

Research

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ON BOTH SIDES OF THE PORTAL: GENDER ATTITUDES TO THE CONSCRIPTION DURING SOCIALISM

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Abstract. One widespread proverb in Bulgaria, knowing some different versions, says that "Man, who can't passed conscription is not man", "A boy, who failed to enter military service is second-hand man", "A man, who has not walked a soldier knows nothing". What exactly is conscription according to public understanding of the Bulgarians? What attitudes have the society to compulsory conscription? Frontier of what is the portal on the military unit? These and other questions related to conscription during socialism will be explored.

Keywords: army, borders, initiation, institutions, socialism

One widespread saying in Bulgaria, which has some different versions, states that: "A man, who wasn't conscripted, is not a man", "A boy, who has opted out of military service, is a second-hand man", "A man, who hasn't been a soldier knows nothing".

In Bulgaria there is no compulsory military service today. This makes the problem a challenge to postmodern studies. What exactly is conscription according to the Bulgarian public understanding? What is the public attitude towards compulsory military service? Limit of what is the entrance in the military? The article discusses these and other issues related to conscription in socialism.

Protection and preservation of kin, nation and motherland - this is the main function of the Armed Forces of any modern country in the world. However, this is one of the essential behaviors that follows and improves mankind since the beginning of its existence until now. From the moment he was born, man has self-preservation instincts, but as a social and intellectual being, he establishes behavior of a particular culture and traditions aimed at not only his survival – physical, spiritual, and social, but that of his fellows too. There are thousands of examples from historical and archaeological sources for different practices of warfare from prehistoric times onwards. Here we enlist not only the military techniques, strategic and tactical operations, but also the customs and rituals before a battle as well as beliefs about the war and about the protection of their own kin and nation.

In most societies (historical and contemporary) the man is considered as the one who has the obligation to protect the family, kin, homeland. This is normal if we take into account two things - the highly developed patriarchal social system among most of the nations of the world and the widespread social attitude that the man is the stronger sex. Of course, it does not exclude the involvement of women, especially when the children need protection, but the male part of society is the one which falls primarily responsible for this prob-

lem. This is the reason why boys from an early age are directed, i.e. socialized and educated, through games and training to those public social roles that built firm and resolute character, courage and discipline, self-reliance, but also sense of collectivity. One of these public social roles is that of a warrior. The place where such behavior is observed, according to the understanding of a significant part of the Bulgarian society, is the army.

Currently participation in the army is not obligatory. The compulsory military service was dropped in 2008. This makes the problem very important in the historical and cultural plan and it's a challenge to postmodern ethnological studies.

This article will examine several questions. The first of them is related to the attitude towards the conscript military barracks, based on the public opinion of the Bulgarians. Furthermore, the material will address the different social attitudes towards conscription, and will examine the concept of the entrance in the military barracks as an essential life border. The main objective of this study was to differentiate these problems in social and gender aspects. The analysis in gender aspects is based on different memories and opinions about the socialist period in Bulgaria. They are collected through fieldwork and on-line interviews. Besides the interview as a method of study, numerous bibliographic sources were used as well. This article has no ambition to thoroughly review the problem, but rather to give one possible scientific interpretation.

One widespread saying in Bulgaria, which has some different versions, states that: "A man, who wasn't conscripted, is not a man", "A boy, who has opted out of military service, is a second-hand man", "A man, who hasn't been a soldier knows nothing".

This proverb indicates that the military unit is regarded as important socializing institution and the military service is a form (stage) of the socialization of boys into the society. A different way to interpret it is that entering

the military should be seen as the beginning of a specific gender socialization, during which the developing youth will acquire different behavior and qualities that the public opinion accepts as typical and desirable for the gender-based and social role of the man.

What does the concept of socialization mean and what manifestations of this process had been observed in Bulgaria in the near and distant past? In general, we can explain socialization as integration into the environment, the team, the community and also into the culture. This is an unorganized, elemental and ongoing process, in which the individual human being turns into a social actor. The human becomes a member of the society by studying and assimilating knowledge, skills, habits, values, beliefs, and various cultural forms and patterns of behavior. At first glance, the described process resembles that of education, but between the two concepts there is a fundamental difference. In the process of socialization various results can be achieved – being accepted or not in the society. For example, under the influence of the social environment individuals can achieve things that are unaccepted in society - lies, violence, passivity and others. On the other hand, education is purposeful, a controlled process, conducted under the guidance of a manager (a teacher, some authorities) in order to achieve certain results and to form desirable and approved social models of behavior that are both desirable and incentive to be followed.¹⁻³⁾ Processes of socialization and education often occur simultaneously, but the first is much more dynamic, permanently present and embraces the daily life of people.

