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What a man can take

Conflict and corporality in the Finnish conscript army, 1919-1929

For many Finnish conscripts, compulsory military training in the period between the two world wars was an experience marked by extremely sharp conflicts and tensions between soldiers and officers. In the words of one former conscript, “at times there seemed to be so much thunder in the air that we were just waiting for an explosion”. These tensions were partly due to the primitive conditions in the new military forces as well as high political and social tensions in society in general. However, this all-male environment with its conflict-laden atmosphere can also be studied as an arena of competing masculinities. The gendered power-struggles, hierarchies and group solidarities found there were in some ways expressions of the bigger conflicts pushing and tearing at Finnish society, but they also had a homosocial dynamic of their own which had much in common with other armed forces in other countries and other historical periods.

In this paper I will sketch out an analysis of compulsory military training in Finland in the 1920’s as an arena for a competition between Western European bourgeois ideologies of masculinity and domestic popular masculinities. I will, however, concentrate on the experiences of ‘ordinary’ men, i.e. men without higher education who did not themselves take part in public printed discourse at the time. The main source for this paper is an ethnological enquiry made in 1973 where almost 500 men wrote down their recollections of doing military service between the two world wars. I am only in the process of reading and analysing this material, comprising several thousand pages, and my paper is therefore very much a report on “work in progress” with many open questions.

Masculinities: Middle class discourses vs. lower class experiences?

In general, the burgeoning field of historical studies of masculinities has paid the greatest attention to textual discourse, to ideals and ideologies of manliness and to cultural representations of masculinity. There is still a need for more research into masculinities not only as a set of cultural stereotypes or even a typology of male identities, but into men’s lives in terms of gendered everyday practices and into men’s gendered *experiences*.¹ Naturally, the historian has no access to “authentic” experiences but only to their interpretations expressions through language and narration; and so we cannot study experience in isolation from discourse.² This, however, in

¹ Cf the ongoing discussion about the meanings and uses of ‘masculinity’ and ‘hegemonic masculinity’ as analytical concepts: Jeff Hearn: ‘From hegemonic masculinity to the hegemony of men’, *Feminist Theory*, Vol. 5(1) 2004, p. 49-72 and R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt: ‘Hegemonic masculinity. Rethinking the concept’, *Gender & Society*, Vol. 19(6) 2005, p. 829-859.

² I am here borrowing ideas presented by MA Ville Kivimäki in a forthcoming article, which in turn is drawing on, among others, Klaus Latzel: *Deutsche Soldaten - nationalsozialistischer Krieg? Kriegserlebnis - Kriegserfahrung 1939-1945*, Paderborn: Schöningh 1998.

no way nullifies individual subjectivity. Although ideology and experience always interact, they are different levels of discourse and if the latter is forgotten by historians it will in most cases mean privileging middle class voices and narratives over those of the lower classes.

I started out working on my thesis with a preliminary hypothesis that middle class notions of manliness in Finland in the second half of the 19th century and first half of the 20th was part of the same bourgeois ideological cluster as nationalism.³ This ideological package, according to the hypothesis, was imported, mainly from Germany, enthusiastically appropriated and with minor adaptations disseminated by the slowly expanding Finnish middle classes (*Bildungsbürgerschaft*). As a part of the middle classes' general program of "educating" the lower classes, what George L. Mosse has called "modern" western masculinity became the pattern into which diverse institutions tried to socialize Finnish youngsters; institutions such as elementary school, youth associations and the conscript army.

Studying the textual and discursive aspects of middle class masculinities, there is absolutely no scarcity of sources. Having analyzed some periodicals and fictional works representative of the nationalist-conservative establishment, I have gotten partial confirmation of my hypothesis: in Finnish middle class ideals of manliness and gendered rhetoric of the period there are striking similarities to comparable discourses in Sweden and Germany. Interestingly, however, manliness seems to be less often explicitly invoked in the Finnish material. In contrast to (at least) contemporary Anglo-Saxon discourses, the Finnish texts do not express any noticeable concern that Finnish manhood would be in any way threatened or weakened by civilization, modernization or the like. This could be explained by the traditional agrarian character of Finnish society of the time; the old gender order had not yet been rocked by urbanization, industrialization and female emancipation to the same extent as in more advanced economies.⁴

