

Concepts of Soldiering between National Norms and International Operations: Results of a Comparative European Research Project

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INTRODUCTION

My contribution reflects on the tensions that soldiers from European democracies encounter as they try to come to terms with competing expectations arising from the normative concepts of soldiering in their national societies and from the practical scope of international operations. In the following, I draw on a research project on the ways in which democratic civil-military relations and soldiering are currently conceptualised in twelve European countries, which I have conducted in an international collaboration with three of my colleagues at the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt and nine external experts (“The Image of the Democratic Soldier”, 2006-2010, <http://www.hsfk.de/Das-Bild-vom-demokratischen-Soldaten-Spannungen-z.75.0.html?&L=1>). In detailed analyses, we first of all studied the ideal-type that professes the socialisation objective of each country’s military. In a second step, we investigated how these normative concepts are understood in military institutions; and finally, we studied how individual soldiers who are socialized at these institutions express their attitudes and professional identities.

Since our approach is not rooted in military psychology, I shall first of all explain the research interest that made us address soldiering before I turn to the research design and present some of our major results. Some of these findings touch upon psychological resources which soldiers of democratic polities are in obvious need of, but which increasingly seem to be missing.

RESEARCH FOCUS: THE “DEMOCRATIC SOLDIER”

The focus of our project concerns relationships within democratic societies and the ways in which they have changed since the end of the Cold War: We wanted to examine those Democratic Peace assumptions which suggest that civil-military relations within democratic polities are characterized by a particular quality of mutual responsibilities. The basic assumption originally put forward by the philosopher Immanuel Kant says that democracy is the most peace-inclined regime type because the interest calculations and value orientations of their citizens reduce the readiness of democratic polities to make use of their military forces. The people would not risk their own health, lives and commonwealth, or those of their “own” soldiers, if there was no ultimate necessity, i.e. self-defence. This assumption suggests that distinctive features and constraints characterize civil-military relations in a democracy. Both, civilians and soldiers are supposed to be stakeholders, and their relationship is construed as one of mutual responsibilities. Our question was: Is this at all true? What impact has the end of the Cold War had on civil-military relations in democratic statehood, and how are the images and concepts of soldiering construed in Europe today?

Empirical observations prompted us to ask these questions: Democratic states in the post-Cold War security environment have called upon their armed forces to fulfil somewhat unconventional and increasingly fuzzy tasks – partly civilian, partly humanitarian, partly

military – in most complex international missions, all of which runs contrary to Democratic Peace assumptions (Müller 2004). Military structures have been transformed to make them suitable for these new types of deployments, but these transformations have hardly ever been accompanied by public debates on the possible implications.

Traditionally, the military assumed the role of the national defence institution; it served as nation builder and regime defender. With changed global conditions, democratic societies now attribute quite different roles to their armed forces. Unconventional conflict and threat scenarios have led to new kinds of military missions such as humanitarian intervention or multinational crisis management; or else the aim is to defend the values of liberalism and democracy, for instance when guarding democratic elections in Congo with the help of EU troops. Seen from the perspective of members of the armed forces, this shift implies various challenges and adaptation pressures. Not only have qualification demands grown. For many soldiers, the new mission types also imply the necessity to adopt a new image and ethos of soldiering: The collective that they are now expected to defend has turned into a transnational value community rather than being a national collective or territory (see Mannitz 2006). We wanted to know how these transformations are processed and how they function within different democratic states.

RESEARCH DESIGN: PREMISES AND OPERATIONALISATION

In order to study the ways in which democratic societies define the functions and profiles of their armed forces, we took a look at the military as a social institution that needs to manage a stock of knowledge, has to transmit the meanings of its tasks to its members, and also has to reorganize these in situations of change. In other words, the ideal of the democratic soldier is neither timeless nor universal. It is shaped in social construction processes which are historically, nationally, and culturally specific; and democratic societies re-negotiate their normative concepts against the background of the changing conditions in their security environment. In this respect, like in many others, democracies differ a lot. For some states, out-of-area military employment is not at all a novelty. Former colonial powers like the UK have been engaged around the globe for a long time. For other nations, such as Germany, the post-Cold War changes in foreign and security policy are tremendous. Consequently we have examined a selected sample of different democracies to study their conceptions of the soldier in context.

