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Writing Veterans' History: a Conversation on the Twentieth Century

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Writing Veterans' History: a Conversation on the Twentieth Century

Abstract: This article is a conversation between five specialists of veterans' history on the current direction of the field and its importance to the study of war and society. The discussants offer an an overview of current methodologies, definitions and historiographical approaches. Concentrating on the experiences of twentieth- century veterans (particularly after 1945) and using a diverse range of case studies from across the world, this article also asks what connections bound veteran communities together, and how we as historians might conceptualise veterans: as a class, as a collective, or as a far looser grouping of individuals? Finally, this article explores what distinguishes veteranhood after 1945 and the evolving relationship between veterans and the memory of conflict.

Keywords: veteran; associations; brutalization; victimhood; agency; memory

This conversation first began at a 2017 international workshop at Ludwig-Maximilian-Universität (LMU), Munich, organised by Ángel Alcalde and Xosé M. Núñez Seixas, on the topic of the history of war veterans after 1945 and their interaction with wider social movements, Cold War politics and decolonization.[1] At this conference, it became evident that veterans' history was a dynamic and source-rich area of research, but also one that continued to grapple with issues around definitions, methodologies and scope. This roundtable discussion is thus designed to summarise the state of veterans' history, but also to stimulate further debate on the figure of the veteran in the social, political and global histories of modern conflict.

This conversation concentrates on the history of veterans in the twentieth century, focusing specifically (though not exclusively) on their experiences after 1945. As Olivier Burtin points out below, the historically unprecedented number of veterans across the world during that period means not just that veterans occupy a significant place in modern history but that they are also a vital lens through which to analyse the changing relationship between war and society. Another important point that became evident in the course of this discussion is the complexity of the subject itself, as the temporal reach of

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[1] Á. Alcalde and X. M. Núñez Seixas, eds., *War Veterans and the World after 1945: Cold War Politics, Decolonisation, Memory* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018).

veterans' history is complex: while veteranhood is predicated on past activity, it is also underwritten by present-centred and future-focused concerns around status, recognition, benefits, and commemoration.

The discussion is purposefully transnational in scope, incorporating the views of historians with a wide range of geographical and methodological interests. As several discussants note, the study of veterans can be deeply enriched by comparative or transnational approaches, although carrying out such research is not without its challenges. The conversation is led by Grace Huxford, a British social historian, with expertise on Britain and the Korean War (1950-3). Joining her are: Ángel Alcalde, a transnational historian with expertise on veterans' organisations; Gary Baines, a historian of South African history, memory and war studies, specialising in the representation and remembrance of the South African Border War (1966-89); Olivier Burtin, a political historian of the modern United States, with particular interests in U.S. veterans, social movements and the state; and Mark Edele, a historian of the Soviet Union with expertise on Soviet veterans of the Second World War and who, together with Martin Crotty and Neil Diamant, is currently writing a global history of veterans.

Our conversation begins with a characterisation of the field at the present moment and common methodologies for examining veterans' history, before moving on to discussing definitional issues of who constitutes a veteran in modern history. We then debated questions such as how to group veterans, what connections bound veteran communities together, and how we as historians might conceptualise veterans: as a class, as a collective, or as a far looser grouping of diverse individuals? We conclude the discussion by examining the post-1945 period in particular depth and reflecting again on the interaction between veterans and memory. Whilst this conversation is inevitably unable to cover all the facets of modern veterans' history, it poses several important questions for historians of war and society, not least asking whether there is anything truly distinctive about veterans' history in the larger context of modern warfare. As noted below, veterans do not have a monopoly on war experience, but they constitute a vital component in social histories of twentieth-century conflict.

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[Grace Huxford]: One of the aims of this conversation is to understand the characteristics of veterans' history and to ascertain if there are any specific research questions and

methodologies which underpin the field. It seems sensible to start then by defining the field to date. Which sub-fields do you feel define veterans' history as a research field?

