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The SAGE Encyclopedia of War: Social Science Perspectives

Demobilization

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One of the major issues arising after a war is the demobilization of combatants who took part in the armed conflict, whether it is a question of recruits drafted by their state or civilians mobilized and armed in nonstate groups. This issue is of primary importance, due, in particular, to the potentially destabilizing role ex-combatants might have vis-à-vis the peace process, which explains why security is a constant concern during the different phases of demobilization. Aside from military demobilization, carried out immediately after a war and essentially a technical matter, there are other aspects of demobilization, namely cognitive ones, which cannot easily be relegated to institutions, although they are essential to the postconflict process in the long term.

Once combatants have been demobilized, the question of their future arises; demobilization is often synonymous with return to civilian life, but it can also be achieved through the integration of ex-combatants into new state security forces. In other words, the alternative is between the “civilianization” of ex-combatants or the institutionalization of military experience acquired outside the state. Thus, demobilization generally cannot be dissociated from reform of the state security apparatus or from broader public policies aimed at favoring ex-combatants’ return to civilian life, policies that thus contribute to the establishment of the welfare state. In that sense, demobilization contributes to the (re)making of the state itself.

This entry further explores these aspects of demobilization, including security issues and disarmament in the immediate postwar period, the phases of military and cultural demobilization, the reentry of ex-combatants to civilian life, and, finally, the formation of the state.

A Security Issue for the Immediate Postwar Period

The works of historian Alec Campbell show that ever since Roman times, demobilization phases have often been accompanied by political crises and struggles, owing notably to claims that emerge or re-emerge after the war, when union against the enemy is no longer necessary. In such circumstances, ex-combatants can play a decisive role. Their experience in the war generally leads them to group together, apart from the working classes they nonetheless issue from, and their political awareness is vague. In Europe, after World War I, some of these “wild cards” allied themselves with the workers, others with the capitalists, yet others with the nationalists. This is why for governments, one of the major issues of the demobilization phase is to create conditions such that veterans will not swell the ranks of the dissatisfied.

In the case of contemporary armed conflicts, 95% of which are intrastate, demobilization is most often closely associated with the disarmament of combating groups with the aim of preventing the spread of violence inherent in the creation of rebel fighting groups who generally rose against the state. The goal of disarmament and demobilization policies is to put an end to a situation symptomatic of the “failure” of certain states, incapable of successfully claiming the monopoly on legitimate physical violence, to use Max Weber’s words. In international relations, the collapse of such states is now considered one of the major factors of insecurity and the reason why, more and more frequently, in the framework of contemporary postconflicts, disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs for ex-combatants are solidly financed by international organizations (e.g., United Nations Development Programme and the World Bank) wishing to maintain the Westphalian system of state sovereignty.

Military Demobilization and Cultural Demobilization

When war has involved conscripts, military demobilization—understood as the fact that soldiers leave combat sites, most often to return to their civilian lives—is a huge bureaucratic task that may last for months after the armistice, as was the case in France after World War I. Such a task involves complex administrative undertakings, for example, the establishment of nominative lists of demobilized men, the updating of military papers, medical appointments, cantonment, allocation of indemnities, and the transport of soldiers to their homes. In the context of contemporary intrastate armed conflicts, military demobilization is much more informal and often imperfect, given that armed mobilization has not been organized under state auspices or entailed much bureaucratic activity. As a result, because there is only an approximate idea of the military arsenal or number of fighters, and the chains of command are extremely loose, the surrender of arms is often only partial. (Many combatants only return arms that are no longer usable, preferring to hold on to a means of defense in case combat resumes.) Thus, the dismantling of armed groups can happen spontaneously or, if combatants are not satisfied with the peace agreement, be a source of difficulty. Outside actors working with international programs are usually powerless when faced with strategies for circumventing and appropriating their disarmament and demobilization mechanisms. The number of combatants who show up to benefit from the financial support of these international programs is often much higher than any of the estimates, as these programs offer a providential income in countries whose economies have been severely weakened.