The other, traditional, domestic, lower-classes' side of this hypothetical opposition of class-based masculinities is more laborious for the historian to access. Finding letters and diaries penned by young uneducated men in Finnish archives is like finding a needle in a haystack. One source material which, in spite of its highly problematic nature as a historical source, I could not therefore pass by is a collection of Finnish men's' recollections of their military service that ethnologists at the University of Turku compiled in 1972-73 by announcing a writing competition on this subject. Among the 685 answers, 493 concern the interwar period. As the average answer is about 40 handwritten pages A5, and many answers comprise 100 or more pages, this is a very rich material. It could, however, be argued that these texts are rather a source to masculinities in the 1970's than in the 1920's and 1930's. What are retold are memories of experiences, memories that have been reshaped in the process of construction of a meaningful autobiographical narrative, memories that in many instances have probably been retold many times and refined in accordance with an oral tradition of anecdote-telling, memories that have been influenced by popular cultural representations and not least by the intermediate war experience. Still, in terms of source criticism, these sources and e.g. contemporary diaries in many respects differ in degree but not in kind, since experience anyway can mainly be studied by the historian as mediated through narrativization.

The detailed ethnological questionnaire the informants were answering contained mostly questions about customs, traditions and folklore in the military culture, but also about social relations among the men and between soldiers and officers. The way the questions were formulated did not, however, encourage the informants to describe their reactions to and interpretations of what they experienced – what it "felt like". Fortunately, some accounts are very

³ Here, I was naturally inspired by the seminal work by George L. Mosse: *The Image of Man. The Creation of Modern Masculinity*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press 1996.

⁴ Jan Löfström: *Sukupuoliero agrarikulttuurissa*, Helsinki: SKS 1999; Irma Sulkunen: "The Women's Movement", in: Max Engman and D. Kirby (eds): *Finland. People, Nation, State*, London: Hurst 1989, p. 178-191.

free in form and some writers give a very full picture of how they experienced military service. Still, there are disturbing silences in the material. Almost nothing is told about the informants' love life, family relations and previous workplace experience at that time – the typical arenas where “gendered relations” have often been sought in historical studies on men. Comradeship and social life in the barracks off-duty is often touched upon but seldom extensively. Most striking is the lack of any reference to the actual teaching and learning of how to kill. One can only wonder if this silence is the expression of a taboo, parallel to the phobia in military jargon of ever naming death, maiming or killing by their real names, or simply telling of how natural and unproblematic it was for these men that they would be taught to kill enemy soldiers.

Conscription as an instrument of social integration

As in so many other countries, the interwar period was a conflict-laden and politically tense time in Finland. Independence from the crumbling Russian empire was gained through a prolonged period of crises and intermingling nationalist and class struggles that started in the last years of the 19th century and culminated in three months of civil war in 1918. The war ended in victory for the “white” bourgeoisie and landholding peasants over the “red” workers and tenant farmers but left both sides in the conflict feeling deep bitterness and suspiciousness towards each other for many years to come.

The conscript military forces of the independent nation emerged from the military mobilization of the white forces in the civil war. There was a lack of domestic military tradition and the military organization and training system had to be rapidly created out of nothing in a time of great material scarcity. The only Finns with a military education were either former officers from the Russian imperial army, often noblemen, or young activists from the nationalist resistance movement who had been trained in Germany during the World War; they represented conflicting military cultures and political ideologies, adding internal tensions to the white military establishment.

The bourgeois public opinion of Finland in the interwar period was very much in favour of the new national armed forces, not to say militaristic. After the trauma of the civil war, the army was seen as the ultimate guarantor for rule by law and the persistence of the social order, a protector against internal as well as external threats. The social democrats, correspondingly, saw the army as an instrument of class oppression. However, the political and military establishment also saw the conscript army as a place of national integration in a country still deeply divided. The army was to be the place where “thoughtless” and uneducated young men would be fostered to responsible patriotic citizens. The goal was to infuse a unitary national manly identity in the sundry masses that arrived at the barracks.⁵

The conscripts were subjected to “enlightenment work” including lessons in “history of the fatherland”, civics and morality taught by military priests, as well as evening prayers and divine services.⁶ For those who had no school education at all, classes in reading and writing were arranged, often with other conscripts as teachers. An excellent source to the moral, political and gendered agenda of this enlightenment is the periodical *Suomen Sotilas* (The Soldier of Finland) published by nationalist-idealist officers to provide the conscripts with suitable reading for their leisure hours. The core message of this magazine was that the army makes men out of boys⁷ and

