

WARFUN diaries

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Exploring the plurality of
experiences and emotional
articulations of war





CONTENTS

Rethinking reintegration and veteran identity	02
Partisan circle dances	05
Moral injury and soldiers in conflict	13
Between privilege and precarity	16
Researching “fun”	22
Let me entertain you	26
Diet nutrition on the Zelengora Mountain	30
Memetic warfare in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict	35
“I’ve seen things...” and other pleasures of war	39
War things in the bed	43
No laughter, no war	47
Neretva and Sutjeska in horror and magic	51
Pleasures of war	54
The self-realizing soldier	58
Come for the war, stay for the swimming pool	62
“Have I killed someone?”	66
Combat sex	69
War as a game	71

WARFUN DIARIES

Edited by Antonio De Lauri

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Rethinking reintegration and veteran identity

BOOK CONVERSATION: ANTONIO DE LAURI AND JENI HUNNIECUTT

Jeni Hunnicutt, Rethinking Reintegration and Veteran Identity. A New Consciousness (Springer, 2022).

Antonio De Lauri (ADL): Would you like to briefly share the personal experiences that brought you to the publication of this book?

Jeni Hunnicutt (JH): I didn't believe I was a Veteran. I separated from the US Army National Guard, having spent six years serving in a part-time capacity, and my unit never deployed to war during that time. According to the US Department of Veterans Affairs' definition of "Veteran," I am not one. So when I separated from the military, I knew it would be a little adjustment. I yearned for the freedom of fully being myself without the constraints to my identity placed on me by service, but I had zero expectations of struggling with mental health in my post-service life. Struggling in a way that related to my service or my transition out, I mean.

But I did struggle, tremendously. My separation coincided with other big life changes at the same time, which is a common experience for those who serve. I got out of the military and two weeks later moved across the country to start a Ph.D. program.

My entire world changed, and I was not prepared for the stress and the instability the changes would bring me. Within just a few months, I was clinically depressed, anxious, and addicted. But I related none of that to my experience of separating from service. *Because I was not a Veteran.*

So as my book reveals, I spent that time in my Ph.D. program using research as a tool to understand and, ultimately, heal. I had a deep need to understand the relationships between Veteran identity, transition, and suicide. I knew someone in my Army unit who had died by suicide, and I had Veteran friends who attempted it. I wouldn't have admitted it then, nor did I even have the language or mental faculties to know it, but I experienced suicide ideation myself during that time. My research during those years was about searching for answers. Certainly answers for what I was experiencing then, but answers that all Veterans could relate to. More than anything else, my book is about navigating all the *stuff* around Veteran identity. It's my story of coming to and choosing to accept and embody my own Veteran identity.



ADL: Identity and belonging are key aspects of military and post-military life, yet also volatile. How do you analyze these aspects in your book?

JH: That's such a great question. I analyze them from a lens of liminality. I use a sociological theoretical concept (by Victor Turner) to explore identity and belonging; it's the idea of being in states of "betweenness."

I now know Veteran identity is a state of perpetual liminality between military and civilian structures, cultures, and worlds. As Veterans, we desperately need tools to integrate these contradictory and often conflicting parts of ourselves. To be frank, I think it's the answer to the Veteran suicide epidemic.

In my book though, I needed to dive deeply into how military identity is constructed, which helps us to then understand the Veteran identity as one of indefinite betweenness. So I tied in concepts of ritual (also part of Turner's theorizing) to elaborate on the identity-making of Service Members. Specifically, I tuned into Initial Entry Training, which is boot camp and job training. It's the period when new recruits go through their training that is designed to transform them into warriors and indoctrinate them into the military institution; it's a rite of passage. It's essential to understand not only that this happens, but also how it happens and what it does to a sense of self, to fully grasp the idea that Veteran identity means never being able to fully rid yourself of that military conditioning.

ADL: A study of the Costs of War project (Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs) finds that at least four times as many active duty personnel and war veterans of post-9/11 conflicts have died of suicide than in combat, as an estimated 30,177 have died by suicide as compared with the 7,057 killed in post-9/11 war operations. How would you explain these figures?

JH: I get a full-body visceral response every time I think about the Veteran suicide epidemic. I lost a military brother I served with to suicide just last fall. And as I mentioned previously, I've been in that head space, I know what it's like to feel that depth of despair and hopelessness.

First, I want to point something very important out. I appreciate your question, but I want to add to it. I think part of why the suicides have lasted so long (we've known it's a problem for over a decade now) and why it even continues to get worse, is because of this overarching, dominant narrative that links the suicides to combat and war experience. That is misleading. There has now been plenty of evidence to show there is a much stronger correlation between suicide ideation and transition out of military service, regardless of what one experienced during service (i.e., whether they went to war or saw combat, or not). And even more mind-boggling than that, there's now research that shows suicide rates to be *higher for never-deployed Veterans* than those who have seen combat directly.

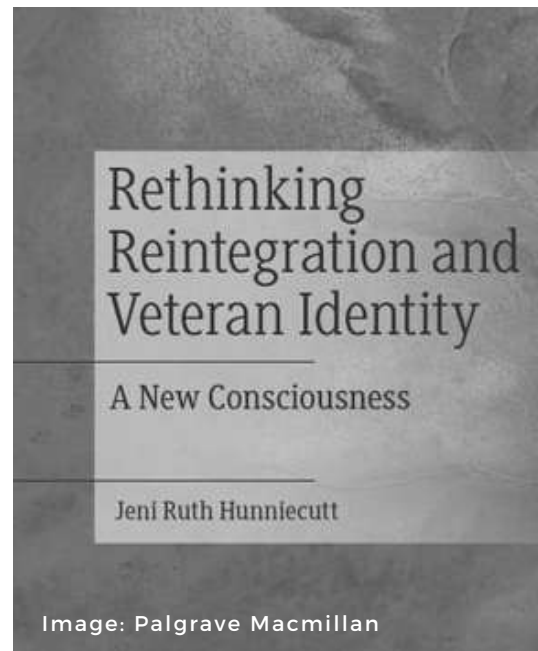
This takes me back to my response to question 2. The Veteran suicide problem exists because Veterans do not know how to integrate our military selves with our post military lives. It is about identity. We do not have tools, language, or guidance to identify, name, process, and create meaning around the conflation of these two contradictory and opposing parts of who we are. It creates profound instability in our sense of self. And that instability often shows up as mental health dissonance. When it's left to stew and fester, many choose death to escape it. It's tragic in every sense of the word, especially because something can be done about it.

There's so many tools, services, and programs focused on career readiness and translating military skills for the civilian job market. And access to evidence-based psychotherapy for Veterans suffering with mental health is now abundant. These parts of transition, and these services, are undoubtedly important. But they are not the answer to the suicides. The identity reconfiguration is, and I do not know of one single program, or US government-funded resource, that addresses it. I plan to take this on within my career.

ADL: There is a growing body of research focusing on the emotional implications of war and soldiering, and on the broad spectrum of emotions at stake in transitioning out of the military. All this beyond the paradigm of PTSD. Your book gives significant space to the emotional sphere, which I guess came naturally as a result of your own experience?

JH: Yes, it stemmed from my own lived experience. It's more than that too. My life is surrounded by Veterans and Veterans work. So I see this in more than just myself. I see it in those I served with, Veterans I work with, and the research I engage with.

"when we were in the military, most of us felt a sense of home because our identity was encapsulated within that institution, culture, and world"



It is beyond PTSD, or any other mental or behavioral health disorders or symptomology. But I don't think it's just about emotions. Again, it's about identity. Identity is our sense of self. A congruent self-identity looks like feeling at home within yourself, as who you are and choose to be. Emotions are intertwined with identity, certainly. When we don't feel at home, we likely feel anxious, unsettled, lost.

As an example, think about the structure and community that we get in the military. We feel a sense of stability and security through the structure it provides us (be here, at this time, wearing this, follow these rules, and you'll get paid this and these benefits), and we feel belonging through the community (at a unit/group level and a sense of belonging to something greater than ourselves). When we separate from service, we immediately lose both things. Through our service, our identity became shaped by this structure and community. Then, when it's gone, we feel a void and a loss. But, again, because we don't have tools or language for it, we have no way of naming or putting a finger on this ambiguous loss. And left unchecked and unprocessed, of course it shows up in strange, emotional ways, like anger and rage outbursts, or inexplicable sadness and a heavy feeling of being lost and unsafe.

The emotions reflect the identity incongruence and dissonance.

ADL: One important issue you discuss in the book is the need of finding a sense of home. Can you elaborate what you mean by that?

JH: This question is a perfect lead into what I just brought up in the last question: a congruent self-identity looks like feeling at home within yourself.

When we were in the military, most of us felt a sense of home because our identity was encapsulated within that institution, culture, and world. And those who serve in the military know just how all-encompassing it is. As a caveat, I will mention that it does differ a bit for reserve and National Guard service members who serve in a part-time capacity opposed to those on active duty. Reserve and National Guard members always have a foot in both worlds (though again, they also know their military commitment always trumps their civilian life). But then, when we separate from service, we lose that sense of place, that sense of home. And we are catapulted into a world of being stuck in between. As I say in my book, we can take the uniform off, but we can never fully wash off the Army green that is in us, and forever *of us*.

And so we find ourselves metaphorically homeless. And not until we are able to see this homelessness, name it, process and express it, will we begin to feel a sense of home within ourselves again.

Partisan circle dances

CURATED BY IVA JELUŠIĆ

PART 1



Refugees and Partisans dancing (fall 1944, Ivanovo Selo, Croatia). MGZ-72713. Further reproduction is prohibited



In celebration of demobilization of the 32nd division of the Yugoslav Army, soldiers danced in a circle to military music, photograph Vilko Hajdukovic (autumn 1945, Zagreb, Croatia). MGZ-72635 ad MGZ-72636. Further reproduction is prohibited

*Hey Kozara, hey Kozara, my thick woodland
You are hiding, you are hiding many a Partisan.*

*How many, hey, how many are there on Kozara tree branches
There are even more, hey, even more young Partisans.*

*How much, hey, how much is there on Kozara leaves
There are even more, hey, there are even more young communists.*

These are some of the most famous verses sung by the Yugoslav Partisan soldiers and their supporters during World War II. Their foundation is a short rhyming couplet appropriated from the popular folklore form known as *bečarac*. Every rhyming couplet is one unit, one independent poem. If the couplets had a similar theme, singers would sometimes put them together in order to create a new, longer poem, and sometimes singers omitted the couplets that, for instance, they could not remember.

The couplets acted as poetic comments on all life experiences, in both peace and war. The brevity of the couplets and familiarity of their form made it possible for everyone to understand the gist and to participate in their further dissemination.

ONE SINGS WHEN ONE DIES

Partisan commentators thus established that:

*Our struggle demands
That one sings when one dies.*

Women Partisans often sung:

*Who could've known last year, comrades,
That girls would become Partisans.*

or

*I'm your only daughter, oh, mother of mine
I am leaving you to carry a carbine.*

Of course, daily news—such as the standoff of the Nazi army before Stalingrad or the capitulation of Italy—were regularly commented on:

*Hey Hitler, what the hell,
Why does your army stall?
Either you can't, or winter has met you,
Or the Russian offensive beats you.*

and

*Rejoice, brothers Partisans
Italians by themselves gave up their guns.*

Partisans sang these kinds of songs in their free time, on the march, and in military hospitals, either in the darkness of their hospital rooms lying on their improvised, often straw, beds, or in groups while enjoying fresh air—maybe even some sun—in front of the hospitals. However, they were most often sung while soldiers, as well as civilians, held hands and moved to the rhythm of singing.

The movement was, of course, a circle dance, probably the oldest dance formation common to many cultures. It was most often performed in a semicircle or a curved line to musical accompaniment while the person at the head sang the verses that the rest of the group then repeated. One participant of the war told the Slavist and folklorist Maja Bošković-Stulli that “when I was in a circle, I would invent and sing, I would sing both my own and other people’s [verses]. I was a part of the people. We were all one then, we fought and sang.”

The couplet and the circle dance—particularly the variation that became known as the circle dance of the Kozara mountain—became a means of communication during the war that strengthened the fighting community and encouraged their togetherness and perseverance. Their symbolic role has also become part of the cultural memory of the war.



Postcard reading "Greetings from Kozara" featuring a group of visitors in front of the 1972 Monument to the Revolution, which is located in the Mrakovica area of the Kozara National Park (now in the Republic of Srpska, Bosnia and Herzegovina).

Translation of the couplets: Iva Jelušić.

Owner of photographs 1–3: Muzej grada Zagreba [Zagreb City Museum], Collection Militaria.

Photograph 4: Spomenik database, <https://www.spomenikdatabase.org/kozara>.

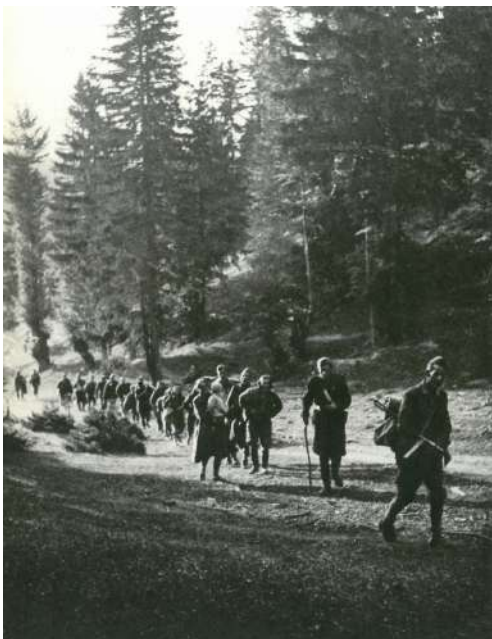
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PART 2



"...we marched all night climbing up the hill, and when it dawned, we were at the same place from which we descended under such difficult circumstances." (Skrigin, 256)

Following the launch of both the airborne and ground assault on the city of Drvar (western Bosnia and Herzegovina) in May 1944, the VIII Partisan Corps retreated to Jadovnik mountain. At night, while the German units were resting to prepare for a new day of fighting, the Partisans partly walked and partly rolled down a goat trail that led to the foot of the mountain. The next day, the German soldiers searched the territory where the VIII Corps had previously stayed. They then searched possible routes of retreat, but not the path by which the Partisans had left. It is assumed that either they did not notice the sad excuse for a retreat passage or did not think that the Partisans would actually dare to use it in the dead of night.

Source

Skrigin, Žorž (1968). *War and Stage*. Belgrade: Turistička štampa. pp. 255–261, photographs on pp. 256 and 257.



"...the Anglo-American mission and their journalists were amazed at our optimism and cheerful mood because the fighters, returning from the positions where the shooting still resounded, immediately got into a circle and sang along with Ceckez's accordion..." (Skrigin, 257)

The German units left Jadovnik. The following morning, after an almost all-night hike, the Partisans returned. The location that was teeming with enemy soldiers the day before was now completely safe. They were alive and, at least temporarily, out of harm's way. So, as soon as they returned, Žorž Skrigin claims, they got into a circle and danced. He snapped a photo.

PART 3

When they discuss circle dances, historical sources of the Yugoslav Partisan war most often mention the Kozara circle dance. Equally as often, they emphasize the rhyming folk couplets on war and political topics that were sung to accompany the circle dances (as explained in Part 1). It is important to mention, however, that there were many variations of the circle dance, and that the topics for the couplets that were popular in peacetime remained so during wartime, especially in more relaxed or unsupervised settings.

The best example is provided by Eva Grlić, who spent most of her Partisan life in Slavonia (eastern Croatia). One evening, with the intention of cheering her up, a friend took her for a walk through the forest to a clearing where a group of young people were dancing, illuminated only by the moon. "There was something magical in that scene of dance in the moonlight. [...] To me it seemed like a pure surrealism," Grlić noted in her memoir.

Young women and men danced the *taraban* circle dance and sang:

*It is easy to dance taraban
Jump up, and on your own you will go down.*

and

*Girls, come to me
Before the women have caught me.*

This short fragment from Eva Grlić's memories of war hints at a relevant aspect of life in the Partisan army: although the Partisan military authorities prohibited romantic relationships among Partisans, particularly what we today might call hooking up, they never succeeded in eradicating them.

Translation of the couplets: Iva Jelušić.

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**"there was
something magical
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If nothing else, many covertly whispered about love, sex, relationships, and marriage, sometimes talked and even sang about them. A series of rhyming couplets with which the mischievous participants expressed their thoughts on the restrictive Partisan policy remained:

*Leave love alone, my sweetheart
And go fight for people's right.
When our country is free again
Return and make love then.*

*When I remember your face, my dear
I forget about my commander.*

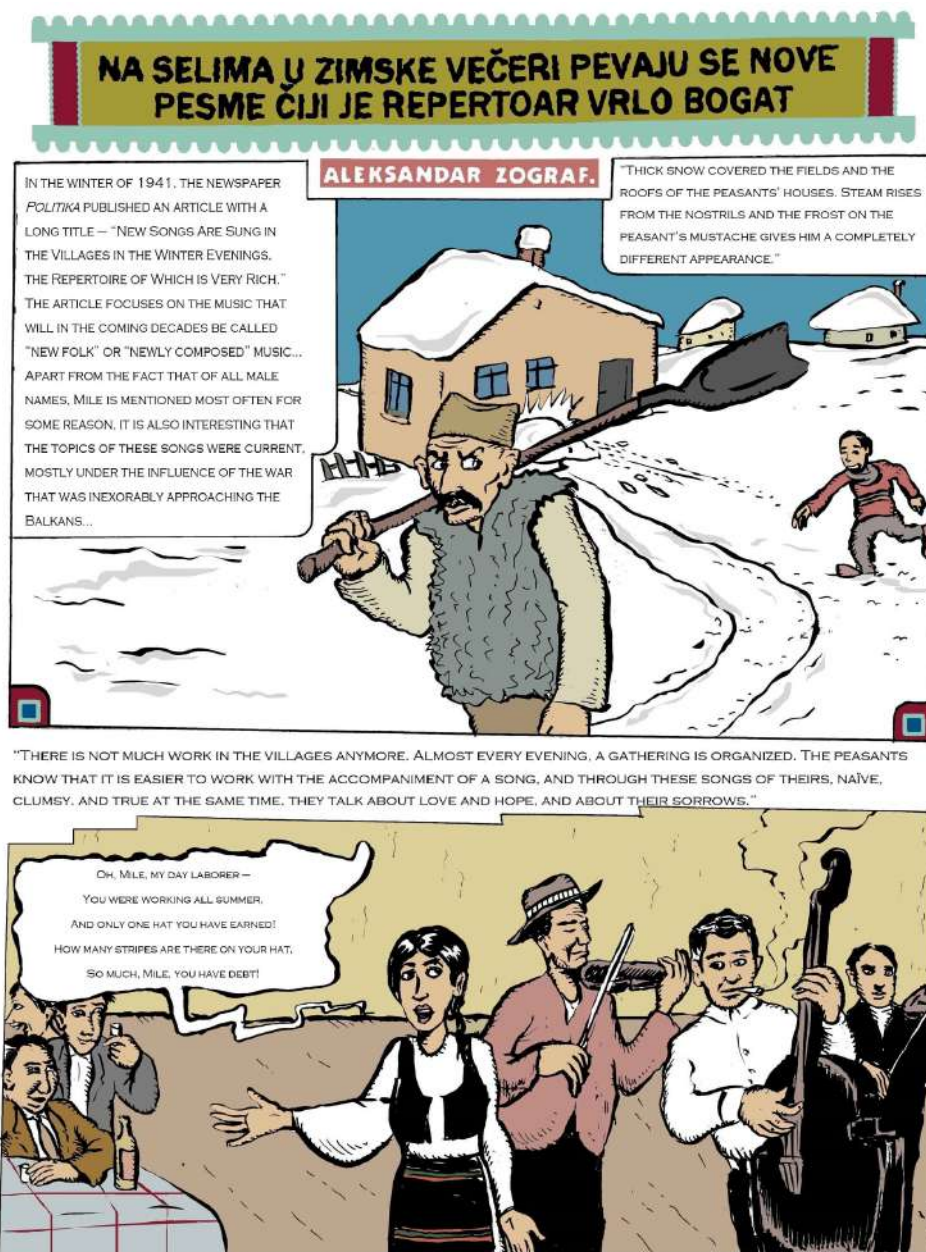
*The girls are begging you, comrade Tito,
Let the boys go.
For two, three days or five, six hours at least
And then return them to the brigade forthwith.*



Illustration by Dario Jelušić

PART 4: NEW SONGS ARE SUNG IN THE VILLAGES IN WINTER EVENINGS, THE REPERTOIRE OF WHICH IS VERY RICH

Scholars who researched Partisan musical expression based on folklore considered that such songs and dances are practically inseparable (as seen in the previous sections). However, dancing could not survive without singing. And despite the efforts of the Yugoslav Partisan leadership and cultural workers to inspire their supporters, both civilians and Partisan soldiers, to sing as much as possible about themes that were inspired by the struggle, people did not stop creating songs about the things that moved them the most. Something on this topic was presented in Part 3, and is presented here as well, this time from the perspective of the Serbian comic artist Saša Rakezić, who is better known by his pen name Aleksandar Zograf.



"WHEN A YOUNG MAN GOES TO THE ARMY, THAT IS NOT EASY FOR THE POOR GIRLFRIEND. DOUBTS ARISE, THAT SOMETHING WILL CHANGE DURING THAT LONG TIME AND THAT, GOD FORBID, THE YOUNG MAN WILL CHANGE HIS MIND AFTER HE RETURNS. IN THE VERSES, SHE EXPRESSES ALL HER SADNESS AND FEAR..."

THE LEAVES ARE TURNING,
THE RECRUITS ARE DEPARTING.
THE LEAVES ARE FALLING,
AND MORE WILL NOW BE LEAVING!
I DON'T CARE THAT THE LEAVES ARE FALLING,
BUT THAT I FEEL THE LOVE IS FAILING...



"INTRIGUES AND GOSSIP ARE NOT THE MONOPOLY OF THE CITY DWELLERS. IT EXISTS IN THE COUNTRYSIDE TOO. AND THE GIRL, WHILE HER CHOSEN ONE IS ON MILITARY TRAINING AND CANNOT PROTECT HER, ADDRESSES HIM THROUGH VERSES..."

HANDKERCHIEF, COLORED EMBROIDERY,
A MACHINE GUN, MILE, BUY FOR ME,
SO I CAN DEFEND MYSELF FROM THE FOE
WHEN I'M ALONE...



Translation: Iva Jelušić.

Source

Zograf, Aleksandar (2022). *Priče iz drugog rata* [Stories from the Second War]. Belgrade: Popboks/Muzej Jugoslavije.
Reproduced with the author's permission. More about Aleksandar Zograf and his work: <https://www.aleksandarzograf.com/>.

Moral injury and soldiers in conflict

BOOK CONVERSATION: ANTONIO DE LAURI AND TINE MOLENDIJK

Tine Molendijk, Moral Injury and Soldiers in Conflict. Political Practices and Public Perceptions (Routledge, 2021).

Antonio De Lauri (ADL): To begin, what is a “moral injury” (for soldiers) and how did this concept develop?

Tine Molendijk (TM): For many, the idea of troubled soldiers will bring to mind the term post-traumatic stress disorder. This is today’s most used term for psychological problems among soldiers, so well known that even the acronym PTSD is common usage. But is it always the most appropriate term? According to the official definition, PTSD may develop after experience of or directly or indirectly witnessing actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence. Also, fear responses are at the heart of post-traumatic stress. Yet the stories of many military veterans are not about exposure to threat and their symptoms are not fear-based. Just as often their stories are about experiences of moral conflict and resulting feelings of guilt, shame, and anger. This is how the concept of moral injury came into being. Increasingly, both scholars and practitioners voiced criticism about the fact that current PTSD models focus mainly on fear, and as a result, pay only marginal attention to the moral dimensions of trauma.

Jonathan Shay can be called the founding father of moral injury. Shay is a psychotherapist who has spent decades treating Vietnam veterans with severe trauma-related problems. Comparing the experiences of these veterans with those of Achilles and other Greek warriors in Homer’s Iliad, he has described how military trauma has crucial moral dimensions. To capture this, he coined the term moral injury in the 1990s. Psychologists Brett T. Litz and his colleagues have played an important role in further developing the concept of moral injury.