In order to make this contextual character operable for empirical research, we perceived the particular national normative concept of the ideal soldier both as an indicator of and as a tool for the inculcation of a democratic consensus in the military. In this sense, the specific image of what constitutes a “good soldier” comprises the relevant norms for military socialisation; and these are supposed to correspond to the ideas of the citizenry. The dimensions we addressed in our case studies were: (1) The official normative model of the “good soldier” in a given country: This refers, for example, to the levels of integration versus segregation of the military and related recruitment policies – the classical divide between the integrated citizen-soldier and the separate functionalist elite (Huntington 1957 vs. Jannowitz 1960). Is the ideal soldier male, or female? Is he or she allowed to express political opinions? (2) Transfer of the norms: How is the normative concept translated into practice and into an agenda of training and education in the military? (3) The concrete expression of the concept at the level of individual soldiers as actors: Does it work? Do the soldiers actually correspond to the socialisation goals which are designed for them? – This is of special relevance in

democracies because of the particular status which the individual enjoys in principle and the high priority given to autonomy and self-expression.

The three dimensions of the study correspond to different research methods: (1) First of all, we analysed the institutional set-up of the civil-military structure, the declared tasks of the armed forces and – if they were of significance – public or political discourses on these issues. (2) For the second dimension, we looked into soldiers’ training and educational principles, the formal code of conduct, documents on military role-sets, and conflict settlement proceedings. (3) In the third phase of our study, we carried out field studies with participant observations in selected military training courses (where possible) and conducted semi-structured interviews with soldiers, the contents of which were then analysed according to a common set of questions.

Our sample consists of twelve cases across Europe involving old and young democracies as well as one country which is in the process of democratisation. The cases were chosen from the different historical phases of democratisation because we wanted to see if the particular path to democratic rule has an effect on the way in which the ideal of the soldier is conceptualised:

Traditional democracies	Switzerland / United Kingdom
Consolidated post-autocratic democracies	Germany / Spain
Post-communist democracies	Czech Republic / Estonia / Hungary / Lithuania / Poland / Romania / Serbia
In the process of democratisation	Ukraine

The main focus of the project is on case studies in countries in Central, Eastern, and Southeast Europe which only began their transition to democracy after the revolutions of 1990 and where one can assume that there may be particular ambivalences within society towards military institutions. The Ukraine is a special case: According to the Freedom House Democracy and Freedom Index and the respective Polity IV scales of Jagers, Gurr and Marshall (2009) the country does not meet the same standards for democracies as the other countries. The Ukraine was nevertheless included because of its importance and the special challenges it faces due to the huge stock of weapons left in the country from Soviet times, competing military structures, and a society struggling for democratisation.

TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE OFFICIAL IMAGE OF THE SOLDIER

For reasons of limited space, I will just briefly summarise the convergences we found across our cases, despite their otherwise distinct traditions and inner complexity. A structural commonality is that the armed forces across Europe have been restructured and made smaller over the past 20 years (see Kuhlmann/Callaghan 2000). The major trend regarding recruitment structures is the transformation towards all-volunteer forces (Werkner 2003; Szvircev Tresch 2005). The arguments in favour of this are well known: Conscript armies are costly; conscripts can hardly be sent into the new types of missions for reasons of political justification and due to lack of training time. In brief, we observe a shift towards the functional efficiency of the armed forces, while the goal of integration in society through the draft has lost importance. On the level of the ideal personal profile in general, and leadership norms in particular, we found the convergent tendency that the ideal-type of the soldier across the countries studied combines a well trained specialist or technician with discipline, bravery,

loyalty to his or her country and/or democratic order – the cases differ in emphasis here – and with a professional respect for the subordination of the military to democratic civilian control.