[Ángel Alcalde]: Sometimes historians work on a specific sub-field of their discipline without being fully aware of the greater thematic implications and intersections of their research and I think this problem applies clearly to the case of veterans' history. Most often, historians working on veterans primarily remain specialists in a period, region or country. In my view though, there are three different broad sub-fields in veterans' history: the political, the social, and the cultural. First, historians working on veteran politics are most interested in the historical and political role of associations and organizations.[2] Second, a social history approach to veterans' history has enhanced the stories of disabled veterans, pensions, rehabilitation and reintegration.[3] Third, the cultural history of modern war has focused intensively on the construction and dissemination of veterans' memory.[4] The most important historiographical contributions to veterans' history, such as Antoine Prost's three-volume book on interwar French veterans, focus on all three aspects.[5] However, this three-fold description is somewhat artificial, as history in general, and veterans' history in particular, does not respect such neat categorisation. Indeed, beyond these sub-fields, I would also identify specific themes that form the core of veterans' history as a research field, such as demobilization.[6] Yet veterans' demobilization processes can in turn be analysed from a political, social and cultural perspective.

[Olivier Burtin:] I do not think that veterans' history is necessarily different from any other field, but some themes are certainly more recurrent than others. Like Ángel, three

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[2] C. Millington, *From Victory to Vichy: Veterans in Inter-War France* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016); N. Barr, *The Lion and the Poppy: British Veterans, Politics, and Society, 1921-1939* (Westport: Praeger, 2005).

[3] J. Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War* (London: Reaktion Books, 1996); D. Cohen, *The War Come Home: Disabled Veterans in Britain and Germany, 1914-1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

[4] K.A. Hass, *Carried to the Wall: American Memory and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Patrick Hagopian, *The Vietnam War in American Memory: Veterans, Memorials, and the Politics of Healing* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009).

[5] A. Prost, *Les Anciens Combattants et la Société Française*, *1914–1939* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 1977).). I followed this three-fold model in Á. Alcalde, *Los excombatientes franquistas: la cultura de guerra del fascismo español y la Delegación Nacional de Excombatientes (1936-1965)* (Zaragoza: Prensas de la Universidad de Zaragoza, 2014).

[6] B. Cabanes, *La Victoire endeuillée. La sortie de guerre des soldats français (1918-1920)* (Paris,: Seuil, 2004).

sub-fields come to my mind, although they are different in scope and certainly not an exhaustive list: disability (the study of how veterans and civilians deal with war-connected ailments),[7] social policy (the study of veterans' benefits, such as pensions or healthcare),[8] and war memory (the study of memorials, commemorations, war literature, history textbooks, and so on).[9] Of course, these themes can and often do overlap.

[Grace Huxford]: The connections with disability history, highlighted by both Olivier and Ángel, certainly resonate in the British context. For instance, Deborah Cohen's comparative history, *The War Come Home,* examines the different political and social experiences of disabled veterans in Britain and Germany in the interwar period. This moment collided with the crystallisation of the conflict's legacy and memory: the focus on injured bodies at the time later fed the growing narrative of the First World War as a 'bad war'. Broken and damaged masculinity fits well within that narrative and reinforces many of its assumptions. As Nigel Hunt has commented, from 1980s, there has been an *expectation* that those who have fought in conflict are damaged or changed by it.[10] However, I would also add that there is a growing sense of dissatisfaction with this reading of veterans simply as 'problems' for the state and society after war, from critical military theorists as well as historians of disability. Sarah Bulmer and David Jackson argue that interpreting the veteran as only a 'broken' or diminished figure skews our understanding of veteran life.[11] In this way, as Olivier points out, it is vital not to study these sub-themes in isolation or to let them characterise our approaches to veterans' history.