Moral injury is usually defined as the psychological, biological, and social impact of a transgression of deeply held beliefs and expectations, of which the morally injured person may have been the victim, the witness, or the perpetrator, at least in his/her own eyes. Although PTSD and moral injury are not mutually exclusive and partly overlap in practice, their focus is different. In current PTSD research, emotions such as guilt and blame are often either disregarded or treated as resulting from irrational thoughts, so as misplaced emotions. By contrast, the literature on moral injury explicitly goes against such an approach. The term “injury” instead of “disorder” is no coincidence. Moral injury emphasizes that moral considerations and judgments should be taken seriously, and that feelings of guilt, shame, and/or betrayal should therefore be considered potentially “appropriate” emotions. This is because it is moral considerations and emotions that make a person human.

ADL: Although the concept of moral injury may illustrate some important elements of military experience, it may also somehow overlook the different moralities at play in war contexts as well as the complexity of emotions and feelings linked to deployment. What do you think?

TM: I agree that current theory on moral injury tends to take an overly simplistic approach to morality in war, for instance by speaking of “the” civilian morality versus “the” military morality. Yet I am attracted by the concept of moral injury precisely because I think it has the potential to go beyond such dichotomies. By combining philosophical, psychological, and social scientific insight, we can illuminate the moral complexities at play in military practice.

That said, I agree that a one-dimensional focus on the “injury” part of military practice disregards that it can also be exciting, thrilling, and fun. Let me unpack what I mean.

To start, the phenomenon of moral injury—as I approach it—can bring to light that military practice is an area of moral tension. Examining moral injury shows that military practice is a field where questions about right and wrong come up all the time and different values can clash with one another, giving rise to dilemmas and other moral challenges. A person’s moral beliefs and expectations never form a neatly harmonious unity, but always a complex, even “messy” whole. This applies to all people, including, and perhaps even specifically, soldiers. Like all people, soldiers are part of a family, a circle of friends, various subcultures, and society as a whole, and all these social spheres have their own specific values and moral standards that are not necessarily neatly in tune with one another. In addition, soldiers belong to a military community, with values and standards that may be at odds with those of society and, moreover, may conflict with each other: Soldiers must be loyal to their “brotherhood” but also guarantee the safety of civilians, and in doing so they must at all times comply with their political mission. Moreover, they must try to manage all these values and moral standards in high-risk environments as potential targets and witnesses and performers of violence. As a result, some deployment situations can cause moral conflict in a soldier, and in some cases a moral injury.

At the same time, for many military personnel, day-to-day practice could hardly feel farther removed from being “an area of moral tension,” as I just called it. On the contrary, mentioning a term like this in the workplace may well be met with laughter by colleagues. Many soldiers will point out that to them their work is just as morally complicated as any other type of work. “You know well what is right and wrong,” one might say with a shrug. And another might say: “You just have to use your common sense.” This is literally what soldiers have said to me.

Now, to some extent such responses may lie in the military can-do mentality, which focuses on being specific and solving problems, and which thus rejects the notion of doubt and tension. Partly it will also lie in the fact that terms like these often evoke highly exceptional, Hollywood-like images, for example of snipers who must decide whether or not to kill a child. Yet shoulder-shrugging responses are also the result of something else, namely that military practice simply isn’t always highly complicated, let alone painful. For many veterans, their deployments were the best experiences they ever had.

ADL: In your book, you invite the reader to understand the perspective of soldiers. You have collected and shared the stories of several Dutch veterans deployed to Bosnia (Srebrenica) and Afghanistan. Can you briefly tell us a bit more about these stories?

TM: For me as an anthropologist, an investigation always starts with delving into the viewpoint of my research participants. So, for this book on moral injury, I listened to the life stories of eighty soldiers, so they could share what was important to them rather than to me. Also, to make sure I captured the full story and the heterogeneity of soldiers, my selection spanned the entire spectrum of moral injury, ranging from soldiers and veterans without any mental health problems to soldiers and veterans with severe and persistent moral injuries.

What struck me most is that when soldiers spoke about morally injurious experiences and feelings of guilt or blame, they rarely did so as unequivocally as suggested in current conceptualizations of moral injury. Some soldiers explicitly expressed confusion about the significance of their experience. They said that they “can’t work it out” and “can’t solve it,” or their experience caused “a short circuit in my head.” Others expressed confusion implicitly and perhaps unconsciously, uttering ambivalent, even conflicting interpretations of their experience.

For instance, some soldiers constantly switched between saying “I did wrong” and “I didn’t do anything wrong.” Generally, some expressed both profound guilt and great pride with respect to the things they had done. Some switched between speaking with resentment about the “fucking backward” locals in their deployment area and sympathetically calling them “the poor bastards.” Some emphasized that there is “no right or wrong but only survival in war,” but also said that they blamed themselves or others for what they had done on their deployment. Some soldiers expressed great suspicion of the military and politicians, but also said they would give anything to serve in another mission. Some accused judgmental Dutch civilians of “not understanding shit,” but said they judged themselves in the same way. Some said they had learned “to put things in perspective,” but admitted they could get angry about trivial things. And some switched between saying “I can’t stand injustice any longer” and “I’ve become completely indifferent to it all.”

Of course, veterans' statements of non-guilt could just be what they tell themselves, while their stated guilt is what they really believe, or vice versa. But, keeping in mind that morality is not harmonious but complicated, in my book I propose another view. My contention is that in many cases, veterans' expressions of guilt and non-guilt may both be considered genuine, even though they conflict, because when experiencing irresolvable moral conflict, it makes sense to feel guilty and not guilty at the same time.

ADL: Another aspect you address in the book is the relationship between moral injury and public perception. Can you elaborate on this?

TM: Injury is, by definition, a relational phenomenon. Shame, guilt, and anger are all emotions that are about relations with other people. More generally, morality is relations. People do not develop their moral beliefs and expectations in a social vacuum, but in the context of the world they live in and the communities they belong to. So, inevitably, public perception plays a crucial role in moral injury.

Military personnel, specifically, by definition do their job as part of a greater whole. After all, military intervention is a collective undertaking. Soldiers are sent on a mission in the name of society, with the monopoly of violence given by the state. Political leaders decide where to go and what to do there, and society as a whole debates whether a mission is legitimate and whether military action is justified.

Such debates occur not only in parliament and media, but also at birthday parties, in bars, at home. Soldiers told me many stories about such interactions. And as they told me, most people simultaneously do and do not want to hear about their deployment experiences. They want to hear about the killing, what it feels like and whether it is hard. Yet people often seem to expect a particular response: They expect to hear that the soldier is still burdened by the fact that he killed, or they simply want to hear a sensational story about the thrilling madness of war. Instead, soldiers' stories are like the examples I just shared. They are paradoxical. And they can be full of "dirty talk."

But such stories evoke discomfort in civilians: they mess up the notions of perpetrator and victim, normal and abnormal, and good and evil. As a result, they unwittingly reinforce public perceptions of veterans as crazy or at least psychologically damaged. Soldiers are aware of this attitude in society. And because of this attitude, they usually do not readily share their stories. Instead, some isolate themselves from society.

ADL: In your research you also focus on issues such as boredom, thrills, and humor. It is important to go beyond the analysis of the normative and institutional aspects of war and soldiering. Do you think there is still some resistance, for example from scholars, in addressing these issues?

TM: As I write in the book, a typical war story is "about the normalcy of cheering and laughing when seeing a blast of fire, the piercing cries of soldiers at the loss of a buddy, the black humor used to cope with this loss, the easy acceptance of 'collateral damage' resulting from combat and, at the same time, about profound feelings of guilt at being unable to save a child from abuse" (Molendijk 2021, p. 135). Soldiers often describe a confluence of antagonistic feelings, including fear, adrenaline, and excitement. This is the case not only for morally injured soldiers, but also for soldiers in general.

People don't like such stories because they mess up the notions of perpetrator and victim, normal and abnormal, and good and evil—and researchers are people, too. First, we find such stories disconcerting because we actually want to hear only about how traumatizing they are to veterans. That's more reassuring than hearing that combat can "feel good." And second, we just don't like paradoxes. I noticed that when researchers hear soldiers making contradictory statements, they tend to try and resolve which one is sincere and which is false. Yet, as I maintain, paradoxical stories are a logical reflection of the moral complexity of the military job.

So my advice to researchers would be to be aware of the tendency to readily approach contradictions in research data as kinks that need to be ironed out. And be aware of your own moral beliefs and expectations and how they shape the way you approach war and soldiering. Take stories seriously, including dirty talk, including contradictions. Only then does it become possible to really capture soldiers' experience and the wider contexts in which their experience is embedded.

Between privilege and precarity

EUROPEAN SOLDIERS REMOBILIZING
AS PRIVATE SECURITY CONTRACTORS IN AFRICA:
AN INTERVIEW WITH JETHRO NORMAN
BY HEIDI MOGSTAD



This interview was initially conducted on November 25, 2022, for a [WARFUN](#) podcast. This version has been edited and amended for clarity.

What happens to soldiers after they leave the military? From the Middle East to Africa, increasing numbers of demobilized soldiers have found work in private military and security companies or as security consultants, military trainers, and risk management professionals. While they are often in the news, sustained ethnographic research with this group is limited, and they are rarely acknowledged as individuals with complex desires, fears, and anxieties.

What follows is an interview with Jethro Norman about his novel multisited research following, interviewing, and living with security professionals across Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania, and South Sudan.

Jethro's upcoming book project, tentatively titled *Military Afterlives: Private Security Contractors in Africa*, dislodges assumptions about private security contractors as either destabilizing mercenaries or the unwitting proxies of states. Instead, Jethro radically reconceives private security work as a struggle for community and solidarity amid the trauma of demobilization and the precarity of the labor market.

The conversation highlights the heady mix of privilege and precarity that defines contemporary private security work. While money is an indisputable motivation for many, Jethro's research shows that there is far more to this line of work. Among other things, we discuss the allure of life in (post)conflict zones and the complex desires and fears of former soldiers, including escapism and colonial nostalgia. Jethro also shares his personal experiences of conducting research in postconflict areas, his "uncomfortable positionality," and some of the quandaries involved in anthropological research with groups often considered undesirable or repugnant.

Heidi Mogstad (HM): Jethro, I have so many questions I want to ask you, but let's start from the beginning. What made you study former European soldiers turned private security contractors?

Jethro Norman (JN): I initially studied History and Politics at university, but the course mostly focused on Great Power conflict, International Diplomacy, and so on, which I quickly discovered was not my vibe. However, in my final year I took a course with a transnational historian who had interviewed foreign fighters traveling to the Balkans in the 1990s. I was immediately struck by how these war volunteers' messy experiences did not align with the relatively bird's-eye and statecentric image of the world that formed the basis of most of my university coursework. So, energized by this newfound transnational angle, I became interested in private military companies. At that time, around 2014, there was still much alarmist and frankly ahistorical talk about the rise of "corporate mercenaries" meaning the end of the Weberian state and a regression to some kind of neo-medieval era (Singer 2010; McFate 2014). Scholars like Rita Abrahamsen and Michael Williams were already pushing back at this, but for me, there was a larger problem: The voices of these individuals were largely absent from the conversation.

As such, I did a Masters by Research where I reached out to some security contractors working in Somalia. Funnily enough, my initial contact point was through LinkedIn, where some of these guys were starting to market themselves. I approached some of them and asked if they would agree to a Skype interview. Quite a lot just ignored me and a few unsurprisingly told me to "F off," but far more than I had expected had a genuine desire to talk about their experiences.

The Masters was interesting, but you cannot build a relationship with people over Skype, nor understand what is really going on in these places. So next, I applied for Ph.D. funding and spent the best part of a year travelling around East Africa talking to people working for private military and security companies, as well as security consultants, military trainers, humanitarian security professionals, and corporate risk management professionals.

At first, I was concerned with mapping "*the industry*": the companies, the clients, and the contracts, etc. Over time, though, I ended up focusing more on the individuals themselves rather than the specific companies they worked for. Because what became apparent to me was that lying behind a mirage of companies and LinkedIn profiles was a transnational *community*, the core of which is a bunch of former soldiers trying to build a new life in Africa, connected by the shared experience of both military service and their own privatization.

HM: I see. You alluded to this already, but why do you believe it is important that we take these ex-soldiers and private security contractors *seriously*, as you argue in one of your forthcoming articles (Norman in press)?

JN: Partly because security contractors are frequently misunderstood and misrepresented. On the one hand, contractors are quite often maligned, even caricatured as mercenaries. At other times, they are treated as soldiers or veterans, but often through a Foucauldian lens as a kind of "docile automaton"—machines disciplined by training and just following orders. However, the individuals I got to know through my research were not unthinking war machines, nor were they motivated *purely* by money or material gain. Many had strong political convictions and were often highly critical of the nation-state militaries and political establishments they once fought for.

Hence, we need to acknowledge, on the one hand, how diverse these people are, and on the other, that they are a group of human beings that have shared some very particular experiences in the military and then subsequently as private contractors.

Moreover, I believe we can learn a lot from taking them seriously and understanding them through long-term ethnography, as I have done. As other scholars have argued (e.g., Catherine Lutz, Ken MacLeish, and Zoe Wool), soldiers can teach us a lot about the way our world works, not least by complicating the neat boundaries between war and peace, and soldier and civilian.

In my case, the group of former soldiers I got to know provided a unique window into Western society. Many of them experienced defeat in Iraq and Afghanistan firsthand and are acutely, viscerally aware of the declining power of the West. Moreover, they are angry about it and seek ways to escape or rebel against this new world.

HM: The idea of *taking people seriously* has become a bit of a cliché or buzzword in Anthropology, but that does not mean it is unimportant. Arguably, it is what ethnographic research is all about. And, as you suggested, it might be especially important when it comes to people who are frequently caricatured and misinterpreted.

Of course, there must still be space for criticism and critique. However, as Astuti (2017: 119) argues, “when people—living human beings—are firmly center stage, one is bound to see temporal and contextual transformations that make it impossible to give a one-dimensional account.”

Jethro, please share more from your fieldwork. What research methods did you use, and how did you go about building trust and relationships with your interlocutors in what I can only imagine must have been an environment characterized by mistrust and secrecy?

JN: The mainstay of my research is semistructured interviews and ethnographic observations. This kind of private security work is quite an insular world, and there are a lot of closed and informal networks. So it should come as little surprise that it took a long while before I made any real breakthroughs. Initially, some people would not talk to me, and if they did, they would be quite suspicious and give abrupt or even hostile interviews.

I vividly remember one of my very first interviews, which was with a towering man, ex-Special Forces, very successful in the business. As I blurted out my first question he stopped me midsentence, looked me in the eye, and gruffly said, “Now, do not be alarmed,” before flourishing a pistol from somewhere around his midriff and placing it on the table, where it sat between him and me for the duration of the interview. This kind of display was something of an outlier; most of my interviews were not like that. And fortunately, after some months, I had made friends and been invited for beers, to watch sports, and so on. And at that point, things started to snowball, and doors began opening everywhere.

This methodological experience also explains why the central concept in the book is what I call *the contractor community*. I argue that while private security is an intensely competitive and cutthroat industry, behind the companies and the contracts there still lies a *community* of mostly ex-military figures who know each other and socialize with each other through their work and military background. So at some point I had managed to become at least tentatively allowed into this community. I was sometimes asked “who I had served with in the military” or “which security company” I was with, for example. I was always upfront that I was a Ph.D. researcher and that while I wanted to hear their perspective, I still stressed my own academic freedom of interpretation. But I did not hide the fact that fieldwork was also an opportunity for me at that time to explore and travel, which I think resonated with a lot of these guys.

I should say here that there is some uncomfortable positionality to this fieldwork. I was a white guy in my early twenties who liked to play rugby and football and did not mind sitting in a bar until 4 am. This certainly made things easier. That is not to say that there were not some ethical quandaries that I struggled with, especially when conversations included misogyny or racism.

Lastly, aside from fieldwork, I also visited the national archives in Nairobi and London because I was interested in how contemporary private security work in East Africa had aspects of continuity between the colonial and postcolonial periods.

HM: That is very interesting, and we will return to some of it later. However, I first wanted to ask you about the contractors' relationship with the military and their past lives as professional soldiers. Contrary to popular opinion, soldiers often characterize war zones as *spaces of freedom*, something you also touch upon in your work. Yet you write that the ex-soldiers you worked with also contrasted the freedom they experienced as private contractors to the rigidity and bureaucratization of the contemporary military in their home countries. Can you elaborate on this?

JN: I think security work promises an opportunity to recapture some of the rhythms and facets of soldierly life. You are surrounded by your former comrades, you work overseas and leave your family at home, and you go to places deemed to be exciting, dangerous, or exotic. Hence, for some of these individuals, security work is an opportunity to *remobilize*—a second chance for a life of travel, comradeship, and adventure.

That said, many of the contractors I got to know were not merely hoping to get back to how things were in the military; they were trying to find something the military could not give them in the first place! Some of them had very ambivalent, if not openly hostile, relationships to the militaries they had served in. And some suggested that security work offered greater freedoms and opportunities than military institutions, which they increasingly saw as bureaucratized—even feminized. And this is *strange*. Because the private security industry can be brutal, with short-term contracts and underregulation, which often leaves these former soldiers in a precarious position. In my book, I explain their embrace of freedom and risk-taking as a means to rationalize their own precarity in the present. However, it is also a way to criticize the military establishment they came from.

The other irony is that their work often directly feeds into the very same bureaucratized systems they are critical of. During my fieldwork, I managed to access an oil camp in Kenya through a private security contractor I knew. One thing that struck me was these incredibly over-the-top security procedures they had to enforce through which everything was ordered and controlled to a minute degree.

At that time, I had been living outside the camp for around a month, talking to communities living around the oil sites. And it became immediately apparent that those inside the camp had no idea what was going on outside their bubble. Hence, for most contractors, it is probably more the *idea* of freedom rather than a lived reality.

HM: That is an important distinction. Let's talk more about the ex-soldiers' motivations to remobilize as private security contractors. In my own work, I have been particularly interested in the question of what *attracts* people to participate in wars they do not believe in or have any personal stakes in, but you make the point that your interlocutors were also trying to *escape* something in their home countries. Can you say something more about this?

JN: I think there is always a mix of push and pull factors, and the question of agency is a thorny one indeed. There are several contexts that are important here in explaining the push as well as the pull of security work.

First, as I mentioned, many contractors had experienced the military debacles in Iraq and Afghanistan firsthand, and then returned to societies that were reeling from the global financial crisis. A lot of the conversations we had were about specific issues related to demobilization, such as marital issues, a feeling of not fitting into society, or finding meaningful work, or indeed finding work at all. And the book I am writing tries to front this context—by reconceiving private security work as not simply about money—but at its heart, a struggle for *community* and *solidarity* amid the trauma of demobilization and the precarity of the labor market.

So this context helps us understand the turn to private security work at this specific moment in time in the 2010s. But the broader backdrop is the steady decline of Western authority and influence at the twilight of empire. In the book, I focus historically on the UK and US, and argue that much soldierly work outside the formal military during the twentieth century—*mercenarism* if you want to call it that—often took place in the context of the decline of empire, with ex-soldiers fighting anticolonial movements in Africa and elsewhere. I argue that we must also understand this phenomenon as part of a larger history in which soldiers circulated from Europe to Africa through the colonial and postcolonial periods to the present day.

Zooming back to East Africa in the 2010s, one of the things that surprised me was how a number of these contractors were reading colonial histories and travelogues of colonial adventurers. Through this, they could recast their private security roles in terms of these colonial adventurers. In effect, I think they found refuge in an imagined settler-colonial past, reinscribing colonial and postcolonial legacies into exploitative neoliberal work practices in order to make the precariousness of private security palatable. So private security becomes a way to escape or even rebel against this new world. Contractors do not see themselves as futuristic, dystopian corporate agents of “new wars” as some academics would suggest, but as the exact reverse: They view their privatized roles as akin to colonial adventurers and explorers.

Of course, much of this is specific to the East African context. Britain’s Kenya colony was constructed as a “white man’s country” (Jackson 2011), but these settlers were not just any white men. It was very much a place of elite privilege, an aristocratic playground in pristine nature, a place of escape, where the ordinary rules did not apply. And this legacy is still alive today—and partly explains the contemporary allure of working there among certain former soldiers, especially from higher ranks.

HM: Colonialism has so many afterlives. These expressions of colonial nostalgia and revival are both disturbing and fascinating. They also remind me of Norwegian ex-soldiers who remobilized as private security contractors in Congo and were charged with espionage and murder. While imprisoned in Kisangani, the two men formed a club for other expat prisoners, which they called Expatriate Club Stanleyville Prison (a reference to the Belgian colonial name of Kisangani). They also regularly expressed nostalgia for colonial Africa (Bangstad and Bertelsen 2010).

Before we conclude the interview, I wanted to ask you about another part of your work that I found intriguing and which unsettles popular imaginaries of war and conflict zones. In one of your upcoming articles, you look at the international green zone in Somalia, which you argue served as a space of not only protection or safety, but also recreation and entertainment. This reminded of the work of historian Meredith Lair (2011), who discusses how boredom was an enemy to the U.S. mission and efficiency in Vietnam and how, in order to combat this boredom, the military created a standard of living for troops in Vietnam which often was higher than what the soldiers enjoyed at home. Could you please tell us more about the role of entertainment and recreation in the international green zone in Somalia?

JN: I think there is some resonance with Meredith Lair’s work that you describe, especially in relation to the disappointment that some individuals felt—that their military experience was not as exciting or life-changing as they perhaps expected it to be. Quite a number of contractors I spoke to claimed they had seen far more “action” in their postmilitary careers than they ever did in decades of military service. At the same time, it is a curious thing that places like Mogadishu or Juba are deemed areas of extreme risk, areas of hardship for international workers, and yet they are also places that some individuals quietly *enjoy*. Some security contractors, for example, seem to find these austere, regulated, and militarized spaces more familiar and even desirable to live in.

Over time, they become not just a place to work but to *live*. I remember one contractor in Mogadishu telling me how nice it is: “Kabul with seaside,” he joked. At the airport, you can buy shark jaws and other curios to take home as souvenirs. People tell stories of some of the best fishing on the planet, with the ocean teeming with fish. Again, though, the risk and reward calculation comes into play, as there are numerous sharks in the water (graphically illustrated by a photo circulating of an unfortunate pilot who had gone harpoon fishing and had his leg bitten off by a shark).



One interpretation of this is that this kind of extreme-sport leisure and recreation becomes a way to deal with the disappointment of not getting the real “action” that many had sought out or expected when travelling to somewhere like Mogadishu. These are important rituals for military masculinities, where social and leisure activities are not separate from war, but constitutive of it.

One of the crucial points here is that these places, like the green zone airport compound in Mogadishu, were always supposed to be temporary: They were supposed to disappear once the mission was complete and stability restored. These are designed as *nonplaces*—spaces of transience, buildings made of prefabricated material, scattered about in patchwork style. But decades later, they are still there. And as the temporary slides into the permanent, leisure becomes increasingly important to maintain the balance between the comfortable inside and the chaotic outside that is the hallmark of enclaves everywhere.

HM: That is very interesting. To conclude, I want to return to the question of your personal experience of studying these private security contractors up close. You mentioned previously that you considered fieldwork in East Africa as an opportunity to travel and explore, and that you did not mind sitting at the bar until four in the morning and chatting with your interlocutors. At the same time, you also underlined that it was difficult and time-consuming to gain trust and acceptance and that you sometimes struggled with ethical quandaries, for instance when your interlocutors expressed racist and misogynistic attitudes. Would you say that you had similar experiences of joy, freedom, and precarity as your interlocutors, or did your research provoke other feelings and experiences? And how did you deal with the ethical quandaries you mentioned?

JN: The short answer is to a degree. Going back to my “uncomfortable positionality,” I certainly felt some similar emotions at that time in my life.

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I suppose it is a part of why I was able to be accepted—that in some senses, my emotions were aligned. However, I would caveat by saying that there were plenty more times when I felt boredom and frustration—and especially in the first six months, *rejection*—rather than intense thrill or joy, or even fear.

However, this is only to a degree, because I certainly would not say that I experienced the same precarity. True, I was a broke Ph.D. student paying for fieldwork costs out of my Ph.D. scholarship. But I did not have a family, I did not have any responsibilities really. Moreover, I had never been a soldier, I had not experienced war in that way. So in that sense my experience was clearly not comparable.

I have already noted how my rather uncomfortable gendered and raced positionality meant I possessed relevant cultural capital that made accessing this particular community easier. Yet there were also some ethical quandaries that I faced. Do you challenge racism and misogyny when it emerges in conversations, for example? What are the limits of the things you will accept in the quest to gain access? Having said that, I want to point out that I experienced an awful lot of this kind of thing from other international actors, especially humanitarian aid workers, albeit often in a more subtle or less blunt manner.