At the same time, a diversification of soldierly role-sets is observable as a result of the very different new mission types involving considerable civilian tasks although soldiers must simultaneously still also be capable of acting as warriors. Soldiers are expected to integrate civilian skills and be able to distinguish, at times within seconds, what best suits the given situation. Soldiers in hybrid missions like those of the EUFOR RD in Congo, the NATO Operation Enduring Freedom, or the ISAF “Peace Enforcement” activities in Afghanistan cannot simply act as if they are in a combat mission because doing so would undermine their soft mission goals. Moreover, defence within the framework of multinational forces and extended security concepts is at best an indirect defence of the nations whose continued functioning depends on the recognition of the values being defended. All this requires complex cognitive capabilities, analytical and decision-making skills from soldiers in general and from military leaders in particular. It creates the need to rearrange professional images and learning contents, and it creates stress.

On the level of official declarations, these consequences are in fact reflected in almost all the cases we studied: The necessity to adapt military training and education to the new international missions environment is generally admitted; in many cases, civilian learning contents such as knowledge of international law, soft skills and training in intercultural competencies are also recognized as being of growing importance. And remarkable emphasis is put on soldiers’ ownership in decision-making within the boundaries of commands. “Mission type tactics” or “leading with values” describe this ideal of leadership. However, while high ambitions are phrased in normative rhetoric, (too) little seems to have been done as yet to provide the necessary assistance and instruction to help soldiers to cope with the diversity of role-sets which they are now expected to represent.

The Czech Republic serves as an example to illustrate the existing gap between the vision and the way: The Czech volunteer army (since 2005) is constructed as an army of citizens and designed according to the concept of an “army in democracy”. This assumes the introduction of the maximum of democratic rules and processes compatible with its functioning as an armed force. The politically informed citizen-soldier is the normative role model aimed at. However, the training of Czech soldiers involves no political or civic education. It comes as no big surprise then that many of the soldiers interviewed do not understand the bigger picture of military values and democratic traditions that they are supposed to have internalised. Apparently, the MoD has an implicit expectation that the country’s pre-communist democratic past and traditions will somehow automatically be absorbed with the re-erection of democratic rule; however, it does not work like that. Our research – as well as sociological survey data – indicate that Czech soldiers are ready to defend their country and even insist on the importance of defending the sovereignty and territory of the Czech Republic, if necessary, at any cost. This is quite a different vision from the actual allotted tasks of the Czech armed forces! But half of our interviewees do not see themselves as guardians of any ideals. One third of them mentioned defence of the state, of national independence and sovereignty as their genuine tasks, and only 14% mentioned peace. As regards the judgement of peace operations, 60% of the soldiers said that they do not believe that politicians understand the political, military or ethical circumstances of these missions! (See Kříž 2009 and 2010 for more details.)

This example may seem extreme, but it is rather typical in three respects: (1) Practical resources tend to be scarce compared with the high ambitions one finds in the latest official documents on the new types of soldiers. High-quality ethical education, e.g. the Swiss dilemma training, has as yet remained rather the exception. (2) By abolishing “political education” – which had obviously been partisan indoctrination in their old regimes – the post-communist democracies threw the baby out with the bath water. Soldiers will neither come to terms with the political ends of their new missions nor understand the particular mutual responsibilities of democratic constituencies and armed forces if nobody explains them. (3) Soldiers across all the countries in our sample expressed disenchantment with the political leadership and noted the lack of military expertise of political decision-makers.

SOLDIERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS

Many of the soldiers at different rank levels and throughout almost all the countries in our sample observe or fear alienation on both levels of domestic relations: towards the politicians who decide on the sending of troops, and towards the democratic citizenries that are in charge of controlling this decision-making through parliament and the media. From the point of view of many soldiers, both sides appear rather careless, or at the best indifferent; even where opinion polls indicate that the military is among the most trusted state institutions. Although we found an overwhelming consensus among soldiers regarding the ongoing trend of transformations towards professionalised all-volunteer forces, there is widespread fear that they will not be taken good care of because politicians and the civilian public could more easily regard the military as just one functional institution and lower inhibitions concerning deployment.

