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Inventing the Swedish (War) Veteran

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ABSTRACT

Research on military veterans often stresses the importance of controlling and ascribing meaning to the bodies of veterans, both for recruitment purposes and for retaining legitimacy of military machineries and missions more generally. As wars and war veterans long have been peripheral phenomena for most citizens, Sweden offers a particularly interesting context in which to study how veterans are ascribed meaning. When abandoning conscription in favour of a postnational, all-volunteer force in 2010, the Swedish veteran emerged as a subject position in need of political invention and intervention. Since then, techniques of government have increasingly represented military personnel as uniquely deserving of public recognition, hence seemingly *inventing* a (war) veteran. The article offers unique insights into this process. It shows how 'the recognized veteran' is scripted as a self-sacrificing and yet self-fulfilling individual, for whom war deployments have brought about personal and professional growth. These constructions render veterans competitive and employable in civilian labour markets and represent the military institution as a career stepping-stone for young, responsible individuals. By analysing how veteran identities are produced and promoted through politics of recognition, this paper offers vital insights into how the Swedish Armed Forces and its deployments are made possible and desirable in a time of marketization and far-reaching military transformations.

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Introduction

We were gathered in a conference facility in close vicinity of the annual Swedish Veteran Day celebrations. I was there together with colleagues who had been invited to present their work for the Swedish Committee on Defence. Today's seminar was organised by the Swedish Armed Forces' recently formed Veteran Unit and it was a member of this unit who began addressing the committee. The PowerPoint presentation in front of us featured the results of an opinion poll, indicating that an overwhelming majority of Swedish soldiers deployed on international missions felt proud of their achievements upon returning home.¹ The problem, however, the speaker concluded, is that despite our efforts to the contrary, few soldiers feel recognized by Swedish society. He continued by rhetorically asking – faced towards us researchers and the politicians in the room – what could we do to help render the Swedish veteran a valuable societal resource? What could we do to make the veteran employable and attractive in civilian labour markets? What could be done to ensure that the veteran felt appreciated by politicians and, lastly, to get the Swedish people to associate the veteran with health

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*and strength?*² The presentation behind the speaker now displayed three words in capital letters against the image of a soldier observing the sunset: proud, respected and valued.

This observation, made by the author at the Swedish Veteran Day in the spring of 2016, illustrates how the potential of scripting a ‘proud, respected and valued’ veteran is currently being explored by political and military elites.³ This politically invented veteran identity, and its position in discursive terrains enabling military deployments, serves as the object of analysis in this paper.

While governmental efforts to control and celebrate veteran identities, bodies and experiences certainly are familiar to many (critical) military scholars (Achter 2010; Ben-Ari 2005; Basham 2016a, 2016b; Bulmer and Eichler 2017; Danilova 2015; King 2010), this is a novel storyline in the context of Sweden. The Swedish Armed Forces (SAF) has been described as a marginal and even distrusted institution of Swedish society (Berndtsson, Dandeker, and Ydén 2015), which often is attributed to Sweden’s non-military participation in World War I and World War II and its identity as a formerly neutral, and still militarily non-aligned, ‘peacekeeping state’ (Agius 2011; Berndtsson, Dandeker, and Ydén 2015; Leander 2004; Åse and Wendt 2018). Reflecting the marginal role of the SAF in society, Swedish soldiers have until recently been rather absent from the public domain – and rarely celebrated. While veteran bodies certainly have existed in Sweden for a long time, the term ‘veteran’ was hardly ever employed in Swedish defence discourses, and rarely associated with the military institution (Government Report 2014, 340).⁴ (As a curious illustration, people’s immediate assumption when I began speaking publicly about my research on veterans [*veteraner*] was often that I had developed an interest in old cars.)

The recent urge to produce a valued Swedish veteran identity should be understood in relation to the ongoing marketization and broader transformations of the SAF, including a temporary transition from a conscripted to a recruited all-volunteer force (AVF) in 2010 and the parallel transition from a primarily territorial to a ‘postnational defense’ (Kronsell 2012). These transformations seemingly actualized a need to rebrand the SAF and render military careers and identities desirable to Swedish citizens, hence mirroring practices already at work in other military settings (cf. Bailey 2007). As many researchers have demonstrated, public recognition, respect, and remembrance of veterans are vital aspects of selling military careers to young individuals and legitimizing the missions of contemporary, neoliberal armed forces in the eyes of their citizens (Achter 2010; Ben-Ari 2005; Basham 2016b; Tidy 2015; Refslund Sørensen 2017; Bulmer and Eichler 2017). Thus, seemingly reflecting such logics, the Swedish veteran emerged as a subject position in need of political invention and intervention, now increasingly described by political and military elites as an individual whose bravery and altruism have been neglected (cf. Löfven 2016; Löfven 2017; Ahlin 2016). Next to recruitment campaigns promoting soldier careers to young individuals (cf. Strand and Berndtsson 2015), efforts to ‘recognize’ the Swedish veteran and peacekeeper emerged, for instance manifested in the adaptation of a Comprehensive Veteran Policy by the parliament in 2010, the institution of a Veteran Day, an official veteran monument, and new veteran medals.⁵

This paper offers insights into the process of politically inventing (not simply reinventing or rehabilitating) a Swedish (War) Veteran. More specifically, it probes how veteran identities are produced and promoted by political and military elites through a ‘governmental programme’ of recognition (Dean 2010). Attending to the ways in which ‘the recognized veteran’ is ascribed meaning is warranted, not simply because this subject position so far remains unexplored in research,⁶ but also because it, arguably, forms part of the ways in which Swedish military transformations and deployments are made possible.