Socialization occurs through interaction of the individuals with different factors (agents), which are: family, the peer group (friends), school, media, etc.¹⁻³⁾ Their impact on the individual is different in the separate stages of life. The first and most influencing agent of socialization is the family, and immediately after it - the peer group (friends). These two factors play an important role especially in the early years of growth and development of the individual.

Later, by reaching a certain age, various public institutions have an impact also. The intensity of the influence of these institutions, however, depends greatly on the individual characteristics of the perceiver and on the type of environment in which he lived in the early years of his socialization. There is a phrase in Bulgaria: *"The first 7 years are the most important in the development of the child"*. The phrase is quite self-explanatory. We should not forget that a significant factor which affects the individual is the media. However, it's difficult to measure to what kind degree of influence it affects the person and will not be considered here.

We can assume that the agents of socialization have different levels of priority and responsibility in different historical periods in the development of the Bulgarian nation. For example, before the liberation of the country from the Ottoman rule in 1878, the most important thing for most Bulgarians is the family. They are agents who educate, train, socialize in social norms and accepted patterns of behavior for a very long time - from birth to *"earning your own living"*. In the Revival period, especially after the formation of the national Bulgarian state, things became very different. Family and clan solidarity gradually reduced their impact on the individual at the expense of the institutions. A strong socializing agent became the school because education in the Bulgarian society became more widespread. The Bulgarian army,⁴⁾ an institution formed immediately after the liberation of the country, also began to play an important socializing role. For men, military training was mandatory. It passed under a strict regime and it was a way of life, quite different from the ordinary home environment.

What about the historical period examined in the article – the Socialism? After 1944, in Bulgaria began the process of imposing a new political and ideological system that gradually covered more and more parts of the public life. The Bulgarian Communist Party in the face of the state through various means of influence and control infiltrated the social life of people and

created a different value system, resting on communist ideology and scientific-atheistic worldview. The actions were aimed at all social environments, including the primary agent of socialization - the family, declared for a fundamental unit of society. According to the political authority, the relationships in the family must be adapted according to the ideological beliefs. It was vital for the family to be a tool for transformation and socialization so that the society is a "socialistic" one. Thus, the state and political ideology penetrated to "the finest branches of public and private life" (Брунбаeyer, 2010, p. 32). In fact, they took the individual from his birth and were present in his life until his death, through the construction of new socialist holidays and rituals that transformed into socialist spirit institutes for socialization and education. Certain norms were imposed and controlled by an embedded special repressive apparatus for mutual monitoring.

The Army, an important public, social and education institute, naturally was also corrupted by the new ideological spirit and it also suffered quite a few changes and transformations. It became a significant tool of totalitarian state power. Through the establishment of various youth sports, labor organizations and schools,⁵⁾ the introduction of universal military training in secondary schools and vocational schools,⁶⁾ as well as continuing the tradition of the previous period of compulsory military service for the boys, the government was able to use the military in the socialization of the whole society under the new norms and rules of life. The ideology declared that this is the way that real advocates of "peace and working people" and "socialist fatherland" are built (Филчев, 1978). The Army, in the face of commanders and conscripts was proclaimed as "an indestructible force to protect the socialist fatherland and the true school of communist education and physical hardening of the youth by forming warrior and civic virtues" (Джуров et al., 1977, p. 6). In the Bulgarian Constitutions of 1947 and 1971 it is written that "defense of the fatherland is the supreme duty and honor of every citizen" and treason and

betrayal of the fatherland is "the most serious crime to [Bulgarian] people and shall be punished with all the rigor of the law".^{7,8)} Obviously, the socialist government and ideology played a significant role in the promotion of the military duty of every citizen. Another question is how the new values and rules were understood and utilized actually by the population. This article, that examines conscription as a part of the life rhythm of the Bulgarians, tries to partially answer this question.

In the memories of the people, who spent their lives in one or another part of the socialist period in the country, there is a very clear perception of the conscription. However, it should be taken into account that the human memory has often kept those moments that have played a significant, mostly positive role in their life. The unpleasant events the memory tries to ignore them or rather forget them. Moreover, sometimes the memories, especially of professional military personnel, are colored with romanticism and strong patriotism i.e. can be subjective, due to professional commitment and bias. It is important who reveals the memory – man or woman, and from what kind of view - from first or third person. Therefore, when analyzing individual stories, a critical approach is crucial.

