

WORLD TRIBUNAL
ON IRAQ

Making the Case Against War

edited by Müge Gürsoy Sökmen

introductions by Arundhati Roy and Richard Falk

2008



An imprint of Interlink Publishing Group, Inc.
www.interlinkbooks.com

Militarism and the Culture of Violence

Ay e Gül Altınay

Exactly 100 years ago, in 1905, Leo Tolstoy published his essay "Patriotism and Government," where he said the following: "Continental powers without a murmur submitted to the introduction of a universal military service, that is, to the slavery, which for the degree of degradation and loss of will cannot be compared with any of the ancient conditions of slavery."¹

Introduced by the French Revolution and perfected by Prussia, universal military service had turned the formation of "citizen armies" into a foundational process in the emerging nation-states of Europe. A state's soldiers would no longer be limited to its paid mercenaries. With the introduction of military service as a foundation of citizenship, the states would have access to the minds and bodies of at least half of their citizen body. This enabled a cheap and effective form of military mobilization, which soon created the catastrophes of WWI and WWII.

I don't know if this was your reaction a minute ago when I read Tolstoy's quote, but when I first read the statement by Tolstoy, calling military service the worst form of slavery, I was quite surprised. These views are quite radical even *today*; they must have been like science fiction in 1905. How could he have been so clear, so unambiguous, so sharp in his critique? Soon I realized that the problem was not with Tolstoy. It was with my assumptions about history and historical change. Deep down, I was assuming that we, as the critical thinkers of late twentieth and early twenty-first century, were more radical in our views about military service and militarism than our predecessors from the previous century. The more I read about militarism, the more problematic this assumption has become.

The twentieth century has been a century of war and destruction. It has also been a century of militarized nationalisms defining the order of our lives. Nationalism and militarism have strongly reinforced each other and have together made it very difficult to remember and appreciate Tolstoy's remarks on military service. After all, serving in the military, whether as part of a compulsory system or as a "volunteer," is the most valued citizenship practice. Who can talk against those "men and women who bravely put their lives at risk for all of us"? We can only be grateful.

Yet, as critic Elaine Scarry reminds us, the most fundamental activity in war is killing.² In the words of Tim Goodrich, who spoke yesterday, "a soldier's foremost job is to kill." Therefore, those men and women to whom we are asked to be grateful are not dying for us, they are *killing* for us. In our name; with our direct or indirect support...

According to historian Alfred Vagts, "if the members of a whole nation are to be made soldiers, they must be filled with a military spirit in time of peace."³ It seems as though nation-states initially had two main tools to create citizens with a military spirit: universal compulsory military service and universal compulsory education. These were the two institutions through which the state had direct contact with its citizens and, in early years of nation-state formation (and particularly during times of war), there was a close link in the way these two institutions were perceived. The military was seen as a school, in Eugen Weber's terms "the school of the fatherland,"⁴ and the schools were given a nationalizing and militarizing role. During and after World War I, there were fierce debates about militarism and education in the United States and Britain (there have been numerous reports, articles, and books published on this issue). Educator and philosopher John Dewey, for instance, was vocal in his critique of military training in schools:

Military Training in schools cannot be defended on the ground of physical training.... Its real purpose is to create a state of mind which is favorable to militarism and to war.... Now that war has been outlawed by agreement among the nations, it ought to be recognized that it is criminal to produce in the young, emotional habits that are favorable to war.⁵

In Britain, John Langdon-Davies wrote a book titled *Militarism in Education: A Contribution to Educational Reconstruction*, and argued that schools were being configured as the thresholds of conscription. He urged the public to "beware of the insidious advance of industrial and military conscription" and suggested that they "must cease to educate for war, and to inculcate the doctrine of force."⁶

So let us ask ourselves: A century into these debates, has this marriage of nationalism and militarism through such practices as military service and national education ceased to exist in the national and global order of things? If not, have we as scholars and activists paid enough attention to

them? Or have the sciences and the social sciences, as well as our oppositional political struggles, been complicit in the *normalization* and *invisibilization* of the everyday forms of militarism?