What I would like to end on is to emphasize the importance of fieldwork, and especially when it concerns politically and emotionally charged topics such as war, or apparently “unlikeable” (Pasieka 2019) groups of people such as mercenaries or security contractors. This point becomes more essential in our current era where long-term fieldwork is becoming more and more difficult. I think the future of sustained fieldwork looks a little bleak right now, but I hope I am wrong!

HM: I hope so too! Thank you for sharing your reflections and experiences, and good luck with finalizing your book. I very much look forward to reading it.

Researching "fun"

ANTONIO DE LAURI INTERVIEWS
SAHANA UDUPA



Antonio De Lauri (ADL): We can start with a short biographical note. Sahana Udupa is Professor of Media Anthropology at the University of Munich (LMU München) and Principal Investigator of the For Digital Dignity Research Network. She teaches and researches online extreme speech, politics of artificial intelligence, critical digital studies, news and journalism, and media policy. She is the recipient of the Joan Shorenstein Fellowship at Harvard University, European Research Council Grant Awards, and the Francqui Chair (Belgium).

Great to have you here, Sahana. In the WARFUN project, we explore the different articulations of "fun" as experienced in war contexts.

Generally, the meaning of fun is often taken for granted both in scientific literature and everyday life. Beyond dictionary definitions, there are few explanations of what fun involves and how to differentiate it from other social experiences.

In one of your papers, "Nationalism in the Digital Age: Fun as a Metapractice of Extreme Speech," you address fun as a key aspect of right-wing mobilization. How do you define fun? And how did you come to realize it has such a central role in the context of extreme speech?

Sahana Udupa (SU): Thanks for having me here. I consider fun as an indelible aspect of online right-wing affiliation and mobilization.

Fun is not frivolity of action. It is not pointless “timepass.” Quite the contrary. It is laden with political purpose and bears serious implications. My key argument is that fun is a metapractice—practice of practices—that frames the distinct online activities of “fact-checking,” argumentative confrontations, assembly, and aggression, which are prominent among right-wing volunteers active in social media networks. Taking a media practice perspective, I have proposed a four-part model to understand fun in relation to right-wing political cultures online:

- being “funny” as a tactical way to enter and rise to prominence within online debates and, by extension, the broader public domain;
- deriving fun from the sheer freshness of colloquialism in political debates, which stands in contrast to the serious tone of political deliberation and official centrality, and by mainstreaming witty political campaign styles as an everyday form of political communication;
- fun as satisfaction of achieving a goal by working with one’s own resources, and in finding tangible results such as hashtag trending, virality, and perceived “real world” changes; and
- as group identification and collective (if at times anonymous) celebration of aggression.

This model emerged while carrying out multiyear ethnographic fieldwork in India among groups of online actors who style themselves as the guardians of national pride. Their declared aim is to upturn what they see as the dominance of “pseudosecular posturing” among the power-wielding elite. A significant part of their online activities and nationalist self-presentations is linked to electoral competition and efforts by different political parties to gain or remain in power. Amid this hectic space of electoral and partisan campaigning, social media has provided a new mediatic context for the centuries-long movement of Hindu nationalism, and for the ambitions of the political party that represents this ideology to hold on to power. The role of online social networking sites has been palpable in terms of drawing a large number of the digitally savvy generation toward Hindu nationalism; in familiarizing and reproducing the ideology of Hindu nationalism as a composite, yet distinct sensibility of Hindu-first India and majoritarian belligerence; and offering a force field where such an exclusivist ideology is rendered acceptable and enjoyable.

The article you have mentioned deals with the last point, since it was amply clear from fieldwork and analysis that the visceral aspects of fun and enjoyment have emerged as critical to right-wing mobilization and affinities online.

Building on this work, I have been exploring the theoretical significance of fun for right-wing movements globally. Across edited collections and articles, in conversation with a rich body of scholarship on Internet cultures, I have delineated fun as it emerges on different levels of online practice linked to oppressive ideologies.

As the four-part model suggests, fun is about ways to enter public discourse and draw the attention of other users through distinct uptake for colloquial styles of speech and forms of self-presentation. It is about new styles and resources for communicating the unsayable—of chest-thumping braggadocio and a bare-knuckles approach to speech. Internet memes offer a vivid illustration of this phenomenon. Memes are striking in their multimodality and the joy of irreverent and witty mash-ups that drive a political point through creative participatory labor. Fun lies in remediating memetic texts and infusing them with the splendor of pop cultural symbols—from Bollywood, Hollywood, and regional cinema to folklore, local idioms, and wordplays.

Fun is not just funny. While hilarity is a key element of online fun, a great deal of fun is in trending the hashtag and making a mark, however momentary, in online discussions. This relates to the third point in the model—fun in relation to satisfaction attached to online labor and palpable results of online visibility metrics. Sometimes, the “fruits” of their online labor are sought outside the online worlds—from bringing down a politician from their incumbent position to forcing someone to tender an apology or even inflicting physical violence. Within the online environments, activities like trending the hashtags are experienced as absolute victory over opposing narratives. Fun generated by trending nationalist hashtags is often seen as a collective endeavor buoyed by success, in ways that denial of the belligerent tone and abuses is made possible by attributing the activity to a potentially expanding network of supporters of which they are a part.

This brings us to the last point in the model—group identification and collective celebration of aggression. Fun as a metapractice signals collective aggression as constitutive of identity that blends with and derives strength from the new media ecology of playfulness and outrage. Anthropologist Peter Hervik (2019) has documented how the far-right in Denmark uses the derisive label of “normie” to dismiss left liberals as naïve, boring, and stubborn social justice warriors who take offense at all manner of speech because they “don’t get the joke.” There is an effort here to create group identification by delegitimizing objections to what is framed as “fun.” Fun as a metapractice provides the new enabling ground for right-wing movements and exclusionary politics to stabilize and complement conventional strategies of “serious” appeal and dissemination.

The distinction between these aspects is only an analytical one; in practice, they intertwine and constitute one another. Together, laden with political purpose, fun emerges as a mediatic condition of gathering together on one’s own will, chiding and clapping together, exchanging online “high fives” for “trending” or pushing back opposing narratives, and making merry with the colloquial use of online language and vibrant visuality, which are distinct from a serious style of political pontification or cadre-based disciplining. Fun offers the daily means to express affiliations through playful outrage.

Furthermore, I suggest that online fun bears *formal* similarity to “objectivity” in the Western journalistic discourse (Tuchman 1972) and liberal communicative reason more broadly. They both embed distance and deniability. This means fun creates a transsubjective point of address and instigates collective pleasures of identity that can mitigate risk. Distance and deniability implied in objectivity and liberal communicative reason based on idealized “impersonal norms of discourse” (Cody 2011, 40) are precisely the performative principles for online fun as a metapractice characterized by collective joking, networked vitriol, and trending. In a curious twist, fun and reason become substitutable in a formal sense. This analysis thus questions the binary between rational action and fun, which has been the basis of political action in the self-performance of Western liberal democracy.

It instead reveals the similarities between them, highlighting the historical formations of privilege that imbue fun with political power. Methodologically, this entails jettisoning the binaries to pay attention to what people actually do and what meanings they derive from their actions.

All these do not dismiss the subversive potential of the ludic, but raise the question around who is claiming the rhetorical and performative resources of “fun” in digital spaces, as well as the specific ways in which online fun as a metapractice enables aggression and assembly for exclusionary ideologies.

ADL: What are the implications of this analysis for regulation and policy?

SU: Over the years, I have been drawing out the implications of the four-part model, especially the strategic use of fun to evade regulatory gaze and content filters, and relatedly, the ways in which “fun” presents serious challenges to online content moderation and internet regulation. In countries such as Germany and Denmark, online “fun” has allowed far-right activists to escape the strict regulations around speech; simultaneously, these actors derive pleasure from escaping the legal nets through their clever twist of words, suggestive phrasing, and coded language.

AI-assisted content moderation struggles to address culturally coded, cryptic, and indirect forms of extreme speech, since such expressions are laced with sarcasm, irony, and in-group joking. Online gaming environments and right-wing “echo chambers” are especially thick with such subcultural semiotics. Styles and forms of expressions are often so heavily coded that they are difficult to comprehend even to new gamers or members, let alone those outside the community. Many of these word games and visual/multimodal “innovations” originate in gaming communities and image boards. It is very difficult for AI-assisted moderation systems to keep pace with or preempt such “creativity” in vitriolic cultures.

"fun is not frivolity of action. It is not pointless "timepass." Quite the contrary. It is laden with political purpose and bears serious implications"

ADL: Fun plays a role in identity formation, and it is also important in the definition of what we see as "normal." How do these aspects emerge in your research?

SU: Fun plays an important role in reproducing and familiarizing as well as reconfiguring historically inflected forms of social fissures and affinities, and entrenched structures of racialization. In online environments, the role of fun is starkly evident. In these conversational contexts, fun greases the surface where—to use Sarah Ahmed’s phrasing—hate could “slide between signs and objects.” In the *Digital Hate* volume, we have described this as the “colloquialization of exclusion.” However, although online mediatic conditions such as fun are important, exclusionary extreme speech is not simply an outcome of it, in that it does not affect everyone equally and in the same way. Let me cite from our upcoming book, *Digital Unsettling*: “Greased as it may be with experiential autonomy, observability, algorithmically mediated polarization, and fun within the participatory condition of the digital, hate is not a free slide... [They are shaped by] longer historical conditions ... Assertions of aggrieved power common among white supremacists and their expression online in the form of exclusionary extreme speech emerge not only out of structural subordination under oppressive market conditions but also by a sense of dethronement, a product of far-reaching racialized processes of the global legacies of the Empire. Crucially, through nation-state relations canonized by colonialism, aggression wrought by imaginary wounds unfolds *within* different national and subnational contexts as racialized relations of majoritarian belligerence [against “domestic” minoritized publics]” (Udupa and Dattatreya 2023, 92-93).

ADL: Debates about the link between online violent language and physical violence point to different aspects, including the much-discussed issue of the impact of human proximity on the willingness to use violence (i.e., the closer the person the harder to inflict violence). What is your opinion about this?

SU: Online fun, like war, can have disinhibition effects. But I do not wish to overstate this point. If we take the analysis of fun as one that is rooted in historical and ethnographic sensibility to structures of power, we recognize that some forms of violence emerge precisely under conditions of close physical copresence. Indeed, physical attacks on communities and objects also become the material for more “fun” online, as illustrated, for instance, by right-wing groups in Europe filming themselves burning sacred texts or refugee shelters and sharing them on online networks.

This interview draws on the following works

Udupa, S. (2019). “Nationalism in the Digital Age: Fun as a Meta-practice of Extreme Speech.” *International Journal of Communication* 13: 3143-3163.
Udupa, S., and E.G. Dattatreya (2023). *Digital Unsettling: Decoloniality and Dispossession in the Age of Social Media*. New York: New York University Press.
Udupa, S., I. Gagliardone, P. and Hervik (eds.) (2021). *Digital Hate: The Global Conjunction of Extreme Speech*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Other works cited

Ahmed, S. (2004). *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
Cody, F. (2011). “Publics and Politics.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 40: 37-52.
Hervik, P. (2019). “Ritualized Opposition in Danish Online Practices of Extremist Language and Thought.” *International Journal of Communication* 13: 3104-3121.
Tuchman, G. (1972). “Objectivity as Strategic Ritual: An Examination of Newsmen’s Nations of Objectivity.” *The American Journal of Sociology* 77 (4): 660-679.



Image 1: Reservist Championship discipline. Eva Johais

Let me entertain you

CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS IN PRACTICE BY EVA JOHAIS

Fieldnotes from the Open House Day of the German Armed Forces, 2022

Getting official access to members of the armed forces is tricky. Therefore, I eagerly seized every opportunity to get in contact with soldiers for my research on soldier humor in the context of the WARFUN project. Accordingly, the event when the German Armed Forces (Bundeswehr) deliberately reach out to the public was not to be missed. Usually, several military barracks across the country invite citizens to take a look behind the scenes. Owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, the yearly Open House Day was reduced to an online event in 2020 and 2021 and a one-site event in 2022 that took place in Warendorf. The event was combined with the holding of the German Reservist Championship, which allowed visitors to watch soldiers demonstrating their skills. Apart from that, the program included an information fair of different units of the armed forces and related organizations as well as an all-day stage program. The following summary gives an impression of my observations during the day.

Warendorf is a middle-size city in northwestern Germany that hosts the sport school of the Bundeswehr. The school trains the armed forces' sports instructors and organizes major events. Apart from the military presence, the city is renowned among horse lovers for the annual stallion parade of the time-honored North Rhine-Westphalian national stud.

During my train journey the day before, I recognized the unusual density of people wearing impeccable camouflage uniforms and polished black boots. When I arrive, I make a detour to the event site before checking in at the hotel. A local whom I ask for directions refers to the upcoming event as a festival. I reach the venue by crossing the wooden "Devil's Bridge," spanning a small river lined with trees—an idyllic scene. A few military vehicles and tanks are already arranged on a vast green field.



When I return the next morning, I enter through the less idyllic main entrance and have to give away my deodorant stick at the bag search. In return, I receive a green visitor wristband. The event is already in full swing, and the key event, the German Reservist Championship, is underway. In the first discipline, four soldiers carry a "wounded" comrade on a tarpaulin, accompanied by a soldier on a bike. The carriers begin to sweat under the bright sun.

After watching several teams finish, I walk over to the stands that overlook the competition field for the other disciplines. The left stand and half of the seats of the middle stand are reserved for military and some civilian VIPs, while the other half is open to the public. The two areas are separated by barrier tape, visibly upholding the civil-military distinction.



From the civilian area, I follow the discipline that consists of mastering several parkour-like obstacles—walls, tubes, a ditch of water—and a shooting exercise.

In parallel with the championship, other program items take place on or in front of a big stage, such as interviews with representatives of different troop branches and a demonstration by dog handlers. The moderator emphasizes that the stage program is being broadcast nationwide. After a while, the music corps tries to boost the atmosphere. The ensemble mainly consists of wind instruments but also includes a drummer and two bass guitarists. To my surprise, the soldiers take turns as singers and do their best to fulfil the event's mission—which the first song title captures: "Let me entertain you!"



Image 3: Reservist championship parkour. Eva Johais

The official highlight of the day is a visit by the German Defence Minister, Christine Lambrecht. In her greeting she underlines the importance of soldiers and reservists and additional investment in the armed forces, announced by Chancellor Olaf Scholz in reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.



Image 4: Defence Minister visit. Eva Johais

When I take a tour through the area, I observe that the event involves not only branches of the military, but also partner institutions such as the police, the Federal Forestry, the German Technical Relief Agency, and the German Life Preserver Association. A food boulevard offers a variety of culinary options, and a mechanical horse ride provides entertainment for children.

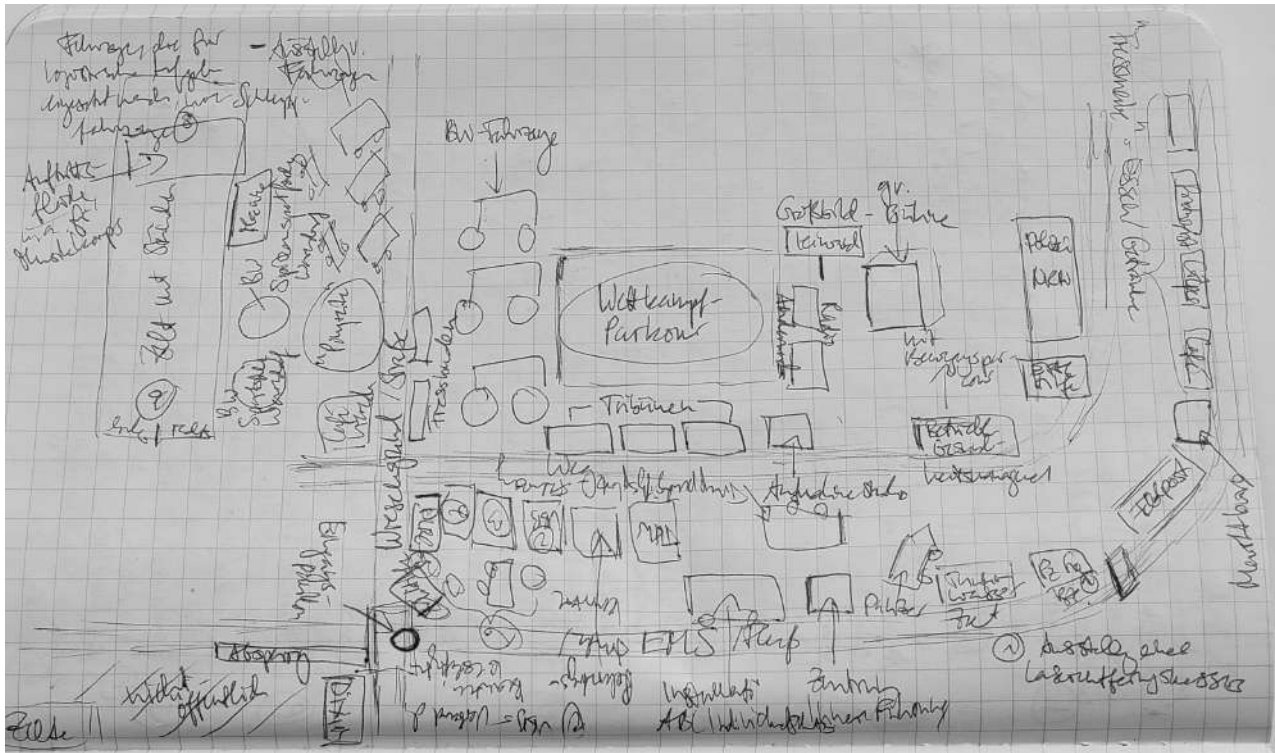


Image 5: Map of the venue. Eva Johais

I abstain from horse riding but join in other entertainment. I queue at the “market office” to pick up a goodie bag containing a notepad, a softball, and gummy bears. I complete the five stations of the “movement parkour” following instructions from a soldier from the Bundeswehr’s operational health management. The exercises aim to stabilize the spine and shoulders, improving coordination and activating muscles, and are designed for the Armed Forces’ desk managers and driving instructors who lack regular physical movement.

When I overhear that another activity for visitors is shooting, I am keen to try it out. I would really like to experience why my soldier interlocutors have described shooting as fun. Unfortunately, I cannot find where this is being offered.

Apart from observing the event, I had also hoped to make contact with soldiers. When I spot a team that took part in the Reservist Championship, I pluck up courage and strike up a conversation with one of its members. The conversation revolves around the role of reservists in the German Armed Forces and how the teams prepare for the championship. My interlocutor explains that training can be difficult as only a few sports sites provide the facilities to train for the championship disciplines, such as shooting ranges and obstacle courses, and that team members often live too far apart to train together on a regular basis. After a while, I sneak in some questions about his professional biography and soldier humor.

When the team leaves, a senior soldier, with the rank of master sergeant, says he could “also tell me something.” This time, I disclose my research interest in soldier humor and affiliation with the WARFUN project up front. After talking about his professional career, he shares a couple of funny anecdotes. The one I find most amusing concerns a trick that instructors played on new recruits. They “scared” the recruits, as he says, by demonstrating what kind of punishment they can expect in the case of misconduct: A soldier knelt on the lawn and cut the grass with nail scissors. In addition, he retells one of the anecdotes his father passed on about the World War II soldier experience. Together with his comrades, his father dismantled a superior’s vehicle and ransacked its component parts. Although the military police investigated the incident, the comrades got away with it because they all kept their mouths shut and denied the offence.

When I set off to reach the train at about 4 pm, the flow of visitors is tapering off and the information stands are being removed. The festival is over—a pleasant and well-organized civil-military encounter, but far from a jolly joint party.

"Diet nutrition" on the Zelengora Mountain

AUTHOR: DJURO BAJIĆ

**TITLE: "DIJETALNA ISHRANA" NA ZELENGORI
["DIET NUTRITION" ON THE ZELENGORA
MOUNTAIN]**

**IN: TREĆA KRAJIŠKA BRIGADA: ZBORNİK
SJEĆANJA [THE THIRD BRIGADE OF KRAJINA:
COLLECTION OF MEMORIES]**

PUBLISHER: VOJNOIZDAVAČKI ZAVOD, 1969

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE: SERBO-CROATIAN / CROATIAN-SERBIAN

TRANSLATION AND INTRODUCTION: IVA JELUŠIĆ

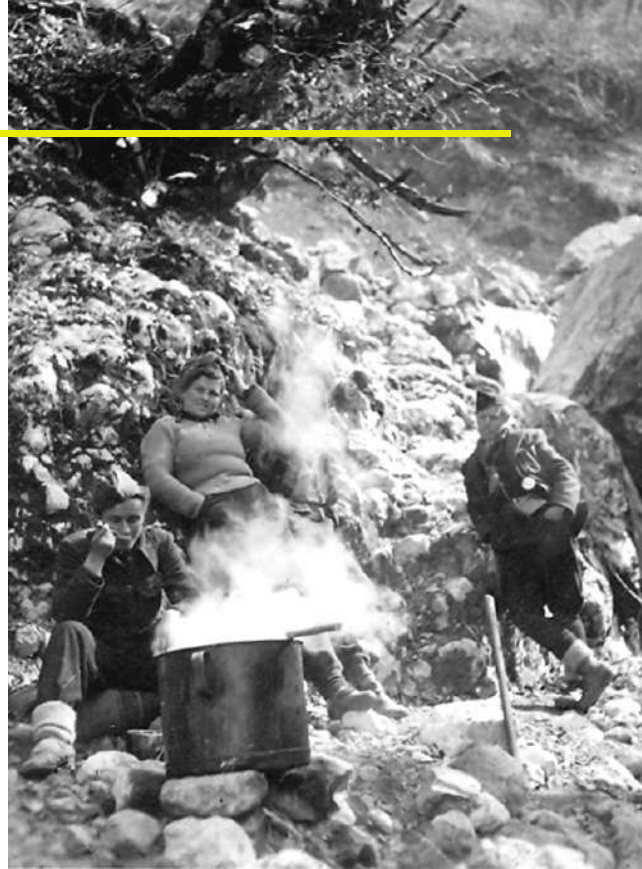


Image: Muzej II zasjedanja AVNOJ-a, Jajce / Museum of the II Session of AVNOJ, Jajce. Further reproduction is prohibited

Introduction

"Dad, send food," Žorž Skrigin jokingly notes, was most likely the content of the telegram sent by Randolph Churchill, son of the somewhat more famous Winston Churchill, on one of the May days of 1944 following the Landing on Drvar (western Bosnia and Herzegovina). In just a few hours, parachutes loaded with food packages rained down on the Bosnian mountain Jadovnik. Finally, the members of the Allied Military Mission and a few British journalists managed to calm down. After a whole day of hide and seek with some German troops in the woods and a night escape beyond their reach, everyone got hungry. And the hunger of the boys from the mission was so great, explains Skrigin, that they threatened not to go ahead with the Partisans if they did not get something to eat. When Boško Šiljegović, the political commissar of the Eight Corps, "knowing that we had no food and that it was impossible to create it, curtly gave us his order to move," the aforementioned boys, albeit continuing to complain, followed. Notably, the Partisans, after they finally reached safety and to the surprise of the members of the Mission, automatically got into a circle and danced and sang along to the harmonica. Hungry and all.[1]

The ways in which wars are retold is culturally specific and largely depends on the abilities and aptitudes of those who decide to share their recollections. Memoir literature about the Yugoslav People's Liberation Struggle (*Narodnooslobodilačka borba*) abounds in notes about food. By providing a glimpse into the behavior of unnamed members of the Allied Military Mission, the episode described highlights why the Partisans and their supporters focused so much attention on it; the scarcity of food that they had ample opportunity to get accustomed to throughout the war made everything related to nutrition one of the most important matters for those who gathered in the anti-fascist resistance.

[1] Žorž Skrigin, *War and Stage* (Belgrade: Turistička štampa, 1968), pp. 255-261, quote on p. 260. The photo that Skrigin shot while the Partisans danced can be seen in: "Partisan Circle Dances," Part 2 on page 08.

Partisan units that were located in agriculturally rich areas (especially in Slavonia, eastern Croatia, and in Vojvodina, northern Serbia) ate better, while in many other parts both Partisans and civilians often ate little or irregularly, and occasionally starved.

The claim that the Yugoslav Partisan army was a people's army is often interpreted as propaganda, but, given that it depended on the population of Yugoslavia, especially the peasantry, for survival—primarily for food, but also for clothing and footwear, as well as shelter—this claim rings very true. In addition, as mentioned in the episode described here and in the source text that follows, the Partisans could count on Allied help from mid-1943. A lot was captured in numerous attacks on enemy trains and warehouses that were carried out throughout the war, and in crises some units resorted to exchanging hostages for food. Finally, when there were no other possibilities, they ate horses, then tree bark and some types of forest plants—grass to the untrained eye.