⁵ Jarl Kronlund: *Suomen puolustuslaitos 1918–1939: Puolustusvoimien rauhan ajan historia*, Sotatieteen laitoksen julkaisuja XXIV, Porvoo 1988, p. 351-355; Kenneth Lundin: 'Armeija astuu valkokankaalle: Meidän poikamme -elokuvan taustaa ja tarkoituksiperiä' in: *Suomen kansallismuografia*, vol 1, Helsinki 1996, p. 395-398; Henrik Meinander: *Finlands historia*, vol 4, Esbo: Schildts 1999 p. 78f, 93-100; Mikko Lehtonen: 'Maskuliinisuus, kansallisuus, identiteetti' in Arto Jokinen (ed.): *Mies ja muutos. Kriittisen miestutkimuksen teemoja*, Tampere: Vastapaino 1999, p. 82.

⁶ Kronlund 1988, p. 232, 325-329.

⁷ This notion of the army as a 'school for men' seems to be a ubiquitous pattern in Western countries and e.g. in Germany, Switzerland and Austria it was well established by 1900: cf Christa Hämmerle: 'Von den Geschlechtern des

that in providing them with the character traits of a good soldier it simultaneously turns them into good patriotic citizens and strong masculine men:

In the hard school of the army they are raised to men, in the true sense of that word. There the typical Finnish tardiness and listlessness is grinded off. Quickness, moderation and above all manful ability to take action infuse themselves in these rough tar-stumps and masur-birch knobs. [...] The army has done its great achievement. A simple child of the people has grown up to be a citizen conscious of his duty, in which the conscious love of the national spirit has been rooted for ever.⁸

In this quote can also be recognized the political project of re-integrating the (male) nation and re-educate leftist young men into a “patriotic”, i.e. national-bourgeois world-view. Manhood is here used as a political rhetorical instrument, establishing certain association links between gendered bodies, identities, social positions and ideologies as “truths”.⁹ What is at stake is actually propagating a certain political ideology, but this is camouflaged by ascribing ‘manly’ character traits to the ‘patriotic’ citizen. The character traits most celebrated in this amalgamation of the ideal soldier, the ideal citizen and the ideal manly man, were courage, ability to take action, self-restraint, sense of duty and self-sacrifice – a catalogue of manly virtues very similar to the 19th century Western European middle class rhetoric and ideology of (military) manliness which has been depicted in several historical studies.¹⁰

A culture of abuse and bullying

The picture of military service conveyed by the recollections written down in 1973 is rather different from the lofty rhetoric of bourgeois sources. Topmost in their memories and narratives is a culture of austerity, coarseness and brutality that seems to have been predominating in the Finnish army in the 1920’s. Abusive language and excessive shouting was showered upon the recruits from day one. Non-commissioned officers (NCOs), both conscripted and regular ones, to a large extent used their uncontrolled power over the soldiers for bullying, often in the form of extreme physical drill (this will be further discussed in the following section on corporality in army life). A handful instances of conscripts dying as the direct or indirect result of bullying were allegedly witnessed by informants in this material. Humiliations of individuals in front of the troop were frequent, e.g. by commanding somebody to climb a tree, a high stone or a rooftop and from there shout e.g. “I am the biggest blockhead of this company!”

Everyday life as depicted in the recollections was dominated by incessant inspections and punishments dealt out abundantly and arbitrarily. One of the most usual methods was the daily “blasting” of conscripts’ meticulously made beds and the contents of their lockers. Collective punishments were frequent and the superiors encouraged the soldiers to violent forms of group discipline. A central institution here was the “belt appeal” where a conscript was laid on a table, sometimes wrapped in the blanket, and the others hit him with their leather belts, sometimes with the buckle. Informants many times emphasize conscripts’ resistance to carry out group discipline but its very possibility seems to have been ever-present among them.

There are, however, numerous exceptions and variations. Some individual company commanders seem to have worked vehemently against the culture of pointless bullying and to have been

Krieges und des Militärs. Forschungseinblicke und Bemerkungen zu einer neuen Debatte’ in: Thomas Kühne und Benjamin Ziemann: *Was ist Militärgeschichte?* Paderborn: Schöningh 2000, p. 238-239.

