The politicization of militarization

Examining military contributions to British policing

Bethany McCarthy, Adam Stokes, and Jonathan Jackson

Abstract

The role of the military is often clear: identify, engage, and destroy the enemy. This is true of all conflicts throughout human history, with armies varying in complexity and scale. This function is distinct from that of policing, which aims to produce a structure to manage communities and provide public safety. The gap between these two paradigms has been rapidly reducing since 9/11, with the global threat of terrorism becoming a tool to justify increasing spending on securitization. This article speculates and debates this transition, demonstrating the key areas of discussion of targeted recruitment of military personnel or the challenge that such an approach has on the ideals of British policing. The piece hopes to examine current and historic discourse to examine whether this is a sleepwalk to authoritarian approaches or directed recruitment is simply an attempt to capture skills and talent to improve policing standards.

Keywords: military, policing, security, force, war, peace

Back in March 2023, a "pioneering" partnership scheme was launched between Nottinghamshire Police and the University of Derby. The project provides greater opportunities for the resettlement of service personnel, via the creation of a direct entry route for those seeking a new career within policing (Nottinghamshire Police, 2023a). The co-created initiative is the Military Service Leavers Pathway into Policing (MSLPP), which operates within the larger academic redesigning of the entry routes. Kate Meynell, the Chief Constable of Nottinghamshire Police, was reported as feeling huge pride at the launch of the enterprise, arguing that policing recruitment seeks to identify those ready to commit to serving communities in line with values and how personnel within the military have these transferrable attributes, thus initiating this pathway (Nottinghamshire Police, 2023a).

Jonathan Jackson, Leeds Trinity University.
Email: Jo.Jackson@leedstrinity.ac.uk

Bethany McCarthy, Leeds Trinity University.
Email: Be.McCarthy@leedstrinity.ac.uk

Adam Stokes, Leeds Trinity University.
Email: a.stokes@leedstrinity.ac.uk

The creation of the MSLPP has sparked debate amongst many academics, political commentaries, and the public on whether such structures are moving British policing closer toward an increasingly militarized model, challenging the governing principles of consent and authority through public legitimacy. The recruitment of former service personnel into "the job", is of course nothing new, with several spikes occurring throughout much of the 19th and 20th centuries (Lee & Punch, 2004). The MSLPP has received praise from across the 43 forces, with many now seeking to adopt a similar routeway. Military intervention as a response to the heightened threats from international groups has raised preverbal eyebrows amongst several thinktanks, suggesting evidence of a slow sleepwalk toward "standing armies" of police officers (Statewatch, 2024).

This article considers and examines some largely "gray" concepts regarding the transition from the military to policing, bringing together varied voices to the debate. The piece hopes to question the effectiveness of targeted recruitment of military personnel and its impact on British policing. Are such models simply sleepwalking toward more authoritarian approaches or is directed recruitment simply an attempt to capture the skills and talent of former armed forces personnel to improve policing standards?

Historical context

When the first London Metropolitan Police officers took to their duties in September 1829, the road toward a centrally controlled, uniformed, disciplined organization, focused on crime prevention had been long and not without its fair share of bumps (Emsley cited in Newburn, 2011: 73). Many orthodox historians point to the creation of the "new police" as something fundamentally unique, but this is to ignore the various structures of enforcement which had existed across Britain since the 11th century. Policing the people had originated long before 1829, with bodies such as the parish constables or the city watch created to maintain the peace (Newburn, 2007). The growth of trade and commerce across the Empire during the 17th century required the formation of the Thames River Police and Bow Street Runners, which introduced radical methods of investigation to tackle the high levels of urban crime. Pioneers such as the Fielding Brothers or Patrick Colquhoun had critically examined the causes of its rise across London, making stark links between criminality and poverty (Emsley, 1991). Work by Reynolds (1998) and Beattie (2001) suggests that contrary to various orthodox perspectives, many of these old systems were showing major reform by the 19th century, with watchmen being recruited from the ranks of young, fit men rather than the "old and decerped" (Beattie, 2001: 83). The end of the Napoleonic War had created an economic crisis, leading to a surplus of workers and an absence of sustained employment. This produced escalating public anxieties from victims unable to fund the high costs of private prosecutions. These concerns had been managed by the Home Secretary Sir Robert Peel, who threw himself into a series of judicial reforms throughout the mid-1820s, leading to greater levels of funding being made available for public prosecutions (Ward, 2014).

