

REVIEW ESSAY

War as Work: Labor and Soldiering in History

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Hussein Anwar Fancy, *The Mercenary Mediterranean: Sovereignty, Religion, and Violence in the Medieval Crown of Aragon* (Chicago, IL, 2016)

Simeon Man, *Soldiering Through Empire: Race and the Making of the Decolonizing Pacific* (Oakland, CA, 2018)

Jennifer Mittelstadt, *The Rise of the Military Welfare State* (Cambridge, MA, 2015)

Michelle R. Moyd, *Violent Intermediaries: African Soldiers, Conquest, and Everyday Colonialism in German East Africa* (Athens, OH, 2014)

Radhika Singha, *The Coolie's Great War: Indian Labour in a Global Conflict, 1914–1921* (Oxford, 2020)

Abstract

In the decade since *International Labor and Working-Class History* (ILWCH) published its special issue on “Labor and the Military,” treating military service as a problem of labor has grown from a provocation into a major debate. By surveying five recent books on soldiering as a form of labor, this essay poses a set of questions about warfare and work. Is military service best understood as a form of labor, and what might that perspective reveal, or occlude? How do militaries draw the line between those who work and those who fight? Where does that line become blurry? How do soldiers themselves understand the peculiar forms of “work” that war demands? War and work are not separate domains of experience, as these books show. But in some respects, they still demand different tools of analysis.

What distinguishes the soldier who patrols a trench from the laborer who digs it? Both tasks are dirty and dangerous, and both people probably had to be conscripted (or at least convinced) to do them. In most quarters of world history, both would be men, though they may not be of the same class, race, or caste. When the war ends, both will return to their peacetime occupations, though not necessarily to the same status within them. Only one is likely to be welcomed as a hero. For the rest of their lives, their wartime experiences will shape their standing and their self-regard—and it makes a difference that one “served” while the other “worked.” What is gained and lost by seeing both the infantryman and the trench-digger as workers?

This review article surveys five recent books about soldiering as a form of labor. They range widely across time and place, and it is debatable whether they are all describing the same phenomenon. “Soldiering” embraces many different activities, not all of them violent. It means one thing in a peacetime society, and quite another in one embroiled in war. “Labor,” of course, is equally tricky. These books share neither a focus nor a method, but all challenge us to think about soldiering through the lens of work. In the ten years that have passed since *International Labor and Working-Class History’s* special issue on “Labor and the Military,” the study of war and work has branched into new historical settings.¹ These books trace a few of its new paths.

Soldiering is a curious kind of labor, but it is not irreconcilable with the work civilians do.² Whether military service is a brief obligation or a lifelong career, it can resemble labor both in its form (toil) and its structures of compensation. In some circumstances, soldiers approach military service as a job—one that confers unusual benefits to match its unusual risks. It can provide access to entitlements that aren’t available to civilians, or it can be the price of admission into full adulthood—its “wage” can be the right to marry, or help in starting a family. In colonial situations, men enlist because military service is a path to greater rights, though it seldom confers full citizenship. The fact that military service is “work” is obvious to many of those who do it. Only the ideologue sees soldiering as pure duty, unaffected by promises of pay or privilege—or indeed, by the punishments that await those who refuse to join up. Like any form of labor, soldiering has different forms, types, and degrees of coercion. Convincing people to do it can involve persuasion, enticement, or force, depending on how dangerous or unpleasant it is in a given moment. Like other forms of labor, soldiering can be structured through contracts, bondage, or the manipulation of emotions. Sometimes it can be hard to tell workers and soldiers apart, as janissaries, mercenaries, and others who populate these books attest. The fact that soldiering is a form of labor does not mean it is like all other forms of labor, and there are some good reasons to carve out military service as a separate realm of experience; patriotism and adventure are native categories of the barracks, but not the field, the shop floor, or the call center. On the battlefield, soldiering is fundamentally violent, even if not every soldier wields a weapon. This alone makes it distinct from all but a few civilian vocations. Killing is a specialized skill. Only ideology makes the work of violence into something other than work—namely “duty” or “patriotism.”