[Gary Baines]: I'd like to go back to Ángel's point on the geographical focus of veterans' history. While Ángel is correct to say that most historians who write about military veterans approach the subject as country or period specialists, I think that there is much value in adopting a transnational perspective. There is no doubt that veterans from all belligerent countries would have had similar difficulties in adjusting to civilian life in the

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[7] D.A. Gerber, ed., *Disabled Veterans in History* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

[8] T. Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992).

[9] D.W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001).

[10] N. Hunt, *Memory, War and Trauma* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 123.

[11] S. Bulmer and D. Jackson, '"You Do Not Live in My Skin": Embodiment, Voice and the Veteran', *Critical Military Studies* 2 (2016), 27.

aftermath of, say, the First World War. So certain comparisons might be made about the postwar experiences of such veterans. But, equally, I think that useful insights might be gleaned from the study of the veteran experience across periods and geographies. So, for instance, I believe that my study of the 'afterlife' of the 'Border War' in which South African Defence Force (SADF) soldiers were deployed in Namibia and Angola during the 1970s and 1980s, was enriched by consulting literature on the legacies of other conflicts.[12] For my purposes, the study of veterans who fought in 'lost wars', especially the German Wehrmacht, the French in Algeria, and the Americans in Vietnam, proved valuable.

One of the themes that veterans of defeated armies have in common is a sense of victimhood. Veterans frequently feel betrayed or 'stabbed in the back' and riddled with guilt after being on the losing side. On the other hand, veterans are seldom held to account for breaches in the codes that govern the rules of war and so answer for their conduct on account of cover ups by the military hierarchy or a failure of political elites to uphold justice. Instead, many veterans tend to blame other parties and to claim victimisation. Jay Winter contends that soldiers joined the ranks of victims as a result of the blurring of the distinction between soldiers and civilian victims, and that this probably occurred during and after the Vietnam War.[13] If all soldiers, irrespective of whether they were conscripted or involved in waging unjust wars, are labelled victims then there is a very real danger of minimising their agency. I have gone as far as to argue that Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) sometimes serves as an alibi for the perpetration of abuses by SADF veterans.[14] This is not to deny that significant numbers of these veterans were traumatised but to suggest that they and medical professionals sometimes invoked the discourse of trauma in mitigation of gross human rights violations. While there is invariably a thin line between perpetrators and victims, this discourse tends to collapse these distinctions altogether. But it also suggests that the category of victim is not merely psychological, and can also have political, social and ethical dimensions.[15] This tends to be overlooked when veterans are treated as unqualified victims.

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[12] G. Baines, *South Africa's 'Border War': Contested Narratives and Conflicting Memories* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

[13] J. Winter, *War Beyond Words: Languages of Remembrance from the Great War to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 66-67.

[14] Baines, 81-87.

[15] D. La Capra, 'Trauma, Absence, Loss', *Critical Inquiry*, 25, 4 (1999), 723.

[Mark Edele]: In addition to the broad approaches (political, social, and cultural history of veterans) and the themes already mentioned (demobilization, reintegration, victimization, and memory) I would add 'brutalization' and 'political struggle' as problematics that define our field of study. The study of veterans and 'brutalization' has two aspects. Some scholars, most famously George Mosse, have construed veterans as major actors in the brutalization of entire societies and their politics.[16] More recent research has questioned this assumption: not only do only a minority of veterans become violent political actors, but cases of post-war brutalization of politics are the exception rather than the rule.[17] Others have asked if, and under what conditions, individuals return from war brutalized, and again differentiated answers have been proposed.[18] Both versions of brutalization – the individual and the collective – are connected in intricate ways with the final field of study which Ángel mentioned at the start of this conversation: veterans' politics. By this term I mean not just the history of veterans' organizations but the wider question of whether and under what conditions veterans form a social group, a collective political actor. When and how can veterans claim a special status in postwar society? This is a question Martin Crotty, Neil Diamant, and myself attempt to answer in an ongoing book project on the comparative history of veterans.