The Bulgarian society traditionally perceived the warrior and the army as something sublime, expressing the highest morals and values. The soldier has a highly idealized image that remains even today.⁹⁾ He is (or should be) a man of honor, selfless, disciplined, strong of mind and body, loving the motherland, its people and land. In general he should possess the highest of virtues. This idea is most likely due to the respect that Bulgarians have for the social and public role of the warrior as such. Reasons for this can be seen in several areas, one of which is the established in the minds of generations of Bulgarians concept of the fighter for freedom and independence from before the Liberation in 1878 and in the years of struggle for national unification. Despite the new ideology in the considered socialist period, the Bulgarian mentality

couldn't be changed so quickly and easily because of the history of the nation. In the mindset of the Bulgarians there are still present exploits of dozens of heroes and chieftains, hymned in many folk songs, tales and legends. Passed on from generation to generation are even the names of officers and soldiers, glorified in epic battles in the Balkans wars, in the First and Second World wars, fought in the name of the national ideals of the country. The glorious military past played an essential educating role in socializing youth in Bulgaria and served as a role model.

In the first two - three decades after 1944 the norms, which promoted and protected conscription were accepted without much objection from the public. There was no problem that these norms were in stained clichéd socialist expressions. However, military duty has always been associated with patriotism and love for their kind, nation and motherland, and the Bulgarians possess these qualities, evidence of which can be found in the ancient Bulgarian history and traditions. These perceptions began their formation in the family so that the male child could develop into a future soldier. The boy was taught to respect his elders, to work, to help and protect the weaker, to be honest, etc. Although parents are always trying to build various virtues in their son, it does not always work out according to their wishes. Male children generally have a violent temper. There are plenty of examples of how mothers and fathers, while preparing their young son for their future and the hardships that it could bring him, utter "In the army, you will learn what discipline, order and respect for others are". This expression is very self-explanatory in terms of the fostering and socializing nature of the military barracks. At this point people have forgotten or perhaps they deliberately skipped the fact (the law must be fulfilled in one way or another, and traditional thinking about military duty is too strong), that the boys are sent to be trained as soldiers and to be capable of killing or dying in the name of some ideal. It is obvious that the public confidence in the conscription was very high at that time. This fact is reflected even

in the situations in which conscription could be avoided. For health reasons, which are certainly normative and which are attested by statutory Military Medical committees, the military service could be omitted. In that case, however, often for the boys this indicates greater psychological impact on their confidence and self-esteem. The latter is especially true for young boys, educated and raised in a very patriotic and patriarchal home. Do not forget the circle of friends, with whom the person spends most of his life. In male companies, most of whom have completed their conscription (in the years of socialism in Bulgaria this phenomenon has very few exceptions) there were conversations about the military service, for the good and not so good memories, for the commanders and for their own experience, etc.¹⁰⁾ In such company the individuals who did not serve in the army, "who didn't step on the parade ground to the sound of marching", "who didn't know the smell of gunpowder" were isolated and often laughed at. The latter, even if it was in a friendly, forgiving tone, clearly showed normal male traits for dominance and superiority over fellow individuals. Thus the male showed and asserted his masculinity, culturally embedded in the society. As a rule, the man sought to promote themselves in physical strength and social significance (Тодорков, 2004, p. 39). This can easily be detected and monitored in the military environment. There, men were trained to be physically fit and endure any extreme situation. They need to master the skills that would make them useful to the society. This reinforces in the male psyche the important role of men in the public social environment. The proverb "A man who has not walked as a soldier knows nothing" again says a lot. Of interest is the fact that it is supported by both men and women. Every boy that went through the army had suffered a "serious", "long", "training the body and the mind" test, making him a real man, who has acquired different skills.

It is important to mention, that in the military environment, among the soldiers (according to public, not-written rules they are still children or young

people, i.e. they have not become men) also have struggles for dominance and leadership. This competition has nothing to do with the official military hierarchy – it is usually about better positions, and hence easier service in the army.

Every soldier wants his service to go easy, but the key to this is to show that you're tough, accurate, that you're not trying to outsmart everyone or that you want to skip your duties. Yes, old soldiers perhaps will humiliate you at least in the beginning, but if you endure, the service will be like a song. If you lose your composure, they will make you remember it.

