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Introduction to the special multilingual issue: European perceptions and care of former military members from the perspective of European nation states.

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Introduction to the Special Multilingual Issue: European Perceptions and Care of Former Military Members from the Perspective of European Nation States

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ABSTRACT

Since the substantive development in the field of European military research in the last decade, the *Journal of Veteran Studies* has seen different approaches to examine veteran-related issues. Although attempts to understand veteran-related issues from national perspectives have been made, wider contextual and cross-national perspectives on Eurocentric veteran-related issues are missing. The present special issue addresses this gap in knowledge by focussing on the European diversity in military traditions and cultural variations that underpin the characteristics and social status of the military, its members, and former members. The special issue consisting of 10 articles in both English and contributors' native language, contributes to our understanding of the military, veterans, and veteran-related issues in European nation states, but also highlights how services and care for veterans may be improved by future collaborations between European nation states.

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Following 5 years of research, in April 2021, the NATO team exploring *The Transition of Military Veterans from Active Service to Civilian Life* published its report outlining the challenges faced across NATO member states (Castro et al., 2021; Castro & Dursun, 2019). Transition out of the military is an inevitable aspect of military service and whilst NATO is essentially concerned with the security of its members, the care of former service personnel and their families is of importance. There are different reasons why personnel transition out of the military, these include but are not restricted to: end of contractual periods; medical discharges (physical and mental health); administrative discharges (dishonourable or otherwise); and unfortunately for some, death in service. Different discharge routes, combined with other complex and compounding issues, will have associated risk factors for both the service person and their families.

The relevance of military to civilian transition among NATO forces has been drawn into the spotlight over the past decades with significant participation in military operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Kosovo, among others. These conflicts have resulted in many service personnel in becoming wounded, injured, or sick. Additionally, strategic defence and security reviews have seen changes in the size and function of militaries; the current Russian war in Ukraine, whilst not a NATO country itself, has also resulted in a reevaluation of threat to NATO countries with consequent deployment and activity.

With the number of service personnel transitioning from the military back to the civilian community, the resources to support these personnel and their families must be optimised. The corollary of not properly supporting service personnel during this transition have an economic and societal cost: work disability, homelessness, substance abuse, poor mental health, family breakdown, unemployment, debt or financial stress, or entering the criminal justice system, have all been cited as potential problems for vulnerable military service leavers by the authors of the most recent NATO report (Castro et al., 2021), as well as by the commentators and academics who have contributed to this special issue.

Societal perceptions of how we treat our veterans during and beyond transition also have an impact on recruitment and re-recruitment (i.e., Reservist, National Guard, and other associated activities). Additionally, effective transition processes may enhance commitment and morale of currently serving personnel, as they will be confident of support whenever they decide to leave the military. Ultimately, societies should be enriched by the pool of trained and talented people that transition from the military into employment and other societal structures (e.g., volunteering). On average across

militaries, most personnel serve for a relatively short period of their peak economic productivity, with the majority having completed their military service by their late 20s. As members of societies, we want our veterans to be net contributors, and sometimes to do this, they may need support and assistance not required by the civilian population.

The NATO research group (Castro et al., 2021) concluded that there were a number of essential components required for successful transition from the military as, importantly, whilst the structures and processes enabling transition may be set within a policy framework, they need to be nuanced enough to deal with the unique circumstances of the service leaver (Castro et al., 2019). Each transition journey is different and the response ultimately effects both the experience and outcome for the service leaver and their family, with consequent wider societal impacts. Thus, it was suggested by NATO experts that:

- Military to civilian transition should have a holistic framework of support that is imbedded in an organised structure that takes into consideration the adjustments made by service personnel when they leave the military. This may be geographic location, career, relationships, family roles, support systems, social networks, and community (Castro et al., 2014). Engagement prior to transition should start at the earliest possible point. This should especially be the case for service leavers who might be deemed vulnerable due to the nature of their personal circumstances or nature of discharge.
- Any programmes that are established to assist the transition pathway should be subject to scrutiny and evaluation. It is imperative that we understand what works well, and if necessary, how programmes with limited merit or value are decommissioned.
- Countries should have clarity on how they characterise and define a military veteran, their families, and dependants, and importantly, the eligibility, scope, and access for support and services.
- Access to appropriate, fulfilling, and meaningful employment should be integral if not central to military to civilian transition. This does not just mean “any” employment, but work, training, or further education that capitalises on the skills acquired during the veteran’s time in military service.
- Families should play a key role in a successful transition pathway. As with the definition of “veteran,” consideration must be placed on how we define military families and their entitlement to services, as they should be considered essential to a successful transition (Fossey et al., 2019).