[Ángel Alcalde]: Certainly, the debate on Mosse's 'brutalization' theory has shaped most scholarship on inter-war veterans in Europe since the 1990s, so it is very pertinent that Mark raises this point. The debate on brutalization has produced no consensus, probably because of the ambiguity inherent to Mosse's notion. Indeed, in my analysis of the relationship between veterans and fascism, I opted to change the terms of this debate and offer alternative explanations based on different concepts, such as stereotyping and myth.[19] As Mark is suggesting, I would emphasize that veteran politics cannot be reduced

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[16] G. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

[17] For a comparison of case studies from the First World War see M. Edele and R. Gerwarth (eds.), 'The Limits of Demobilization', special issue of *Journal of Contemporary History* 50, 1 (2015); for the Soviet case after the Second World War see M. Edele and F. Slaveski, 'Violence from Below: Explaining Crimes against Civilians across Soviet Space, 1943–1947', *Europe-Asia Studies* 68, 6 (2016), 1020-35.

[18] J. Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face to Face Killing in 20th Century Warfare* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

[19] Á. Alcalde, *War Veterans and Fascism in Interwar Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

to the issue of 'brutalization' (generally meaning political violence and paramilitarism); it is a much richer field of inquiry.

[Grace Huxford]: From our very first question then, it is clear that recent veterans' history writing has been underpinned by a number of sub-fields, but that these sub-fields are potentially problematic, overemphasising particular themes at the expense of broader comparative approaches. This characterisation of the field leads me to my next question: what research methodologies are best suited to studying veterans' history? Are there specific methodologies that define veterans' history writing?

[Olivier Burtin]: I am not sure that veterans' history has specific research methods, as it is vast enough to accommodate a wide range of different approaches. Historians interested in how individual veterans went through war and transitioned to the postwar can look at letters, photographs, novels, memoirs, diaries, interviews, and material culture, while those focusing on the macro-level dynamics of veterans' groups or veterans' legislation can look at more traditional documents like newsletters, newspapers, congressional publications, and so on. As always, the sources we use depend on the kind of story we want to tell.

[Ángel Alcalde]: I completely agree: methodology depends on the kind of hypothesis and research questions, as well as on the available evidence. In principle, as Olivier notes, any methodology is legitimate. In order to understand veterans' identity, I personally found anthropological theories very insightful. Eric J. Leed, a cultural historian of the First World War, explained the veterans' war experience as a rite of passage.[20] But with this anthropological perspective there is a certain danger of essentialism. Some concepts borrowed from social and political sciences are illuminating for historians too, such as the current notion of DDR (Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration), widely used by agencies dealing with postwar recovery in current post-conflict states such as Mozambique or Liberia. This notion of DDR might also help understand veterans' demobilization after the First World War. From a more practical point of view, if one is interested in veteran politics, archival material from veterans' associations is usually

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[20] E. Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

indispensable, but in its absence other archival and published sources (for example, periodicals and state archives) can be useful. The processes of rehabilitation of disabled veterans have traditionally left a great amount of written sources, thus allowing historians to conduct very detailed analyses. Memoirs and, where possible, oral history seem crucial to understand veterans' memory.

[Grace Huxford]: Yes, I would argue that oral history is a crucial research methodology for veterans' history. In the UK, oral history emerged as a research methodology intimately tied to both community history and the reminiscence movement (the use of life narratives to promote well-being among older people).[21] Given the varying, but persistent relevance of 'community' to veterans, it seems a highly appropriate methodology through which to understand the composition of veteran groups and the changing memory of past conflict among them. The insights from the reminiscence movement also give direction in interviewing, collaborating with, and empowering older generations.[22] To be sure, oral history is not without its problems: the often-cited issues with memory distortion and anecdotes are valid, but perhaps of more importance is the contentious issue of community oral history itself. As Alistair Thomson has argued, oral history projects can be empowering for excluded groups, but potentially also conceal tensions around issues such as race or 'awkward and taboo memories'.[23] There is also a tendency to equate oral history with allowing veterans to 'speak for themselves' or to see it as a demonstration of agency. Even as an oral historian myself I would err away from the view that oral history is in and of itself always empowering. We should therefore approach it with care as a method for understanding veterans' history.