Historians of labor and the military are not natural allies. But perhaps they should be. Fighting and laboring are both embodied actions, and those who describe them have to strike a balance between collectivities, like armies and classes, and the individuals who make decisions within them, such as officers and managers. Modern soldiering and industrial labor arguably grew up together. In the modern era, the soldier and the worker both operated in highly structured systems that constrained how they moved, spoke, and used time. Both had top-down structures of authority, and managerial “sciences” developed for the factory and the barracks alike, sometimes borrowing from one another. Both created new, horrifying ways to mutilate the human body, whether through industrial accidents or the deliberate maiming of mechanized warfare. Soldiers themselves see the affinity between work and war, and the world of civilian labor is often the one that disappoints. Soldiers who finish their military service often find that the jobs awaiting them at home have all the strictures of military life, but none of its honor or camaraderie.

Labor unions have long recognized the affinity between workers and soldiers, and some have hoped that making military service more like a job would improve the lot of both groups. In 1914, George Bernard Shaw argued that “the Militarist soldier” was “only a quaint survival of the King’s footman.” If each soldier was a “trained combatant with full civil rights, receiving the Trade Union rate of wages proper to a skilled worker at a dangerous trade,” war might become a safer and more ennobling thing. Labor protections, Shaw argued, would force states to think more carefully about the costs of war, and the labor movement would benefit from having a vast, uniformed membership.³ But then as now, many militaries insist that unionization is incompatible with the prerogatives of warmaking; soldiering is a duty, even when it is voluntary, and it demands a different structure of compensation and incentive than other forms of “work.”

Or does it? In *The Rise of the Military Welfare State*, Jennifer Mittelstadt tracks the rise and fall of the benefits the United States Army offered to enlisted men and women in the late twentieth century. Following the end of the draft in 1973, the army faced a crisis. Its prestige had fallen during the war in Vietnam, and it struggled to recruit soldiers into a career force. It solved this problem by offering generous incentives to enlist (and stay) in the military, including housing, education entitlements, and child care for soldiers’ dependents. This expansion happened at the same time that welfare programs for civilians were being cut. Public assistance was recast as a reward for “super citizens”—soldiers—rather than a resource for the public at large. The military leadership did not uniformly favor this move toward welfarism; some believed that it encouraged people to enlist for the wrong reasons, or that it infantilized them, or brought their families (particularly their wives) into the equation in a way that undermined the army’s effectiveness. Under pressure from many sides, including free market economists, the army would later scale back some of these entitlements, and privatize others. Its leaders embraced “responsibility” and “self-reliance” as army values, not unlike the values being used to justify dismantling the civilian welfare state. Civilians have good reason to pay attention to the details of how soldiers are compensated, which Mittelstadt describes deftly—she makes haggling over pay and pensions as gripping as the war stories other military historians might tell about the same people. These details are important because the way a government treats its army can blur into how it treats civilians (and the other way around). Increasingly, soldiers and civilians have a “shared fate” (228), including when it comes to the conditions of their drudgery.

Soldiers are not always fighting, and some of their time is devoted to nonmartial forms of work. They can be useful for “just in time” labor, especially in sectors like agriculture or mining that demand large numbers of temporary, able-bodied workers at short notice, as Danny Hoffman describes in West Africa’s entropic civil wars of the late twentieth century.⁴ The availability of soldiers for manual labor is not just a modern phenomenon; going back and forth between the farm and the battlefield has been a part of peasant life in many historical settings, and armies invariably depend on domestic labor and agriculture, which military historians sometimes ignore. Given the overlap of military recruitment with forced labor in colonial regimes, this point is especially important for African history.