During the war, some people died of hunger, and some died of overeating after relatively long stretches with little or no food to eat. Between these sad extremes existed a wide variety of situations. For members and supporters of the Partisan army, these were the cause of a large part of their worries. This gave their enemies material to mock them, but they were also able to joke about their circumstances. Observed from a grassroots perspective, a significant part of the Partisan *poiesis* of the People's Liberation Struggle was joking about it.[2] The humor could be satirical but good-natured, as is the case with the text that follows. It was often simple, even childish, for example when hungry Partisans recklessly gorged themselves on accidentally discovered homemade jam: The more soldiers got diarrhea afterwards, the more intense the mockery.[3]

This humor could be brutal, but it was rarely shared in written form.

[2] The Partisan *poiesis* is explained in Iva Jelušić, "The Merry Wind," *WarFun Diaries* 1 (December 2022), pp. 43-44.

[3] Skrigin, *War and Stage*, 207.

For instance, when passing by a fighter who could not continue to march and was sitting leaning against a tree, begging his comrades to kill him and not to leave him to the approaching German troops,[4] a Partisan actor caustically thought to himself: "There was no horse to carry him, he knew that well—because he ate them together with the rest of us." [5] There was certainly much of this kind of humor, referred to by researchers as black or bawdy or gallows humor (the kind that is said to gradually develop as an individual becomes accustomed to life in wartime,[6] that often dominates wartime magazines written by soldiers for soldiers, World War I trench newspapers being the most famous,[7] and that is sometimes defined as "infused with a masculine spirit of teasing,"[8] meaning crude and sexist), I very rarely came across it in printed publications issued either during the war or during the existence of socialist Yugoslavia.[9]

In any case, the frequent reference to food in the sources, as well as the highlighted ability to joke about this matter even in the most difficult situations, points to a multilayered history behind the polished master narrative about the undoubtedly heroic but also desperate Partisan struggle against fascist forces. The following narrative engages with the everyday experiences of ordinary people who struggled to survive the war. In it humor arises as an important instrument of relaxation and socialization, as well as an outlet for the feelings of ever-present hopelessness and dread. In other words, humor and laughter can be considered a wartime necessity. No topic is recognized as too serious and no taboo as beyond the limit of what is allowed; and therein perhaps lies the reason for its ubiquity.

[4] The main way Partisan units traveled around Yugoslavia was on foot. The usual traces that were left behind the Partisan columns, especially in cases of long and difficult marches (the described instance took place during the escape from the enemy encirclement during the Battle of Sutjeska, one of the most difficult battles fought on the territory of Yugoslavia during World War II), were injured, sick, and exhausted people who often perished while their comrades were still passing by. It was not exceptional for some of them, the more clear-headed ones, to beg their comrades to kill them so they would not fall into enemy hands.

[5] Joža Rutić, "Dva dana sa Sutjeske" ["Two Days from Sutjeska"], in *Sutjeska: zbornik radova, knjiga 5* [*Sutjeska: Collection of Works, volume 5*], ed. Milinko Djurović (Belgrade: Vojnoizdavački zavod JNA "Vojno delo", 1961), p. 423.

[6] Tim O'Brien, "The Lives of the Dead," in *The Things They Carried* (Boston, MA and New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1990).

[7] For instance, see: Koenraad Du Pont, "Nature and Functions of Humor in Trench Newspapers (1914-1918)," in *Humor, Entertainment, and Popular Culture during World War I*, ed. Clémentine Tholas-Disset and Karen A. Ritzenhoff (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 107-121.

[8] Tim Cook, "I Will Meet the World with a Smile and a Joke": Canadian Soldiers' Humour in the Great War," *Canadian Military History* 22 (2) (2013): 54.

[9] That, of course, deserves its own discussion.

"DIET NUTRITION" ON THE ZELENGORA MOUNTAIN

Well, it must be admitted that our quartermasters started to organize a "more modern" nutrition for our army quite a long time ago, if not before then at least since [the battle of] Sutjeska. In fact, there was an idea of introducing a "menu," so that the monotony would not affect fighters' appetites.

Even in the enemy encirclement on Zelengora, we ate according to these modern methods, and the menu was prescribed by the quartermasters. Maybe, at first glance, it seems strange that only one menu was created and was valid for the entire time of the encirclement. A bit curious, but believe me, there were strong justifications and reasons. Here are just two of them, but convincing ones.

Representatives of the Allied armies were at that time with us (for the first time). Their military missions promised that they would help us abundantly with weapons, ammunition, clothing, food, medicine. Our quartermasters knew about these promises, but, as good politicians and even better soldiers, they assessed the situation like this:

"Weapons and ammunition are more valuable than food. The same goes for medicaments. It is true that our country is agrarian but, buddy, it's not so poor that it can't feed its army. Therefore, the promises for weapons, ammunition, and medicaments can remain, and we'll provide food from local sources."

The second reason boils down to this comment:

"And if we agreed that the Allies send us food, and plenty of it, who, buddy, would mess around [here the quartermasters again showed their inclinations and abilities to see into the future and the modern way of eating] with giving political commissars headaches with more menus? ... Namely, it is known that more menus get cooks more tired, because here the firewood is fresh and burns poorly, and some fireplaces do not circulate air very well." Not enough draught on Zelengora, or what?

Quartermasters make assumptions. One day, for example, all the fighters of the 1st unit of the 1st battalion, as if out of spite, would want menu number one, but it wouldn't be available. The cooks would offer menus number two, three, five ... but nope! "Number one, or we won't eat lunch!" the fighters, we can imagine, would say.

And there'd be trouble! The political commissars would have to hold political lessons to convince the fighters [to eat], and cooks would be forced to throw away so much food! What a waste!

And since war demands the simplest and most successful solution, the quartermasters decided:

"From own meat sources—one menu. One for everyone, and that's it!"

Image: Skrigin, *War and Stage*, p. 23



Composition of the menu:

The appetizer: This was not provided (well, guys, we're in a war and who would think of an appetizer in a war?!)

Soups and stews: These were not given either (in Zelengora, despite all the quartermasters' efforts, dill could not be found, and it's well known that a stew without dill is no good).

Main course: This was a piece of beef, mutton, or horse meat, boiled in plain water, no salt.

Salt was not added to food for several reasons. First of all, there was no suitable packaging, and, if put in regular bags, it would become moist on Zelengora and the cooks would have to struggle to break the lumps. Apart from that, salty food requires a lot of drinking, and we didn't have drinks at all, because we'd learned from our fathers and grandfathers that the elite of the *Ka und Ka* army (men from Lika, Bosnia, and Kordun) died in number when they got drunk on rum.[10] We consciously and deliberately rejected the outdated slogan: "No rum, no *strum* [attack]!"

"It's not acceptable to get people drunk so they die if it's not necessary," said the quartermasters. "And if we don't allow them to drink [alcohol], people will have to drink a lot of water, ordinary water. And mountain water is harsh, so it could be harmful. Very."

That's why it's easiest not to use salt!

Bread was also not provided. Because even then we knew (not just guessed) that we would build an industrially developed country from an agrarian one following the end of the war. And in such countries people eat very little bread.

And we wanted to go even further!

In this ordeal, we decided to abolish bread completely. People would get used to it, and only later—if everything goes well with the agrarian reform, nationalization, expropriation, and land amelioration—will we then introduce bread into meals. And if there's trouble [with reform et al.], at least people will not ask for bread: They'll be used to the situation.

Instead of dessert (*mešpajz* we call it), a handful of boiled corn kernels (while we had it) or grain—barley or oat, because wheat did not grow that year in Zelengora.

As a second, additional dessert, for those who were faster, more gourmand, more diligent, allocated according to the self-service system: nettle, beech leaf, ramsons, wood sorrel, meadow buttercup (all these because of their vitamins). Or meat from horse carcasses or black and white liver, even intestines—for those who had a hard time orienting themselves by smell and arrived last. And all that in unlimited quantities. As much as one can find.

There! That's all. And what more could there be?

After the battle of Sutjeska, when we analyzed the results, successes, and failures of this kind of diet, we concluded that we made a mistake by introducing this last part of the meal, the additional dessert, at all, or at least not limiting its quantities, because there were consequences. These were individual and also widespread; some serious and some lighter. Some complained of a week-long constipation. Others, on the other hand, did not have time to tie up their pants, so to speak, but constantly held them so they were prepared and constantly ran alongside the column!

[10] *Ka und Ka* or *K.u.K.* stands for *Kaiserlich und Königlich*, a phrase meant to mock the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy that, after the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867, had both the emperor (residing in Vienna) and the king (residing in Budapest).

To fall out of a column is not an easy thing. First, it is not allowed in the military: It breaks the order in the column. Secondly, for the sake of one's own life, it was not advisable to fall behind a column, because one never knew "in which bush the rabbit is lying."

Even the doctors intervened. They did not want anyone to say later that the Medical Corps had failed. They examined people, gave advice, they even gave medicine: "Tea without sugar, made from fir needles."

But one case was more serious, and even tea did not help.

—Patient: Milan Ćup, political commissar of the 2nd battalion.

—Doctor: Julka Mešterović.

—Diagnosis: We know what it is.

—Solution: Strict diet.

Everyone knew comrade Ćup as a very nice, cheerful, and amiable young man. Everyone appreciated and loved him, both his superiors and his equals, even more so the fighters that he led.

In this particular case, everyone pitied him:

"How could this happen to him? And in such a way. It's not going away."

The doctors did everything.

Doctor Julka made a special effort to help him, but the fir-needle tea did not help.

Comrade Ćup got angry at the doctors, even at comrade Julka. And comrade Julka got angry with him.

"What kind of doctors are you, when you can't cure ordinary trots?" comrade Ćup said at the end.

At that, comrade Julka wrote him a prescription, a real one in Latin. He said:

"Hand this over to the Medical Corps officer. It's the last thing I can do to help you."

Expecting a life-saving solution from a prescription written in Latin, comrade Ćup immediately went to the brigade's medical officer, comrade "No Mistake" Božo, and handed him the prescription.

"Make this medicine and save me," said comrade Ćup, and added: "Comrade Julka said if this medicine does not help, then there's no salvation for me."

Looking at the prescription, the Medical Corps officer laughed out loud.

"Do you know what's written in this recipe?" he asked Ćup, and without waiting for an answer immediately added: "It says: 'Strict diet for three days. Regarding food, eat only RICE PUDDING, but without SUGAR.' Cheers for rice pudding on Zelengora!" finished the officer.

"Cheers!" repeated the patient, and started taking off his pants on the spot.

Memetic warfare in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict

FIELDNOTES FROM DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY OF #NAFO
BY EVA JOHAIS

#NAFO

As Fassin (2017, 26) notes, “astonishment and indignation are the two driving forces of anthropology and other social sciences.” In line with that, my fieldwork on the North Atlantic Fella Organization (NAFO) started with confusion. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Twitter users had started to signal their solidarity with Ukraine by attaching Ukraine’s national flag to their profile. One day I came across a pro-Ukrainian tweet that mentioned the NAFO hashtag. At first, I misread NAFO for NATO, and interpreted the tweet as a call to action targeted at the Western military alliance. Upon realizing my mistake, my curiosity was aroused. What was behind the acronym that played on the NATO military alliance? Was the hashtag meant to make fun of NATO? Or, on the contrary, was it an unofficial fan club that sympathized with NATO’s values and goals?

Through tracing NAFO on Twitter and beyond, I learned what the NAFO movement is and what it does. On top of that, the digital ethnography of NAFO revealed the importance of memetic warfare in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict.



Image: JoohnChoe/Twitter, 17 October 2022

NAFO emerged in May 2022 on Twitter with the first post of the NAFO logo (Figure 1).

This logo modifies the NATO logo by replacing the “T” for treaty with the “F” for fella and the doge (*dog*) meme in the lower left corner. The identification with NATO implies that NAFO fellas stand for the same democratic values associated with NATO. However, the self-understanding the tweets convey is that NAFO complements, or is even “the better,” NATO. With the slogan “NAFO expansion is non-negotiable,” NAFO proclaims that it is a more inclusive alliance, which explicitly includes Ukraine. In doing so, NAFO also criticizes the fact that NATO has not yet offered Ukraine a concrete membership prospect. In turn, the doge meme signifies how NAFO practices complement conventional modes of warfare.



Figure 1: NAFO original tweet

The conventional mode of the Russo-Ukrainian war consists of the armed forces fighting each other on the ground. Instead, in NAFO’s memetic warfare, individual, mostly anonymous, dogs attack representatives and partisans of the enemy in the Twitterverse. The meme originally spread in 2013 and became so popular that it was even used as the eponym for a new cryptocurrency called Dogecoin that Elon Musk promoted. The doge is modeled on the Japanese dog breed Shiba Inu. According to a pet magazine (*Zooplus* 2023), the Shiba Inu knows its own mind and does not like to be submissive. Furthermore, it shows strong territorial behavior and is untrusting of strangers. Thus, the dog’s character presents a very suitable identification figure for a guerrilla force fighting an invader. On top of that, choosing a dog creates a self-representation of the underdog, and thereby the underdog effect: The apparent disadvantage of one side gives the impression of an unfair competition that the underdog is expected to lose, thus generating sympathy and emotional support.

Despite the differences, NAFO appears to be a welcome complement from the perspective of NATO as well. In 2016, Jeff Giese—a business affiliate of Peter Thiel and a Trump supporter—urged NATO that “it’s time to embrace memetic warfare.” He defines this as the “competition over narrative, ideas, and social control in a social-media battlefield” (Giese 2016, 69–70). Accordingly, he classifies memetic warfare “as a ‘guerilla version’ of psychological warfare, more commonly known as propaganda”. Despite his enthusiasm, he acknowledges the legal, moral, and bureaucratic problems that NATO member states face when they want to invest in “a type of activity that flourishes with greater autonomy and less oversight” (Giese 2016, 75).

What characterizes NAFO is that it is a collaborative project: There is an “official” NAFO Twitter account, but that does not produce many of the memes. Instead, as everyone can use #NAFO, NAFO has gained momentum through the unpredictable and uncontrollable participation of Twitter users. While NAFO originated on Twitter, the movement has spread to other virtual spaces and in the offline world. The phenomenon has become the object of media reports, NAFO posters are held up at street protests in different cities, NAFO recruits fellas at offline events, and it launched its own website in January 2023.[1] More than that, what NAFO does mirrors closely the idea of competing over the narrative in a social media battlefield.

[1] The NAFO website can be found at: <https://nafo-ofan.org/>.

A tweet by Ivana Stradner, affiliated with the Washington, DC-based Foundation for Defense of Democracies (Figure 2), captures succinctly what NAFO is up to: The objective is to “win the info war” through memes and satire directed against Russian trolls.

In NAFO language, this practice is called “bonking vatniks.” This means that whenever NAFO fellas spot a Russian official or sympathizer posting a pro-Kremlin take on Twitter, they bombard the account with support for Ukraine. For instance, they use #Article5, alluding to the part of the NATO treaty that calls for collective defense. In addition, they flood Twitter with memes and videos that mock Vladimir Putin and the Kremlin’s war effort.



Figure 2: Winning the info war

But NAFO’s activities are not limited to psychological warfare. It also supports Ukraine’s war effort through fundraising. As the new website explains, you become a fella and “earn” a personalized avatar if you donate to a charity that supports the Ukrainian defense effort or make a purchase from a store that directs its profits to Ukraine. Conveniently, the website offers merchandise for sale and presents a list of charities and organizations to donate to. This list includes organizations such as the Georgian legion, a voluntary unit that has fought on Ukraine’s side since 2014.

Basically, NAFO’s memetic warfare has two target audiences: the pro-Ukrainian camp and the opposing side. The memes directed at supporters often refer to feelings of fear and anger, and emphasize that solidarity can work as a remedy against them. For instance, the Joda avatar dressed in Ukraine’s national colors (Figure 3) is supposed to calm the concerns of a new fella by proclaiming that NAFO fellas can end all fear when they stand together.



Figure 3: NAFO fella solidarity

Another way to mobilize and encourage supporters is to spread the confidence of victory. A case in point was the offer of an early-bird ticket for the NAFO Summer Beach Party 2023 in Crimea to celebrate Ukraine’s victory and independence (Figure 4).

This offer suggests military steadfastness and envisions an approaching glorious post-war era. Thereby, it provides NAFO fellas with a political perspective and takes up the underdog narrative, indicating that the side that initially appears to be the losing party will eventually emerge victorious.

Figures

- Figure 1: Know Your Meme. 2022. “NAFO/North Atlantic Fella Organization.” *Knowyourmeme.com*, October 7, 2022.
- Figure 2: Ivana Stradner@ivanastradner. 2022. “What is #NAFO ? NAFO is the HIMARS of social media.” *Twitter*, September 8, 2022.
- Figure 3: Tim@CeRuLeaNBLuMaN. 2022. “Together the #NAFOfellas can end all fear.” *Twitter*, November 22, 2022.
- Figure 4: Saint Javelin. 2023. “Crimea Beach Party - Early Bird Ticket Sale - 1 Entry.” *Saintjavelin.com*.
- Figure 5: Know Your Meme. 2023. “Waddled Jacket.”
- Figure 6: @Kama_Kamilia. 2023. *Twitter*, April 17, 2023.

As expected, NAFO fellas construct the enemy in a very different way. As mentioned, the term commonly used to denote the enemy is “vatnik.” The vatnik is depicted as a grotesque, battered character wearing a padded jacket—the literal meaning of vatnik.

During the Soviet era, the padded jacket used to be worn by the poorer strata of society. In its memetic impersonation, “vatnik” is a pejorative term for Russians who believe the Kremlin’s propaganda and always agree with the government, which includes holding imperialistic or nationalistic views—as well as protecting the idea that Putin is the president who should rule Russia. The meme stems from a caricature that the Russian artist Anton Chadskiy designed back in 2011 and disseminated via the social media channel VKontakte.

The memes targeting the enemy are supposed to score strikes on the virtual battlefield just as Ukrainian military operations do on the ground. By way of example, the tweet reproduced as Figure 6 is openly aggressive and calls for violence.



Figure 6: Hitting the enemy

Therefore, the effects of memetic warfare go beyond the supposedly non-real virtual space and interlock with real-world kinetic military violence.

Overall, the NAFO movement supports the Ukrainian war effort as a kind of virtual guerrilla through the discursive effects of its memetic warfare, and also through fundraising for military and medical equipment.

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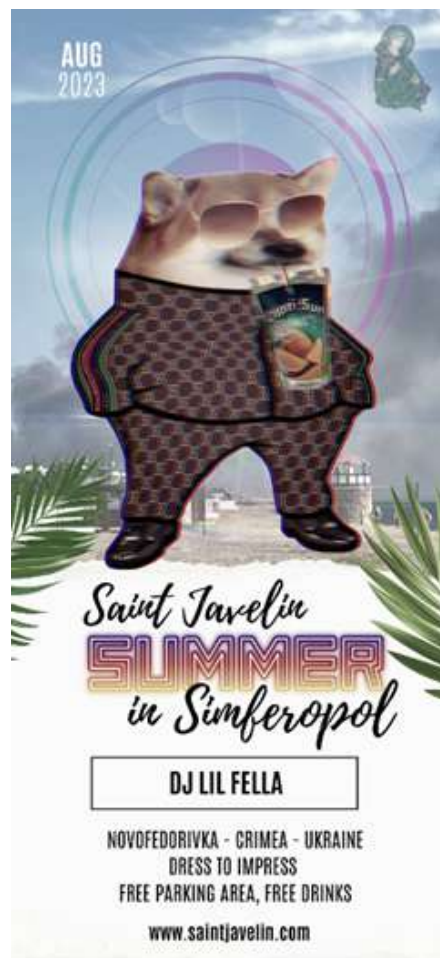


Figure 4: Confidence of victory



Figure 5: Vatnik meme

"I've seen things..." and other pleasures of war

THOMAS RANDRUP PEDERSEN



Image: Flares, Camp Viking, Bastion. © Thomas Randrup Pedersen

"The world is not in your books and maps. It's out there," Gandalf noted, turning his glance towards the moonlit window. "You'll have a tale or two to tell of your own when you come back," he added. "You can promise that I will be back?" Bilbo Baggins anxiously inquired. "No. And if you do, you won't be the same," Gandalf replied in a serious, even ominous, voice.

The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey (2012)

"I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain."

Roy Batty's death soliloquy, Blade Runner (1982)

Why do we fight? For freedom? For democracy? For peace? You name it, and politicians readily do. There are justifications of war in plenty. Still, is that really why we fight? What about power? What about resources? What about greatness? Surely, these are credible explanations of war. Yet is that really, really why we fight? The answer must depend upon who “we” are, and which fight “we” have in mind. For instance, are we talking about Russians invading a neighboring country, about Ukrainians defending their homeland, or about “foreign fighters” volunteering for Ukraine’s International Legion? In any event, the dominant political discourse on why the “national we” fight is often radically different from the demotic discourse among those who do the actual fighting. At least that is the case of those Danish combat troops with whom I, as an embedded researcher, have conducted ethnographic fieldwork—before, during, and after deployment to Al Anbar, Iraq, and to Helmand, Afghanistan, respectively.

It’s the adventure, stupid!

Once more, why do we fight? Why do our troops fight? This question is one I have endeavored to get to grips with since the heyday of the Danish Helmand campaign. Back then, I had a defining moment of ethnographic wonder when one day, comfortably seated in my armchair, I read my newspaper and came across a series of short portraits of Danish soldiers, all deployment-bound for Afghanistan. One mugshot in particular caught my eye. The caption stated that the young man, depicted in his “desert uniform,” had signed up for the coming tour of duty because of the adventure. I almost spilled my coffee. Wait, what? The adventure? Not anti-terrorism? Not good governance? Not women’s rights and girls’ schools? Not even God, Queen, and Country? I carefully scrutinized the soldier’s portrait—a private in his early twenties. He looked perfectly sane and normal. But if he was not somehow retarded, how then could he be willing to risk life and limb for the sake of an adventure? How could he be willing to cause death and destruction, not in the name of a greater cause, but merely for what he seemingly expected to be an exciting experience? I was shocked. I was dumbfounded. I was puzzled. Above all, my curiosity was kindled. What was going on? What was at stake? And so my journey began into worlds of military and warfighting.

In retrospect, of course, my initial wonder strikes me today as rather naïve.

My then modest insight into “things military” (Mohr, Sørensen, and Weisdorf 2021) had made me expect the portrayed soldier’s war participation to be in line with the dominant, political discourse on why we, the Danes, fought in Afghanistan. Instead of recognizing the adventurous soldier as one who, however unintentionally, spoke truth to power and gave voice to what I, with inspiration from Brown and Lutz (2007), have elsewhere called a “subjugated warrior knowledge” (Pedersen 2017b), my first reaction was one of disbelief. Clearly, I found it hard to accept that the soldier in the news did not fit my discursively informed preconception of our troops as a heroic breed of patriots and humanitarians, more noble and more altruistic than the rest of us. All the same, the discursive spell was broken: It’s the adventure, stupid!

The rookie and the veteran

What then is in an adventure? Why is an adventure worth dying for? One place to start looking for answers is in the margins of the battlespace yet right under our noses, namely in cinema or popular culture more generally. Take, for example, *The Hobbit’s* Bilbo Baggins and *Blade Runner’s* Roy Batty. Of course, Bilbo and Roy are fictional characters, but each of them embodies a widespread cultural figure: the rookie (Bilbo) and the veteran (Roy). The adventurous rookie is dying to see the world and happily faces the unknown once the existential bargain has been settled in favor of going into the danger zone rather than staying in the zone of comfort. The seasoned combat veteran, on the other hand, has seen their fair share of extraordinary things in life and may thus die with peace of mind.

The rookie and the veteran, I contend, prime our young people for going to war in search of happy-ending adventures. The rookie and the veteran socialize our young men and women into war as a place of adventure, a place where there might be a *price to pay*, yet also a *prize to win*. Now it goes without saying that war involves the risk of death and (self-)destruction, yet it is not often said that war also harbors the chance of life and (self-)creation. On this, the “bright side” of war, the rookie and the veteran enchant the world of war as a place of potentialities and possibilities; a place where one goes in search of experience and pleasure, of feeling alive and undergoing transformation, of self-discovery and self-improvement, of existential well-being and self-becoming (Pedersen 2017a, 2017b, 2019). Indeed, the quest for adventure entails that our troops seek out war in the pursuit of happiness, hedonic as eudemonic (ibid.). That is at least so in the case of those Danish “grunts” I have followed.