[Mark Edele]: I also do not see a specific method for the history of veterans. Depending on the questions asked and the sources available, any type of historical methodology might prove useful. In my original work on Soviet veterans I tried to use as catholic an approach to sources and methods as I could, although I was more interested in some aspects than in others. In Ángel's terms, the result was a social and political history of

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[21] A. Thomson, 'Oral History and Community History in Britain: Personal and Critical Reflections on Twenty-Five Years of Continuity and Change', *Oral History,* 36, 1 (2008), 95-104; L. Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London: Routledge, 2010)*,* 158-9.

[22] J. Bornat, 'Oral History as a Social Movement: Reminiscence and Older People', *Oral History,* 17, 2 (1989), 16-20.

[23] Thomson, 98.

Soviet Second World War veterans.[24] Their cultural history and the changing memory of war – which others had explored before me – played a lesser role in my study.[25] This focus on the social and the political had some effects on what kind of research I did. After a few trial runs, I eventually abandoned oral history, because the questions I was interested in could be answered more precisely and more quickly with archival and library research. Had I been more interested in memory, I would probably have done more oral history. More recently, my work has been comparative and collaborative, an attempt to put the Soviet experience further into a global context while simultaneously enriching the comparative history of veterans by integrating the Soviet example. Other historians of Soviet society went the opposite path, producing important local studies of veterans' reintegration and the construction of memory.[26] Both approaches – to go comparative and global and to go focused and local – strike me as legitimate research strategies. They illuminate different aspects of a complex reality.

[Gary Baines]: My own work has been influenced primarily by the 'cultural turn' in war studies and the emerging field of memory studies. The cultural studies approach to war is almost, by definition, interdisciplinary. It borrows insights from the study of history, linguistics, literature, performance and visual culture, memory, political and international relations, psychology, and so on. It owes as much to the influence of scholars who write about how war is represented by society's elites and literati, as it does to those concerned with the common soldiers' experience and witness of war. My focus is on cultural history and cultural production that shapes the experience, representation and memory of war by veterans. The shaping and transmission of war's memory is performed largely by veterans who constitute a mnemonic community [more about this, later]. However, my methodology also borrows much of its conceptual vocabulary from media studies and discourse analysis for its interrogation of articles, newspaper reports, reviews, blogs, and so on. And its appraisal of the secondary literature of the 'Border War' is supplemented

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[24] M. Edele, *Soviet Veterans of the Second World War: A Popular Movement in an Authoritarian Society, 1941-1991* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[25] N. Tumarkin, *The Living & the Dead. The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia* (New York: BasicBooks, 1994); A. Weiner, *Making Sense of War:The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001); L. Kirschenbaum, *The Legacy of the Siege of Leningrad, 1941-1995. Myth, Memories, and Monuments* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); D. Youngblood, *Russian War Films:On the Cinema Front, 1914-2005* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007).

[26] R. Dale, *Demobilized Veterans in Late Stalinist Leningrad: Soldiers to Civilians.*(London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015); V. Davis, *Myth Making in the Soviet Union and Modern Russia:Remembering World War II in Brezhnev's Hero City* (London and New York: I.B. Tauiris, 2018).

by tried and tested historical methods such as archival research, oral interviews and an analysis of primary sources. In short, my approach is unashamedly eclectic.

[Grace Huxford]: And perhaps veterans' history is at its strongest with such a broad methodological approach, addressing again the many sub-fields that underpin it. But I wonder if twentieth-century veterans as historical actors are unique in the sheer amount of historical traces they leave behind? Certainly in the British case, modern veterans are by comparison with previous generations, highly literate and create an astonishing range of ego-documents in addition to organisational or state-created documents.[27] But the definition of the 'veteran' also seems crucial to these methodological considerations too. Can veterans be seen as coherent and well-defined historical actors? If so, what characterizes them historically?

