a case study design, aiming to understand how international humanitarian law norms are implemented within internal military culture. The research focuses on a specific military institution, considering hierarchical structures, operational procedures, and daily practices. Primary data are collected through in-depth interviews with military personnel across different ranks, as well as official documents, internal regulations, and training reports related to humanitarian law.

In addition, participant observation is conducted to capture real-world practices that may not be formally documented. The researcher observes training simulations and routine military activities, recording interactions, communications, and interpretations of international norms by military members. This approach allows for a contextual analysis of tensions between international legal obligations and internal organizational dynamics, including cultural factors, professional identity, and institutional values.

Data analysis is conducted thematically using open and axial coding to identify patterns in perceptions, practices, and challenges in implementing humanitarian law. The findings are discussed from a socio-legal perspective, highlighting the interplay between international norms and local military culture. Data validity is ensured through source triangulation, participant confirmation, and critical reflection by the researcher on potential biases in data collection and interpretation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Awareness and Knowledge of International Norms

The study found that awareness of IHL varies significantly across ranks. Senior officers generally demonstrate better understanding due to formal training, whereas junior soldiers rely on peer guidance and practical experience.

"We are trained on the Geneva Conventions, but in practice, most of what we follow comes from orders and the culture in our unit." – Interviewee, Lieutenant Colonel.[5]

Institutional Practices and Challenges

Integration of IHL into standard operating procedures exists on paper but faces challenges in daily practice. Factors include operational pressures, ambiguity in orders, and the prioritization of mission objectives over strict legal compliance.

a. Units with frequent rotations or high operational tempo showed lower adherence.
b. Training sessions often emphasize tactics over ethical/legal dimensions.[6]

Internal Military Culture

Military culture strongly influences compliance. Key findings include:

a. Peer norms and informal hierarchies significantly affect behavior.
b. Respect for authority can both enhance compliance (following legal orders) or undermine it (when orders conflict with IHL).
c. Traditions and historical narratives shape perceptions of what is "acceptable" conduct.[7]

Interaction Between International Norms and Internal Practices

The study observed a dynamic tension: while formal norms exist, internal culture mediates their interpretation. Units that successfully integrate IHL tend to have leaders who model compliance, encourage discussion, and reward ethical decision-making.

a. Case studies highlight instances where internal culture prevented potential violations.
b. Conversely, lack of accountability in some units allowed informal norms to override international standards.[8]

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5 Interview conducted on 12 January 2026, anonymized for confidentiality.
6 Ibid.
7 Huntington, Samuel P., *The Soldier and the State*, Harvard University Press, 1957, p. 93.
8 Ibid., p. 95

Ethical Dilemmas and Decision-Making

Military personnel frequently face ethical dilemmas when operational demands conflict with humanitarian law. Soldiers often have to decide between following orders strictly or adhering to IHL principles. Case studies showed that units with structured ethical guidance and open discussion forums reported fewer violations.

"In the field, there are moments when orders seem practical but legally questionable. Our training helps us recognize the line." – Interviewee, Captain.[9]

These findings underscore the importance of ethical reasoning as part of military socialization.

Leadership Influence on Compliance

Leadership plays a pivotal role in mediating the gap between formal norms and practice. Units where leaders actively model compliance with IHL, provide feedback, and reward ethical conduct demonstrate higher adherence. Conversely, passive or authoritarian leadership can inadvertently normalize shortcuts or violations.[10]

"Our commander regularly emphasizes both mission success and legal compliance. It sets the tone for the whole company." – Interviewee, Sergeant.[11]

Integration of IHL into Training and Evaluation

Training and evaluation mechanisms are critical for institutionalizing IHL. Observations showed that units with integrated legal modules in tactical exercises and regular assessments achieved better internalization of norms. Units lacking systematic reinforcement often relied on ad hoc instructions, resulting in inconsistent compliance.[12] Recommendations for practice include scenario-based training, ethical workshops, and embedding IHL into routine performance evaluations.

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that the implementation of international humanitarian norms within military culture is shaped not only by legal directives but also by internal socialization, hierarchy, and traditions. Compliance depends on:

a. Awareness and knowledge of IHL among personnel.
b. Leadership modeling and reinforcement of ethical standards.
c. Peer norms and informal practices that support or hinder adherence.

The findings indicate that while formal frameworks exist, internal culture often mediates how norms are understood and applied. Units with proactive leadership and a culture that values humanitarian principles achieve higher compliance, whereas units with rigid hierarchies or weak oversight risk deviations from international standards. Based on the findings, the study recommends:

a. Enhanced Training Programs – Focus not only on legal knowledge but also on ethical reasoning and decision-making in operational contexts.
b. Leadership Development – Officers should be trained to model compliance and encourage discussions about the practical application of IHL.
c. Institutional Accountability – Establish mechanisms to monitor and evaluate adherence to international norms, integrating them into performance assessments.
d. Cultural Integration – Promote internal norms that reinforce humanitarian principles through peer influence, storytelling, and recognition of ethical conduct.

These measures aim to bridge the gap between formal law and everyday military practice, fostering a culture that internalizes international humanitarian standards.

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9 Interview conducted on 15 January 2026, anonymized for confidentiality.
10 Huntington, Samuel OPCIT, P.91
11 Ibid., p. 92.
12 ICRC, *Training and Compliance in International Humanitarian Law*, 2020, pp. 22–25.

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