⁸ Armas Laitinen: ”Suomalainen mies – suomalainen painija”, *Suomen Sotilas* 10/1923, p. 155f.

⁹ Cf Gail Bederman: *Manliness and civilization. A cultural history of gender and race in the United States, 1880-1917*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press 1996, p. 7f.

¹⁰ Cf among others Mosse 1996; Ute Frevert: *Die kasernierte Nation: Militärdienst und Gesellschaft in Deutschland*, München: C.H. Beck 2001; David Tjeder: *The Power of Character: Middle-class masculinities, 1800-1900* Stockholm: Stockholm University 2003; J.A. Mangan and James Walvin (eds): *Manliness and Morality. Middle-class Masculinity in Britain and America, 1800-1940*, Manchester: Manchester University Press 1987; Michael Kimmel: *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, New York: The Free Press 1996.

successful in eradicating it from their units. This, on the other hand, indicates that where bullying did dominate recruits' life, it was with the encouragement or at least the silent approval of the company officers.

This kind of brutal treatment of soldiers, especially recruits, is no unfamiliar picture of life in Western 20th century armies, and I will not here dwell on its specific forms in Finland in the 1920's. In social research it has often been interpreted in functionalistic terms. E.g. Thomas Kühne has described this process along the lines of Erving Goffman's analysis of total institutions: the objective is to first break down the recruit, strip him of his dignity, individuality and previous identities, in order to then rebuild him as an efficient soldier, identifying only with his military unit and combat group. The soldier regains his dignity only in the complete control of his body and emotions making him a well-working part of this fighting machine.¹¹ Joanna Bourke has found rather similar reasoning in writings of British and American military psychologists in the 1920's and 1930's trying to deal with the issue that a huge number of soldiers in the First World War had proved extremely reluctant to actually kill enemy soldiers in combat situations. A theory of how aggression could be fostered by increasing frustration in men was used to legitimise the more sadistic aspects of basic training. Conscious efforts were made to brutalize the soldiers by an array of training techniques.¹²

In the Finnish case, army authorities had a double motivation to rebuild the conscripts. In addition to the military imperative of producing obedient and efficient soldiers, there was the political project of producing "a citizen conscious of his duty" evidently embraced particularly by the young idealistic officers leaning towards the political right. Some informants write about how they were anxious to conceal their family association with the red rebellion or the workers' movement from the officers in fear of harassment and others about how certain conscripts' advancement to NCO training was blocked for political reasons.

However, I am doubtful about how far any functionalist analysis of the bullying culture can be applied to the Finnish army in the 1920's. It would seem that even the psychologists and other military educationalists in some of the most militarily advanced nations, studied by Bourke, were to a large extent only giving seemingly scientific authority to traditional military customs. In the Finnish army in the 1920's the level of organizational culture was rather more primitive and the military educational level of most of its NCOs at the time very low. Given this, I think the brutalities should in this case be seen as a combination of echoes of Russian and Prussian military traditions, a half-baked military pedagogy based on the idea of 'hardening' originating in these traditions, and sheer abuse of unchecked power inspired by traditional military forms. The incoherent disciplinary practice in different companies, even within the same regiment would seem to imply that there was no rational "master plan" by higher army authorities behind the bullying. Rather, there are many anecdotes of how higher officers intervened to stop bullying and chastise bullies among the lower command. The conscripts seem to have harboured contradictory images of the higher ranks: sometimes they are portrayed as benevolent patriarchal figures who see that justice is done, sometimes they are contempered for their indifference to the well-being of ordinary soldiers.

Few of the informants seem to have recognised the brutalities and harassments as a conscious psychological technique for making them good soldiers; neither at the time nor half a century later when writing down their memories. Rather, many discarded the bullying as meaningless sadism that seemed to provide the bullies with intense perverted pleasure but only aroused bitterness instead of any group spirit or patriotic sentiment in the conscripts. Many accounts

¹¹ Thomas Kühne: 'Der Soldat' in: Ute Frevert and Henz-Gerhard Haupt (eds.): *Der Mensch des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Frankfurt a.M.: Campus 1999, p. 349-351. Joanna Bourke has found similar reasoning in

¹² Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing*, London: Granta Books 2000, p. 72-83, 97-102.

show that for the soldiers one way of dealing with this treatment was contempt for those NCOs and officers prone to bully. The low level of education and the lack of self-restraint of these bullies are often emphasized and ridiculed, and they are depicted as sadistic illiterate brutes, sorry dregs who would never have found employment in the civil sector. A significant contrast is made to officers and NCOs who possess a calm and businesslike approach to training and commanding:

Kamonen's style of command was sharp at the same time as it was demanding, calm but very resolute. He never got over-excited. In other words, he did not jump out of his skin. Never spraying spit on the eyes of those he was commanding. His eyes never bulged as much as an inch out of his head. Thus, self-confidence above all.