War happy

Drawing upon Walker and Kavedžija (2015), I conceive hedonic happiness as an inner state of feeling good, a state of satisfaction and enjoyment. Eudemonic happiness, on the other hand, I understand as a matter of doing good and living a life of human flourishing (ibid.). In short, hedonia emphasizes pleasurable sensations and eudaimonia a life of virtue. Yet, as Walker and Kavedžija (2015) remind us, hedonia and eudaimonia need not necessarily to be in conflict: You might feel good by doing good. In a similar vein, Lutz calls attention to a variety of war pleasures, including “the thrill of feeling like a moral victor, the pleasure of feeling like you are a good person” (Johais and Lutz 2022: 9).

In my earlier work with Danish International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) troops, I have explicitly explored eudemonic happiness in the case of my interlocutors’ struggle for becoming what I have described as “virtuous warriors” (Pedersen 2017b). By contrast, my interrogation of hedonic happiness has only been implicit, namely in the case of the “desire for the real”—real combat, that is (Pedersen 2017a). However, the current, reinvigorated focus of the WARFUN research project on relationships between war and fun (De Lauri 2022; Johais and Lutz 2022; Mogstad 2022) has encouraged me to revisit my empirical data on contemporary Danish expeditionary forces and look at them through the analytical lens of hedonic pleasure. Accordingly, what has materialized is a range of pleasures, including some of the more well known, such as the ecstasy of combat, the thrill of destruction, and the joys of comradeship. Yet what appear to be less researched pleasures of war have also emerged, such as what we might call “gun fun,” “joys of bravado and badassery,” “pleasures of trials and transformations,” “pleasures of feeling like a somebody,” and “satisfaction in ‘been there, done that, bought the T-shirt.’”. I have looked further into these pleasures in a different context ([The Experience of War Conference](#)).

Tales and spectacles

For now, I restrict myself to attend to what we may refer to as “delights of tales and spectacles,” thus taking us back to Bilbo and Roy; that is, to the pleasure of having stories of one’s own to tell and to the pleasure of seeing remarkable things.

In the case of my Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) material, these pleasures were voiced, among others, by Private First Class Larsen (Larsen is a pseudonym), then serving with the Jutland Dragoon Regiment’s Viking Company, a mechanized infantry company. Larsen was deployed as Guardian Angel, providing force protection to a Company Training Team stationed at Al Asad Airbase. A few months into the tour, which was his first, Larsen shared his thoughts on the deployment while we enjoyed the cool night breeze outside his quarters in Al Asad’s Camp Tripoli:

If this should have been an adventure, which I would have loved it to be, then we should have been doing like the Norwegians who get out [of the camp] and get to see more ... Surely, that sounds considerably more exciting. Then you do also have that as a draw: You get to see Iraq. Then you can say, “I’ve been driving round in Iraq for half a year and seen what it looks like.”

Inquiring into what extent he had signed up to OIR for the sake of the deployment bonus, Larsen promptly replied:

I would have done it for less money as well. After all, it’s because of the adventure, although there is not much adventure in it. But one does always set off hoping. Surely, we have seen things. It is a funny place, right? We are never going to see anything like this anywhere else. So, in that sense, there has been a very tiny adventure in it. Surely, we have seen something that resembles a ghost town ... Once it was a huge camp [nicknamed Camp Cupcake, 2003–2011] with swimming pools and all sorts of things built by the Americans. We were out having a look at it. It’s almost like Chernobyl where things have just been deserted ... It’s special. It’s very strange. You return home with that. At least you get to see those things.

As for my ISAF material, the delights of tales and spectacles are expressed, for example, by Gunner Private Lyngby (Lyngby is a pseudonym). He served with the Guard Hussar Regiment’s 1st Light Recce Squadron and deployed with the Force Protection Section Fenrir. It was Lyngby’s first tour of duty—a tour that would take him into the Helmandi theatre of operations at the time when ISAF’s war was drawing to a close. Shortly prior to the deployment, on a sunny summer afternoon at Almegaard Barracks, home of the 3rd Recce Battalion, Lyngby let me in on his expectations for the coming tour:

I’m just looking forward to experiencing it all; experiencing being deployed to Afghanistan ... What is it actually like down there? ... I’d be lying if I returned and didn’t say it was awesome to be part of it ... Then you’re just a little more. After all, it’s not that many who have been down there. Then you can say you’ve tried it ... It will also be exciting to see Camp Bastion. What the heck is that? It’s quite a monstrosity, right? ... It is bloody well not kid’s stuff. It’s huge. The outer perimeter equals the distance of a Marathon race. It’s quite impressive.



Image: Camp Cupcake no more: "The Twilight Zone," Al Asad Airbase. © Thomas Randrup Pedersen

Lyngby and Larsen might not have any fantastic tales of trolls and dragons to tell, and they might not have seen anything as spectacular as space combat. Nevertheless, they did seem to find pleasure in the not quite so dramatic tales and spectacles that their deployment was offering them. But what then is so pleasurable about such pleasure? First, to judge from the interviews quoted, tales and spectacles, I suggest, harbor the pleasure of seeing things with one's own eyes, the pleasure of being there, the pleasure of learning for oneself what it is like "for real" (Pedersen 2017a), whether that be Iraq, or Afghanistan, or simply a tour of duty. Second, tales and spectacles, it appears, involve the pleasure of feeling awed in the presence of large-scale war infrastructures such as Al Asad and Bastion; the pleasure of feeling one's sense of self enlarged through attachments to "things military" among one's own or allied forces. Third, tales and spectacles seem to entail the pleasure of having rare experiences and becoming remarkably experienced; the pleasure of becoming a "who" by virtue of the "what" one has experienced at war (cf. Jackson 2013); the pleasure of feeling special, a somebody (a veteran) rather than a nobody (a rookie); the pleasure of having tales of one's own to tell, and perhaps, however wishful, even becoming the most interesting person in the room.

More than meets the ear and the eye

To be sure, the study of war pleasures calls for further elaboration, empirically as well as theoretically. I conclude this reflection by noting that my preliminary investigation into delights of tales and spectacles tends to collapse the distinction between hedonic and eudemonic happiness. There is more to the adventurous longing to see the world than pleasurable sensations of war wonders—existential well-being and human flourishing, for instance, and thus the pleasure, with Jackson (2013), of experiencing oneself as acting upon the world rather than being acted upon by others; and, as I add, the pleasure of imagining, or even experiencing, oneself as self-transforming and coming into one's own as an experienced individual and seasoned veteran.

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War things in the bed

YOUNES SARAMIFAR

War and warring are extremely playful events. Warriors playfully lighten the burden of brutalities that either they are haunted by through their anticipation or they are exposed to in combats. However, warriors' playfulness is considered intensely transgressive fun by civilians and those disengaged from wars. For instance, brutal hazing among military personnel depicted in movies such as *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), *G.I. Jane* (1997), and *Jarhead* (2005), or documentaries such as *Lohamim* (2021) has evoked moral judgment among civilians. They overlook these brutalities, and the hazing is regarded as a *fun* act that pales in the face of brutalities and inhumanities that are seen or expected to be seen in combat. In other words, fun for one is brutality for another. Of course, this relative approach to brutality and inhumanities does not approve or express sympathy but rather highlights perspectivism in militancy.

I never took the fun seriously enough while researching Shia militias and following the everyday lives of Shia men who volunteered and joined the so-called resistance groups across the Middle East. Fun was deeply obvious and integral to their everyday lives whether on the front, during training, or on deployments. I took fun for granted. Two different academic encounters turned fun into a serious anthropological inquiry. The first instance was when a female Dutch-Moroccan Muslim student who was a practicing Muslim furiously walked out of my class because of the video clips I showed. She complained that they seemed like "fun, and the resistance fighters were not seriously engaged with their ideologies during combat." I had showed real-life recorded clips of Sunni Lebanese militants fighting Shias in the street in the city of Saida. They laughed, joked, and took turns shooting at the other side. My student did not have fun watching them having fun. The second instance was when I collaborated with Lara Stall (a Dutch dramaturge) to organize an anti-conference that made fun of the Munich Security Conference, where high-level statesmen talk about global security issues. Professor Nandi Sundar, who spoke at our anti-conference, explained that activists should not lose their sense of humor and should "fight the oppression while having fun." These two instances lingered in my head, sharpening my attention on the word fun and instances of fun during my fieldwork as I investigated what it means to do and live with inhumanity.

My research on inhumanity has entailed following the sociocultural acts that render people, persons, things, biotic and abiotic extractable, disposable, killable and unworthy of dignity (Saramifar 2017, 2019, 2021; van Liere and Meinema 2022). Therefore, I have followed combatants and militants engaged in the resistance transnational networks among Shia communities in the Middle East and Central Asia to explain how socialization *in* violence generates a warring ecology that infuses everything and everyone.

My ethnographic interest in inhumanities took me to Iraq, Iran, and Lebanon, among other places. I conducted fieldwork in Iraq, where the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) occupied large territories in 2013. The Iraqi Shia combatants resisting and fighting against ISIS were my interlocutors, and I explored their everyday lives as they volunteered to fight ISIS. These men (twenty-five to fifty years old) volunteered and raised arms to join *Hashd u Shaabi*, Popular Mobilization Fronts (PMF), in response to a religious ordinance issued by Ayatollah Sistani, one of the highest religious authorities in Iraq. Sistani called on any able-bodied men to volunteer and fight against ISIS after the Iraqi army collapsed and abandoned its post when facing ISIS' overwhelming attacks. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), a paramilitary group and integral component of the Islamic Republic of Iran, contributed to the training, organization, and deployment of these volunteers. IRGC suggested that the Shia religious ideology was the common framework for Iranians and Iraqis who should collaborate and mobilize against ISIS, which had vowed to kill Shias and demolish their holy sites and shrines. Accordingly, the pervasive representational discourse among the militias suggested that Shia combatants from across the region, including Afghanistan and Pakistan, should join PMF to protect the holy shrines and resist extremists who threatened Iraqi national harmony. Although any anthropologist worthy of the name knows there is a large gap between what is said and what occurs on the ground, Human Rights Watch groups documented the inhumanities and violence inflicted on Sunni civilians by Shia militias. Shia militants tortured Sunni civilians after liberating areas occupied by ISIS, and Sunni civilians were arrested and tortured as ISIS collaborators without evidence.

A cacophony of violence in the name of Islam and sectarian hatred was in the air of everyday life in Iraq—although Shia combatants who had become my research-friends were preoccupied with everything except Islam and sectarian differences. They were too busy staying alive, dealing with inflation and Iraq's broken economy, and finding medicine for their elderly and to treat their own injuries. They saw ISIS as the new threat to the stability of the fragile political economy.

Initially, they referred to defending shrines during interviews and called this their primary motivation for joining PMF in 2014. But they gradually became comfortable and familiar enough with me to tell their stories, and to reveal that joining PMF had nothing to do with God, shrines or sectarian differences. The story of Abbas, a thirty-one-year-old shopkeeper in the city of Karbala, is a good anthropological lesson in finding nonreligious motivations in religiously framed political violence; why following fun is an unexpected clue that reveals different hues of subjectivities and how to trace specters of inhumanities in warring ecologies.

Abbas' story helps to understand how masculinity, love, things, sex, curiosity, and war are entangled with the warring ecology. Hence, those such as Abbas should not be reduced to their religious affiliations. Abbas' piety was exemplary among shopkeepers in the market beside the holy shrines in Karbala. Most shopkeepers referred to him whenever they had any disputes because they believed he was pure of heart and his judgment was godly. Referring to pious and elderly savants to settle any dispute, ranging from disagreement about football or which music is Islamic enough to debt and marital disputes, is usual in Iraq. However, Abbas' young age distinguished him from the crowd of savants, indicating that his piety brought him such credibility that it overshadowed his age. I met him while he was struggling to climb the stairs into the hospital. I helped him, and it took us more than an hour to climb fifteen stairs and finally take a seat to wait for the doctors. He was embarrassed, and I assumed his pride was wounded because he needed help—so I said with a humble tone, "You have suffered for Iraq, so helping is an obligation." Abbas smirked, sat silently for ten minutes, then began laughing as he touched his right inner thigh, blurting out, "You wouldn't say that if you knew where my injury is located." He squeezed his thigh and pointed between his legs.

Abbas was too high on painkillers to care for social etiquette. He explained how shrapnel had injured his right thigh and cut part of his penis. He added with pride, "Yes, it is that big." This introduction allowed me to recognize that Abbas was a man preoccupied with things other than religion and politics. He believed he had been injured after being cursed by his mother for leaving home, closing his shop and volunteering for PMF because they had fought over the woman he desired to marry.

His mother refused to approve of the woman he loved, a young divorcee whom he had befriended. They had been sexually intimate whenever they could find a safe empty house, but his mother refused to reach out to the young woman's family and ask for her hand. Abbas' mother approved of his pleasure and sexual conquests but believed "his penis should not guide his marriage choice." Abbas found this expression insensitive and insulting to the woman he loved, so he left home and told his mother he would kill himself. He joined PMF so that ISIS would do the job, as he did not have the courage to commit suicide. He was injured in his first deployment.

Abbas said to me: "My mother's anger at my pleasure-seeking choice caused my odd injury. She was right; I did not listen, but the shrapnel made me listen." Mother and son had made peace on condition that Abbas repented, and he had remained in PMU initially to prove his pious commitment to holy sites. As our acquaintance continued, Abbas began to express more and more sectarian hatred and repeated typical religious phrasing about Islam and protecting Shiaism from ISIS. It seemed the gentle, pious Shia had turned into a firebrand militant. As I sat in his shop, I observed his discussions and the behavior change that was bringing him more business and popularity. I was unable to speak to him as much as previously because his booming business interrupted our conversations whenever I was in his shop. Finally, he hired an assistant to handle customers, and we were able to spend more time alone than before. He could let loose away from the public eye, joke, relax and laugh, and one day he mastered the courage to ask me a question. He handed me his mobile phone and asked me to translate some information about the Durex Vibrations Ring. I translated and explained nonchalantly and in the most clinical manner. I have learned to numb myself against frequent discussions about sex, women, and various forms of vulgarity among militants. My clinical approach made him uncomfortable and silent. He seemed guilty, then broke his silence by adding, "I'm not all about God and PMF. I have fun too." He explained that he was secretly continuing his affair with the divorcee, and the only reason he remained in PMF was that she found it sexy. His lover seemed to enjoy the appeal of the uniform, and Abbas entertained her interest to compensate for the erectile dysfunction he had developed owing to his injury.

"fun was integral to their exercise of power and living with and by power"

However, her interest had impacted Abbas in ways he did not enjoy. He was annoyed by himself: "I get hard whenever I see uniforms and think of what she would like. I see guns and rifles, then I get hard because I think about her and how she likes them. I don't want war-things in my bed, but this ring may change things for me. Would it help me to get an erection or hold it for a long while?"

It was difficult to answer this, but I turned his comments around and said, "Maybe you just have to try to have fun and not think too much?" I returned to the Netherlands the next day, and he messaged me a few days later: "You deserve the title Doctor although you cannot administer an injection. I just had fun with it, and *war-things became fun-things.*" I was relieved that my ambiguous and vague answer saved me from advising him, but it helped him, although our encounter clarified how fun is situated in the lives of those exposed to death. Abbas and many other combatants' idea of fun was not necessarily "an array of ad hoc, nonroutine and joyful conducts ... where individuals break free temporarily from the disciplined constraints of everyday life, normative obligations and organised power" (Bayat 2013).

Fun was integral to their exercise of power and living with and by power: for instance, Abbas succeeded in having fun when he complied with the image of militants and stopped thinking about war-things such as guns and uniforms through the lens of violence. He had fun and was able to hold an erection when war-things were not objects of violence, but rather were tools available to militants. He complied with the regime of militancy in which weaponry and war-things are mere tools and not memorabilia of inhumanities. In other words, he could have fun as long as he allowed the war machine to absorb him and warring ecology to shape him, and he embraced unreason (Port 1998) by complying with the Shia militancy's moral authority. Asef Bayat (2013) points out fun as an expression against organized power, but fun in warring ecology is an expression of compliance with power. It suspends thoughts and meaning and assigns thinking and reasoning to the organized power. In other words, some men cannot "perform" their masculinity and have fun in warring ecology as long as they think and attempt to make sense of inhumanities, so they assign thinking to the organized power (i.e., war machine, militancy including the paramilitary command system, religious and ideological authorities), and comply with it to become joyful militants.



Image: r2hox/Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 2.0)

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No laughter, no war

**AN EXPLORATION OF
SOLDIER HUMOR BY
EVA JOHAIS**

Are soldiers funny? On the face of it, military life does not appear to hold a lot of fun: Soldiers relinquish civil liberties and accept the possibility of injury and death, hierarchy orders relations top-down, soldiers learn to control their body through drill exercises.

For Michel Foucault, the military is an institution that produces disciplinary power (Foucault 1979). Disciplinary power governs through creating “docile bodies” that have incorporated a certain form of conduct as normal. Modern institutions such as the military achieve this by subjecting individuals to constant surveillance, isolation, punishment, exercises, and a specific arrangement of time and space. Thanks to these techniques, discipline foregoes the excessive use of force or coercion because “docile bodies” govern themselves.

In a similar way, Erving Goffman (1961) characterizes “total institutions.” These are largely cut off from the outside world, remove the separation between work and private life, and manage their members according to a fixed set of rules oriented towards an overarching institutional purpose. These conditions straitjacket individuals in a public role and prevent them from developing their own identity. In light of both theoretical conceptions, soldiers face a regime of total control. Thus stripped of agency, how can soldiers nourish a sense of humor?

But in contrast to these preconceptions, humor forms an integral part of military culture. Soldiers find reasons for amusement not despite but because of the particularities of military life. Humor is essential for upholding military practice because it makes people stay. Three sayings discussed here demonstrate how the particularities of military life shape the humor of German soldiers.[1]

Humor arises from social interaction (Podilchak 1991, 137). Therefore, the examples provided here are an entry point into soldier culture. I will explore the lifeworld of soldiers through situating the sayings in the social situation in which they occur and the universe of meaning in which they make sense. The examples include a “classic” handed down from generation to generation and sayings that respond to specific situations in a soldier’s life.

“Wer nichts kann, kann Anzug”: “Who Knows Nothing, Knows Dresscode”

“Wer nichts kann, kann Anzug” is a classic comment on the competence of superiors. However, when soldiers utter that a superior knows dresscode, it is not meant as a compliment about fashion consciousness. Instead, the soldier says figuratively “The guy has no idea what he is talking about.”[2] Typically, the saying occurs when soldiers are grappling with a superior who belongs to a branch of service other than their own. In this situation, the superior faces a dilemma.

[1] I selected these sayings from in-depth interviews and group discussions with more than thirty current or former members of the German armed forces conducted in 2022.

[2] I use the male pronoun throughout instead of a greater gender variety as this reflects that the military is still a male-dominated social sphere.

On the one hand, he has the task of supervising the subordinates and providing feedback on their performance. Thus, he is supposed to say something. On the other hand, he lacks the expertise to say something meaningful. According to one interlocutor, only a few superiors solve this dilemma through honesty, proclaiming: “Well done, lads! Looks good! I have no clue about what you’ve done but I assume it’s correct.” Most superiors compensate for their lack of expertise in evaluating the proper handling of weapons or the execution of bodily movements through focusing on something that everybody knows: Even a halfwit can assess whether soldiers observe the military dresscode. Are boots polished? Are pockets closed? Do straps hang loose? Are trouser seams turned up neatly? Are faces well shaved?

Although soldiers generally accept the rules that secure a uniform and well-groomed appearance, they sense when superiors misuse these rules for covering up their own incompetence. Thus, by dropping in “Wer nichts kann, kann Anzug,” soldiers express their disdain. They would not address the superior upfront, but use the comment to “create a shared universe of meaning” (Ben-Ari and Sion 2005, 669) with their peers, who are united in the experience of an incompetent, giggling superior.

With this saying, a soldier finds a humorous way to deal with the particularities of military life in lieu of anger or apathy. In the hierarchical order, soldiers are subject to the will of superiors and evaluations by superiors affect their future career. In addition, they learn to follow, not challenge given orders. Therefore, they abstain from open criticism. An interlocutor explained how humor provides room for agency in the hierarchical order:

The human being needs an outlet to communicate his displeasure or ideas. Frank words—not allowed in the hierarchical system. Therefore, he seeks communication channels, such as irony. He says things that he dresses up as flowery, but where everybody comprehends what he wants to convey. But when put on trial, he could always claim: I have never said it that way. The soldier learns from the beginning how to express his position especially if he disagrees with the general mood or state of command. Thus, after thirty-five service years I am able to communicate to a general that I absolutely oppose his statements. Of course, I don’t say that to his face. I smile at him, and a classic statement I would utter is: “You can do it that way.” This is the highest form of disapproval. Translated literally: “What you are doing is total nonsense.” He knows exactly what I just told him, namely he’s an asshole. But, of course, I could never call him “asshole.”

As becomes clear, humor offers a safe mode for transmitting criticism to superiors that keeps the hierarchical order intact. The subordinate finds a way of expression that avoids the risk of sanctions. The superior saves face and could even – if warranted – take the subordinate’s suggestion into account.

“Schluss ist, wenn schluss ist”: “It’s not over till it’s over.”

The English translation “It’s not over till it’s over” conveys a different meaning from the use in German soldier life. The proverb points out that the final outcome cannot be assumed or determined before a given situation or activity such as a football match or the vote count after an election is completely finished. Usually, the phrase is supposed to keep up hope that—in contrast to the current state—events will develop in the desired way. Instead, when my interlocutor used it to underline that the present activity was unfinished, this was by no means a reason for hope. He replied “Schluss ist, wenn Schluss ist” when subordinates moaned how long a strenuous exercise would take.

With this, the instructor socializes recruits into military discipline: The civilian organization of time is replaced by the military organization of time. This means that the aspiring soldier can neither rely on a schedule that predetermines when working hours end nor a task description that allows for planning the steps until its completion. Instead, duty ends when the mission is completed, or when the superior says it is.^[3] For instance, a soldier remembered an instructor’s counting method: When the trainees were supposed to do fifty push-ups, he would not count “1-2-3 ...50” but, for example “1-2-2-2-3-1...” Thus, the instructor suspended the (civilian) commonsensical manner of counting in favor of his own unpredictable style. Similarly, the saying conveys that superiors’ commands supersede one’s own judgment.

[3] Military tactics differ in the degree to which they grant subordinates freedom in the execution of tasks. In mission-type tactics, the military commander defines a clear objective and orders which forces are supposed to accomplish the objective in a given time frame. Then, subordinate leaders decide themselves how to achieve the objective. In contrast to tactics focused on executing a set of orders, mission-type tactics require that subordinates understand the intent of the order and are trained to act independently. In the German armed forces, mission-type tactics are the predominant style of command.

Accordingly, the hierarchical order puts soldiers at the mercy of people who are higher up in the chain of command. Some superiors may enjoy exploiting their might and take sadistic pleasure from issuing arbitrary orders. However, a good superior instills in his subordinates that he can better assess a situation owing to his experience. Thus, while soldiers lose familiar orientation frameworks, they learn to trust their superiors.

In the case of my interlocutor, his subordinates appropriated the saying “Schluss ist, wenn Schluss ist” that he had employed as an educational measure. It turned into a running gag that the soldiers of his platoon used among each other and towards other units as a motivation mantra for holding out. In particular, the running gag served as a source of power in arduous or thorny situations during deployment abroad. The example therefore illustrates again the productive effect of humor for military performance: Starting out as a disciplining method, the saying later promoted self-motivation. Furthermore, it reflected how the relationship between superior and subordinates matured.

“Nach links wird geschossen und nach rechts kannst du Bonbons verteilen”:[4] “Shooting to the left and handing out candies to the right.”

An interlocutor made this remark in passing to underscore that soldier life holds a mix of emotions. In one moment, soldiers feel confident about mastering their bodies or weapons and enjoy the camaraderie of their peers. All of a sudden, when they detect an improvised explosive device or—even worse—if it explodes, they can tumble from feeling over the moon to anxious and tense.

Initially, the remark points out that the military profession generally distinguishes itself by the use of armed force. Apart from that, it captures a specific mission reality: the population-centric counterinsurgency approach that soldiers of the International Security Assistance Force were supposed to adopt in Afghanistan. In conventional warfare, the military focuses on fighting the enemy—“shooting to the left.” However, counterinsurgency (COIN) strategies address tactical situations in which regular armed forces face irregular militant groups who use unconventional tactics such as suicide attacks and improvised weapons (Mujahid 2016, 47–50).

