

Research

THE CONSCRIPTION: SCHOOL "FOR WAR" OR SCHOOL "FOR PEACE"

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Abstract. The article focuses on the question “According to public perceptions, school for what is the conscription: school for war or school for peace; school for military training and education or school for national (civil) awareness and responsibility?”. The reason for posing this problem is the widespread public opinion that the return of "the compulsory military conscription" is an opportunity for prevention from certain negative social processes, which developed recently in Bulgaria. In fact, the article tries to indicate some possible factors, which influence public position about the benefits and negatives of the military training and education.

Keywords: ethno-cultural problems, military education, conscription, soldier, identity, memory

"If you want peace, prepare for war," said a Roman maxim. Another one claims the opposite: "War is sweet for those who have never experienced

it". Our daily live reflects exactly these two principles – of peace and war. Globally, we witness war conflicts with catastrophic consequences for thousands of lives; armed attacks and terrorist acts; bloody riots and protests. The situation is not different, however, in Bulgarian national perspective. Every day the media in Bulgaria reported aggression in the neighborhood; on the way to school; vandalism in homes, parks, and shops; premeditated murders "by jealousy," "by perverse pride", "by selfish interests". Apparently the beast in man has awakened or perhaps certain processes make him look more ferocious than ever.

The article focuses on this problem, but from a different angle. It addresses the question: school for what is actually the conscription,¹⁾ according to the public perceptions – school "for war" or school "for peace"; school for military training and education or school for national (civil) awareness and responsibility? The reason for posing this problem is the widespread public opinion that the return of "the compulsory military conscription" is an opportunity for prevention from certain negative social processes, which developed recently in the state; that the conscription is "a great school of life", which could "bring people into line"; "stop the degradation of the younger generation"; "discipline the young and teach them to take responsibility".

Here is the place to emphasize that the article is not intended to give assess whether or not military service is necessary for our Bulgarian modernity. Rather, it tries to indicate some possible factors, which influence public position about the benefits and negatives of the military training and education. Since factors could have economic, psychological and socio-cultural nature, the following lines will focus on the latter, i.e. those with ethno-cultural nature. It is necessary to be mentioned also that the analyzes and conclusions in the article are based on personal ethnographic field work carried out in different parts of the country in the period 2011-2015.²⁾

Thus, excluding the economic aspect of the problem, the analysis of field materials indicates that causes for different attitudes to the conscription can be found in several directions.

The particular memories of men performed their military service, and how these memories are transmitted to the rest of society, i.e. persons who haven't served

Analyzing the problem, it has to be taken into account that each man has built and keep different memories for his military service due to specific conditions in each military unit. On this basis he establishes certain position towards the compulsory nature of the military service. For example, studies show that men who were assigned into a unit, where they had the opportunity to develop their physical, cultural or educational skills and competences are satisfied with his military service. They usually support its compulsory character. Others, who did not have this chance, do not support the compulsory military service and are against its restore. It is important also the fact that many men keep traumatic memories of psychological harassment, violence, rude jokes, or acts of humiliation. Because of these experiences, they are not able to construct a positive attitude to the military training and education. However, it appears that these soldiers' memories, kept and transmitted from generation to generation, are the most genuine indicator how the conscription would be perceived in the Bulgarian society: *"to develop aggressive machismo"* or *"to educate in national values"*; *"wasted time"* or *"chance for learning useful things"*; *"place of constant suppress and humiliation"* or *"place for building male character, physical shape and sense of national belonging"*. Or maybe all these things together, but in dependence of the specific conditions of certain military unit.

The image of the warrior in the Bulgarian tradition

Field research shows that Bulgarian society traditionally perceives the warrior as something noble, possessing the highest morals and values. Practically, the soldier in Bulgaria has a highly idealized image. He is (or he should be) a man of honor, selfless, disciplined, strong in spirit and in body, loving motherland, his nation and land. Generally, he possesses virtues of the highest order. This idea is connected with Bulgarians' respect to the social and public role of the warrior as such. But let's clarify that the soldier could be not only one those who is enrolled in the armed forces, but also one "who is committed to a cause" (Neshev et al., 1979), which could be also a peaceful one. For example, in different historical periods in Bulgaria the labels "soldier", "warrior" or "hero" are used for everyone who has dedicated himself to the building and protecting the country. Besides media publications and scholarly literature, this designation is highly appreciated in the Bulgarian culture and folklore. From there it persists in the Bulgarian mentality as well. Thus, thanks to the military service, the young man has to acquire those idealized characteristics of the Warrior, which will help him to protect the Bulgarian name and land. In other words, the boy will develop behaviors and qualities typical and desirable for the social role of the man.