However, the NATO research team were only able to consider in detail the transition support, structures, and challenges of seven participating countries. This, of course, is not representative of all countries that lie within the North Atlantic Treaty area and not those that hold similar aspirations (e.g., Partnerships for Peace countries). Differences in traditions, strategic attitudes, and spending on defence underpin cultural variations in the characteristics and social status of the military, its soldiers, and veterans. While military research in the European context has spawned theoretical and empirical discussions around policy making, technology, health, and military effectiveness, critical scholarship has rarely examined the European member states' military in a contextual perspective. Evidence on the military, its serving and formerly serving personnel produced by many European nation states, remains isolated, unconnected, or inaccessible due to language barriers. This is particularly problematic, taking present challenges and associated future aspirations, such as the establishment of a European Armed Force in response to international threats and wars in close proximity into consideration. As such, collaborative and comparative approaches in examining evidence on national characteristics of the military, its structure, service members, and former service personnel produced in European spheres and cultures is a vital endeavour.

This special issue of the *Journal of Veterans Studies* (JVS) has been specifically commissioned to give voice to some of the other nations who did not participate in the NATO research exercise. It examines the European member states' militaries as social institutions that are highly intertwined with historical aspects, culture, international relations, and politics. By drawing on academic expertise, this issue brings together a collection of articles focussing on the cultural diversity of the Armed Forces in European nation states, their service, and former service members, as well as exploring the cultural underpinnings in contemporary roles the military and its former members may play in different societies. Additionally, Dr. Rita Phillips and Professor Matt Fossey persuaded the JVS editorial team that it would be important for those contributing to this special issue had the opportunity to write in their home-country language as well as the *lingua franca* of academia, English. We hope that this approach has given the writers, policy makers, and academics confidence in their abilities to convey complex information in a language other their mother tongue, and for this we are indebted to the language-specific subeditors who helped with their unique contributions.

Investigating the Swedish perspective on its military, military structure, service personnel, and former service personnel, Jan Grimmel examines what he aptly phrases as the Swedish peace bubble. Sweden, with its unique

history of not being engaged in warfare within its territory for 200 years, is about to change its policies by joining NATO in near future. The author examines evidence of a civil-military gap by suggesting problems relating to the societal reception of veterans, particularly in health clinics. Veterans who participated in international peacekeeping and peacebuilding missions may experience moral injury or PTSD and are often questioned regarding the legitimacy of fighting abroad when trying to access healthcare. The author argues that veterans of war often receive inappropriate care and highlights recent initiatives that address this issue by presenting the veteran clinic in Uppsala. The veteran clinic in Uppsala specialises on mental healthcare, drawing upon a range of support that is administered by nonprofit organizations. Also, differences in terminology are discussed, differentiating between Swedish veterans and Swedish veterans of armed conflicts, with the latter receiving more specialised healthcare provisions.

Sofia Nilsson, Alicia Ohlsson, Sofia Svensén, Eva Johansson, and Gerry Larsson focus on the physical and mental health of Swedish veterans, by presenting an exhaustive literature review. Furthermore, Nilsson and colleagues examine the prevalence of PTSD, trauma, moral injury, and milder stress reactions among Swedish veterans, and discusses coping strategies. Looking at the implications of work-related stress on social life and romantic relations, the contributors provide an overview of pressing issues to support sustainable relationships.

Júlia Milanová discusses empirical evidence and legislation perspectives on Slovak veterans and their employment, socioeconomic status, and health status. After giving historical, geographical, and cultural context, Milanová examines different approaches and legislation changes relating to the definition and provision of care for veterans. With the Concept of Care for our Veterans Program and the Care Programs for Professional Soldiers and their Families, support for war veterans can take various forms. In her contribution, Milanová presents evidence that veterans may be in particular need of health related and social support.