Michelle Moyd’s *Violent Intermediaries: African Soldiers, Conquest, and Everyday Colonialism in German East Africa*, which has quickly become a landmark in the

small field of African military history, describes the role of *askari* (African soldiers) in making German imperialism “from the bottom up” (22). Why were they willing to do the dirty work of colonial conquest, and what did they get in return? Describing the everyday lives of the African soldiers who made the German colonial state (and were reviled by other Africans for it), Moyd argues that African soldiers in the employ of Germany helped make the colonial state in exchange for standing; military service brought resources and a particular kind of respectability that allowed them to become local “big men”—a status otherwise unavailable to most of them. Their work took many forms, not just the violence of armed conquest but also tax collection and other administrative duties. Askaris and their German commanders both benefitted from this arrangement, which fostered a robust, if not unconditional, loyalty on the part of the soldiers in question. But as Moyd’s book elegantly shows, soldiers have ambitions of their own. When they dovetail with their commanders’ plans, what results is often an effective fighting force—which the German colonial army was, and chillingly so. Why men in Tanganyika would turn against their own and join a violent colonial occupation doesn’t make sense if we see *duty* as what always animates military service. It is easier to understand if we view them as workers, who exchanged their labor, martial and otherwise, for certain rewards that their foreign commanders could offer them. What motivates someone to enlist might not be conviction, patriotism, or the obligations of citizenship. Soldiers can also be enticed by social capital, protection, or cash.

Many problems of warfare are problems of labor, although military strategists seldom speak of them as such. How to raise an army is the first and hardest of them. How does a state compel people to do the dangerous and uncomfortable work that war entails? How do militaries compensate soldiers, and how do they square that compensation with the idea that military service is a duty—one that some insist is its own reward? Raising an army usually entails a combination of threats (“we’ll kill you if you don’t fight”), sentiment (“it’s your duty to protect your daughters and sisters”), and bargaining (“only those who fight today will enjoy the fruits of victory tomorrow”). Soldiers can also be paid, which those who insist on putting soldiering in a separate category from work are often sheepish to admit. An English rhyme from the nineteenth century is more pragmatic about war’s opportunities: “The fortunes of war, I’ll tell you plain, are a wooden leg or a golden chain.” Of course, one does not always *choose* to pursue war’s fortunes, and military service can be more like forced servitude than remunerated work, whether in wage or status. Unlike some other forms of “unfree” labor, however, conscripts can use their service as leverage to make demands once their term of duty is over, provided they survive it. Only some successfully parlay their sacrifices into rights or respect when they return to the civilian fold, but many try.

Sometimes honor is not enough to compel people to fight—and sometimes threats aren’t either. What does an army do if there simply aren’t enough combatants available? Or if warfare is so dangerous that the risk of shirking is a risk that many soldiers decide is worth taking? In these circumstances, an army might decide to pay them handsomely. The mercenary is a good figure to think through war’s connection to labor. Hussein Fancy’s *The Mercenary Mediterranean: Sovereignty, Religion, and Violence in the Medieval Crown of Aragon* gives a particularly striking illustration

of the antinomies of soldiers of fortune. Fancy's object is the Muslim cavalymen known as *jenets*, whom the Crown of Aragon recruited by the thousands in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries—at the same time that the Christian kingdom was fighting and enslaving Muslims wherever it could. Fancy rejects the explanation that the *jenets*' strange allegiance can be explained by money. Payment is not the only language that mercenaries speak, and the “secular” logic of our own era prevents us from seeing that the *jenets* saw their martial labor in the employ of a Christian king as one front in their own “holy war”—a dynamic that we can't see if we accept that mercenaries work only for pay. Fancy's argument puts an important asterisk on the notion that war is work: to say that soldiering is a form of labor does not imply that it is necessarily *waged*, nor that it is compensated by tangible things. People work for ideological, spiritual, and personal reasons, too.

Each military has its set of rules about who does “labor,” and who does not. They often distinguish between combat troops and everyone else—especially those who dig, build, bury, or carry. Some avoid the language of “work” altogether, favoring other terms to describe what the unarmed among them do. Those in combat roles command the most respect, even though in the heat of battle the line between “soldier” and “laborer” might melt away. Not all roles in a military are equally prestigious, and not all forms of work garner the same recognition. The rewards of military service usually accrue to those who have an opportunity to distinguish themselves in battle, and it's easier to win a medal if you're armed with a gun than a shovel.