[4] “Kannste” is a contraction of the words “kannst du/you can” that I retained to preserve the ironic tone of my interlocutor.

"although humor opens up room for soldier agency, it ultimately stabilizes the military institution because it makes people stay"



In addition, COIN strategies assume that insurgents can count on the support of the civilian population. Accordingly, COIN practice in Afghanistan is aimed at persuading civilians to defect from the insurgents commonly called Taliban. Therefore, foreign soldiers were instructed to promote the popularity of the international forces and loyalty towards the Afghan government. In other words, they had the task to win the hearts and minds of the people—"handing out candies to the right."

With such remarks, soldiers prove their ability to put the complexity of a situation in a nutshell. In addition, the ironic tone with which this summary of daily life was delivered creates a "feeling of distance" from the experience (Beck and Spencer 2020, 70). Presumably, this emotional detachment helped soldiers deployed to Afghanistan cope with the contrasting roles they were tasked to carry out both as fighters and as aids to development (cf. Daxner 2018, 99).

Conclusion

Do soldiers display a special sense of humor? Certainly, humor is equally important for organizations and group processes in civilian domains. However, the examples presented here show that the particularities of military life shape how humor is used and what it achieves. Among the specific conditions of military life is the hierarchical order that exposes soldiers to the will of superiors and prevents them from uttering criticism openly. Furthermore, the military structuring of time and space replaces the familiar civilian framework of orientation. Civilians become soldiers through disciplinary methods that entail interminable repetition. At the same time, military life offers the safety of comradeship and trust in respected leaders.

Humor provides a way to live with the conditions of military life. The humorous mode functions as a safe way for expressing criticism, an option for coping with ambivalent feelings, a didactic approach, and a source for self-motivation. Although humor opens up room for soldier agency, it ultimately stabilizes the military institution because it makes people stay. While possible, I suggest that running a military organization and disciplining soldiers solely in a serious mode is less successful. Or, to put it simply, no laughter, no war.

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Neretva and Sutjeska in horror and magic of individual remembrances

RESEARCH NOTES AND LATE-NIGHT THOUGHTS BY IVA JELUŠIĆ



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Yugoslav historiography counts seven major Axis military operations undertaken against the Yugoslav Partisan forces during World War II. Each of the offensives had as its goal elimination of the Partisan resistance and the pacification of the Yugoslav countries. By surviving and continuing to fight, the Partisan forces won all of them. And by surviving, they had no other choice than to continue to fight. Part of the reason was the ideological irreconcilability of enemy groups.

From the Partisan perspective, all military activity was supplemented by cultural and educational activities organized by the Partisans in their military units as well as by the representatives of communist institutions in the liberated territories that colored the idea of the postwar future with the utopian tones of communism. "Their" as well as "our" dead paid the toll towards the realization of that ideal. The corresponding resolve of the enemy forces was the other element. The sources often mark the German Wehrmacht's efficiency and ruthlessness as particularly formidable in the Partisans' eyes. Behind them, it seems, nothing but ruin remained.

And in order to survive and to continue to fight, a little magic was needed too. I am well aware that magic, a noun denoting the power of influencing events by using mysterious or supernatural forces, is an unwieldy concept. At this point in my research, however, it serves the purpose of sheltering a set of different occurrences that helped some of the participants in the Yugoslav Partisan struggle to make it through one more day, and sometimes even made a difference between surviving and resisting. Such magic, prime quality emergency handmade hodgepodge, could come in the form of hope, empathy, love, or laughter. For many of these episodes, if they did not happen in such extreme circumstances, one would easily say that they were simply examples of having fun. Whatever they were, they influenced moods, minds, and dispositions. Personal accounts about the war in Yugoslavia abound in randomly scattered moments of such commiseration and comfort, even in the most desperate of situations. In addition, because of the way some of the participants remembered the war, to a reader like me it sometimes seems that it really was magic in the literal sense of the word.

It seemed pointless in the Sarajevo prison when, after returning from yet another all-night interrogation-cum-beating, Radojka Lakić's friend and comrade combed blood and dirt out of her hair, braided it, pulled it up into a bun, and secured it with hairpins. At the same time, other prisoners joined her in the quiet singing of revolutionary songs, the only ones that Lakić sang (Beoković 1967, 158). It seems girlish and frivolous when Drvar peasant girls, instead of elaborating the work strategy of the local branch of the women's organization (on which the Partisan army often depended), assigned priority to embroidering flowers on the skirts of their Party representatives, because, they fancied, it was not acceptable for young women to wear black. Carried away by cheerfulness, the girls started to sing, and some even started a circle dance (Beoković 1967, 420). It seems mystical when the actor Vjekoslav Afrić recited verses about sixteenth-century peasant rebel Matija Gubec into the ear of a Partisan with whom he happened to be sharing a campfire between two long marches (1958, 486-487).

It seems completely ridiculous and incredible when one vet refused to continue to walk and had himself tied on a mule as a piece of equipment, and even more so when, in the meal break in which everyone got to eat except for him (as a joke), he got so upset and shouted so much that he also upset the mule, which disappeared into some shrubbery amid the clatter of hooves and equipment and laughter of all present (Božović 1958, 411-412).

The war distorted things. The experiences it made possible were extreme, physically and emotionally strenuous and draining. Consequently, it made small things look and feel big, important, lifesaving. That is why the narrative of World War II in Yugoslavia, individual destinies as well as the biggest of battles, is entwined with stories of magic. Sometimes these were hairpins, quite often they were Partisan variety shows, involving singing and dancing, and over time Partisan leader Josip Broz Tito became imbued in magic as well. In the context of my research so far, the battles of Neretva and Sutjeska have brought to the fore some of the most exquisite examples.

In January 1943, the battle of Neretva (locally also known as the Battle for the Wounded or the Fourth Enemy Offensive, January-March 1943) began. Its goal was to destroy the central command of the Partisan movement and the units around it as well as the Central Committee of the Communist Party. To be as effective as possible, German and Italian commanders did not punish soldiers' excessive brutality. Participating Chetniks and Ustasha soldiers did not deal with such trivialities anyway. In March 1943, still in the midst of enemy encirclement and without a set plan of extraction, the members of the Cultural and Artistic Team of the Fourth Operative Zone (for Dalmatia) gave a theatrical performance— involving songs with accordion accompaniment, recitations, and two comic plays—for the members of the Fourth and Fifth Montenegrin Brigades who had just arrived from fighting positions as well as the wounded and civilians who were present. The performance culminated in a familiar manner, with a circle dance. Reportedly, it was interrupted just before dawn when the soldiers had to return to battle positions (Rutić 1952, 331-332; Borožan 1983, 45).

Despite heavy losses, with more than half of the Partisans within the encirclement killed and captured, and a clear tactical victory for the Axis, the Partisan army managed to secure their command and the central hospital, retreat, and resume activity. Taking advantage of the Partisans' exhaustion, however, the Axis forces immediately set about executing another large-scale operation, the battle of Sutjeska (also known as the Fifth Enemy Offensive, May/June 1943). The goals of this offensive remained the same, as did the methods employed by the Axis soldiers. Unlike in the previous offensive, though, Partisan leader Josip Broz Tito was wounded in this battle. In this all-embracing carnage, most of the central hospital, particularly the immobile wounded, could not be transferred across Sutjeska as they had been transferred across Neretva; along with some medical personnel, mostly Partisan nurses, as well as local civilian population, they were killed in the clean-up operation that followed the closing of the encirclement. A number of personal memories reflect particularly on Tito's wounding (e.g., Božović 1958, 395–396).

This intimation of his mortality astounded and frightened many. According to one exceptional testimony, after the news of the wounding, Tito's safe exit from the closing enemy encirclement offered a glimpse of magic of almost biblical proportions. Exhausted groups who dropped to the ground only a few hundred meters from the place where the battle was still being fought and showed no intention of moving forward, rose to their feet and continued their journey in silence when they saw Tito passing by (Skrigin 1968, 198). In academic language, using the conceptualization of Ernst Kantorowicz's king's two bodies, it can be said that with his natural body Tito already stood for the body politic of (the future of) Yugoslavia (Brkljačić 2003). Following on the emotion emanating from the sources, maybe such an occurrence should not come as a surprise. Maybe it is quite reasonable that people who were drawn into a war that all but guaranteed their destruction and exceeded the limits of what they thought possible on a daily basis, had to believe in a higher power, even if it was another man. They could be the heroes and heroines as long as he was willing to be their savior. Together, they survived.

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Pleasures of war

JACKIE DENT

Anything is better than to have nothing at all happen day after day. You know that I do not love war or want it to return. But at least it made me feel alive, as I have not felt alive before or since.

An unknown French woman, who had been in the Resistance.

It may sound like a dramatic thing to write, but reading this quote actually changed my life. It really did. Let me tell you what happened.

It was 2012 and I was studying a Masters of International Relations (IR) at the University of New South Wales. Unsettled, restless, bored, I had thrown myself into my studies, a bit lost after working overseas with international organizations for a few years—two “missions” in Afghanistan, one in North Ossetia in Southern Russia and one in Pakistan. The serious and international nature of the Masters was keeping me sane in Sydney, a peaceful city that felt so far away from the intensity of where I’d been. Let’s go to the beach! Good idea. It might stop me from feeling like I’m drowning on land.

As part of my degree, I was researching a short paper on women on the frontline when I found the above line. An unknown Frenchwoman in the Resistance had made the statement to J. Glenn Gray after the war. I was startled. I hadn't been in the Resistance but I felt exactly like this woman did. Her words were my words; her voice through time articulated my dilemma. In Afghanistan, I had indeed felt very alive. Here in Sydney, I was partly dead.

I emailed my lecturer, asking if she knew anyone who had written about the thrill of combat and women's positive experiences in war. My teacher replied that she didn't know of any. A few months later, I wrote again, asking if she knew of any books or research into the emotional elements of war that might cover pleasures and highs of fighting.

As I put it, "It is a topic that interests me and I can't seem to find much on it."

I was so curious about this woman who had been enlivened by war. Wasn't war meant to be awful? I did not know I was at the beginning of an unstoppable intrigue.

I tracked down Gray's *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle* and found he had an unusual back story. In 1941, on the day he got his paperwork to go to war, he was also awarded his Ph.D. in philosophy from Columbia University. He spent the next four years in various theatres of World War II as an intelligence officer. He returned to university life in the US, becoming a professor and a translator of Heidegger. The book was based on his diaries from the war and time spent back in Germany in the 1950s.

The Warriors threw open a door: Here was a soldier focusing on the strange pleasures of war. On page after page after page. As Gray put it, "What are the secret attractions of war, the ones that have persisted in the West despite revolutionary changes in the methods of warfare? I believe that they are: the delight in seeing, the delight in comradeship, the delight in destruction" (Gray 1959, 29).

I began trying to find other voices examining positive experiences of war. Of course, there were ancient epic poems lauding the heroism to be gained in battle. There was an endless supply of Hollywood war movies starring pleasure, but they were about male soldiers. I intermittently found gold in the memoirs of war correspondents and aid workers.

But I needed more depth. I wanted to know what pleasure in war meant, what the politics of it were, how it played its part.

Theorizing experience and emotions in war is quite new to international relations. For too long, as Christine Sylvester suggests, the field has been "operating comfortably in a world of theoretical abstractions" (Sylvester 2012, 483). Swati Parashar, who has spent years conducting fieldwork studying political violence, has argued that the focus on causes and impacts of war—and the use of quantitative tools—neglects that people who "fight/suffer/live" in war have knowledge about it and insights into why they happen (Parashar 2013, 618). So while scholars were exploring war in a myriad of ways, emotionally, as an affect, embodied or disembodied, the focus was largely negative. Any examination of emotions was usually in relation to PTSD, violence, trauma, and death experienced by soldiers. As one would expect really.

(It should be noted that the field of IR is not alone in being focused on the negative. The anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner documents how anthropology has been fixated on the "dark turn," which is dominated by examining power, inequality, and ethnographies of poverty and violence.)

The fact that IR had ignored or not engaged with the pleasures of war felt like an incomplete portrait of this huge social phenomenon. So I wandered into psychology, history, sociology, anthropology, and ethnomusicology, and it was here that I found a range of pleasures: existential notions of freedom (Sartre 1944), love and vulnerability (Macleish 2013), beautiful sounds (Daughtry 2015), friendship (Gray 1959; Harari 2008), the joys of travel (Lisle 2016) and laughter (Brown and Penttinen 2013) to name a few. Again, it was largely soldiers, but it was something.

Piqued, I set out to deconstruct this somewhat controversial idea that war is solely a source of trauma. I also wanted to wrestle war away from the military; they were not the only ones at it, were they?

Thus, as part of my Ph.D.—which I'm halfway through—I have interviewed thirty-two noncombatants who were in Afghanistan from 1996 to 2019, and found a world of professional and personal positive experiences.

"if they were having moments of pleasure—did that mean they were not in a war?"

Of course there is pain: friends killed in suicide bombings, compounds attacked, and high stress levels. But there are also reams of pages of extraordinary, poignant, and mundane moments of pleasure: the satisfaction of changing the US military's approach to airstrikes and night raids; the simple joys of warm Afghan bread; the adventure of facing risk and danger while embedded with troops; working alongside passionate Afghan colleagues and seeing them want more for their country; shoe shopping or eating a muffin at an embassy event while a bomb explodes; sitting down for a meal; visiting the spectacular pale blue lakes at Band-e Amir; the sense of importance at being in a country that was at the center of world affairs; going to Dubai for a break and having the money to be able to choose champagne over prosecco; enduring and deep friendships.

But what was also striking was how some of the respondents wondered if they were in a war. Most of them hadn't been on the frontline. They hadn't picked up a gun. And if they were having moments of pleasure—did that mean they were not in a war? Could one only be in a war if one were traumatized and terrified? I began to see that pleasure was a curious frame for looking at the ontology of war.

I too hadn't been on the frontline getting shot at or lying terrified in a house as bombs rained down around me. Nor was I a male warrior. I was a female international organization worker who worked in an office. Like some of the respondents, I also wasn't sure if I was in a war. Maybe I wasn't. Maybe it was a half-war? Or as one respondent put it: "It was the right amount of war."

It certainly felt war-ish. Security was central to everything. My home and my office were both surrounded by barbed wire and guards out the front with guns. When I got picked up to go to work every day, we took a different route to the office to avoid kidnapping; a security guard used a mirror to check for bombs under the vehicle when it stopped for me.

Explosions and the crackles of gunfire intermittently rang through the city at any time of day. Sometimes the boom was so loud my housemates and I would rush onto our front lawn, sleepy-eyed in our pajamas, wondering what had happened. We were often put into "lockdown" for a few days owing to any number of security incidents—an explosion, a kidnapping, or a suicide attack. One of my flatmates was a former British soldier who kept a rifle under his bed. At night, we did radio checks with a walkie-talkie that I took everywhere I went.

If I wanted to visit a restaurant or an office, it had to be 'MOSS' compliant, which was short for Minimal Operation Security Standards. Certain restaurants were cleared. Visiting public places was limited and only "point shopping" was allowed, which was defined as direct from car to shop. Walking was not allowed. Every day, a security briefing landed in my inbox, giving an update of the various bombs, threats, thefts, and deaths that had taken place across the country.

Kabul was certainly dressed for war: Hesco blocks, barbed wire draped across high walls, guards and soldiers in camo, large tanks sitting in traffic lights next to my bullet proof 4WD. This violent dressing undoubtedly masked something deeper, though. Brett Ashley Kaplan has explored, for example, how the often gushing and peaceful depictions of Hitler's holiday chalet on the Obersalzberg, in the hills of Bavaria, in magazines of the time masked the violence of the Nazi regime (Kaplan 2007, 241).

In a sense, was this “war” dressing that I saw daily helping to mask the pleasures? Perhaps we need to mask these pleasures. Or do we? Kaplan highlights how when it comes to depicting the Holocaust in literature, art and memorials, beauty has long been demonized. In response, he argues that the *unwanted beauty* of these depictions “encourage us to see the complexity of the Shoah in ways that conventional works fail to achieve” (Kaplan 2006, 3).

Aside from beginning the journey of looking at human experiences, IR is also going deeper into the ontology of war, which has for centuries put fighting at its core. “War is nothing but a duel on an extensive scale,” wrote the Prussian general and military theorist Carl von Clausewitz on the opening page of *On War*. He asks us to imagine two wrestlers: “Each strives by physical force to compel the other to submit to his will: Each endeavours to throw his adversary, and thus render him incapable of further resistance. War therefore is an act of violence intended to compel our opponent to fulfil our will” (Clausewitz 1984).

But many scholars see this characterization of war as being about soldiers fighting with guns, bombs, and an assortment of warcraft as not quite right. As Carolyn Nordstrom argues, war is not just about men doing battle nor is it set in a particular place (Nordstrom 1997, 8). She writes of looking for the “warzone,” a marked battlefield with soldiers. “Finding it proved difficult” (Nordstrom 1999, 21). She also speaks of it as being a “sprawling process” (1999, 21).

To claim that war is solely about soldiers fighting also cruelly ignores the thousands of Afghan civilians who have been killed in their homes, offices, and cars, and the international noncombatants who died doing their jobs. As the Afghan journalist Bilal Sarwary said of the Afghanistan war in 2019: “Everywhere is a frontline. Where has not been attacked? Schools, clinics, mosques, restaurants,” he says. “Cities, villages, highways—nowhere is safe” (Dent 2019).

The pairing of pleasure and war is undoubtedly offensive, a jolt to our idea of what is right. But the connection has been known for thousands of years, dating back to the love affair between Mars, the God of War, and Venus, the Goddess of Love. The fact that their affair was illicit touches on how pleasure and war together—and apart—have always been touched by morality. Nonetheless, we need to keep digging through the darkness of war, as getting to the light will help us better understand this social phenomenon.

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The self-realizing soldier

HEIDI MOGSTAD

Soldiers participate in wars for various reasons, some of which are historically, politically, and culturally contingent, and others shaped by individual circumstances and dispositions. While research on the US and UK militaries has often highlighted soldiers' desires for social mobility and economic security, the Israeli military sociologist Ben-Shalom (2012) emphasizes soldiers' need to feel a sense of purpose or meaning. From his perspective, meaning-making is an active creation and selection process, leaving room for individual agency and choice. However, soldiers' motivations and narratives are also a matter of public and political concern. Moreover, public institutions such as the government and the military are heavily invested in the "psychic and emotional lives of those whose job it is to fight, kill, be injured, and die on the nation's behalf" (MacLeish 2019: 275). In other words, it matters not only what soldiers do, but also what they say and feel.

In this essay, I begin by discussing what other scholars have identified as the "humanitarian soldier"; that is, a moral figure embodying both the humanitarian spirit and military ethos expressed in the post-9/11 "humanitarian wars" and counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan in particular (Kotilainen 2011; 2020; De Lauri 2019a).

Drawing on my own research with Norwegian soldiers and veterans, I identify a new mode of soldiering: the "self-realizing soldier" motivated primarily by a desire for adventure, thrill, and growth.

The contribution is based on my ongoing research with Norwegian soldiers and war veterans who have served in international operations during the last two decades. My primary data collection method is in-depth, semi-structured, and occasionally repeated interviews with current and former soldiers in the Norwegian Armed Forces. These are supplemented with media analysis, archival research, expert interviews, and research visits to military camps and academies, veteran centers, military museums, and soldiers' homes. My interviewees are mainly men (hitherto eighteen men and four women), but they have different class and educational backgrounds and come from and live across the country. Moreover, they have different ranks, military specialties, and careers, ranging from special forces operatives and intelligence officers to infantry soldiers and other enlisted personnel. Owing to my interest in soldiers' relationships to violence and enemy construction, I purposefully sought out those with combat experience.



I have also focused on soldiers and veterans who have served in professionalized expeditionary forces in Afghanistan, sometimes referred to in Norway as “the new generation of soldiers and veterans.” However, several of my interlocutors have also experience with peacekeeping missions and military interventions in the Balkans, Africa, Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria. Since I have yet to complete my analysis, what I present here are only preliminary findings and reflections. Further discussions and ethnography will be shared in future articles and publications.

The humanitarian soldier

Writing specifically about the post-9/11 era, Kotilainen argues that “the co-optation and closer collaboration of humanitarianism and militarism have given birth to a figure who encapsulates and embodies the global politics of the politicized humanitarian system and the logics of the new wars: The humanitarian soldier” (Kotilainen 2020, 100). As De Lauri elaborates, “the humanitarian soldier appears as a global moral agent who embodies both the ‘humanitarian spirit’ and the military ethos expressed in contemporary humanitarianism and the counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan in particular” (De Lauri 2019a, 33). The figure frequently appears in political discourses and legitimizing speeches where it “aspires to make Western warfare seem humane and conducted in accordance with the moral legitimizations for such interventions. The humanitarian soldier is therefore well suited to winning over the hearts and minds of the domestic populations of the warring states” (Kotilainen 2020, 100; see also Kotilainen 2011).

However, the figure of the humanitarian soldier is more than a visual representation or tool to persuade civilians and noncombatants. In the context of the war in Afghanistan, scholars have shown that soldiers’ narratives and self-understandings are deeply influenced by humanitarian campaigns, justifications, and imaginaries. For instance, one of the Italian soldiers De Lauri interviewed emphasized ISAF’s mission to “help Afghans to rebuild their country, to give hope to the Afghan population” (De Lauri 2019a, 49). Another interviewee spoke of soldiers’ “moral duty towards humanity at large” (ibid., 50).

Likewise, Welland writes that, when asked about their personal motivations, British soldiers tended to “assume a more humanitarian explanation than the security of their home nation” (Welland 2016, 140). In her understanding, “many soldiers appeared genuinely excited about getting involved with the local population, with doing something more than just war-fighting, and had an unselfconscious desire to ‘do good’” (ibid.; see also Duncanson 2013). Put differently; they had come to embody the figure of the humanitarian soldier used to legitimize foreign interventions as a form of compassion and moral responsibility (De Lauri 2019a).

The self-realizing soldier

Prior to starting my research, I had expected that at least some of the Norwegian soldiers I interviewed would talk about their motivations and experiences in similar ways. A major donor of aid and development assistance, Norway has a rather self-congratulatory public self-image as a “nation of peace and compassion” (*fredsnaasjon*) or “humanitarian superpower” (*humanitær stormakt*) (Gullestad 2006; Tvedt 2017). In accordance with this self-definition, the country’s participation in foreign wars and military operations are typically framed as humanitarian or peacebuilding interventions (Heier et al 2017). Moreover, the Norwegian Army is known to be restrictive with the use of violence and decorate soldiers for their efforts to save civilian lives. Given the Armed Forces’ consistent efforts to make historical connections with Norway’s World War II “resistance heroes” and positive nationalist sentiments in the population at large (Gullestad 2006), I had also expected several of my interlocutors to exhibit patriotic values and motivations.

However, none of the soldiers and veterans I interviewed conformed with these dominant cultural scripts. First, despite the ideological justifications for the war in Afghanistan (De Lauri 2019b) and the focus on counterinsurgency (Welland 2016), they rarely expressed strong positive or negative feelings about Afghan Others, whether enemy or civilian. In fact, nearly all interlocutors explicitly underscored that they were *not* in Afghanistan to help the civilian population or to serve humanity, nor did they express hatred of the enemy. Second, while generally proud and grateful to be Norwegian, the soldiers and ex-soldiers I interviewed rejected or downplayed patriotic commitments to “serve the king and fatherland” (*tjene kongen og fedreland*).