Sir Robert Peel was nothing if not a shrewd political operator, understanding that a "new" system of policing for London would have to be a project of community cooperation, evidencing a governance framework that would hold officers to account for their actions (Emsley, 1991). Peel was quick to distance his officers from the pre-existing military structure, choosing blue rather than red tunics as the uniform color of choice (Beatie, 2001). Eagerly aware of the high levels of public anxiety toward the function of this new agency, he prioritized the building of community trust and confidence, recognizing its historical legacies within the British psyche. Peel was dedicated to the ideal that through obtaining trust, public obedience to the law could be achieved without the need to revert to oppressive tactics (Storch, 1976). The relevance of this should not be underestimated and the early pioneers recognized that authority to govern citizens, would not be achieved by large and

expensive standing armies but from the British public's belief that law enforcement was unbiased and operated in symbiotic conjunction. The choice not to routinely equip officers with firearms, preferring instead to issue wooden batons, evidenced this focus, distancing the "new" police from military comparisons and any accusations that they mirrored the tools of repression during the Napoleonic regime (Philips & Storch, 1999).

That is not to discount the adoption of some military structures, relying upon the implementation of harsh training regimes for recruits, forcing many to complain to their superiors that such approaches were having on detrimental impact on staff (Newburn, 2007). Thus, the Metropolitan Police may have tried to publicly distance itself from militarization but still relied heavily upon its culture and regime to govern behaviors. Much of this may be the result of its first co-commissioner Lt. Colonel Rowan, who modeled much of the hierarchal model from his military service. However, his tendencies may have been kept in check by his fellow commissioner, Richard Mayne, who understood that the horror of the Peterloo Massacre still hung over the public conscience (Ward, 2014). The actions of both regular soldiers and ill-disciplined yeomanry cavalry in 1819, led to the deaths of many citizens, leaving a mark of distrust toward the overlapping of responsibilities for managing public order.

History provides evidence that militarization within British police has often been met with hostility from the public. The model of legitimacy, sits at the center of policing by consent, relying not on force but on public reassurance to maintain fair and accountable control (Durston, 2012). Politicians and strategic leaders are often pressured into adopting "militarized" tactics to deal with sophisticated crime threats (Newburn, 2007). It remains to be seen whether such individuals can resist the demand for a more authoritarian style of governance.

The past cannot predict the future but can provide a guide to navigate the impacts that change may bring. An increased militarized transformation of the ideals and principles of British policing would be met with widespread hostility and community resistance, with case examples of the 19th century providing evidence of such resistance. The rise of directed recruitment of former armed forces personnel should not be halted. However, new officers entering with previous military experience must recognize that overt militarized views and ideologies would need to change if they were to fit the discretionary and accountable nature of British policing.

Contemporary background

Copious testimonies decades later continue to indicate how military involvement in policing has not ceased, owing to governmental need, or ensuing from conflicts instigated by militarized agendas (Harig, 2020). With global surges in the utilization of military resources within policing remarked to recurrently be employed in a bid to seize societal control for political means. Continually renowned for initiating devasting consequences on police reputation through altering community credence toward a "war on citizens", triggered by fear of domineering violence (Den Heyer, 2011). While the above narrative is evident in certain countries, it does not dominate all aspects of military involvement in policing.

An exploration of military involvement in policing within the United Kingdom, associates the use of military personnel and tactics to differ, acknowledging instead formations when pressures on policing capabilities arise, initiating soldiering by public consent (Murray & Taylor, 2019). Public perception as a result is largely supportive based on recognition that military deployment alongside policing can be utilized effectively to undertake domestic security roles (Olympics), provide reinforcement via specialist roles for (bomb disposal officers) or contribute to policing activities including Operation Temperer or COVID-19. Such public support is routinely established on the condition of transparency surrounding

training and professionalism (Gearson & Berry, 2021). Thus, removing any societal confusion that any military input alongside policing differs from overriding policing objectives and instead emphasizes how military involvement assists to counterbalance policing resources.