Jitka Laštovková and Václav Kmoníček assess the present situation of care and service provision for Czech veterans. After providing relevant contextual information on the Czech military, its history, and overseas deployments, the authors describe common challenges that veterans may face in Czechia and how they are supported to overcome these challenges. Here, the authors discuss the legal underpinnings of support for veterans by drawing on the Czech Concept of Care for War Veterans that differentiates between different types of Czech veterans. These types of veterans have access to specific sources of support granted by the government. By highlighting inconsistencies

in the care and provision delivery system and the lack of associated research, the authors conclude that, to improve veteran services, research-based efficiency-evaluations would be required.

Andres Siplane examines perspectives on the Estonian Armed Forces. Supported by a volunteer national defence organisation, the Estonian Military is based on a reserve army system, reflecting the small country size. Siplane argues that the Estonian approach strongly emphasizes the role of motivated citizen-soldiers to defend their country. While Estonia utilizes one of the strictest definitions of the term veteran, with only those being veterans who participated in deployments, there may be a mismatch between societal perceptions and policy definitions of who a veteran is. Societal perceptions often relate veterans to those who fought in WWII, and therefore possibly to an older cohort of men.

Christian Lund Pedersen and Clemens Wieser highlight the most pressing issues Danish veterans encounter by conducting an exhaustive literature review of existing research on the psychosocial areas of veteran well-being. In this context, Pedersen and Wieser present the Danish veteran centre that opened in 2011 and focus on holistic and inclusive service provisions. Although compelling evidence has been produced examining veteran-related research in Denmark, the authors raise ontological and epistemological concerns. To date, evidence on the physical and psychosocial well-being of Danish veterans is derived predominantly by focussing on positivist paradigms, understanding complex phenomena as causal and univocal. As such, the authors call for ontological discussions in veteran research.

Jacco Duel and Alieke Reijnen, who present perspectives on the Dutch Armed Forces and veterans, produced an overview of the multifaceted support system for veterans in the Netherlands. The authors provide evidence to indicate that, while the majority of Dutch veterans score high on self-rated life satisfaction scales, they also frequently experience problems in different domains of their life. Specifically, Duel and Reijnen highlight issues surrounding impaired social functioning and difficulties in the transition to civilian life, despite high levels of societal appreciation and support for Dutch veterans outlined in surveys and polls. Duel and Reijnen present sources of help and support for veterans that have been implemented, focussing particularly on the Ministry of Defence and associated centres, as well as on the veterans' perceptions of available resources.

Joonas Sahramäki, Karri Kuivanen, Lari Törmä, and Petteri Simola present an overview of the *CriMa Report*, a survey on the psychological well-being of Finnish peacekeeping veterans. While the authors highlight that

Finnish peacekeeping veterans generally score higher on self-perceived psychological well-being scales than civilians, veterans were found to report challenges adapting to civilian society. The authors also discuss predictors of Finnish veterans' mental well-being, such as social aspects and roles that veterans had during deployment.

In the Lithuanian context, Paulius Balsys provides empirical evidence on the reintegration of veterans into civilian society. After providing context, the author utilizes the constructivist paradigm to present empirical data on pressing challenges that Lithuanian veterans may encounter. Here, common themes discussed issues and challenges relating to the socioeconomic reintegration. Veterans may experience problems coming to terms with social isolation and perceive that their potential and knowledge cannot be made use of in civilian settings. The author suggests that employment in the Armed Forces does not necessarily create sustainable social connections that can be transposed into civilian settings. Acquired skills need to be translated into the civilian setting for which they need to receive provisions of adequate support.

Lastly, Hannah Johnstone examines pressing issues British veterans encounter in their transition to civilian society. Johnstone scrutinizes the British Armed Forces' most-inclusive definition of a veteran by drawing on British military history. After presenting evidence on the physical and psychosocial well-being of British veterans and legislative, statutory, and charitable support services, the author concludes that support services need to be established in a more cohesive and consistent way to guarantee the quality of care for veterans.

The contributions of this special issue highlight differences and similarities in European nation states' military, in their definitions of veterans, of the most-prevalent issues veterans encounter, and the support they receive. This allows us to understand shared and unique challenges veterans may encounter from a Eurocentric perspective and highlights how European nation states may learn from each other. The presentation of best practice examples and empirical examinations of benefits and limitations of different kinds of support services may allow future collaborations between European nation states. There is potential in listening to and learning from each other's programs and initiatives for veteran support. Eurocentric perspectives on veteran support may therefore lead to novel avenues in taking care of veterans in a unified, European way.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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