Those superiors admired and appreciated by the men are often implicitly described as manly, sometimes even explicitly as father figures, whereas bullies among the conscript NCOs were, among other things, called "cockerels" at the time – a way of explaining away their behaviour as immature boyishness and unworthy of a real man.

The expression "Prussian discipline" is often used in this connection; it was a common notion that this slavish discipline was something that the aforementioned nationalist activists had brought with them from their training in the Prussian army. One of these officers is reported to have confirmed that he had been taught in Germany "you have rip the spunk out of a man, only then can he become a good soldier."¹³ Here the bullying is brought in connection with military objectives, but its functionality is immediately denied: the text continues with the informants' assertion that these foreign methods did not suit nor did they work on the Finnish national character. One can therefore interpret the use of the expression "Prussian discipline" as a way for the conscripts of distancing themselves from their superiors' brutality.¹⁴

One way of interpreting army bullying is to put it in connection with theorising on men's violences more generally. In his book on men's violences towards women they know, sociologist Jeff Hearn points out that doing violence is "resource for demonstrating and showing a person is a man"; a resource for the making of masculinities.¹⁵ This violence does not have to be socially accepted in any moral sense. It still associates the violator with activity, dominance and, indeed, violence which all are hallmarks of masculinity in most cultures. In the incoherent organizational environment sketched above, this would provide individuals with motivation for the abovementioned abuse of unchecked power in the form of bullying, whether by psychological or physical violence. This kind of analysis could be seen as supported by the conscripts' reactions through contempt and belittlement of bullies: they recognized the very attempt to assert masculinity through violence and dominance and tried to resist it by denying both the masculinity of the bully and thus their own emasculation through domination.

However, at this point I am uncertain whether such a highly speculative analysis should be put forward. It would seem to need support by some indications of, or theory about, why the men who bullied other men would have felt their masculinity somehow questioned and so would have needed to assert it so excessively. Social inferiority complexes might be one explanation, but hardly sufficient since there were uneducated men among the bullies but also university students belonging to the social elite.

¹³ Archives of the Turku University Ethnology Department (TYKL) enquiry 45: 35.

¹⁴ TYKL enquiry 45: 35.

¹⁵ Jeff Hearn: *The Violences of Men. How Men Talk About and How Agencies Respond to Men's Violence to Women*, London: Sage 1998, p. 35-37.

Corporeal military experiences

Corporality is a central aspect to the gender analysis of the military sphere although it has seldom been put centre stage in research literature. This might have a lot to do with the “Cartesian” legacy of sociology and its implicit downplaying of the body in favour of immaterial social structures.¹⁶ However, even from a social constructionist point of view, gender still must always be seen as referring back to bodies. In the words of R.W. Connell, although there is no fixed biological basis for gender, there is an “arena in which bodies are brought into social processes, in which our social conduct does something with reproductive difference”; gender according to Connell is the structure of social relations that centres on that arena and the practices that bring reproductive distinctions between bodies into social processes.¹⁷ The conscription of men but not women to military service is of course based on such a distinction, but many other practices and discourses in the military sphere elaborate further on this particular construction of the male body. I will here concentrate on those corporeal issues that touch upon the conflict between conscripts and the military establishment.