We gained the impression from among the more senior officer ranks in particular that experienced soldiers are deeply disappointed by politicians if missions that have been decided are not clearly explained and if the people who are to exert democratic control of the security sector do not know much about military affairs; or if politicians do not differentiate clearly between civilian/humanitarian and military mission tasks. This critical stance, in fact, coincides with much of the scholarly discourse on the dilemma of democratic control and the requirements for democratic security sector governance: Against the background of the above quoted Democratic Peace assumptions and in spite of their reluctance regarding casualties (Schörnig 2008), citizenries may define or tacitly accept political ends that sweep away inhibitions about dealing with conflicts by military means; especially if an all-volunteer force is available and is provided with up-to-date equipment. The idea that soldiering could then be (merely) regarded as a profession meets with considerable uneasiness on the part of the soldiers. The ironic conclusion that emanates from this constellation is that it is the military that has the strongest interest in the scrupulous democratic control of the armed forces, and in clear criteria concerning out-of-area and out-of-classical-defence deployments (see Müller/Fey/Mannitz/Schörnig 2010).

The potential overstretch of soldierly role-models adds further to the cumulation of identity stress factors with which military institutions and individual soldiers have to cope following the end of the Cold War. Deployment abroad under EU, UN or NATO command has become a “normal” condition for most countries in our sample. The respective constituencies accept their forces being sent into highly complex, high-risk international missions, but do not care too much about how their fellow citizens in uniform manage to bridge the gap between national expectations or factual, existing bonds of loyalty and the new

challenges of international mission realities. Peace-keeping or the monitoring of post-conflict reconstruction processes have become prominent resources of soldierly self-assurance. They are related to the image of “doing a good job”, and it is the hybrid, partly civilian and partly post-national character of certain missions that makes these employments meaningful. However, a majority of the soldiers we talked to still quote national defence as the ultimate motivation for their readiness to risk their health and life. Hence, the changes in soldierly role conceptions are not so much carried by a normative consensus which the democratic polity defines, but develop within the military institutions as a result of international mission experiences, and as a result of the sheer necessity of coping with the loss of certainties.

CONCLUSIONS

The diversity of contemporary missions, most of which combine military combat readiness with soft goals like the establishment of trust in peace consolidation processes, makes it more difficult to prepare soldiers in advance. These missions raise the level of required cognitive abilities and call for situational flexibility. Professional efficiency is expected from the individual soldier in the role of the warrior as well as in the role of the proverbial armed social worker. Among soldiers, the very hybridisation of their professional self-conception is a common answer to these new ambiguities, but it is also accompanied by a considerable feeling of uneasiness. Most of our interlocutors long for a clarity of roles and structures that is no longer available. They are experiencing simultaneous transformations in the international system and the defence alliance, in life-worlds, recruitment systems, military technology, mission types, and – in post-socialist countries – also in the political system. All this implies the loss of orientation marks such as tradition, clear enemies, role certainties, clear identities and (taken for granted) bonds with the parent society (see Mannitz 2006; Müller forthcoming).

The net result of the ongoing transformations is an enhanced multi-dimensional complexity that needs to be tackled by the armed forces and by its members alike. The qualitative case studies of our research show that many soldiers feel left alone in the face of such fundamental challenges (see the country cases in Mannitz forthcoming). Soldiers have to redefine their professional identities and adjust to the new demands which unfold in the gap between the national norms of defence and the ambiguous realities of international missions, while this gap is not even made an issue in much of the public representation of contemporary military missions. Soldiers who are integrated in democratic systems are entitled to sound reasons for being deployed; not least in order to be able to cope with the personal risks involved. Finally, democratic constituencies are accountable for engaging their collective means of violence. Scholars in the subject of democratic civil-military relations agree that a comprehensive concept of democratic control is necessary – including more public reflection. The democratic justification of extraterritorial military activities means a revaluation of the use of the military in foreign policy, even if framed as serving the agenda of Enlightenment. Our comparative research has evidenced that the so-called “second generation problematic” (Cottey/Edmunds/Forster 2002), i.e. the effective engagement of civil society in the democratic governance of the defence and security sector, is not only a problem of the relatively young post-communist democracies but a more general deficit.

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