"it was about my own desires to experience war and test myself in combat" ... "it was an "ego-trip" or "form of self-realization"

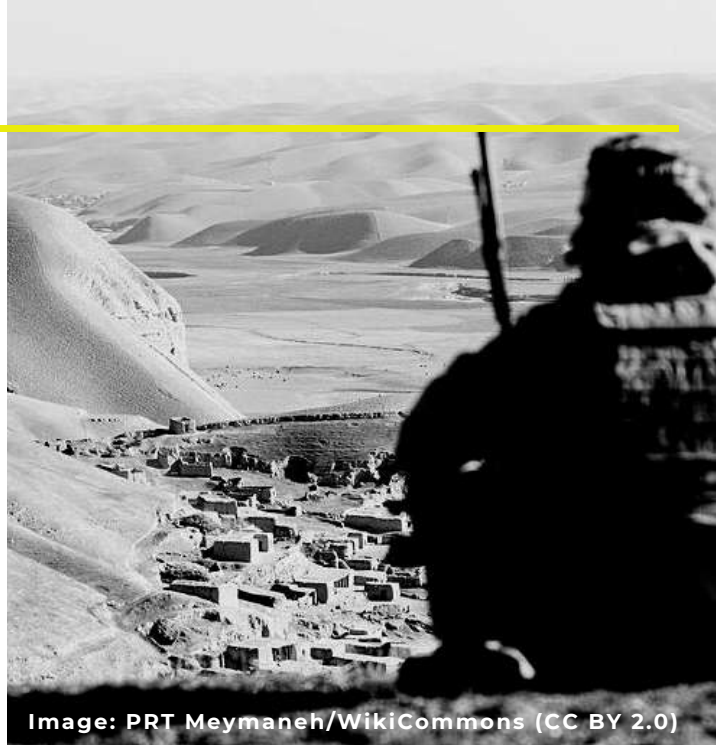


Image: PRT Meymaneh/WikiCommons (CC BY 2.0)

As one explained, "I have always felt proud to wear the Norwegian flag on my shoulder and serve in the Norwegian Army. But going to Afghanistan was never about that. It was about my own desires to experience war and test myself in combat." It was an "ego-trip" or "form of self-realization," others admitted unapologetically.

Notably, the soldiers emphasized that their exact motivation changed over time. Initially, many were motivated by a strong desire to experience a "real war" (see also Dyvik 2016; Pedersen 2017) or do something "unique" that was unparalleled by the experiences of their friends and peers at home. They typically described themselves as "young, immature boys who had always enjoyed speed and thrill" (*fart og spenning*) and life outdoors in the wild. Largely without economic and familial responsibilities at home, they considered themselves free and immortal, though retrospectively, many said they were probably "a bit stupid and naïve."

However, after one or several tours in Afghanistan, most of my interlocutors said they had satisfied their lust for risky assignments and combat. At this point, they were not only "older and wiser," but many had been promoted and were leaders for younger troops. "No longer in their carefree twenties," the majority had further married and got young children who depended on them and worried about them when they were abroad. Both developments made them feel more responsible and less willing to take risks on behalf of themselves or others.

At the same time, serving in international operations was still considered more than just their job and obligation as professional soldiers. Using words such as "freedom," "comradeship," "simplicity," "fun," "mastery," and "bubble," many described their tours in Afghanistan as an exciting and pleasurable break from their work and commitments at home. Moreover, nearly all the soldiers I interviewed described Afghanistan as a place to grow and develop themselves as soldiers and individuals. Most also said they had experienced such growth, typically telling me they returned from their tours in Afghanistan as better warriors, leaders, and even human beings. Together with a growing sense of duty to and camaraderie with their fellow soldiers and unit, this desire to grow professionally and personally was a key motivation to return to war despite being more risk-averse and having lost faith in the overall mission (Waalder et al. 2019).

By way of conclusion

Serving in war is often framed as a national duty and sacrifice, which we assume provides soldiers with a larger purpose and meaning. In the post-9/11 era, the blurring of militarism and humanitarianism has also given birth to the figure of the "humanitarian soldier," which has influenced European soldiers' narratives and self-understanding.

However, as described earlier, my interlocutors' decision to join—and in many cases return—to the war in Afghanistan had little to do with their moral or emotional commitments to Afghan civilians or an abstract humanity. Nor were they primarily motivated by military or national loyalty or a desire for economic security. Conversely, what emerges from my interviews is the figure of a *self-realizing soldier*, initially motivated by the promise of adventure, thrill, and self-discovery (including a desire to experience combat firsthand) and later by a strong desire for personal growth and development.

How should we interpret this figure of the self-realizing soldier, and where does it come from? At first glance, it is easy to view my interlocutors' emphasis on self-realization as an expression of the disciplinary power of contemporary neoliberalism (Strand and Berndtsson 2015).

Indeed, the figure of the self-realizing soldier is closely associated with the neoliberal ideal of the autonomous and entrepreneurial citizen always looking for a way to invest in himself (Gershon 2011; Strand 2022).

However, the idea that war can be regenerative or transformative is not new (Mosse 1990; Pedersen 2017). Moreover, we should be careful not to portray soldiers as:

somehow seduced into military and war, either by valorization of personal regeneration in the "Myth of War Experience" (Mosse 1990) or by idealization of self-making in neoliberal recruitment discourses (Strand and Berndtsson 2015) – let alone by celebration of violence and warriorhood in military-industrial-media-entertainment networks (Der Derian 2009) or in political-military narratives and commemorative practices (Sørensen 2015; Sørensen and Pedersen 2012) (Pedersen 2017: 8).

In my current work, I follow Pedersen's (2017) example and take soldiers "seriously" as self-driven and reflective human beings with complex and shifting motivations. I also tackle what I initially believed was a big puzzle: How come Norwegian soldiers—publicly said to protect the nation's liberal democracy and humanitarian values—repeatedly and unashamedly describe their main motivation as self-realization? Finally, I consider some of the questions my interlocutors did not ponder much: What, if anything, are the problems with seeking self-realization in war? Moreover, what are the moral and political implications of treating Afghanistan as an arena for adventure and growth?

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Come for the war, stay for the swimming pool

THE GREEN ZONES OF BAGHDAD AND MOGADISHU AS HETEROTOPIC SPACES
BY HELLE MALMVIC AND JETHRO NORMAN



There has been significant scholarly interest in the militarized and enclavized spaces of international intervention and war (Chandrasekaran 2010; Fisher 2017; Weigand and Andersson 2019). Afghanistan's "Kabbuble," Baghdad's "Emerald City," or Mogadishu's airport "green zone" are among the most well-known examples.

Yet from Bamako to Juba, sprawling networks of fortified international compounds have proliferated, providing full-spectrum "life support" facilities for international staff (Duffield 2010; Autesserre 2014). Indeed, the fortified enclave seems to be an integral facet of contemporary Western intervention in war zones and postconflict societies across the globe.

The literature has importantly criticized this bunkerization for undermining the stated aims of liberal intervention and/or humanitarian aid, the radical inequality it produces and sustains, the coloniality of these spaces, and commodifying intervention, attributing it to remote warfare or a physical manifestation of the “forever war.” Less attention, however, has been given to the lived experience within these so-called green zones, to what the military personnel actually *do* within them; in particular, the overlooked yet—we argue—salient role that leisure, entertainment, and recreation play in how soldiers and military contractors negotiate the frustrations and boredom of life within the “bunker,” and thus, ultimately, how the continuation of Western remote warfare and liberal interventionism are enabled.

Drawing on comparative insights from fieldwork in the green zones of Mogadishu and a week-long stay at the US operating base Union III in the heart of the Green Zone in Baghdad, as well as over eighty interviews with soldiers, security contractors, military advisors, and trainers, this essay explores the tensions, pleasures, and frustrations of contemporary life in the green zone. While green zones tend to be thought of as sterile, austere, featureless “non-places” (Auge 1996), we argue that they may rather be seen as distinctive, heterotopic social worlds (Foucault and Dreyfus 1986). They are alternate spaces both unreal and absolutely real, near utopias where palm trees, swimming pools, and continuous electricity set them apart from the war-torn societies they are ostensibly part of, while the watchtowers, checkpoints, T-walls, and container homes simultaneously create prison-like spaces of confinement. As heterotopias, they uncannily combine incompatible spaces such as the exotic holiday destination and the prison camp. We argue that in these heterotopic sites significant energy and investment is expended on keeping up the excitement and to routinize recreational activities in order to stave off the boredom and frustration that results from the bunker condition. Leisure facilities and activities have thus expanded to the extent that bunkerized spaces have, for some, become not just tolerable, but even *fun* or comforting to be in.

Bunkerized life

Danger. Combat. Explosions. All things that do not typically happen in the green zone. Many soldiers and military contractors deployed to Baghdad and Mogadishu’s green zones at first had strong expectations about life in a war zone and were disappointed to find themselves confined behind blast walls with minimal contact with the outside and limited opportunities to travel. At Union III in Baghdad’s Green Zone, about 75 percent of the military personnel are not even allowed to exit the military camp—that is, enter the wider Green Zone—and the camp is generally referred to as “the open prison.” As the dreams of adventure recede, the frustration that they will not get to “experience” Mogadishu or Baghdad or any form of “real” warfare sets in. In Mogadishu, the blame often lands on risk-averse or inept bureaucracies in their home countries, or in the case of Baghdad the very conservative US intelligence evaluations that the Coalition forces are dependent on.

Green zones are not only populated by soldiers and military contractors. They are also crammed with people working for different organizations, under different mandates, bureaucratic responsibilities, and risk thresholds. In Mogadishu, for example, security contractors enjoy far more freedom to move within the green zone and outside it relative to many military contingents, who have stringent force protection protocols on mobility and security. In Baghdad, any trip from the military base to the wider Green Zone requires four armored vehicles and twelve men from the Force Protection Team. It is evidently extremely resource-demanding and very few—often the most senior commanders—are therefore allowed to enter the wider Green Zone. Life within Union III has become so bunkerized that even the Green Zone is considered going “outside.”

Negotiating the confinement

For many, the gap created by the disjuncture between expectation and reality is filled by routine. You circulate from one compound to the next, eat in the same canteen with the same people, stay in the same air-conditioned container. In Baghdad, cleaning is on Sundays and movie nights are on Thursdays. In Mogadishu, “make your own pizza” night is Friday evening’s entertainment.

"you circulate from one compound to the next, eat in the same canteen with the same people ... in Baghdad, cleaning is on Sundays and movie nights are on Thursdays"

Hard physical training also offers a way to fill time. In Mogadishu, there are regular touch rugby games, and on weekend afternoons, the beachfront is packed with runners, who jog up and down like hamsters in a cage. At Union III in Baghdad, most of the military personnel spend the evening jogging in circles along the outer walls of the small camp. There are competitions over who can run the most kilometers during their six-month deployment. "You get your name on the board if you reach 500 kilometers," explains a Croatian soldier from the Force Protection team. "I'll get there, and maybe I'll go for the next level of 840 kilometers, there is really nothing else to do." Working out may also offer a substitute for "real action" and a way to engage the hypermasculinity of the military. At the intermittent quarters of the force protection teams, young men spend hours pumping iron in front of the mirror—and each other. Even the lieutenant general commanding the mission, despite being close to the age of retirement, was known to do heavy weightlifting every morning with his team.

Telling war stories from other conflict zones, or—if you can—about journeys "outside the wire" can similarly act as substitutes for "action" and as meaning-creating practices. At Union III every week, the military advisors of the coalition forces meet for an informal talk in the evening. The Finns, for instance, share a story of the famous sniper Simo Häyhä fighting the Russians, and the Danes relate the notorious "Operation Bøllebank," a Danish-led battle against Serbian forces in the Balkans in the 1990s. Their present rather uneventful deployment could thereby be linked to a continuous history of heroic war-making and humanitarian interventionism. Others had stories of occasional missile attacks from Shia militias into the Green Zone, at times countered by exciting noise from the American C-Ram.

Those dreaming of getting outside the walls need to come up with creative exit plans. A flyer on a bulletin board in Union III ironically asked "Tired of life in the open prison? Come teach at the Iraqi Ministry of Defense." Over time, the desire to transgress the boundaries of the green zone may diminish. One individual who had been circulating in and out of Mogadishu's green zone boasted of having been there for almost a year and never having spoken to a Somali. Many questioned why they were even there, sitting in a container, when they could be doing exactly the same job in Nairobi. A Canadian lieutenant in Baghdad similarly revealed that he was offered a trip outside (i.e., outside the Green Zone) by his commander; "but why should I?" he shrugged. Yet many were longing for a bit of light and a glimpse of the outside. They went to the rooftop of one of Saddam Hussein's former government buildings in the heart of Union III to escape the darkness and confinement of the T walls. There they would get a peek at Baghdad city, the clocktower, and Saddam Hussein's two famous crossing swords. This would be the closest most would ever be to Baghdad.

Can camp life be entertaining?

The problem of frustration and boredom—and simply having too much time to spare in a confined space—is of course nothing new to the military. As Meredith Lair has observed in her book on consumerism and soldiering in Vietnam, the US war machine went to great lengths to provide entertainment and recreation in an effort to stave off dissent and trouble-making.

In present Baghdad, the US military similarly provides mainstream American entertainment for the coalition forces, from a sneak premiere of a Star Wars movie to a concert with the country singer Toby Keith. In Mogadishu, entertainment is mainly provided by market forces. It has now become a business with strong parallels to (war) tourism (e.g., Lisle, 2016;).

In one securitized hotel, container homes are organized into carefully arranged “streets” named after famous London locations, such as Covent Garden and Baker Street, invoking a caricatured “Britishness” reminiscent of colonial bourgeois cultures or British tourist enclaves in Spain. The number of swimming pools, gastro-pubs, and hotel bars has also proliferated in Mogadishu’s green zone. A common quip is that you can do a pub crawl around the green zone, owing to the proliferation of drinking establishments—in a Muslim country, where alcohol is strictly forbidden. One side of the green zone is a seafront that has become a private beach for the international community. A liminal space of leisure and escapism, the beach is where UN staff may be found barbecuing imported Italian meats, security contractors might go spear fishing, or peacekeepers paddle in the water. Outside the airport, one can buy shark jaws and other curios to take home as souvenirs. In Baghdad, diplomats and government officials still meet at the al Rasheed Hotel overlooking the palm trees and the Tigris river, as they have ever since the US-led invasion in 2003.

As bunkerization has fortified, entertainment and routinization seem no less important than during the Vietnam War. As heterotopic spaces, the green zones enfold multiple imaginaries of place into one compressed space, thereby juxtaposing seemingly incompatible lived experiences—close to both tourism and prison life—yet sufficiently tolerable to make the denizens remain. This shows how war, often seen as an exceptional and radically contingent event, is in fact a part of everyday life. Boredom and pleasure-seeking are as much aspects of contemporary war as the thrill of combat. Many may have come for the war, but most stayed on for the swimming pools.

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"Have I killed someone?"

MEANING MAKING BY GERMAN SOLDIERS AFTER COMBAT IN AFGHANISTAN BY MAREN TOMFORDE

The experience of military violence during the German International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) operation has not only been essentially new to German society and the armed forces, but also and particularly to the Bundeswehr soldiers. For the first time since the end of World War II, German service members actively used kinetic violence during combat. The question in focus here is how do soldiers deal with combat situations, the fear, the permanent tension, and how do they cope with killing and death? Killing is still one of the best hidden phenomena of modern wars, because social scientists generally hesitate when it comes to discussing and investigating the act of killing. It is a challenging research undertaking to not per se classify violence as something evil (or something good) but, in defiance of the moral challenge, to examine how people can inflict violence upon others or even kill them, and how they evaluate the significance of such an act.

When ISAF soldiers returned to Germany, friends and relatives often tersely enquire “Did you kill anyone?” instead of asking the usual question: “So what was it like?” Owing to certain spatial distances given in most combat situations, the soldiers more often than not do not know whether they have actually injured or killed someone. Having certain knowledge in this respect is very rare in military conflicts. This not-knowing can lead to equally irritating feelings of guilt and shame as being sure that one has shot somebody. In most combat situations, soldiers do not face each other when they shoot; on the contrary, the view of the other soldier (who is moving and taking cover) can be blocked by (large) distances, the terrain, bushes, buildings, and so on. This is also called the “fog of combat.” A (fatal) hit on an opponent is only noticed when return fire ceases—in most cases, the only ones who have a clear view of the enemy to be killed are the snipers or movie heroes. Therefore, the experience of killing another person seems to remain rather abstract to most German soldiers with combat experience. Interestingly enough, even snipers are protected from too direct confrontation with the act of killing by looking through their rifle scopes.

Therefore, soldiers experience killing in highly contradictory ways. This may lead to a range of (emotional) reactions between desire for combat and triumph on the one hand and the seeking of sense and feelings of guilt, compassion, and remorse on the other hand. Directly after a fight, soldiers are happy to have survived and maybe to have even killed the enemy. In most cases, unsettling thoughts, questions of meaning, and feelings of guilt only arise after some time has passed, because the soldiers may come to see “an ominous component of hopelessness” in the bloodshed and killing.

Soldiers can be morally unsettled by these questions. Most studies in the context of social sciences are focused on the victims of violence rather than on the perpetrators. During ISAF’s mission in Afghanistan, however, the soldiers not only became victims, but also perpetrators. This perspective can be hard to bear for some soldiers and, apart from moral questions, can lead to feelings of guilt, shame, and aggressiveness as well as speechlessness and helplessness.

Additional consequences may include disturbed social behavior as well as impulse control disorders. The majority of soldiers nevertheless deal quite well with killing in battle—especially if the enemy has been identified unequivocally and if service members can be sure to have successfully fought against insurgents. However, our natural biological scruples about killing another person have to be overcome again and again. People do not want to kill, and soldiers are no exception. Apparently, in World War II, 80 to 85 percent of the American soldiers did not shoot at the enemy. This psychological barrier has been lowered considerably by better training during the wars in Korea and Vietnam.

When soldiers kill another human being, this act can call our inherent humanity into question. The legitimization of the use of violence by society is thus of particular significance. If one’s own group approves of the collective killing (the imperative to kill), the cultural concept of the prohibition of killing can be overcome and adequately processed. As indicated by German ISAF soldiers during personal interviews, they sometimes not only questioned the meaning and purpose of the mission, but they were also aware of the poor legitimization of this robust operation on the part of German society. This awareness burdens soldiers additionally, as war is not an endeavor of a few but a state of society, and therefore affects everyone.

With regard to the psychological well-being of soldiers from a combat mission, it is vital for them to be reaccepted and readmitted by society as “people like you and me” and to not be perceived as psychopathologized strangers or marginal women/men, as is often the case in Western societies.

In German society, soldiers are often marked as being special so that their experiences may be excluded as particular ones. This way, society does not have to integrate war experiences and enter into direct confrontation with the experienced violence. In other words, experiences of violence are not being integrated into society; instead, the affected soldiers are being repulsed by a focus on psychopathology. However, war and warlike conflicts cannot be individualized. Combat experiences cannot be excluded by so-called post-heroic societies that send their soldiers into conflict or war scenarios. Experiences of violence are not only stored in narrations, but also archived in language. They are also incorporated into bodies, movements, gestures, (unofficial) rituals, and objects.

Personal interviews with Bundeswehr soldiers with combat experience have demonstrated that, even in the military context, violence is being interpreted in highly different ways. It can have both abominable and positive aspects. As unsettling as experiences of violence may be in that particular moment, for many soldiers the confrontation with violence is only part of a more complex experience during a mission as well as afterwards. Externally, the armed forces represent the state's monopoly on the use of violence. As members of this organization of the state, the soldiers are trained in the use of violence and sent on sometimes robust missions mandated by parliament. During these operations they will have to make use of the learned violence in combat situations. For the soldiers, violence is the gravitational center, which is not only the basis for core military training, but also for the emergence of a soldierly identity. The training and performance of military violence is an essential part of a professional soldier's view on his profession. Therefore, we need to understand that for many members of the military, violence is not something that automatically traumatizes but is part of their profession as well as of their professional self-perception. In most cases, soldiers are able to deal quite well with experiences of violence as an integral part of their soldierly assignment in the country of deployment.

The experience of violence is not automatically traumatizing and is not taken as an opportunity to distance oneself from the values and norms of the native peaceful society. In many cases, soldiers with combat experiences who have been directly confronted with their own mortality often appreciate their home more than they did before. In many cases they also experience a strengthening of their value system: Virtues such as honesty, politeness, reliability and taking care of each other now have a higher importance. Combat experiences can trigger a certain self-assurance, which helps to regain one's own wholeness. Suppressed or dormant facets of one's own personality can be revived/lived out under the challenging conditions of violent confrontation.





Image: Ricardo Cabrera Letelier/Flickr (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Combat sex

**PLEASURE OF WAR IN
AFRICA BY
GODFREY MARINGIRA**

Traditional war practices, such as killing, are not easily linked with sexual intimacies in war. The image of a soldier is that of a rough-riding macho man driven by the desire to kill and characterized by bigotry. While this is sometimes true, it is not the image presented here. This essay is interested in an intimate and romantic soldier in the context of war in Africa, in the Democratic Republic of Congo war, fought between 1998 and 2002. The focus is on intervening forces, the Zimbabwean soldiers, whose stories of war were embedded with intimate sex with civilian Congolese women in war. This Democratic Republic of Congo war has been referred to as the “Great War” in Africa and/or the “Africa World War” (Reyntjens 1999; Rawlence 2012). This is premised on the number of intervening countries and forces in the war: Rwanda and Uganda supporting the rebel forces fighting against the Democratic Republic of Congo government, supported by Zimbabwe, Angola, and Namibia. This was fought for five consecutive years, and millions of civilians lost their lives, including soldiers and rebels.

"what makes this sex pleasurable is not just engaging in the act during war, but the possibility of an exciting experience in the face of adversity and the certainty of death"

The burgeoning scholarship interest in war continues to present it as a social, economic, and politically destructive experience. This is real. However, war also has intimate moments. Thus, while the dominant discourse on and about war is that it is about killing or incapacitating perceived enemies, sex in war changes our understanding of war and being in combat to a pleasurable experience. What makes this sex pleasurable is not just engaging in the act during war, but the possibility of an exciting experience in the face of adversity and the certainty of death. Soldiers are not just instruments of killing; they are able to establish long term and intimate relationships with civilians in the context of war. The strong academic and policy position is that sex in war is rape, yet soldiers also establish sexual and romantic relationships with civilian women in the context of war. The social processes involved in the context of war are quite similar to those involved in the context of peace. Such practices help us to understand that even though soldiers' intention in war is to fight and kill, killing in war is inextricably linked with moments of intimate sex.

The idea here is not to refute the presence of rape in war by soldiers against civilians, or by civilians against civilians, but to discuss a grey area that even scholars skirt around. The question about intimate sex during war engaged in by soldiers reveals to us issues about soldiering in its totality in the context of war. Often, soldiers (and men in general) are presented as perpetrators of sexual violence, without an understanding that they are law-abiding citizens even in spaces in which they can act otherwise. Infantry soldiers are often accompanied in war by the military police, who can enforce discipline on soldiers.

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The military police represent the state, and they can arrest and detain soldiers, ensuring that the due process is followed in prosecution, even in war. Thus, as well as being moral agents, soldiers abide by the laws that guide them in the context of war. It is not entirely true that soldiers "go rogue" in wartime; rather, military commanders and military police prepare standing orders that guide and control soldiers so they act within the specific confines of the law. Any soldier who goes against the standing orders is severely punished.

War is a window of opportunity for soldiers to meet and establish intimate relationships, and these sometimes go beyond the context of war. Soldiers understand and make a distinction between rape and other forms of sexual violence and intimate sex. This is because they are humane. Carrying guns does not of itself cause men to lose morality in sexual relations. Soldiers in war go out beyond the trenches, dress in civilian clothing, and meet and date civilian women. In turn, soldiers take civilian women into the trenches of war, engaging in wartime companionship.

It is therefore important to understand that sex in war is a social practice that is characterized by humane emotions. War does not completely eradicate the ways in which intimacies are understood both in theory and in practice.

War as a game

THE PLAYFUL ASPECTS OF THE DARING ONES' MILITARY AND PARAMILITARY EXPERIENCES, 1917-1922 BY BLASCO SCIARRINO

Introduction

In political and social history, the Italian elite army corps known as the *Arditi* (Daring Ones), which fought mainly in World War I, is often portrayed as a paragon of virile might, or its grim public image, which included depictions of skulls and daggers, is emphasized. The popularity of these representations is perhaps inevitable: After all, the *Arditi* proved considerably effective on the battlefield, while many of these former assault troops later flanked the Italian Combat Leagues (*Fasci italiani di combattimento*), extensively partaking in the Blackshirts' paramilitary mobilization of 1919-1922, and sharing macabre public rituals and imagery with the Fascists.

Nevertheless, both the *Arditi's* wartime valor and postwar paramilitary fervor displayed two somewhat paradoxical features: The fact that these soldiers showed, at times, a manifestly playful and jolly—in some ways, almost childlike—demeanor, and that their combat performances were the result of training achieved through the use of sports and games, in addition to self-soothing based on chanting. Several *Arditi*, in other words, were shaped by fun—here understood to be either the act of experiencing enjoyment or amusement, or the process of partaking in ludic and athletic activities.