This article shows how the programme of recognition scripts veterans as individuals who have developed both personally and professionally through their war deployments and therefore grown into responsible and resourceful citizens of neoliberal society. This construction seemingly merges the desires of private enterprises and ‘enterprising’ citizens (Miller and Rose 2008) with those of the responsible peacekeeping state. ‘The recognized veteran’ thus forms part of a neoliberal regime of government through which military interventions are made possible and desirable in the name of responsible states and citizens. Following recent scholarship on the legitimation of (neo)liberal military interventions (cf. Duffield 2007; Meyer 2008; Piotukh 2015), I suggest that this perceived overlap de-contextualizes and ascribes a sense of self-evidence to international military deployments, in turn undermining constructive political debates around their often-problematic conditions, conduct, and consequences.

Thus, this paper contributes new insights into the ways in which veterans – and military identities more broadly – are produced by, and reproductive of, a neoliberal regime of government, enacted through rationalities and techniques of the market. The ways in which veteran identities are rendered desirable through the market have, with few exceptions (Basham 2016b; Bulmer and Eichler 2017), so far received limited attention in the literature, which largely explores other logics, such as gendered hero, protection, and rescue narratives (cf. Young 2003; Pin Fat and Stern 2005; Kronsell 2012; Dyvik 2014; Åse and Wendt 2018). Without in any way questioning the relevance of such perspectives, this paper shows how attending to the workings of neoliberal rationalities and techniques also provides a useful tool with which to put political constructions of veteran identity under critical scrutiny. Exploring a case where such logics appear to be particularly salient – given how the Swedish veteran appears to have been an urgent political invention – may also contribute important insights into other military settings. Relatedly, by particularly focusing on the Swedish veteran, this analysis sheds light on a context with many particularities, not only compared to the Anglo-Saxon context, where the veteran long has been a subject of political interventions, but also to its neighbours in the Nordic-Baltic region, where shared experiences of wars and armed resistance against foreign interventions arguably have granted military subjects more central positions in the construction and consolidation of the nation-state (Agius 2017, 114; Leander 2004, 591; Åse and Wendt 2018, 27).⁷

Military transformations and the emergence of the Swedish (War) Veteran programme

The formative period for the Swedish veteran image arguably began with the end of the Cold War and lasted until around 2015 (when the Swedish government decided to yet

again refocus the SAF on defending territorial borders). During these years, the SAF gradually altered its focus from a territorial to a 'postnational defense', increasingly emphasizing and intensifying its participation in expeditionary operations abroad (Kronsell 2012, 75–9) – a transformation that culminated in the abandonment of conscription in favour of a professional AVF in 2010 (Government Bill 2010). With these transformations, the familiar representation of Sweden as a neutral and balancing player between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Warsaw Pact was replaced with a defence discourse where 'cooperation' constituted the nodal point and Sweden's collaboration with NATO was increasingly emphasized (Agius 2011). These transformations are perhaps best illustrated by the war in Afghanistan where Sweden, from 2006 until 2014, was responsible for four NATO Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Mazar-e-Sharif. The intervention in Afghanistan has been described as the most combat-intensive mission undertaken by the SAF since the 1960s (Berndtsson, Dandeker, and Ydén 2015, 318) and sparked domestic debate. The government was criticized for failing to communicate the armed forces' activities and mandate to the Swedish public – particularly when the focus of the international troops shifted from peacekeeping to counterinsurgency (Agrell 2013). Perhaps most notably, the government was criticized for refusing to recognize that Swedish soldiers were *at war*,⁸ a denial that collided with the experiences of many soldiers and with news stories about Swedish combat casualties.⁹

The reluctance to speak about the intervention in Afghanistan as an actual war deployment needs to be understood in relation to the marginal role of the SAF in society and its deeply rooted peacekeeping identity mentioned above. In 2013, then Swedish Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt famously referred to the military as a 'vested interest', implying that the SAF was simply one of many authorities which were grasping for resources from the state. In other words, for the Reinfeldt administration, and for many administrations prior to it, the military was not considered an exceptional public authority. Instead, the SAF was understood as a cost unit that ought to be balanced against other state expenditures and hence must *compete* for its resources. In addition, although Sweden supplied troops to military missions under both United Nations (UN) and NATO leadership long before the intervention in Afghanistan, these missions have been framed as peacekeeping missions rather than combat missions and often as duties outside of the core objective and identity of the SAF (Kronsell 2012). For instance, when Swedish troops participated in combat for the first time in over a century – in the 1960s under the UN flag in the Congo – the soldiers' experiences were scarcely documented and rarely talked about in the public domain, and, if they were, often disregarded and criticized for their incompatibility with the Swedish peacekeeping identity (Thisner and Garpenhag 2016).

In order to shed further light on the transforming context in which the Swedish (War) Veteran Programme emerged, two additional aspects deserve attention. Ever since the (temporary) transition to a postnational AVF, the public has provided low levels of support for the military and the SAF has struggled to recruit and retain personnel (Government Report 2016, 63–6). In the past decade, a higher percentage of the public has declared 'low trust' in the SAF than the ones declaring 'high trust' (Berndtsson, Dandeker, and Ydén 2015). These numbers stand in contrast to similar studies in the UK and the US where the trust and/or respect for the armed forces have remained high even

in times when the military has been engaged in wars generally opposed by the public (Berndtsson, Dandeker, and Ydén 2015; Achter 2010, 52). In these contexts, ‘support the troops, oppose the war’ campaigns have seemingly disconnected individual soldiers from their politically decided missions and thus contributed to rehabilitate the military, through the bodies of veterans, and restore its role in society (Basham 2016a, 887; Bulmer and Eichler 2017, 165). In addition, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have continuously been moved to the periphery of everyday remembrance techniques and replaced by nostalgic narratives of older and purportedly more legitimate wars, such as WWI and WWII (Tidy 2015; Basham 2016a). In Sweden, by contrast, the SAF’s marginal and distrusted position in society undoubtedly provided challenges for political and military elites in their efforts to rebrand the SAF so as to convince young individuals about the attractiveness of military careers and the broader public about the necessity of an expeditionary force. With a legacy of neutrality, a peacekeeping identity and rare and oft-criticized combat deployments, few – if any – discourses of war nostalgia had the capacity to *rehabilitate* the SAF and *restore* its role in Swedish society. In this precarious situation, ‘the veteran’ emerged in the national defence discourse.