Doing your military service in Finland during the interwar period was a staggering corporeal experience. The treatment of men’s bodies by the military system was throughout marked by roughness and often outright brutality even in peacetime. Although this was partly due to arbitrary abuse of power, it does seem to reflect notions of ‘what a man can take’, indeed what he must take in order to become a man. There are interesting parallels here to observations by sociologists in our time about how boys are brought up to a more active physical orientation and bodily awareness than girls. Starting with rough-and-tumble games in early childhood, boys are encouraged to regard their bodies as robust, tough and wear-resistant, as bodies made for action, not fragile objects to be handled with care like girls’ bodies.¹⁸

Reference has often been made, again, to sociological theories of total institutions when it comes to the military rituals of stripping the recruit naked as an intake ritual and rebuilding his identity and social position from scratch. It is clear that being inspected in the nude at the drafting, in front of the draft board and all the other young men present, was an experience that has left a lasting impression on most informants in the Finnish collection of memories studied here. The situation was clearly very awkward for many, especially since the men were often controlled for venereal disease at the call-up. It has produced a big number of anecdotes and jokes trying to ease the embarrassment. In one typical such story, a local estate-owner on the draft board tells a youngster who is being weighed by the medical officer:

Now, now, young man, don’t you cover nor lessen the load. Step down and take your hands off your balls and then step up again and we’ll see your real weight. You don’t get yourself discarded that easily!¹⁹

The situation invites for symbolic (over-)interpretation of how the state here scrutinizes the male body and claims it for its own in its entirety, etcetera. However, It seems that what was at stake for the Finnish draft boards in the 1920’s was rather to strip nakedness of its intimacy, to condemn all kinds of ‘unmanly’ shyness and ashamedness in bodily matters and encourage a ‘manly’ self-assured comportment. The treatment of recruits later on indicates that what was aimed at was not pride in the male body but rather *indifference* to it.

Almost all informants remember instances of or stories about men trying to avoid drafting by feigning illness and other disabilities. Yet being discarded because of bodily weakness had a strong stigma of unmanliness and the “Crown Wrecks” were looked down upon. The drafting

¹⁶ Alexandra Howson, *The Body in Society*, Cambridge: Polity 2004, p.3.

¹⁷ R.W. Connell: *Gender*, Cambridge: Polity Press 2002, p. 10.

¹⁸ Howson 2004, p. 53-59; Stephen Whitehead, *Men and Masculinities*, Cambridge: Polity 2002, p. 189.

¹⁹ TYKL enquiry 45: 147.

was a test of corporeal manhood. Even though few men mention having been agog for their military service, it was a matter of (often concealed) pride to have been classified as fit for service. One informant remembers having been very nervous about the medical examination, since both his brothers had been discarded. A woman in his home village had told people that “she herself would not dare make kids who are not fit for soldiers. This naturally reached my mother’s ears and she cried bitterly.”²⁰

Despite the pride of this informant and other men of their physique and fitness, their bodies were treated with disrespect, even recklessness, once they entered military training. Many were chocked by the incessant shouting and abusive language showered upon the recruits from day one. Quite a few also remember an experience of disillusionment as they got worn-down, ragged gear in stead of the handsome uniforms they had imagined or seen other soldiers wear on leave. The recruits were treated to endless closed exercises, marches and collective punishments which often resulted in extreme physical exhaustion, bodily injuries and occasionally to conscripts fainting.

The training was hard, get up and get down until the boys grew quite faint and the weakest fell ill and every now and then the hospital was filled with patients.²¹

‘Nobody actually died, but there were close shots. One big guy from the Northwest was carried away from the bullying spot, stiff and unconscious, to come round.’²²

Different kinds of bullying by officers and non-commissioned officers that flourished, often disguised as punishments for some trifle, mostly took the form of forcing conscripts to do something physically unpleasant as well as humiliating. One often-mentioned form of bullying was making men crawl through slush, sleet or deep puddles.

One informant remembers how he got such bad abrasions on a field march that a high-ranking medical officer told him to leave his rucksack in the supply vehicle. Minutes later his company commander, however, ordered him to go fetch it and said that he would not have his orders overridden by any medical officer.²³ Another informant saw a fellow conscript faint as they were marching back to the garrison after several days of heavy field exercise, fall off the road and roll down into a ditch filled with water. As the informant rushed after him to save him from drowning, an officer on horseback roared at him to let the man lie and get back in line.²⁴

The “Prussian” disciplinary culture included what may conscripts later remembered as an artificial stiffness and a ridiculous pompousness in matters of military hierarchy. Sports were not yet at the curriculum in the 1920’s, so the conscripts did gymnastic exercises in the “old style”, the whole company aligned in the courtyard doing simultaneous movements. The enormous emphasis put and time spent on closed orders also bears witness of a stiff military body idiom. In the words of one informant:

I am sure a ten pence coin would have stayed tightly put between one’s buttocks as we stood there in attention, like each of us would have swallowed an iron bar, and still [the sergeant-major] had the cheek to squeak, in a voice like sour beer: “No kind of posture whatsoever in this pack, not even crushed bones, just gruel, just gruel.”²⁵

The conscripts had very limited means of protesting or resisting unwarranted physical treatment. Still, informants narrate heroic stories about individual conscripts who repaid in kind to some

²⁰ TYKL enquiry 45: 165.