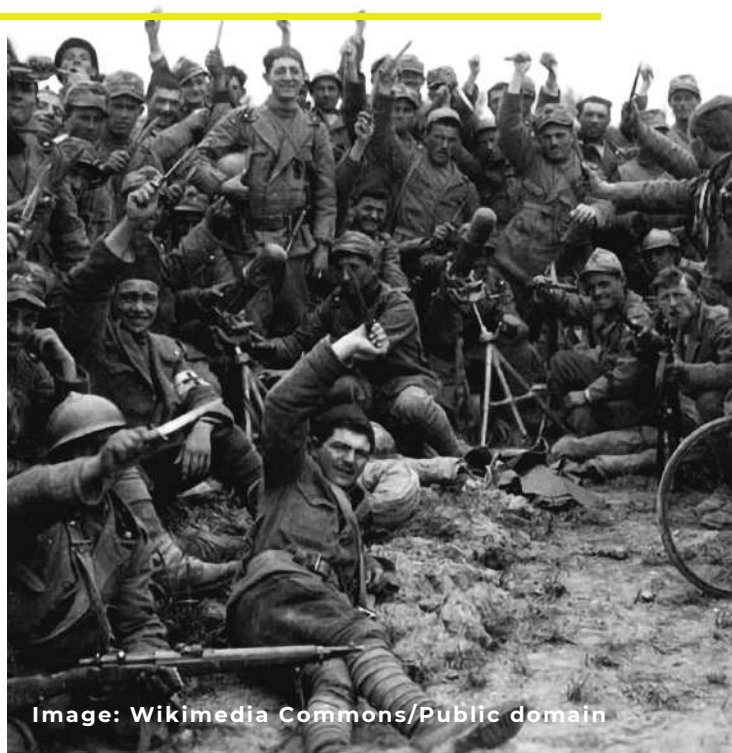


Image: Wikimedia Commons/Public domain

Keeping this in mind, the aim of this essay is twofold. To begin with, it seeks to analyze how fun increased the shock troopers' fighting power during World War I and their subsequent paramilitary activism. Second, the analysis verifies whether the playful states of mind and collective pursuits increased not just the *Arditi's* military prowess, but also the men's resolve, during World War I and thereafter, to use violence—thereby contributing to the process of moral brutalization some of these soldiers underwent in the course of the conflict. Specifically, it looks at the ways in which factors such as youth, political cultures that promoted jubilant and ecstatic sentiments, and enjoyable group activities all helped make the *Arditi* more functional soldiers, and in some instances more violent men.

Daring Ones in World War I

The *Arditi* army corps was a special body that was created in 1917, amid Italy's involvement in World War I (1915-1918). Envisioned by the Italian military command as a tool for swiftly breaching enemy defenses, the *Arditi* indeed managed to storm enemy positions in several circumstances, gaining a reputation as powerful fighters.

After the war, and the *Arditi's* military demobilization, many of these elite veterans ended up collaborating with Mussolini's Blackshirts, taking up a central role in Fascist paramilitary activism. Later, numerous special ex-combatants swore allegiance to the Fascist leader's dictatorship.

On the whole, then, the Italian shock troops exhibited remarkable martial prowess and interest in political violence. Crucially, it appears that, for numerous *Arditi*, fun and fighting were not separate endeavors, but rather two sides of the same coin. In other words, while we might instinctively think of war and play as being at odds, in the case of the *Arditi* they might be understood as a single activity. To investigate the ways in which these two undertakings were entwined, I survey how specific circumstances made some recruits of the elite units predisposed to finding war 'amusing', even before serving in the army. Additionally, I survey how these men's mindsets, which dismissed the horrors of war, were further consolidated through military training based on games and sports. Furthermore, I indicate that this type of training took away feelings of hesitancy that other kinds of recruits might have initially felt, while also heightening reflexes and hence increasing combat skills. Finally, I point out that members of the *Arditi* corps devised merry group activities—such as singing war chants together—to cope with any residual concerns, a tactic that proved effective.

Concerning the first dynamic, it appears several members of the elite body signed up with worldviews that, for varied reasons, trivialized military conflicts, conceptualizing them as "experience[s] stripped of [their] horror and untidiness" (Mosse 1990, 133) and equating them with "good adventure stor[ies]" (Mosse 1986, 497). One reason for adopting these views might have been that they belonged to the nationalist political faction that had wanted Italy to enter World War I, the so-called interventionist (*interventista*) camp. Indeed, prior to Italy's involvement in the war, several *Arditi* had been interventionists, including those who belonged to the Futurist artistic-political movement.

While interventionism was a heterogeneous phenomenon—encompassing groups with a range of ideological leanings and political strategies—some of its proponents understood life as a ludic event—a perpetual ceremony. Furthermore, the Futurists openly understood waging war as taking part in a festival. These worldviews might have led interventionist *Arditi* to banalize the European conflict, viewing it as an opportunity for entertainment, with the result that, for instance, they played pranks during their military service on enemies. Notably, the Futurist Alberto Businelli claimed that as a serviceman, even before becoming a stormtrooper, he had engaged in a game of hide and seek with an enemy sharpshooter on a mountainside, taunting him with his carefree and irreverent attitude.

I rush to the walkway as I hear the raging hiss of the bullet pass by me. I smile compassionately to the unknown enemy and yell:

"Gotcha!"

Then I pull down my white hood, take off my helmet, place it on the tip of the climbing staff and raise it so the Austrian can see it. Pow! [A]nother rifle shot and the helmet disappears [just in time]. I laugh. The helmet is then raised more to the right, now more to the left, chased by the pow [sic] while I laugh out loud. Finally I place it back on my head, I get back on my feet, I reveal myself to the enemy and yell: "See you next time!" (Businelli 1935, 24–25)

Social factors such as having a sportsman's background or being youthful also played an important role with regard to the tendency by certain *Arditi* to see war as a game or an adventure. Concerning the first of these factors, it should be mentioned that various interventionists played or venerated sports, which likely led some of them to trivialize the brutality of war. Futurists practiced fencing, football, boxing, and cycling, while an interventionist war volunteer fighting in France spoke of the war as an agonistic match between two teams of competing nations. A similar trivializing impulse likely affected some recruits because of their youth, which probably gave them a more childlike outlook on life, helping them to view military service as a romantic quest. Finally, the corps attracted thrill seekers, who might have overlooked the horrors of the war in the pursuit of an exciting lifestyle. Paolo Giudici, a Sicilian stormtrooper, was a restless writer who took up arms to satisfy his yearning for meaning and vivid experiences.

All these varied trivializing mentalities were doubtless entrenched by the training and indoctrination undergone in the process of becoming *Arditi*. How and why did this consolidation take place? Essentially, army authorities, in striving to grant the *Arditi* a high offensive thrust, by making them faster and more agile and aggressive, adopted a variety of ingenious and effective tactics that in all likelihood further strengthened the tendency of certain *Arditi* to make light of the horrors of war.

First of all, commanders and trainers in charge of the *Arditi* decided to preserve and improve these men's physical prowess, speed, and agility by having them follow a rigorous, while also often enjoyable, training regimen, which took place in special boot camps and was mostly based on practicing sports. One outcome of the army's tactic for increasing the *Arditi*'s fighting power was the cultivation of soldiers' habit of seeing combat as a ludic and athletic activity, enveloping Daring Ones in an agonistic atmosphere. For instance, while undergoing training, Paolo Giudici saw the grenades he was learning to handle as toys. Another *Ardito*, Maggiore Radicati di Primeglio, boasted that "through the varied [camp] exercises, the moral and physical qualities of the Daring Ones were automatically consolidated, so that he viewed fighting as a game, danger as an incentive, battle as an adventure with a mysterious appeal" (Radicati di Primeglio 1957, 31).

The *Arditi*'s superiors also enacted other measures that certainly helped specific special troops feel as if they were taking part in a game, albeit a high-risk one. Notably, the army command was definitely aware of several elite troops' understanding of World War I as a joyous activity, and consciously cultivated this outlook. Indeed, official wartime propaganda depicted the shock troopers as enjoying the conflict, even in risky situations. Notably, a cartoon in a trench newspaper showed *Arditi* treating their military routines as leisure opportunities (see Figure 1).

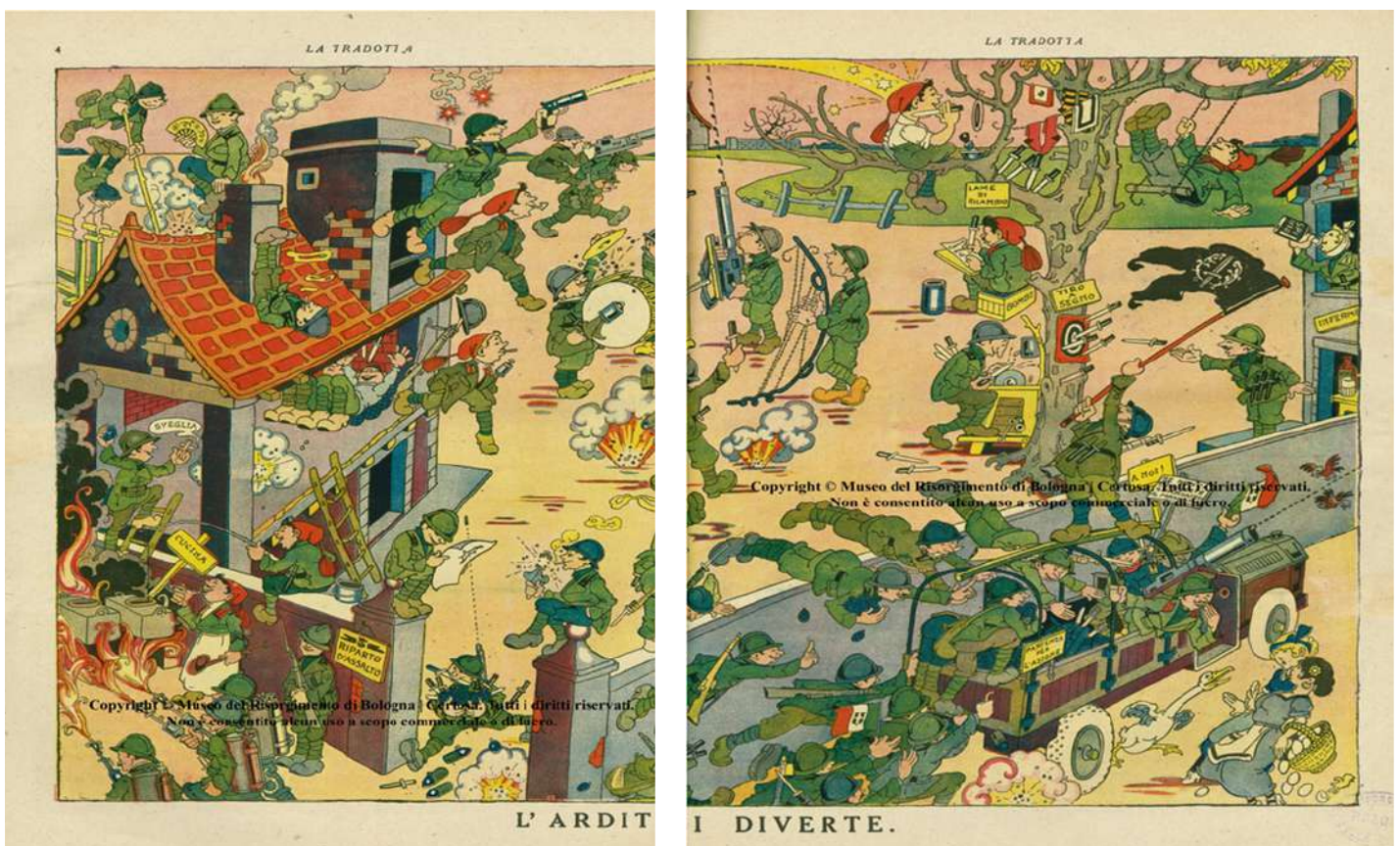


Figure 1: Source: *La Tradotta: Giornale Settimanale della Terza Armata*, October 15, 1918 (Image courtesy of the Museo Civico del Risorgimento di Bologna; further reproduction is prohibited)

On a similar note, another cartoon represented the *Arditi* as enjoying themselves in the face of danger, reading or writing under falling enemy shrapnel (see Figure 2).

The army's approach to drilling the assault troops undoubtedly paid dividends. Remarkably, these tactics made soldiers who tended to trivialize combat experiences into skilled fighters. On the one hand, these tactics assisted combatants in mastering the art of war; on the other hand, the rewarding and entertaining aspects of the servicemen's stay at the boot camps certainly helped them to enjoy actual fighting, as they began to view, or increasingly understood combat operations as festive events. Notably, Giudici claimed that, in struggling on the battlefield, he and his comrades felt elated and carefree, treating the whole endeavor as a series of exhilarating antics, despite their life-threatening nature.

Crucially, *Arditi* training likely ensured that even those among them who did not trivialize the war became better at fighting. This was because of the games and sports employed, which generally tended to increase fighting reflexes and neutralize moral doubts or emotional inhibitions among recruits. Firsthand accounts of life in the boot camps tend to agree on this point. One observer indicated that the drilling honed the rookies' mechanical aggressive reactions. Notably, soldiers were trained to knife enemies in an instinctive way, by constantly repeating this kind of attack on hay bales.

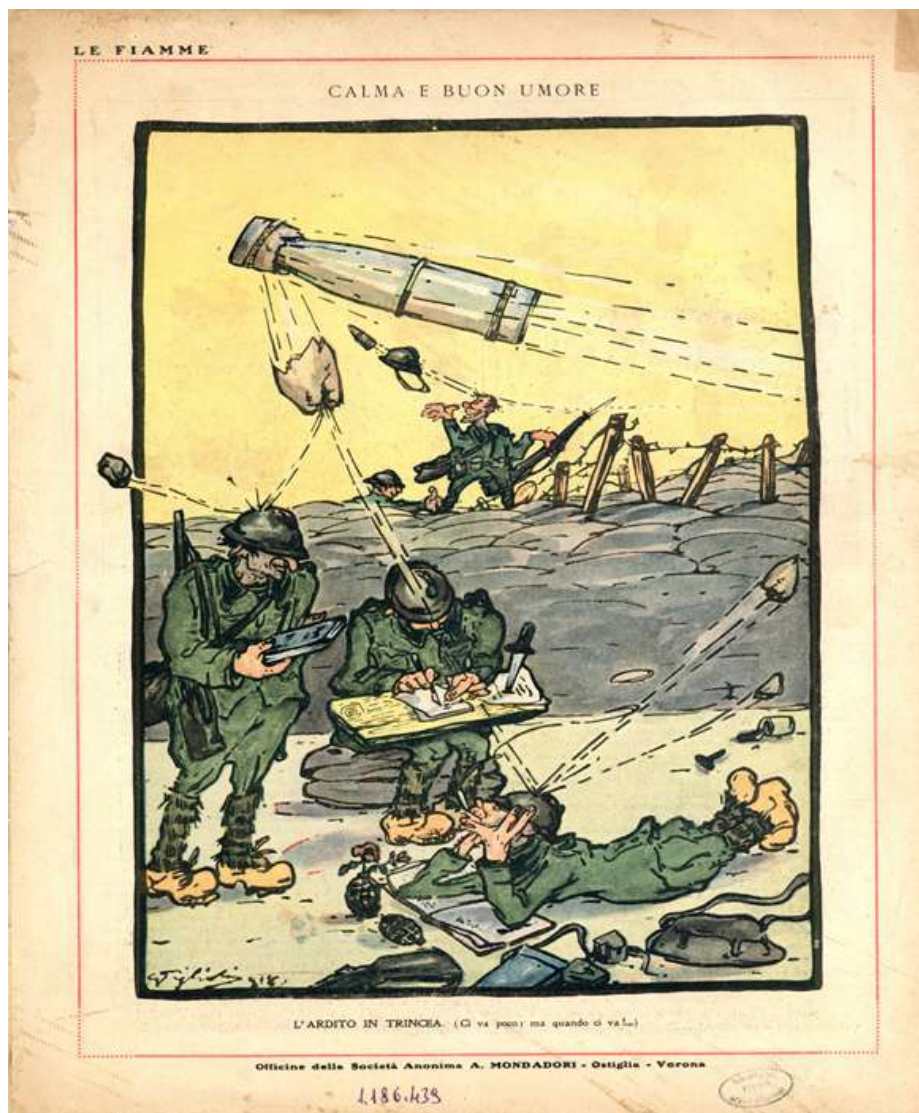


Figure 2: Source: *Le Fiamme: Numero Unico per le Truppe d'Assalto*, September 22, 1918 (Image courtesy of the *Biblioteca di Storia Moderna e Contemporanea (Roma)*; further reproduction is prohibited)

Having been trained to fight using sports and games, the *Arditi* appear to have generally stepped up their combat efficiency. One monograph claims that, thanks to “gymnastic training,” by the end of the conflict *Arditi* units were able to “run across any kind of ground, no matter how rough, even if it included unfordable streams of water ... without losing one man” (*XXVII battaglione d’assalto*, 15–16). One probable result of the training regimen was an increase in soldiers’ propensity to use violence, thereby contributing to the process of moral brutalization that some *Arditi* underwent during World War I. To begin with, elite troopers who possessed a trivializing mindset certainly felt increasingly at ease in acting brutally: After all, if they were being taught that war was but a game, why should they consider the harm wrought by their violence as anything but negligible? Even soldiers who did not understand war as a game ended up being desensitized to cruelty, at least in some cases. After all, if *Arditi* training really did diminish hesitancy towards combat and nurture mechanical aggressive responses—as in the case of the training for handling daggers mentioned earlier—it is likely to have reduced moral qualms towards deploying violence.

There is one final noteworthy instance of playful practices that helped to improve the fighting performance of the *Arditi*: group chants. They spontaneously engaged in group singing during World War I, this widespread practice appearing to have acted primarily as a way of insulating the soldiers from fear of fighting, thereby helping them to struggle more resolutely. While the *Arditi* wished to promote public understanding of them as fearless combatants, some of their public statements indirectly betray at least a modicum of concern at the dangers posed by the battlefield. For instance, Alberto Businelli noted that, following the accidental death by grenade of a recruit at one boot camp, the *Arditi* did not sing their group songs for the rest of the day, in all likelihood shocked by their peer’s unexpected demise.

That this concern existed is also suggested by a comment that the president of the Fascist *Arditi* association, Major Alessandro Parisi, gave in 1933 when considering the rollout of the Japanese human torpedoes known as *Kaiten* (heaven shakers), meant for suicidal deployment.

The Italian officer, while appreciating the courage and selflessness of Japanese suicidal pilots, also argued that Italian World War I heroes had been exceptionally brave, even if they had not expected to die while serving—unlike the pilots manning the *Kaiten*. His florid and convoluted prose appears to betray a certain uneasiness at the prospect of losing one’s life in combat, suggesting that he (and probably many other *Arditi*) had experienced at least a degree of fear while serving in the military during World War I:

Someone hence came up with the idea of building a torpedo containing a human being [and] has found amidst their race human beings ready to ... deliberately lose their life ... Some of our writers recently tried to find recent [local] war events that echo, if not outright mimic, these suicides ... However, this is something quite different ... For instance, [Italian World War I aviator] Arturo dell’Oro, in July 1917, was definitely not aiming to destroy an Austrian [plane] when he crashed against one of the latter in the following September, and if his [own plane’s] machine gun had not jammed, he would undoubtedly have resorted to his ingenuity to take it down, possibly without losing his life, but rather carefully preserving the latter, for other combat and fighting purposes. He was hence a world away from the outright suicide with religious and fanatical overtones committed by the Japanese ... Fanatics and heroes should be neither likened to nor compared with each other. (*L’Ardito d’Italia*, December 1933)

It might hence be suggested that *Arditi* group chants were another military tactic for improving the fighting power of these warriors, alongside the sports and games employed by the military command for training. Specifically, these chants, with their heroic and macho imagery, likely helped to remind *Arditi* of their courageous and capable qualities, hence preserving their morale. For instance, these virtues, and the *Arditi*’s purported embodiment of them, are lionized in one of the principal songs they sang, “Youth” (later to be embraced by the Fascists as one of their anthems). Its lyrics exhort the stormtroopers to fight fearlessly to the death.

The fact that *Arditi* sang these hymns in life-threatening situations, or in proximity to them, appears to indicate that morale raising was one of their main functions. Indeed, shock troops reportedly sang them while moving close to front lines amid enemy bombing and while storming enemy positions.

Arditi in the Fascist mobilization, 1919–1922

Importantly, many elite troops' involvement in the Italian Combat Leagues' militant activism after 1918 came down to a variety of incentives: hardcore nationalism, a wish to carry on living a military lifestyle in peacetime, and the desire to pressure the Italian political system into granting *Arditi* rewards for their wartime service. For instance, Lieutenant Giancarlo Nannini, who was active in the Bolognese Blackshirts, complained that Italian politicians had not granted the *Arditi* an official public role as educators of the nation.

It appears that many of these pro-Fascist *Arditi*, independently from their main reason for adhering to Mussolini's movement, found it easier to deploy paramilitary violence owing to fun-related factors: As in wartime, they either possessed mentalities that trivialized combat, or had been desensitized to harming others by their training, or used enjoyable activities (such as war chants) to steady themselves in meting out violence.

First of all, as noted earlier, several shock troopers had come to World War I with a propensity to banalize the horrors of war, for a variety of reasons. This tendency had then been strengthened by their combat experiences. Ultimately, once they underwent military demobilization, those among these returnees who flanked Mussolini found it easy to downplay the viciousness of Fascist militant activism, viewing it as a game. Notably, the group of *Arditi* who in 1920 assaulted the director of the socialist newspaper *Avanti!* (Forward!) staged this attack as a cruel prank: The victim was held still while the attackers shaved off his beard and took pictures of him. Furthermore, Fascist *Arditi* portrayed their paramilitary struggle as an exhilarating, childlike event: Their periodical *Fiamma Nera* (*Black Flame*) printed cartoons that equated fighting with entertainment.

Ultimately, trivializing mindsets undoubtedly guided much of the pro-Fascist *Arditi's* extremism. At the same time, even stormtroopers who did not subscribe to this understanding of fighting were shaped by fun in their casual approach to enacting Fascist thuggery.

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As mentioned earlier, during the war several shock troops had developed a knee-jerk attitude to employing violence as a result of their training being based on sports and games. Consequently, once some of these men flanked Mussolini's movement, they undoubtedly felt it was intuitive to employ coercion to settle political problems. Certainly, the fact that pro-Fascist assault troops kept on refining their combat skills in the postwar era—for example, they acted as instructors for paramilitary auxiliaries in combat schools they set up at the grassroots level, which were meant to include gymnastic training—and this further helped them nurture mechanical aggressive reactions. Finally, the tradition of using war chants to muster courage continued in the postwar period among Fascist *Arditi*. According to Paolo Giudici, as the shock troops began skirmishing with leftist forces after the end of the war, they sang their old military songs, which reminded them of their wartime exploits; they undoubtedly drew courage and reassurance from such memories.

Conclusions

Analyzing the ways in which fun influenced wartime and postwar mindsets and practices of Italian *Arditi* helps to provide an in-depth understanding of the factors that led to these troops achieving a considerable degree of fighting prowess, in addition to a pronounced penchant for employing violence for political purposes.

Specifically, my research indicates that outlooks that made light of the direness and harshness of military conflicts—based on political traditions, age, or sports backgrounds—in addition to fun-based methods of military training, and the use of singing as a remedy against fear, all contributed, often in an entwined manner, to increase the Italian shock troops' general military proficiency and readiness to resort to extremist political methods. Inquiring into the dynamics mentioned here helps to enrich scholarly understandings of processes of wartime brutalization, a development that is usually viewed as stemming from traumatic, aggravating combat experiences; conversely, my review of brutalized *Arditi's* group behaviors suggests that this process included relevant entertaining and recreational aspects, and was often highly pleasurable.



THE WARFUN PROJECT

Project Team

Chr. Michelsen Institute

Antonio De Lauri, Principal Investigator

Katharina Maria Sewening, Project Controller

Emily Hume, Project Assistant

Iva Jelušić, Postdoctoral Researcher

Eva Johais, Postdoctoral Researcher

Heidi Mogstad, Postdoctoral Researcher

Luigi Achilli, Affiliated Senior Researcher

Collaborators: Trine Berntsen (artist), Livio Senigalliesi (photographer),

Anders Hereid and Vegard Lund Bergheim (documentary film),

Aron Corbett (WARFUN Diaries' publication design), Ragnhild Dybdahl (ethics adviser).

Advisory Board: Catherine Lutz (Brown University), Erin Finley (UT Health San

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(University College Dublin), Martin Bricknell (King's College London).

Webpage

<https://www.cmi.no/projects/2535-erc-war-and-fun>

Contact

Antonio De Lauri

antonio.delauri@cmi.no

<https://www.cmi.no/staff/antonio-de-lauri>

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