With the Comprehensive Veteran Policy, the government established a responsibility for state representatives to openly and actively recognize personnel serving in risk-exposed international military missions (Government Bill 2010, 190, 200) and to further ‘ensure that these missions are perceived as legitimate and constructive in the eyes of the public’ (200). Although stating the sacrifices made by veterans as the key reason behind their well-deserved recognition (Government Bill 2010, 191), political and military elites have also stated that the recognition of veterans is ‘important for the societal support of the military institution and contributes to enhancing recruitment’ (Government Bill 2015, 19; see also Government Bill 2010, 192, 197; Försvarmakten 2011, 3; Tolgfors 2016). Following the recommendations made by a preceding parliamentary investigation (Government Report 2008), a national Veteran Day was instituted on 29 May, the International Day of UN Peacekeepers. Together with an official Veteran Ceremony, performed for the first time in 2011, and a national Veteran Memorial, inaugurated in 2013, the Veteran Day was made ‘the core of the official honouring of Swedish Veterans’ (Government Bill 2010, 193). Today, the memorial serves as the principal site for the annual ceremony where military personnel are celebrated and awarded medals by generals, politicians, and members of the royal family. In addition to the official monument situated in Stockholm, several municipalities have followed suit and inaugurated local veteran memorials and ceremonies. Moreover, two new medals were introduced as part of this Veteran Programme – one referred to as the Government’s Reward Medal, assigned to military personnel for ‘particularly commendable international achievements’, and the other as the Armed Forces’ Medal for Soldiers Wounded in Combat (Government Bill 2010) – the latter awarded retroactively to veterans having served abroad starting with the UN mission in Gaza in the 1950s. Beside techniques aimed at increasing the recognition of veterans by the public and the political elite, the SAF has launched veteran employment schemes encouraging private businesses and civilian employers to recognize veterans by hiring and/or providing discounts to former and part-time soldiers. Before further unpacking these techniques and the forms of identity they produce and presuppose, the next section situates the Veteran Programme within the literature on neoliberal governmentality and elaborates on the methodology of this paper.

Valuable veterans and marketized military machineries

Following Dardot and Laval, I understand the key characteristics of neoliberal governmentality to be ‘the generalization of competition as a behavioural norm and of the enterprise as a mode of subjectivation’ (2013, 4). Put differently, neoliberalism can be understood as acting upon individuals who believe in their own freedom, responsibility, and ability to ‘enterprise’ the self in order to compete against others (Miller and Rose 2008). At the core of this definition lies the idea of the market as an organizer of social relations (Miller and Rose 2008; Dardot and Laval 2013; Dean 2010). The military apparatus is here understood as one example of a previously state-governed area now increasingly governed by and through rationalities and techniques of the market. More specifically, ‘marketization’ is used to describe the particular process through which military institutions transform into employer brands and sell the attractiveness and benefits of enlisting, remaining, and deploying with the armed forces in order to compete for both resources and the attention of presumed-to-be autonomous individuals in civilian labour markets, often through the use of advertisements or similar market techniques (Baily 2007). Importantly, through this market rationality, the SAF’s low legitimacy and personnel shortage are conceived of as problems to be addressed by techniques which appeal to and convince (rather than coerce) Swedish society about the value and competitiveness of the military institution and its personnel.

With the marketization of the military, constructions of soldiers and veterans as ‘masculine warriors’ are complemented with, and perhaps challenged by, other forms of military identity (cf. Duncanson 2009). For instance, Basham (2016a) has analysed veteran employment schemes and shows how military ethos initiatives in British schools represent veterans as individuals particularly suitable to educate and socialize disengaged pupils, capacities which distinguish military personnel from other occupational categories and render them valuable to the British state and society. Moreover, as demonstrated by Brown (2012), recruiting campaigns by the US Armed Forces increasingly represent military personnel as embodying a ‘business masculinity’. Similarly, Swedish military recruiting campaigns launched since the introduction of the AVF have been promoting ‘enterprising soldiers’, inviting potential recruits to ‘grow as individuals’ by gaining ‘transferable skills’ and ‘employability’ with the SAF (Strand and Berndtsson 2015).

Marketization can thus be understood as transforming the field of possibility within which military identities are produced and promoted for consumption by a civilian population. It provides space for military institutions to rebrand soldiering by producing and promoting military imageries linked to characteristics, skills, and ethics broadly considered to be valuable and appealing within the ‘enterprise culture’ of neoliberal democracies (Burchell 1993, 275). In this context, efforts by political and military elites to script desirable veterans are perhaps particularly interesting given how they also provide highly visible ways for civilian populations to make sense of wars and war deployments (Achter 2010, 63). The ‘mythologized’ military sacrifice every veteran has been called upon to make, i.e. the preparedness to kill and be killed (Pin-Fat and Stern 2005), must therefore either be sold and rendered desirable to, or downplayed and hidden from, civilian populations.¹⁰ This appears particularly crucial within states

employing AVFs where military sacrifices no longer can be framed as duties connected to citizenship rights (Kronsell 2012, 26–8, 41).