²¹ TYKL enquiry 45: 32.

²² TYKL enquiry 45: 20.

²³ TYKL enquiry 45: 138.

²⁴ TYKL enquiry 45: 65.

²⁵ TYKL enquiry 45: 132.

officer through the use or threat of physical violence. In almost all the cases mentioned by informants where a conscript crossed the line and actually hit back at an officer or NCO this man managed to either frighten off the bully or even gain his respect and get commended for shown courage. With reference to the discussion above of violence as a way of demonstrating masculinity, one wonders if the informants, looking back when in their 60's and 70's, thought that striking back would actually have been the adequate, *manly* response to bullying?

An undoubtedly much more common response was malingering or simply playing truant.²⁶ As Joanna Bourke has pointed out, the military malingerers' protest centres on his body which often was the last remaining thing he could call his own.²⁷ There are many stories about more or less fanciful attempts to fake illness, including the extreme case of one man chopping off his forefinger to get sent home. However, many mention not daring to seek medical care even when they were very ill, since medical officers mostly declared patients fit for service anyway which led to punishment for malingering. Some informants mention that malingerers were very unpopular with the other conscripts since somebody else had to e.g. do the carrying of heavy weaponry for them, or since they might provoke the officers to punish the company collectively. On the other hand, there are many indications that playing truant and shirking in general was very widespread and considered a legitimate response to an abusive system.

Many informants did describe a kind of upward social mobility during the year spent in military training. The recruit training was by most remembered as the very worst period, after which things slowly got a bit better. Both conscripts and officers seem to have been assisting in constructing the military training period as a kind of slow initiation process into manhood and back into human dignity. The closer their disbandment day drew, the more relaxed and self-assured the conscripts felt. This was partly a corporeal change; one informant describes how one easily could discern recruits from "old" soldiers on the basis of physical appearance. Recruits always had crew cuts, the most worn-out uniforms and a nervous expression whereas the "old" men with time had managed to get better uniforms by barter, let their hair grow longer, walked in a more relaxed and self-confident manner, "even their faces started showing signs of life".²⁸

Manhood – investing men's suffering with meaning

There is a common significant narrative construction connected to the culture of abuse and bullying in many of the answers to the enquiry. It is the story about how the first months in the army was hell, but how things got a bit better when the endless closed orders training of the first months ended and field training begun, or when the narrator moved on to NCO training or other special assignments. The closer the end of their service drew, the more self-confident the conscripts grew. Accounts of military training in the reserve often note a much more respectful attitude of officers and NCOs towards the soldiers. Many writers touch upon the notion of how the conscripts on disbandment day felt they were now grown-up men, not the childish boys they had been on joining-up day. Afterwards, many men seem to have invested their hardships with meaning by seeing them as a process of learning how to cope and endure, and the time spent in the military as a development from a timid youngster to a self-confident grown-up man:

...even if it was a very hard time for me mentally, I realized that I had come to be like a fish in the water there. I realized that I coped with everything and succeeded in everything I encountered. I felt my self-confidence growing. ... Freedom gone, home-sickness, longing and bitterness all made that life so repulsive. But they made men of boys there. That has to be admitted.

²⁶ A.o. TYKL enquiry 45: 138.

²⁷ Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male*, London: Reaktion Books 1996, p. 81.

²⁸ TYKL enquiry 45: 147, p. 114f.

The notion of the army where “boys become men” is interesting – exactly what is it you learn or achieve there that places you firmly in the gender category of adult men? To judge by these accounts, it is primarily the experience of having been able to adjust to and cope with an environment described by most informants as repulsive, prison-like and brutal. To some extent we can safely presume that this environment was intended to be just that by the higher command, according to a certain idea of how *men* can and must be “hardened” for war. The big question is what this treatment actually did to the men. Could you from the fact that they evidently reacted with anger and bitterness as recruits, but afterwards came to see it all as somehow salutary, draw the conclusion that a successful militarization took place?