This was said by a man, who served thirty-five years ago. It summarizes the test of any boy-rookie, who is seeking its place among hundreds of soldiers like him. It is known that the army merges people with different social status, physical and biological conditions and degree of intelligence. Everyone tries to prove himself not only to their superiors, commanders and older soldiers, but also to their peers. Some of them do this by befriending and gaining credibility, while others – with not so accepted and aggressive means by which "they take the fear" of others, but with this they receive more awe, and not respect. We can assume that the previous described are men with more aggressive and hard characters than others. For them conscription often appears as a transition that must be completed, because in the barracks they have the best opportunity to show their physical properties and to vent their energy. Others, however, do not have well-developed physique and look visibly weak. These guys usually try to compensate this with different skills and competences, and rely on their intellect. Usually they think of conscription as a "waste of time" because these two or three years which they spend in the military unit may be spent in university or institute.¹¹⁾ Of course, there are guys

with well-developed physique and intelligence. For them, the compulsory nature of the military service is usually not a problem. It is important to clarify that the military units do not resemble each other, i.e. they have different living conditions and carrying service. From interviews conducted so far it can be summarized that men who were in a unit where they had the opportunity to develop their skills and competencies, whether in physical or mental aspects, were satisfied with their military service and usually support its binding character. Others, who had no luck, do not feel such sympathy for the conscription.

It is interesting to observe the phenomenon, which appears among some men. They attempt to avoid service in the army due to rejection of the ideology and political system or due to plain fear. In the first case generally conscription is considered, but because of disagreement with the government and their policies and professed values, they try to avoid it, fleeing abroad. For the second case, however, the military service is a major concern, which is difficult to overcome. Looking from this side, the army is really a hostile environment to the individual. Not only from the standpoint that the Self is gone and must "blend into the gray soldier majority", as rightly pointed by Хаджийски (2002, p. 147). Sometimes there are situations similar to martial law, and exercises that end in deaths due to negligence, error or just bad circumstances. The soldier, someone's son, was killed in peacetime. During the historical period in the article, the so-called Cold War, there are many memories of very extreme situations that have driven quite a few soldiers to a nervous breakdown. The aforementioned male competition for dominance also plays a big role in the fragile young psyche. Often timid and weak boys are harassed by older soldiers, who bring them to mental and nervous disorders, even to suicide. Before entering the barracks future recruits listened to, accidentally or not, similar stories from their grandfathers, fathers and older

friends. This uncertainty about what awaits beyond the portal led to fear. Today this recognition makes the great majority of men express opinions like:

[c]onscription strengthens the mind and the body", "makes a boy a real man, not a coward", "a boy must pass the military service to see the difficulties of life", "the army is difficult, after that it gets easier", "the army forges and tempers the boy into a man, while it's young, like hot iron.

The attitudes of women are slightly different. Standing outside of the military barracks, most of them know about the soldier's life and troubles only by the stories of men and on this opinion build by stories. Of interest is the observed stronger social and age differentiation among women. It is expressed in the fact that young girls, who are not married, have a positive view of the boys that performed military service. For them, they are more staid and "stable", "not spoiled brats". Rarely it is taken into account the fact that their biological and social development that occurred with age. Widely advocated by unmarried women is the view that "He was in the army, he's healthy." This opinion shows a typical female trait. She initially is looking for a healthy, strong and sexually prolific man that has passed the physical and mental difficulties of the army. It must mean that he has covered most of its criteria and is able to create and support a family. It should not be forgotten the fact that the period of military service is two or three years depending on the type and the kind of armies in which the boy is distributed. This is an extremely long period of separation between him and his family and friends. Quite a lot of life examples show that the intimate relationship¹²⁾ between the girl and the boy that has yet to pass his military service is not healthy and long. They are over the first few months after the young boy goes to the army. Bulgarian people created the proverb which described the event: "A soldier and a goner are re-

membered 40 days". This is another reason why single girls looked for boys, who finished their duties in the army.

On the other hand, the married women and especially those who have male children, have a more critical opinion. Most of them support the claim that "military service built men", but if there is a way for her boy to avoid conscription they would benefit from it. This should be explained by the loving and timid character of women. They fear and worry that their son (or husband) may be injured or killed during the war or training. Here's how a mother from Russia summarizes the fate of her son, who was about to enter the ranks of the Red Army: "Not only a cannon fodder, but absolute slaves for two years. At the risk of him returning back to me as a corpse, emaciated, or mutilated, or not even in a coffin or a name" (Тъойнинга, 2008, p. 119). This example although foreign is extremely indicative to the attitude to compulsory military service by women. Such a negative attitude can be seen in not a few memories and experiences in Bulgaria. „I'm not happy with the army, especially because my son was beaten up there, got psychosis and had to be accommodated in the special home In his best years, he was imprisoned in the division with a certain schedule. And what happens - I give them my son healthy, with a certain intellectual level but in a moment they returned him to me as a wreck. After than all life was suffering" – tells a soldier's mother. Another identical memory adds: "I gave my son to the state, to serve, to do something there, and in what conditions, in what environment does he do that, I do not know, but my son came back with serious health problems, and no one has claimed responsibility. Why is such a thing allowed?"