If you do a search on books that have “militarism” in their titles, you would be surprised (or perhaps not) to find that quite a few of your major resources will be books from the first part of this century. Despite the critical thinking, at least in academia, on nationalism since the 1980s, there are still very few works that discuss militarism, apart from the militarism of Japan and Germany during World War II.⁷ For some reason, militarism as a concept has been absent from our critical vocabulary. Does this mean that it has been absent from our lives? Or have we, as Issa Shivji’s paper suggested on the first day, been *embedded* in military structures and militarized language as intellectuals as well?

In the past years, as I was studying militarism in Turkey, one of the things I looked at in the context of the militarization of education was a high-school course on national security.⁸ Every single Turkish person you have met who is a high-school graduate has taken a one-year course focusing on military issues, as part of a curriculum and textbook developed by the military. The teachers of this course are military officers. As I was doing ethnographic research on this course, my interest was met with surprise by many of the people I interviewed. Almost everyone suggested that this course was “not important at all.” It was an “easy” course which did not “mean anything to the students.” Many remembered that the students often made *fun* of this course and its teacher. The suggestion that the course might have had an impact on us in any way was “absurd.” “No one takes the course seriously, why are you?” was the response I often received. I ultimately concluded that these responses themselves were the utmost expression of the widespread nature of militarization in Turkey. The fact that all high-school students were educated in military affairs by a military officer was something to simply make fun of. The presence of the military in civilian schools was so normalized that there was nothing to take seriously.

We are here today discussing war. A horrific human tragedy has taken place—is taking place—in Iraq. Even as someone who has been following this war pretty closely, I was shocked and utterly disgusted at the testimonies provided at this tribunal. The crimes committed against the Iraqi people are crimes against all of us. We are all asking ourselves a simple yet very difficult question: “How has this been possible?”

I would like to suggest that in seeking this answer, we remember Tolstoy and many others who have taken similar positions, and pay more attention to *peacetime* war preparations and *peacetime* militarization.

I understand militarism to be an ideology that glorifies practices and norms associated with militaries.⁹ Fundamental here is the *normalization* of the use of violence. Military thinking and practice rests on the use of violence and makes everything else unimaginable. It is *unrealistic*, we are often told, to imagine nonviolent solutions to serious international conflicts. Nonviolence *may* be the ideal, but we all have to be realists and “bite the bullet,” so to speak. Very successful acts of nonviolent opposition to colonialism and racism, such as the Gandhian resistance, which resulted in the independence of India, or the African-American struggle for civil rights, which resulted in the desegregation of the United States, are presented as exceptions to the rule that violence is necessary to initiate social and political change.

It is this argument about the “inevitability of violence” that militarizes our notion of resistance, our notion of opposition, our politics in general, often times even in the antiwar movement.

It is very significant in this sense that one member of the Jury of Conscience in this tribunal is a conscientious objector. Mehmet Tarhan is not against the Turkish military; he is against all militaries. Most importantly, he is against the very institution of military service, which even in the absence of war—perhaps more effectively then—militarizes our minds, our bodies, our relationships with one another, and our own self-understanding.

As we hold this World Tribunal at the turn of the twenty-first century, what do we have to say about our embeddedness in the prevailing discourses of militarism, in the subtle processes of militarization, and in the normalization of violence in both hegemonic and oppositional politics? What would Mehmet Tarhan say if he were here with us today instead of being detained in a military prison for “persistent insubordination”? What does his insubordination tell us about *our* subordination? I am personally saddened by our lack of attention to the militarization of Iraqi resistance and the crimes committed by armed resisters against civilian Iraqis. Are we once again suggesting that “there is no other way”? And whose language does this mimic?

This session is about the global security environment and future