[Olivier Burtin]: The short answer is that veterans are characterized by the fact that they share a common experience of war. But I would quickly add several caveats to this definition.

First and most important, their experience is always mediated by other factors such as class, race, gender, disability, generation, religion, and so on. Veterans of different wars, and sometimes even of the same war, do not necessarily identify with each other. The highly diverse patchwork of veterans' groups that exist in countries such as the U.S. – from the Disabled American Veterans to the Jewish War Veterans to the Iraq and Afghanistan War Veterans – belies any claim of a monolithic 'veteran community'. However, this does not mean that we should see veterans as less 'coherent and well-defined actors' than other groups, for they are not the only ones to experience these kinds of internal divides. It simply means that veterans do not speak with one voice – just like women, workers, or Asian-Americans.

Second, the answer to the question of who qualifies as a 'veteran' changes across time and space, especially in a legal sense. In the U.S., for instance, the term currently applies to anyone having served in the military for a minimum period of time regardless of whether they saw combat, whereas in the UK it is reserved to those having served in

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[27] D. Vincent, *The Rise of Mass Literacy: Reading and Writing in Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), p. 10.

military operations.[28] Even though the experience of someone having served in an office in Washington, D.C., will be very different from that of someone having been deployed for combat on the frontlines, they will both qualify as 'veteran' in the US. In other words, there is nothing self-evident about being a veteran: it is a historically constructed category, which can be more or less inclusive depending on a country's specific experience of war.

Third and last, veterans do not necessarily have a monopoly on the war experience. Depending on the conflict, other groups may also claim to have "been through" war (think of Londoners during the Blitz, for instance).The difference is that veterans were typically enlisted in a military organization, as opposed to merely being civilians engulfed in war (though again, this is not always true). This distinction between veterans and war-affected civilians is noteworthy, because it often plays a key role in determining the situation of the former group after war's end. To make a crude but useful generalization, it is possible to say that the more veterans have a credible claim to being the only group affected by war, the more they will be able to obtain generous benefits from the state and to enjoy a superior social and cultural status—which makes sense, since feelings of moral obligation towards them will naturally be higher. We can see this, for instance, by comparing the US with the UK during and after the Second World War: the fact that British civilians greatly suffered from this war, while American ones were largely out of harm's way, helps explain why the special benefits granted US veterans were so much more generous (with the 1944 G.I. Bill of Rights, for instance) than those received by their British counterparts.

[Grace Huxford]: In addition to a common experience of war, I would add that veterans have a common experience of the aftermath of war too. In the case of British veterans of the Korean War, it is not remembering, but *forgetting* that binds veterans together.[29] This social experience brings the group together and constitutes a major part of their veteran identity. So I would argue that memory (or its absence) too makes veterans into a more coherent historical grouping. I think it is also important to acknowledge that 'veteranhood' is potentially a time and age-specific identity for individuals too. Hunt

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[28] C. Dandeker et al., 'What's in a Name? Defining and Caring for "Veterans": the United Kingdom in International Perspective', *Armed Forces & Society* 32, 2 (January 2006), 161–77.

[29] G. Huxford, *The Korean War in Britain: Citizenship, Selfhood and Forgetting* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 168.

writes that in many modern conflicts, veterans only seek one another out in old age, as they do not associate with the term 'veteran' until after retirement.[30] For example, many British national service conscripts of the late 1940s and 1950s did not see themselves as veterans after their military service, as they left in their early twenties. Does that mean that age is a particularly important characteristic in defining the veteran culturally or on an individual level?