Men, not just those that have raised and sent their boys to the army, rarely tell stories of a similar nature. Even if there is hint for a health problem received in the military, it is noted only as part of any soldier's life woes - "Service is service! There are many woes, but you stand up and act". The men who completed military service are aware of the difficulties that every boy

will face in the army. They understand that the young man goes to a place where everyday life is not easy and is quite different from the home environment. In the army life is under a specific schedule and it has a specific discipline. However, they believe that despite some adversity that the military service will bring, the boy will learn to be more independent and to have a fighting spirit. "He needs to face problems alone!" That's how a father commented the forthcoming entry of the male heir to the barracks at that time. At the insistence of the mother, the husband may try to "*settle*" a lighter military service for his son,¹³⁾ but the paternal instinct to show good example to his boy, the father will not seek such opportunities with relish. A Bulgarian father, who sent his two sons to the army and who is reasoning for the revoked nowadays conscription in Bulgaria: "Every young man should go through the army, to march on the parade ground and take an oath of allegiance to the people and their homeland. If not, how will he protect his future wife and children!?"

It can be seen that according to the public perceptions and attitudes, which live today among the majority of the Bulgarian citizens over the age of 30, the conscription is an extremely important life limit. Any male person is obliged to pass in the army not only because of the state law, as it was during socialism, but because of a non-written rule. It is assumed that it ends the process of the formation of the "*real*" man. Although there were some gender and social differences issues, the established in the minds of generations of Bulgarians conception of the role of military service as nurture and socialization stage of man's life is extremely strong. Bulgarians see the army rather as an institution that teaches young adolescents certain behaviors and qualities that are typical and desirable for men's role in public life. It is rarely emphasized the fact that the army is a place that makes a man into a soldier, ready to die or to kill in the name of some goal. These concepts are seen as such because of the Bulgarian traditions and beliefs that a boy should be proud to be a soldier.

This is a public sign that shows that a family has a strong and behaved male child that is not only capable of continuing his family but also of protecting his kin, nation and homeland.

NOTES

1. <http://vcampus.uom.ac.mu/soci1101/index.html>

2. <http://www.kaminata.net/topic-t50007.html>

3. http://ikonomika12.com/document/socializacij_na_licnostta/53157

4. The Bulgarian Army was formed under the name of Bulgarian *Zemska Army* in 1878. According to the "Provisional rules for the formation of the *Zemska Army* of the Principality of Bulgaria", published in the same year, the personnel of the army should be completed in principles of conscription. This principle of manning the troops has been observed almost without interruption until 2008, when the Bulgarian army became professional.

5. Here we view the National Union for the sport and equipment, established in 1947, which in 1951 merged with Voluntary organizations to assist the defense, existing until 1967; military teams from students, created in the form of extracurricular activities at high schools and vocational schools in 1976; as well as individual schools and military-clubs to individual county, city, factory and other centers (Филчев, 1978, pp. 184-187).

6. Since the autumn of 1968, Bulgaria introduced the mandatory military-training (this training is for a period of two years) for all boys and girls from 16 to 18 years old (Филчев, 1978, p. 186).

7. *Конституция на Народна република България* (1947). София: Държавна печатница (art 90).

8. *Конституция на Народна република България* (1971). София: Наука и изкуство (art 61).

9. Let us once again recall that the study covers the period of socialism. While some of the phenomena can be observed in modern times, the author does not analyze in the article today's image and attitudes towards the military profession in society.

10. This is analogous to the female companies and the female meetings, during which women often talk about a future, present or past pregnancy. In Bulgarian traditional folk concepts the birth is considered to be the border point where the woman has really become a woman and a mother.

11. In the socialist period in Bulgaria in general, we can say that the following rule "first you have to serve in the army, and then higher education or college." This means that guys who wish to continue their education after completing secondary education course, must first complete their military service, and only then begin university studies. This rule was defined legally in 1958 with the Law on Universal Military Service. This law has suffered changes over the years. The Laws governing mandatory military service in the years of socialism in Bulgaria are discussed in another article of the author (Вълев, 2014).

12. In the years that the article discusses - 1944-1989, the relationship between girls and boys in Bulgaria were very different. Because of the conservative and traditional beliefs of Bulgarians intimacy in sexual aspect had been rare before the wedding. The close friendship between boys and girls was expressed more in platonic love.

13. In the historical period discussed the phenomenon of "settlement" of the military service is quite common, especially among the higher echelons of power. "Settlement" means finding a "better and easier place for the military service" for the boy. It does not depend so much on the attitudes of the young man who will enter the army but of those of his family and kinship circle. The parents must trigger extremely strong friendly and family ties and contacts.

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