If governmental techniques such as war memorials and veteran celebrations are unsuccessful in silencing and/or rendering military sacrifices desirable, injured and dead veteran bodies can threaten efforts to recruit and retain military personnel as well as legitimate military operations (Achter 2010, 47, 65; Ben-Ari 2005, 654; Basham 2016a, 891; Bulmer and Eichler 2017). The production of appealing veteran identities by the state and its military machinery therefore constitutes an integral part of how military operations are made possible and is, as Ben-Ari (2005, 662) suggests, ‘directly related to a host of questions about how they manage their identity as the wielders of the means of violence’. Hence, by studying how the Swedish veteran is constituted as desirable through its separation and elevation from the civilian Other, this article draws upon and contributes to a larger body of literature which primarily has discussed how particular representations of *external* Others have enabled military interventions by the responsible neoliberal state. That is, when interventions are justified under banners such as ‘humanitarianism’ (Duffield 2007; Piotukh 2015) and/or ‘saving women’ (Kronsell 2012; Dyvik 2014; True 2015), they rely on a biopolitical separation between caring and to-be-cared-for populations (Dean 2010, 266–7; Duffield 2007; Meyer 2008; Piotukh 2015). As we shall see, such dividing practices are crucial not only for the production of the Swedish state and its military deployments, but for the process of distinguishing the recognized military veteran from the civilian constitutive Other.

Methodology

This paper primarily studies how ‘the Swedish veteran’ is constituted and rendered desirable through written texts, including official documents composing the Comprehensive Veteran Policy and information accessible via the SAF’s website. Yet this paper is also built on ethnographic observations (see Rech in Rech and Williams 2017). As indicated in the introduction, in May 2016, I attended the SAF’s Veteran Day celebrations in Stockholm. During the course of the day, I observed and documented (via field notes and audio and video recordings of speeches, monuments, showcases, and ceremonies) the official Veteran Ceremony and exhibition area. I also observed a seminar where the Swedish Committee on Defence was informed about current efforts undertaken by the SAF Veteran Unit, and ongoing research on veterans. As a complementary method, ethnographic observations make possible particular attention to narratives which appear to be silenced within politics of recognition. As Öberg (2016) suggests, paying attention to the ‘emptiness, absence, and various kinds of disappearances’ is key to understanding meaning-making processes constituting particular sites and techniques of war memorialization (155).

Drawing on Dean’s (2010) ‘analytics of government’, I understand the material outlined above and thus the collective interventions made by Swedish political and military elites following the launch of the Comprehensive Veteran Policy as a ‘governmental programme’ of recognition, which ‘promotes and presupposes’ forms of veteran identity to Swedish society (53–4). The production of identity, which Dean identifies as one ‘object of an analytic of government’ (278–9), is thus the focus of this analysis. More specifically, I analyse how veteran identities are discursively and relationally produced through their

distinction from (civilian and/or foreign, internal and/or external) constitutive Others as well as through their equation and contrastation with different 'signifiers' (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 46–7) – for instance, personal characteristics and national symbols such as flags and uniforms. These dividing practices do not determine subjects but should be understood as seeking to guide, shape, and form them (Dean 2010, 53–4, 202–4). It should be emphasized that the programme of government studied here does not predominantly produce and promote veteran identities with the purpose of governing 'the veteran subject'. Rather, these identities are primarily intended to be acted upon by – and thus guide the conduct of – civilian subjects, whether in the form of private enterprises, Veteran Day audiences, potential military recruits, or elected politicians. The forms of veteran identity studied herein should therefore not be confused with 'real' veterans who, like all subjects, are more than mere recipients of meaning (Dean 2010, 53–4; Bulmer and Jackson 2016).

Politics of recognition: who is the Swedish (War) Veteran?

The following sections probe how veteran identities are produced by the Swedish (War) Veteran Programme, in three steps. Firstly, I return to the Veteran Day in the spring of 2016 and approach techniques (e.g. a ceremony, a monument, speeches, and medals) through which current and former military personnel are recognized and remembered by the Swedish public and political elite. Secondly, I approach techniques through which private businesses and civilian labour markets are called upon to recognize veterans (e.g. employment schemes and Veteran Cards). Lastly, I discuss narratives that appear to be silenced by/within the programme and politics of recognition. By laying bare how veteran identities are constituted through these techniques, we gain a better understanding of how certain actions and aspirations – narratives and (war) stories – appear rational and unavoidable, whilst others are rendered irrational and avoidable. As a result, we can begin to critically interrogate 'the veteran' and its position in discursive terrains enabling military deployments (Dean 2010, 55–60).

The self-sacrificing and self-fulfilling Swedish veteran

Since it was established in 2011, the Swedish Veteran Day has grown every year and gradually attracted more people and media coverage. This year, for the first time, the official Veteran Ceremony was attended by a Swedish Prime Minister, the Social Democrat Stefan Löfven. The Prime Minister, as well as the Speaker of Parliament, the Supreme Commander of the SAF and the Director General of the Swedish Agency for Peace, Security and Development gave speeches in front of the veterans and their families, filling a stand in front of the podium, and before the rest of us, a few hundred civilians who had formed a circle around the stage. The ceremony was also attended by King Carl XVI Gustav and Prince Carl Philip – both in military uniforms – and several other politicians and party leaders (also attending for the first time).

When listening to and later transcribing the four speeches given during the course of the Veteran Ceremony, I noticed some familiar depictions of military masculinities, well covered in feminist and critical military studies (cf. Enloe 2000; Young 2003; Pin-Fat and Stern 2005; Withworth 2008; Kronsell 2012; True 2015; Basham 2016a, 2016b; Åse and Wendt 2018). Supreme Commander Michael Bydén (2016), for instance, portrayed the

Swedish veteran as a protector of families and loved ones as well as of the ‘freedom’, ‘sovereignty’, and ‘democratic values’ of the Swedish nation-state. Throughout the speech, Bydén spoke about a photo of his family that served to give him strength on deployments, but also to remind him about ‘the ones we are placed to serve and protect’ (2016). Several speakers also emphasized the ‘price’ that veterans can be forced to pay in their roles as protectors: some in the form of the ‘ultimate sacrifice’ (Löfven 2016; Bydén 2016) – others in the form of ‘physical injuries’, ‘psychological stress’, ‘memories of unspeakable suffering’ (Löfven 2016), ‘homesickness’, and missing out on ‘yet another birthday’ (Bydén 2016).