Acknowledgment of key organizational distinctions has long been discussed by authorities when considering any military participation in policing. Customarily directed at incompatibility based on differences in culture, and ideologies, with opinions predominantly engrossed in how military activities are enemy-centered, contradictory of policing attention concentrated on criminals (Gearson & Berry, 2021). These insights often exclude apparent role similarities including preservation of peacetime cohesion, assistance with humanitarian crises (Harig, 2020; Royal Navy, 2024; British Army, 2024b; Royal Air Force, 2024). Subsequently failing to recognize how personnel from both organizations possess transferrable skills including but not limited to resilience (due to their frequency in dealing with traumatic incidents) and decision-making (in high-pressure environments).

Further unease about the deviations in the roles of the two organizations is exposed when discussing the use of physical force. With policing recurrently managing a precarious rapport with the public, resulting from discontent surrounding the sanctioning of officers to employ such strength, regardless of governing guidelines and legislations (Section 117 of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act, 1984) which aim to prevent disproportionality or illegitimate use of force (Mullinix et al., 2021; College of policing, 2012). Whereas the military faces public scrutiny in general for any involvement where use of force is required for combat (wars or conflicts), with insinuations viewing tactics to be heavy-handed and intensifying stigma toward violence and aggression rather than resolution (Reifler et al., 2014). Consideration should be taken toward the fact that while environments differ, the military coherently in line with policing in the United Kingdom, ensures all personnel are held to account for the use of force (including unarmed duties and lethal force) and if judged to be unlawful are subject to domestic and international laws (Gov.uk, 2017). Thus, ensuring no embracement of any unjust policing or militarized force practices (Clausewitzian theory) (Salt & Smith, 2008), in line with the governmental enforcement of reasonable forcefulness, reinforcing policing by consent.

Politicization of militarization

The hierarchal structure of military organizations with a focus on discipline is due largely to the nature of combat situations, which demand that participants understand their role to ensure decisions are made quickly. Membership in a military unit is often much more than a job, with services providing housing, healthcare, and many other necessities of life as well as the mechanisms to support the well-being of individuals (British Army, 2024a). Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943) suggests that meeting the needs for services personal, whether they be physiological or physical, provides an incentive for staff to remain within the organization. The police service may seem an ideal replacement for those who had previously served in the armed forces, owing to both being uninformed, a familiar hierarchical structure and provision of a sense of belonging, and in some respects it is. While there are certainly similarities in its structure, as with the 19th century, the ideological focus remains different. Both are demanding roles that are much more than a job but officers in England and Wales can often lack the support provision that services personnel may be entitled to. Shift work and unpredictable hours make the mundane tasks of living more difficult. The transition of ex-service personnel to "civvy street" has always been problematic, with examples of the scars of war going untreated and the impacts of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder being amplified due to the stresses within policing (Green, 2004).

Difficulties in the transition to military service following the unimaginable violence of war can be harder due to the proportion of those who have faced similar ordeals. After the

mass mobilization of the conflicts of the mid-20th century and the introduction of national service, the embedding of a militarized culture into policing became inescapable. Soldiers who had fought all over the globe found themselves returning to a country which was experiencing economic and political uncertainty, with many seeing the police as stable income and job security (Reingle Gonzalez et al., 2019). More recent focused military action especially in the Middle East has not required the mass conscription of men and women, often creating a disconnect between those who have experienced trauma and the wider public. There is a danger that the police service stacked with ex-service personnel could seem like a repeat of the mid-20th century, thus reinforcing a militaristic culture. It must not be forgotten that policing by consent is built upon a foundation of public trust and confidence in professional practice as the source of authority. Still, there remains a risk that divisions may form between police officers and "civilians", due to the clash of ideological perspectives endangering the principles of policing by consent (Blaskovits et al., 2022).

As discussed previously, the first of Sir Robert Peel's Policing Principles (Home Office, 2012) was "to prevent crime and disorder, as an alternative to their repression by military force and severity of legal punishment", which suggests a continued emphasis on resistance to militarization and that it may not be the best source of potential recruits. Diversity of communities, ex-military personnel included, remains essential to maintaining "the historic tradition that the police are the public and that the public are the police" (Emsley, 2013: 14). Targeted recruitment with noble intentions can counterintuitively promote a backlash amongst members of the organization and a culture of positive discrimination. The recruiting of candidates specifically based on ethnic minorities may seem a positive step to increase representation and diversity but can be a barrier to true integration. There have been times when police forces have focused on internal recruitment, targeting mainly Police Community Support Officers, but Cosgrove (2016) suggests that this does not promote diversity of thinking, but reinforces pre-existing attitudes and values. A cohort solely made up of military personnel, without a clear space for challenging military culture, may greatly influence operational practice. Targeted recruitment is valuable and a necessity, but exclusive cohorts can be counterproductive, creating behavioral echo chambers (Koehler, 2022). Mixed cohorts with recruits from a range of backgrounds and experience result in groups benefiting from diverse experiences and ex-miliary personnel have a large part to play in that.