This is never more evident than in Radhika Singha's *The Coolie's Great War: Indian Labour in a Global Conflict, 1914–1921*, which shows what treating workers as soldiers (and vice versa) can reveal about both categories. Focusing on the workers who occupied the lowest rung of the pecking order, Singha's vivid social history of the Indian “coolies” who labored in the British armed forces in World War I speaks to many historical debates. They include the workings of British imperialism, the “global” nature of the war, and the category of unskilled migrant labor itself. Viewed from the perspective of the coolie, India takes on a much more important role in World War I—one that we can't see if we privilege the figure of the combatant. Singha shows that labor policy changed as a result of the war; the need for efficiency in wartime portage and sanitation shaped peacetime labor regulations, for example, and the rules of difference that structured labor in military society (race, caste, communal identity, etc.) endured, sometimes in altered form, after the men came home. Singha is attentive to subtleties of rank and hierarchy, and to why categorical questions of what constituted “labor” vs. “soldiering” mattered, both to the Indian men who served and to their governments.

In the twentieth century, the difference between those who “worked” during wartime and those who “fought” was very often a racial difference. This is especially true in empires—a category which nearly all the subjects of these books fall under. Those who do the dirtiest, most dangerous, or most dishonorable labor are often subalterns—colonial subjects, the poor, the outcast, or the low caste. This labor ranges from the mundane (cooking, carrying equipment), to the gruesome (gravedigging, stretcher-bearing).

Simeon Man's *Soldiering Through Empire: Race and the Making of the Decolonizing Pacific* describes how Asian and Asian American people became integral—though not necessarily “integrated” – in US militarism in the Pacific in the twentieth century. Man

explicitly considers how working and soldiering overlap; “Seeing soldiering as labor,” he writes, “reveals the class basis of war and the fact those who are most likely to fight are most likely to be poor or from the working class” (10–11). This is certainly true, but something is also lost in putting those who “work” and those who “fight” in the same frame. Man’s account of the partial integration of Asians and Asian Americans blurs many different types of people into a “particular labor force,” which he argues was caught between a decolonizing Asia and an expanding US empire. Among them we find Filipino nurses, Korean conscripts, Chinese American GIs, and Japanese American veterans turned peace activists. These groups have different statuses on the basis of their ranks and roles, which gets lost if we see them all as members of a workforce. There are certain things we can’t understand about militarism without following the grain of militaries’ own logics and hierarchies. Labor works differently in a complex system like an army, for example, where “efficiency” might not be a value. And the intricacies of military rank have no equivalent in the world of civilian work. Not all who toil on a base or a battlefield see what they are doing as “labor,” and to insist that they do (or should) risks imposing a civilian logic on military institutions that simply don’t work that way.

We can see the full picture of what soldiers do only when we *disenchant* the form of labor they perform—when we strip away the veils of duty, service, and higher purpose that often adorn it. When we view militaries through the lens of labor, as these authors do in various ways (sometimes without announcing it), we can better understand why soldiers enlist, why they fight, and how they understand what they are owed. Moreover, militaries employ vast numbers of people who are *not* soldiers—contractors, consultants, civilian administrators—which begs the question of where a form of labor stops being “duty” and starts being “work.” When we include the kinds of labor that women perform next to the base, or behind the line, war’s culture of work looks different yet again. The “citizen soldier” is only one model of military service, and even within it there is more coercion, bargaining, and managerialism—in short, more labor history—than we might imagine. That said, not all tasks performed under the sign of war are the same, and to say that there is no wall between work and soldiering can prevent us from seeing how the military edifice stands up. We ignore militarism’s internal structures at our own peril. But it is also perilous to partition workers from soldiers completely. As these books show, historians of war and those who study work stand to gain from one another.

Notes

1. Joshua B. Freeman and Geoffrey Field, eds., special issue, “Labor and the Military,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* no. 80 (2011).
2. The notion that there are discrete military and civilian worlds is not universal. In places where there is not a clear line between them, the difference between work and soldiering is even blurrier.
3. J.P. Wearing, ed., *Bernard Shaw On War* (London, 2009), 17.
4. Danny Hoffman, “Violence, Just In Time: War and Work in Contemporary West Africa,” *Cultural Anthropology* 26, no. 1 (2011): 34–57.