Yet, after having listened to all the speeches at the Veteran Ceremony, it became evident that the Swedish veteran was being scripted as something more (or perhaps something other) than a mere, masculine protector. In their addresses, several speakers emphasized veterans’ autonomous *decisions* to take great risks and leave their families behind for deployments abroad as a key reason for their well-deserved and overdue recognition (Löfven 2016; Ahlin 2016; Söder 2016). The alleged voluntariness of war deployments in the new Swedish AVF thus appeared to make possible the construction of a veteran that was not only a daring protector, but also a responsible, altruistic, and caring individual.¹¹ The speech given by Prime Minister Löfven (2016) was particularly illustrative of this narrative. He said,

Few people deserve our admiration and respect as much as the women and men who have chosen to risk their lives to save others. We often speak of the selfishness in the world, about our inability to comprehend the situation of others. You, however, have proven that you are prepared to be far away from your loved ones, to leave for unknown places and to work despite great threats and extreme conditions, to relieve and help people whom you’ve never met before, and to defend the peace and the freedom for all of us. You have demonstrated the bravery, the commitment and the respect for the human value that this task demands. For that, you deserve Sweden’s deepest gratitude.¹²

Throughout Löfven’s speech, veterans were promoted as extraordinary individuals worthy of the public’s appreciation and gratitude. Within this technique of recognition, the veteran appears not only to be produced in relation to an external Other, i.e. the population that s/he is assumed to ‘relieve’, ‘help’, and care for. The veteran is also distinguished from domestic, civilian Others, i.e. the ones who were encouraged to extend their recognition. Interestingly, the civilian Other constituting the Swedish veteran is not (only) a feminized citizen subject in need of protection, but an irresponsible citizen. In the Prime Minister’s speech, the civilian Other represents the ‘selfishness of the world’ and the ‘inability to comprehend the situation of others’ (Löfven 2016). Narratives about altruistic veterans in a world of individualism have, since then, been reoccurring in speeches by the Swedish Prime Minister (cf. Löfven 2017). Yet within the technique of recognition embodied by Prime Minister Löfven in his Veteran Day speech, the selfless veteran was, importantly, not left unrewarded. On the contrary, the veteran was scripted as a person whose sacrifices provide ‘incredible abilities’, which constitute *a resource* for the individual in his/her future life. Löfven (2016) continued,

When I meet veterans, it also becomes clear to me what these missions can bring about for the people undertaking them. You arrive back with incredible abilities: to be self-perceptive and confident in your capacities, to take responsibility and to lead, to collaborate under difficult constraints, to create order in chaos. These are strengths you will carry with you for the rest of your lives.

In other words, in the Prime Minister's speech, the decision to deploy on an(y) international military mission is described as both self-sacrificing *and* self-fulfilling. Swedish veterans are here produced as neoliberal peacekeepers who deploy on risk-exposed military missions for the sake of others whilst simultaneously investing in their own personal development. The veteran is thus presupposed to be an individual who sacrifices for the nation-state and for the external Other, but also for the *Self*. Within this technique of recognition, the sacrifices of Swedish veterans are not only scripted as desirable for the individual, they are also controlled when described as exceptions (often through the use of signifiers such as 'some' veterans 'can' sustain injuries). When military sacrifices are constructed as rewarding, but *rare*, their inevitable position within techniques of recognition are seemingly concealed. That is, in essence, narratives about absence, injury, and death act as load-bearing pillars supporting and stabilizing representations of veteran subjects as altruistic and responsible protectors. Hence, without their sacrifices, veteran identities would, arguably, not be constituted as worthy of recognition. This form of veteran identity – produced, promoted, and presupposed in speeches by the Swedish political and military elite at the Veteran Day – speaks to the precarious position arguably held by veteran subjects within neoliberal regimes of government (to be further discussed below). In order to continue unpacking how the 'self-fulfilled veteran' is constituted, let us now temporarily leave the scene of the Swedish Veteran Ceremony and analyse how veteran identities are rendered desirable also through a set of techniques by which private businesses and civilian employers are called upon to recognize military personnel.

Employability: the veteran and the military as societal resources

This section further probes the 'self-fulfilled' veteran introduced above and, more specifically, the 'incredible abilities' that s/he supposedly earns on deployment. A potential indication to what such abilities can consist of as well as how they supposedly can be used 'for the rest of their [veterans'] lives', can be found in the observation accounted for at the beginning of this article, i.e. *employability*.

The seminar organized for the Swedish Committee on Defence at the Veteran Day in 2016 proclaimed the branding of veterans as 'societal resources' and 'attractive on the civilian labour market' high priorities in the transformation of the SAF (see also Försvarsmakten 2014). Such ambitions should be understood in light of the increasing share of short and part-time employments, characteristic of marketized military institutions (Edmunds et al. 2016). In order to successfully motivate and recruit young individuals to part-time, reservist positions – but also to regular full-time, short-term (maximum 8 years) positions (Försvarsmakten 2017a) – the military is dependent on the willingness of civilian employers to hire soldiers and veterans, both between and after training and deployments. Ever since the draft was abandoned in 2010, the SAF has been working resolutely to convince the civilian labour market of the employability of soldiers and veterans. Among other things, the SAF has arranged recruitment seminars and workshops with the Swedish industrial sector as well as embarked on collaborative projects with civilian employers specifically hiring part-time soldiers currently serving in the military. Perhaps most notably, the SAF has entered into collaboration with a private recruiting and staffing company called Military Work,

which focuses on making military personnel attractive to civilian employers, thus constituting a ‘bridge between the armed forces and the labour market’ (Försvarsmakten 2017a). The SAF continuously stresses how ‘sharing employees with the armed forces’ brings about many and ‘cost-efficient’ advantages (Försvarsmakten 2017a). On their website, the SAF argues that individuals serving in the armed forces have passed difficult tests and challenging training, where:

individuals learn how to handle both physical and psychological pressure. That means that they are capable of working in teams, trained in leadership skills and above all: they know themselves. As an employer hiring personnel from the armed forces, these are all capacities that you can profit from. (Försvarsmakten 2017a)