In his analyses of World War I, Bruno Cabanes pointed out that demobilization involved three phases: (1) the separation of the soldier from his “brothers in arms”; (2) the liminal phase, when the former soldier, in limbo, forges a new identity; and (3) the reintegration phase, in which he finds his place in economic life, in the framework of social rules and the daily life of family and friendly relations. Demobilization is indeed not only a technical operation, and the transition from military to civilian life has many dimensions (social and psychological in particular), which explains why the transition is facilitated by the organization of certain rituals of reintegration that ease the way into noncombating societies. Historian John Horne emphasized that the re-establishment of peace meant, in particular, a cultural demobilization—that is, the demobilization of the war cultures underlying the idealization of one’s own camp and the corresponding demonization of the enemy. This cultural demobilization, which contributes to humanizing the former enemy, now conceivable as a partner, is an indispensable condition for any reconciliation process. Whereas military demobilization can be relatively rapid, cultural demobilization operates in a different, longer temporality.

Return to Civilian Life or Consolidation of the Military Career

In the context of contemporary intrastate conflicts, peace agreements often stipulate a reform of the security sector, based notably on the integration of ex-combatants into the armed forces or the police. This can make it possible to settle conflicts, not only because it gives satisfaction to veterans wanting to engage in a military career but also because it furthers their allegiance to the state, thus favoring its legitimation or re-legitimation. However, such integration is not without its stumbling blocks because it makes for situations in which rebels and loyalists coexist in the same institution, sometimes while the hostilities of the armed conflict are still alive. In addition, involvement in intrastate groups has not always led combatants to integrate principles of discipline or even give proof of serious military capacity—both of which are indispensable to the functioning of a sovereign institution. All of this could contribute to disorganizing the new security forces.

However, the large majority of ex-combatants return to civilian life. Historians have underscored the difficulties involved in this return to private life, due to the fact that often, the war experience seems incommunicable. Thus sociability among veterans, particularly in an associative framework, plays an essential role in their effort to give meaning to their war experience and, at the same time, construct a memory of the armed conflict. Political science research on contemporary conflict exits stresses the importance of reintegration programs whose objective, after the disarmament and demobilization of ex-combatants, is civilianization, to use the expression of Mats Berdal. Helping demobilized men to reintegrate to civilian life means encouraging them to end all links they may have to former combatant groups and to their military identity. However, for various reasons, this last part of DDR programs is rarely well funded; it would mean investment in the medium or long term, unlike disarmament and demobilization immediately after the war. It also involves multiple levels (economic, social, and even psychological), whereas the preceding phases are strictly military. All of the aforementioned factors underscore the essentially security-focused concept of these postconflict mechanisms: The main objective of reintegration programs is to keep ex-combatants busy, and they consist mainly in training offers not always adapted to an impoverished postwar economy.

Demobilization and State Making

Charles Tilly showed clearly the link that exists between mobilizing combatants for the war effort and the formation of the state. But one can also consider that link in connection with demobilization. Demobilization affects state making when ex-combatants become its agents; it then gives rise to a bureaucratic reconfiguration that resembles the reinforcing of the state in wartime, through its efforts in conducting war. But demobilization contributes to state making in another, more indirect sense: The claims usually put forth by ex-combatants after the war often lead to the adoption of public policies to their advantage, and historically, this has played a role in the genesis of the welfare state.

According to Theda Skocpol, in a country like the United States, where the development of the state remained limited, ex-combatants were nevertheless at the origin of the introduction of social welfare policy, due to the efficient lobbying of the Grand Army of the Republic association, which demanded that pensions be granted to veterans of the Civil War. These pensions constituted the keystone of U.S. social benefits between 1880 and 1910. Alec Campbell shows that the formation of the American state after World War I is indebted to the benefits system set up for demobilized men due to the Foreign Legion's promotion of their interests.

Besides granting specific benefits involved in material policy (e.g., pensions, advantages for resuming studies, housing, and free medical care), after a war, the state is most often led to introduce symbolic policies—mainly commemoration ceremonies—in answer to demands on the part of veterans' associations for recognition of "sacrifices made." What is at stake in these symbolic policies, which contribute to the establishment of a national narrative of the historical foundations of the state and underscore the role of veterans in that process, is the very refounding of the nation.

See also [Armistice Day](#); [Conscription and Mobilization of Soldiers](#); [Disarmament](#); [Nation Building](#)

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