Organization of traditional kinship relations in the Bulgarian society

Because of the patrilineal nature of kinship, every Bulgarian man is perceived as a potential forefather, who alone can transmit the kinship (male) line (Ivanova, 1998). Also, despite the changes in the traditional system of values of the Bulgarian society, man's general obligation still attributes the protection of the family, home and land. So, analyzing the military service in the framework of the patriarchal society, we can claim that it is vital for the

preservation of the kinship that a man is able to be not only continuer of the family, i.e. to create children, but also to be strong, disciplined and responsible head of the family, who is able to provide for them and defend them. It is expected that he will acquire these qualities through passing military training and education.

The concept of national identity and its importance in the society

The conscription, where everyone is equal, i.e. no matter of ethnicity and religion, builds united national identity. Entering the army, the man, as a citizen of the Republic of Bulgaria, gives oath "to serve honestly to his people, to respect the Constitution, the country's laws and army's statutes ... to defend bravely the integrity and independence of the homeland and if it is necessary, to give his life for it ... ".³⁾ Turned into certain sacred archetype (Yung, 1999) the soldiers' vows have to determine the unity of identity. In other words, the man serves in the Bulgarian armed forces to protect the Bulgarian nation and homeland, to which he himself belongs by birth. In fact, this idea is not a new invention. As it was clarified above, one of the main duties of a man is to protect the family, home and land. After the formation of the national state, however, this idea expands its scope and become a leading state idea. So, to the obligations of a man were added the protection of state sovereignty and integrity and the protection of his own nation.

The strict order and absolute organization of time in the military units

Actually, the strict order and absolute organization of time is priority for all kinds of forces. Only in this way, despite their heterogeneity, they can work as an organized machine in order to fulfill its primary purpose – the successful warfare. By ethno-cultural perspective, however, a daily routine creates a habit of systematic organization for every soldier in his personal life as well.

This is the basis for creation of the notion in Bulgarian society that the military service made men better organized, i.e. *"responsible young men"*. But this cultural phenomenon can be questioned because *"how many men have gone through the military service, but not all of them are organized. My husband is so scattered ... "*; *"At first [after the dismissal] men may continue to observe a regime similar to that in the barracks, that is the habit, but after a few months it goes away. In the end, if you've been a disordered before, you remain so and then"*.

Subsequently from the above mentioned is clear that the notion of the army as an institution of order is built on the basis of objective and subjective factors. However, the analysis of field materials reveals that the public opinion towards the military service is positive as a whole. This is due to the fact that the conscription is perceived as a period in which young men acquire qualities which validate them as *"real"* men who can create a family and protect it. In fact, research shows that "the opponents" of military service do not deny its positive aspects which could be achieved with the help of well-organized and properly managed military training and education. They rather doubt the fact that nowadays is possible to build effective military educational system: (1) through which youth would have been received good theoretical and practical training; (2) in which would be absent the sense of *"lost time"* and/or *"humiliation"*; (3) in which the so-called "irrational actions" and the violence are absent.

Finally, returning to the initial question, it can be concluded that the conscription in Bulgaria is perceived as a "school of peace", not as a "school of war", although in every modern society it is the institution that is specialized to perform military and anthropological, i.e. socio-cultural and psychological, preparation of men for war (Koprinarov, 2012). The results of the field studies show that this fact is diminished or it is not mentioned when it comes to the army and its role in the society. For Bulgarians the army is a place where boys

learn about independence and collectivity, organization, responsibility, courage and fighting spirit – all characteristics that, according to the public opinion, one "real" man should possess. The other role, the actual military character of the conscription as a training place where boys prepare to be warriors, capable of killing and being killed in the name of certain goal or idea, step aside to second place.

NOTES

1. According to the Dictionary of Military Terms, the word "kazarma" (barracks) denotes a particular building with residential, cultural, educational, office and teaching space, designed for accommodation, training and employment of personnel from various military units and subdivisions (Neshev et al., 1979). In colloquial language, however, this concept has much broader meaning. Most often it specifies the period of the regular (conscript) military service and much less the particular space. In fact, today the terminological definition is used only in historical context in Bulgaria since the compulsory military service has been closed down at the beginning of 2008. This act, however, not only raises many questions, but also divided the Bulgarian society into two opposite poles – "pro" and "con" its return.
2. A result of this field work is the monograph "Youth Passions, Men's Times. Ethno-cultural Portrayal of Bulgarian Conscription during Socialism" (Valev, 2016), which is based on my doctoral dissertation.
3. *Устав за войсковата служба в Република България*. София: Министерство на отбраната, 2012.

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