The website also contains interviews with veterans describing how military service has bolstered their civilian careers (Försvarsmakten 2017b), and with civilian employers narrating their beneficial experiences from hiring military personnel, one of them arguing that you ‘get a lot into the bargain’ (Försvarsmakten 2017a). In addition, the SAF and their partners repeatedly describe and promote the soldier as a ‘hard working’, ‘mature’, ‘structured’, ‘enterprising’, ‘dedicated’, ‘reliable’, ‘responsible’, ‘problem-solving’, ‘punctual’, and ‘competent’ individual, who is able to ‘withstand stress’, ‘take directions’, ‘collaborate’, ‘lead others’, and, due to his/her military service, has reached a high level of ‘personal growth’ (Försvarsmakten 2017a, 2017b; Military Work 2016). The scripting of veterans as employable forms part of an explicit strategy by the SAF to ensure that military employments and deployments are viewed as ‘merits’ as well as a ‘mark of quality’ for soldiers re-entering civilian life (Försvarsmakten 2011, 4), thus reflecting processes at work also within other neoliberal military institutions (Bulmer and Eichler 2017).

Besides profiting from skilled personnel, collaborative projects with the SAF are, interestingly, also sold to civilian employers as a way to shoulder a corporate social responsibility (CSR). The SAF is calling upon private actors to ‘contribute to society’ by assisting the military in ‘increasing the chances of young individuals on the labour market’ and, at the same time, gaining both competence and ‘good-will’ for their societal contributions (Försvarsmakten 2017a). Similarly, businesses are encouraged to recognize the work conducted by veterans by providing discounts and offers through a recently launched Veteran Card and, by doing so, broaden their company’s CSR profile (Veterankortet 2016).

Consequently, the techniques discussed above seemingly produce, promote, and presuppose a neoliberal form of veteran identity (Miller and Rose 2008; Dardot and Laval 2013). Swedish veterans are scripted as enterprising citizens who, due to their *voluntary* war deployments, have assumed the responsibility placed upon them and, therefore, grown and developed as individuals. These techniques distinguish veterans from their (irresponsible and self-centred) civilian counterparts and make soldiering appear a particularly fulfilling and rewarding occupation. Interestingly, for the veteran, self-fulfilment is presumed to be synergetic with the embodiment of a large range of professional abilities assumed to be valuable in the civilian labour market. As such, military deployments, and the sacrifices that they entail, are constituted as ways for individuals to transform into responsible, valuable, and competitive actors in civilian labour markets, but also as ways for businesses to transform into responsible, valuable, and competitive actors in consumer markets.

In addition to promoting the veteran as employable, the programme of recognition and its associated market techniques also construct the SAF as a valuable societal institution. By offering young individuals a career stepping-stone and opportunities to grow as professionals and, thus, individuals, the military is ascribed a purpose beyond its traditional core function and unique competence, armed combat. The military is attributed the ability to foster and care for young individuals (see also Basham 2016b). Although somewhat familiar attributes for the military, which long has been assigned the role of ‘turning boys into men’ (Kronsell 2012, 27), today’s Swedish military is provided with the particular capacity of fostering future *employees*. Interestingly, then, within the programme of recognition and its representations of the employable veteran, the interests of young individuals and private businesses appear to coincide with those of the state and its military machinery. More specifically, when claiming that ‘above all’, veterans ‘know themselves’, the Veteran Programme portrays the process of training for and deploying to war zones as personal journeys rather than political operations. When these desires are synchronized and ‘recognition’, as a governmental technology, is de-politicized, the perceived benefits of military missions appear commonsensical and their underlying assumptions might, therefore, become difficult to problematize and critique. Although the workings of this neoliberal regime of government are not limited to the military institution, the political stakes attached to the failure of critically interrogating these techniques are arguably particularly high when they act upon military subjects. As demonstrated above, the promise of employability plays an important role in rendering military sacrifices – whether in the form of absence, injury, or death – as self-fulfilling for the ones who decide to submit themselves to the state. The promotion of a recognized veteran identity hence seems to suggest that being a valued citizen of Swedish society is a transition which is to be deserved and, for some individuals, dearly won.¹³ Moreover, and importantly, the ability by the Swedish state to control and ascribe meaning to military sacrifices is, as others have shown (Achter 2010; Ben-Ari 2005; Pin-Fat and Stern 2005), crucial for sustaining its military machinery and war deployments, thus further raising the political stakes involved.

The scripting of military deployments as rewarding and thus desirable for both soldier and society, in other words, does *more* than ascribe meaning to the veteran and the military institution. It also contributes to produce ‘Sweden’ and its role in the world.

De-contextualized war deployments and the Swedish peacekeeping state

This section will focus on what is *absent* within the Veteran Programme and thereby equally constitutive of ‘the recognized (war) veteran’, i.e. the actual conduct and consequences of particular military missions.

During the Swedish Veteran Ceremony in 2016, I observed four soldiers receiving medals for injuries sustained during four different deployments. One veteran was injured in Gaza in 1967, one in Macedonia in 1993, one in Kosovo in 2004, and one in Afghanistan in 2011. The four men were awarded their medals by the Swedish Monarch and, thereafter, congratulated through handshakes with four other men: a prince, the Minister for Defence, the Prime Minister, and the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces. Earlier that day, the latter two had repeated the mantra ‘Sweden thanks you’ and ‘Sweden is proud of you’ during their speeches in front of the medallists (Löfven 2016; Bydén 2016). In the spatial

representation of the medal ceremony, neither the war, nor the specific mission in which each soldier was injured, appeared to matter for the meaning-making process enacted. What mattered, instead, were the veterans' shared sacrifices, uniforms, and constituent: the Swedish state and its military apparatus. Together with the Veteran Memorial and the waving Swedish flags, the awarded veterans and the five uniformed men shaking their hands seemingly intertwined and transfigured into a grand representation of the military power of the Swedish state. From where I stood, the representation of a proud 'peace-keeping state' appeared stable and consistent as the past 50 years of Swedish military missions were celebrated next to the recently inaugurated Veteran Memorial, which made promises of further missions and medals ahead (see also Öberg 2016).