Multiple masculinities: comparing sources

Middle class sources like soldiers’ magazines naturally did not depict the military as a culture of austerity, coarseness and brutality as the memory narratives tend to do. Admittedly, there were some concerned writings by military priests about the roughness of manners in the barracks and how innocent boys might get bad influences. In general, however, the image is one of briskness and comradeship, of an environment where uneducated, awkward and sluggish youngsters are made into alert and agile adult men powered by a thriving sense of duty and patriotic spirit of self-restraint and self-sacrifice.

Reading the autobiographic narratives, you many times get the impression that the relation was the reverse: the conscripts who were typically 21-22 years old, came to the army as experienced labourers and had suddenly to face an environment where hard work could be rewarded by arbitrary punishment; where it was often considered better to lie to your superiors or just lay low than being honest and hard-trying. There is scathing critique of the pompousness of relations towards superiors and artificial honouring of them. The technical standard of military training is compared to the writers’ war experiences and often spurned. As good as nowhere in the recollections I have read is there any mention made of the military education, as such, fostering nationalist sentiments. Rather, many mention a bitterness that faded away only decades later. Still, though these narratives do not tell much about it, the experience of living in close quarters for a year or more together with other young men of different regional and social background does seem to have made possible a higher degree of identification with the abstract notion of the Finnish *Volk*.

The recollections seem to give a somewhat more authentic picture of the complexities and multiplicities of masculinity than the often rather stereotypical idealized/ridiculed forms of manliness in middle class sources. Tensions and differentiations between rural and urban, educated and non-educated, sexually experienced and inexperienced, younger and older cohorts, tough and shy men etcetera flash by and there does not really seem to have been a generally shared unequivocal notion of masculinity looming behind it all. Of course, the informants certainly borrow narrative structures and stereotypical representations from oral narrative traditions and post-war popular culture. Yet especially when it comes to how those writing with the greatest detail and psychological depth portray their own ways of coping in the homosocial army world, a gallery of rather different strategies and self-understandings seems to emerge. Just a few examples:

- Urpo (farmer) depicts himself as a very sensitive young man who suffered much of loneliness, melancholy and longing for his girlfriend. He emphasizes the barrenness and dreariness of military life. He sought to avoid conflict with anybody; self-understanding of coping, being humane and being well-liked by everyone seems to have helped him through.
- Emil (lumberman) portrays himself as a real tough guy, very suspicious of his superiors’ intentions and resolved not to be ridiculed by anyone. Coming from a poor working-class family, he is highly class conscious. He expresses pride in his good physique, courage and

intelligence although he actually emphasizes having been a virgin at the time. The strategy he took on to cope with military service was being stiff-necked and demonstratively aware of his rights. He asserted himself through actively seeking conflict with officers exceeding their authority.

- Eero (office clerk): A member of the bourgeois militia very loyal to the army system, depicts himself as a shy youngster who, however, was resolved to fulfil his duties and responsibilities as well as possible. He evidently became a scrupulous conscript NCO which led to conflict with his peers: he was ridiculed by his comrades, something he explains away with their jealousy of his advancement and good standing with the officers.

At the moment, one of my strongest impression of this material is how different the voices and ways of being a man are that speak out of it. I hope I will be able to investigate and describe a handful of such individuals' notions of manliness and reactions to the military training and militarism. Yet I fear that the self-portrayal of even those who have written the most extensive answers to the enquiry will prove too fragmentary for this purpose; that their cases will rather have to be used the other way around, as providing a set of clues to "mainstream" or hegemonic masculinities which become visible when someone deviates from them. For practical reasons, then, I might end up doing what historians mostly do – generalizing from individual cases, constructing patterns and ideal types, maybe not *a* hegemonic masculinity in this social environment, but a narrow set of "typical" gendered practices, styles and notions. One reason for this habit of historians is naturally the wish to say something that is generally true e.g. for an institution like the conscript army, or treat individuals as representative for larger groups of people.

Regarding masculinity, however, this is problematic since a central element of the "male myth" has been that masculinity is one; natural and basically ahistorical. The driving force in contemporary gender history lies in deconstructing this monolithic naturalness and revealing the complexity and contingency of gender. But can we tell meaningful stories about the past, produce "historical knowledge" without generalizing, i.e. construct "typical" gender configurations for different historical settings?