The offering up of military personnel as a panacea for policing is a politically motivated act. It falls squarely within the astonishingly irrelevant culture wars propagated by the current conservative administration. We have seen Priti Patel's (while in one of her stints as Home Secretary) use of the Royal Navy to prevent migrants from crossing the English Channel, this is pure political rhetoric to "out Farage", Nigel Farage (Hart, 2022). The moral and ethical dilemmas as well as the public backlash associated with the practical use of a battleship against dinghies, raised concerns as to how the military is used within national security and policing operations. The comments made by Kate Meynell are important to consider, raising the question as to whether military personnel do indeed retain such qualities of compassion or whether the high-profile lapses of professional standards by members of the military suggest an alternative response (Nottinghamshire Police, 2023a). Pre-existing cultures of toxicity may have an impact on initiatives such as the direct entry schemes, further entrenching banter and bullying (Cosgrove, 2016) The complex nature of conflicts in both Iraq and Afghanistan will have left the physical and mental scars of extreme stress, which itself can lead to battle fatigue, manifesting itself in varying ways. With policing remaining such a highly pressured and discretionary position, could the strains of war impact the conduct of duties during peacetime (Reingle Gonzalez et al., 2019)?

Combining military and policing such as in public order operations or dealing with climate emergencies, can be of public benefit. The roles of a constable, however, are varied and require many soft skills as well as disciplined efficiency (Emsley, 1991). The Police

Federation (2018) shows that each officer is an independent legal entity charged with duties to prevent and detect crime. There are much less prescriptive courses of action that a constable is expected to take to achieve aims set by the Chief Constable, than a soldier to achieve set military objectives (Beatie, 2012).

Currently, three force areas in England and Wales now offer entry routes focused on ex-military personnel, with Conservative Police Crime Commissioners. Donna Jones, The Hampshire PCC previously opposed the mandatory requirement of a degree qualification in policing citing ex-service personnel partly as a reason for her stance. The Chief Constable of the force, who is accountable to Donna Jones, advocated for alternative entry routes but emphasized a more focused training plan, more operational time and being "tough on crime" (Hampshire & Isle of Wight PCC, 2023). A political soundbite rather than an evidence-based response to what works raises the continuing theme that the decisions of senior police officers, beholden to politicians, can be influenced. Several other force areas which have non-national party PCCs, support the Armed Forces Covenant. This approach seems to be a more measured approach to recruitment, removing barriers and attending to the specific pastoral needs of those recruits without engraining military culture. Andy Cooke, the Chief Inspector of Constabulary wrote to the Home Secretary, James Cleverly, in January 2024 (HMICFRS, 2024) outlining concerns of chief officers, that senior politicians attempt to influence operational matters of policing directly and indirectly.

Ultimately politically motivated projects need to be managed if not removed from matters of operational policing. The British police service must represent the community they serve, which includes ex-service personnel and the valuable skillset they bring (Hartley et al., 2013). However, there must be clarity as to the various roles and that British policing is not inherent in previously held military cultures. Traditionally recruits make up the bulk of response officers, with the most interaction with the public (Nottinghamshire Police, 2023b). As new cohorts arrive, and experienced officers move on to specialist departments, even small numbers can have a disproportionate impact.

The model of British policing remains a largely envied approach across the globe, even with the passing of two centuries. The style introduced by Sir Robert Peel demonstrates that officers should continue to strive to achieve public accountability and transparent governance (Emsley, 1991, 2013) and the increasing use of military units within policing should not in itself be resisted, with national emergencies and climate change forcing agencies to share resources to protect communities (Gearson & Berry, 2021). The rise of schemes which are designed to encourage armed forces personnel into policing should also not be discouraged but appropriately managed. History must not be repeated, with forces recognizing that they should harness military skills but that toxic cultures must always be challenged. It is vital that leaders and politicians do not forget the ideals established in 1829 and that the British model remains focused on policing by consent (Blaskovits et al., 2022; Durston, 2012).

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