Clearly, the representation of Sweden as a legitimate peacekeeping state is not produced at the annual Veteran Ceremony alone. This construction forms part of a long tradition within which Sweden's role in the international arena has been explained to the public through stories of humanitarianism, international solidarity, and, more recently, women's enjoyment of human rights (Agius 2011, 375; Bergman 2004; Kronsell 2012). Nevertheless, similar to the techniques of recognition discussed above, this representation of 'Sweden' risks contributing to silence or make inconceivable alternative and/or critical voices narrating military deployments undertaken by the SAF. Thereto, even when alternative war stories can be imagined, the programme of recognition risks rendering such voices irrelevant or even inappropriate. The scripting of the veteran, the military, and the state through techniques of recognition and remembrance is, as also shown by others (Basham 2016a; Danilova 2015; King 2010; Refslund Sørensen 2017), often a highly depoliticized process, admittedly complex to critique without dishonouring the sacrifices of individual soldiers. In mid-2016, the Veteran Programme and its buzzword recognition faced no visible political opposition. On the contrary, the recognition of veterans has been described as *the* governmental technology circumvented with the least controversy (Tolgfors 2016). Echoing this consensus in his Veteran Day speech, Prime Minister Löfven (2016) stressed that the 'support for veterans is not a matter about right or left, but a matter of decency, respect and our responsibility as a nation'. Urban Ahlin (2016), the speaker of the Swedish Parliament, went even further in de-politicizing the recognized veteran. In his speech at the Veteran Day, Ahlin (2016) spoke about international military missions as going through two phases: the first phase was characterized by support and a collective feeling that 'we have to do something', whereas the second phase was characterized by criticism. He said,

When the decision is made, we often turn to a discussion about problems: what are we doing there? Are we really benefitting the situation?, and so on. I have to say that I wish that a person who arrives back from service abroad will feel that we are grateful back home [...] that the work that you have conducted, all the risks that you have taken and the responsibility that you have shouldered – are our wishes. Not only the wishes of the parliament, but the whole of society.

For a politician to express gratitude for the work done by public officials is neither uncommon nor unexpected. However, when encouraging the recognition of veterans, Ahlin seemingly also discourages public debate about the actions and contributions of Swedish troops on deployments. By doing so, the Speaker effectively de-contextualizes war deployments by the SAF and shifts focus from the conduct and consequences of international military missions to the sacrifices made by Swedish soldiers (see also

Danilova 2015; King 2010). Following Meyer, such rhetoric can be understood as part of a post-9/11 discourse on neoliberal military interventions where ‘peace’ often is regarded as ‘something that has to be imposed’ (2008, 565) and where doing something thus appears to be more important than doing right by something. Within this governmental regime, intervening states are constructed as responsible and caring and – by the logic of good intentions – separated from the consequences of the violence likely conducted by their soldiers (Meyer 2008; Piotukh 2015). The apparent depoliticization of veteran recognition in the Swedish context could thus, I suggest, be understood as contributing to relieve military and political elites from having to ‘take seriously their own contribution to the violence they claim to fight’ (Meyer 2008, 555). Consequently, narratives about the actual conduct and consequences of Swedish military deployments enable – by their absence from the programme of recognition – the production of the Swedish military institution and veteran as responsible, caring, and valuable ‘forces for good’, inside but also *outside* of Swedish territorial borders (see also Bergman 2004; Duncanson 2009). As a result, the construction of Sweden as a legitimate peacekeeping state is seemingly sustained and further deployments, arguably, enabled.

Concluding reflections

When the Swedish Parliament passed a Comprehensive Veteran Policy in 2010, political and military elites anticipated the invention of a ‘proud, respected and valued’ veteran identity to enhance recruitment and retention of military personnel and diminish criticism directed towards the military institution and its missions. Rather than testing the outcome of these desires, this article has demonstrated how governmental techniques of recognition script veterans as responsible and altruistic individuals who – through their autonomous decisions to take risks on war deployments – also have grown as individuals and professionals and therefore transfigured into valuable and employable resources for Swedish society. Accordingly, the programme of recognition represents military deployments, and the sacrifices they entail, as self-fulfilling for Swedish soldiers, a way to enterprise and invest in the self. This seemingly conflicting construction of an altruistic, yet self-enterprising, veteran has enabled not only the invention of a competitive, responsible, and valued veteran identity, but also the reinvention of a competitive, responsible, and valued military institution and, ultimately, the reinvention of a responsible and valued Swedish peacekeeping state. Following recent scholarship demonstrating the importance of controlling the meaning ascribed to the bodies of veterans for the legitimacy and sustention of war deployments, this article has suggested that ‘the recognized veteran’ forms part of, and reproduces, a neoliberal regime of government through which military interventions (and thus the Swedish, postnational AVF) are made possible and desirable under a banner of responsibility. This political invention, therefore, risks silencing constructive political debates around the very conduct, conditions, and consequences of international military deployments – for Swedish veterans as well as for societies in which military interventions are conducted.

Whilst others have described the mobilization of past wars, war victories, and/or gendered hero and rescue narratives as important for the production, recognition, and remembrance of

veterans (Basham 2016a; Tidy 2015; Refslund Sørensen 2017; Åse and Wendt 2018), this paper has shed light on a context in which wars and military missions seemingly play a marginal and/or silent role in the official promotion of 'the veteran'. In the Swedish context, this subject position is instead, above all, produced and rendered desirable by its constitution as a neoliberal, enterprising, and responsible individual. This suggestion should certainly not be read as a rejection of other rationalities at play. As illustrated above, the notion of a masculine protector of both the feminized nation and the distant Other clearly figure in representations of the recognized Swedish veteran. Yet this paper shows how attending to the workings of neoliberal rationalities and techniques of the market also provides a useful and perhaps even necessary tool in the process of critically interrogating political constructions of veteran subjects. Exploring a case where such logics seems particularly salient might also contribute important insights to research in other military settings.

Lastly, a better understanding of how the Swedish veteran has been invented and constituted is critical not only given its arguably problematic role in enabling deployments by the postnational, Swedish AVF, but also because of the possible roles this subject position might be called on to play in future discursive formations of a military machinery still transforming. It is important to recognize that the Veteran Programme analysed here is a product of its time and that we are now beginning to distinguish a territorial (re)turn in Nordic-Baltic defence policies. Reflecting this process, the Swedish Parliament decided in 2015 to begin rebuilding the territorial defence heavily downscaled in the early 2000s (Government Bill 2015). In addition, in order to fill the ranks of the new territorial force, the SAF has begun the process of reinstating a partial conscription (Government Decision 2017). This suggested reversion of the defence-political pendulum will certainly present new challenges to the official production and recognition of veterans. For instance, if future Swedish veterans are conscripted soldiers rarely deployed on international missions, how will their inevitable sacrifices be scripted? Further, if sacrifices in the form of combat casualties and the absence of loved ones are – as I have suggested – constitutive of a valued and desirable veteran identity, will a lack of international war deployments disrupt the programme of recognition? These questions are beyond the scope of this article but will most likely be central for political and military elites who view the recognition of veterans as key to the overall legitimacy and role of the SAF in, and beyond, Swedish society. Further research is needed in order to better understand the implications of these ambiguous and contradictory transformations on the social and political (re)invention of Swedish veterans and, not least, the important role of veteran subjects in the construction and (self) governing of the marketized military machinery.

Notes

1. According to a survey by Demoskop from 13 February 2015 ordered by the Swedish Armed Forces.
2. Here explained in contrast to images of 'the weak' and 'the (mentally) ill' veteran as allegedly portrayed by mainstream media (see also Thisner and Garpenhag 2016, 82–85, 114).
3. Herein defined broadly as government ministers and politicians generally outspoken in the Swedish defence debate, high-ranking military personnel and veteran lobby organizations.

4. To be clear, Swedish veterans – independent of the definition employed – have long existed, told their stories and organized in social and political units. *The Peace Berets* [Fredsbaskrarna], established in 1982, is one example of an association that has arranged activities and support structures for soldiers having served in United Nations missions. However, even the Peace Berets, now officially referred to as ‘the Swedish Veteran Association’, did not embrace the term ‘veteran’ until 2013, alongside recent policy shifts. The Peace Berets also describes how the Veteran Policy has marked a ‘new era’ for the association, which has grown drastically in recent years (Lunqe 2014).
5. Although this paper particularly probes the construction of *military* veterans – defined loosely in the Comprehensive Veteran Policy as ‘personnel serving in international military missions’ (Government Bill 2010, 135) – there has never been consensus among political and military elites around who ‘the Swedish veteran’ is. Since the launch of the Veteran programme, the term has been ascribed different meanings by different actors. Whilst the SAF refers to all their personnel as veterans – soldiers serving both domestically and internationally (Försvarsmakten 2011) – a recent Government Bill vaguely defined veterans as all Swedish personnel serving in ‘international missions’ abroad (Government Bill 2015), thus opening the possibility for the veteran definition to include civil servants within other authorities than the SAF, whilst excluding military personnel serving domestically.
6. Important literature has been published on the experiences of Swedish soldiers and veterans, both scholarly work and memoirs (cf. Carlen and Falk 2012). However, previous literature has not analysed what role ‘the veteran’ (whether as a subject or a political invention) is playing in discourses ascribing meaning to the transforming SAF.
7. However, it should be recognized that the Swedish case also shares many similarities with its Nordic-Baltic neighbours, deserving of further scholarly attention. In September 2016, the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEF) arranged a Veteran Conference where one of the main themes was recognition. The conference hosted public officials and lobby organizations from Sweden, Finland, Norway, Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. All of these countries were in the process of instituting techniques to further recognize and improve the position of ‘the veteran’ in society.
8. See also Dyvik (2016) and Refslund Sørensen (2017) for discussions about the unwillingness among Norwegian and Danish politicians to associate recent military interventions with the term ‘war’.
9. Between 1956 and 2010, approximately 100,000 Swedish soldiers were deployed on military missions abroad; 82 of them were terminally injured (17 in combat, five of whom were killed in Afghanistan; Thisner and Garpenhag 2016).
10. Others have importantly demonstrated the gendered (classed, sexualized, and raced) techniques through which military sacrifices and the bodies of (wounded and/or mentally ill) veterans are ascribed meaning, ‘feminized’ and delegitimized (Pin-Fat and Stern 2005; Withworth 2008; Basham 2016a, 2016b; Enloe 2000; Åse and Wendt 2018).
11. See Strand and Berndtsson (2015) for a critique of the ‘voluntary’ branding of military enlistments.
12. All speeches and policy documents cited in this paper were translated by the author. The speeches were either accessed online (see References) or audio recorded and transcribed by the author.
13. See Pin-Fat and Stern (2005) for an important discussion about how the military sacrifice, i.e. the notion of giving one’s life for the survival of the sovereign state, in fact is an ‘impossible’ myth. Following Agamben, these authors view soldiers as ‘*Homo sacer*’ and thus bodies exiled from society to a ‘zone of indistinction’ where political lives *already* are lost. If understood this way, the stakes involved when self-sacrifice is rendered self-fulfilling in the Swedish veteran programme are arguably particularly high as it hides the very impossibility for veterans of becoming a valued part of (Swedish) society which they, in fact, are constituting by their *exclusion*.

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