[Gary Baines]: I have to agree with Olivier that the veteran is a politically and socially constructed category. In post-apartheid South Africa, for instance, the issue of defining who qualifies as a veteran is contentious. There is more at stake than semantics as definitions are linked to access to limited resources, economic opportunities and the construction of collective memory. Ex-combatants from the liberation armies, in particular, have a vested interest in being accorded veteran status. It promised, but did not necessarily deliver, a position in the newly-integrated South African National Defence Force (SANDF). Secondly, it made them eligible for certain benefits in terms of recently-enacted legislation pertaining to military veterans. Former members of the SADF, including conscripts, might not have quite the same financial stake in the matter but many attach significant value to their identity and status as veterans.

Whereas the definition of military veteran may be determined in law, identity is constructed by the self in relation to a specific veteran community. I think that we need to address the question of extent (if any) to which militarised identities linger beyond the return to civilian life. In other words, can we speak about *residual* militarised identities in veterans? In my aforementioned book, I illustrate how SADF veterans' thought processes and speech patterns reveal the ongoing impact of military training and discourse. The loyalty to the fighting unit and shared experience of military engagement seemed to have created a sense of camaraderie that outlasted demobilisation and the existence of the SADF. And for some veterans the experience of combat was exhilarating, even life-affirming and transformative, and has come to define who they are. But this is not true of all veterans. Indeed, some resent the indoctrination to which they were subjected in a hyper-masculinised military environment and having to defend a discredited ideology and illegitimate regime. So SADF veterans are not a homogeneous group and their postwar identities have only been partially fashioned by their military

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[30] Hunt, 158.

experience. And, of course, they have little in common with the (surviving) South African veterans of the Second World War even though they might belong to the same veterans' associations. For, one thing, they comprise two different age groups or generations. For another, those who served in the Union Defence Force (UDF) and went to war against Germany were volunteers, whereas the vast majority of those who were deployed in the 'Border War' were national servicemen (i.e. conscripts).

[Ángel Alcalde]: I think this conceptual issue is crucial. My answer would be no, veterans are not a coherent set of historical actors, but I do have a number of reservations. As historians such as Mark Edele and Martin Crotty have argued, all veterans in very different parts of the world and in different periods have shared some characteristics, presumably a 'sense of entitlement'. An anthropological perspective also allows us to approach all ex-soldiers as individuals shaped by the war experience. At the same time, I agree with the notion that the 'veteran' is constructed in a number of ways: defined by legislation, by culture and discourse, by politics, etc. In my view, one of the most interesting tasks is to analyse the processes by which notions of 'veteran' were constructed. Moreover, I would say that veterans' history cannot be restricted to the study of veterans as actors, but must embrace also the analysis of institutions, discourses, ideologies and practices that contributed to construct and re-construct the very notion of 'veteran'. Approaching the 'veteran' as a culturally constructed symbol, rather than as a strictly delimited actor, allows us to understand phenomena such as the emergence of stereotypes about veterans and their utilization by other historical actors. Thus, attitudes and strategies such as 'veteranizing' (publicly posing and acting as a veteran is expected to do), as James Marten describes it,[31] become meaningful in historical narratives.

[Mark Edele]: There is no universal answer to this empirical question: it requires concrete answers for concrete cases. Nevertheless, there are some patterns. A central question which always arises is who counts as a veteran and who does not. This problematic is particularly acute in situations where there are multiple and overlapping wars (the Russian and Soviet empires after both World Wars; China after the Second World War), and where the distinction between front and hinterland is blurry (as in situations of total war,

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[31] James Marten, *Sing Not War: The Lives of Union and Confederate Veterans in Gilded Age America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

civil war, or occupation and resistance to it).[32] More generally there are nearly always struggles about who gets included in the group, who not, and why. Do you have to have seen combat, for example, to count as a veteran? Do you have to have fought in uniform, or can you qualify if you served as an irregular? There are always debates about these boundaries, both among veterans themselves, among legislators producing legal definitions, and among those who implement whatever legislation exists.

[Grace Huxford]: Following on from that, how different are war veterans *from each other*? And given the varied experiences of veterans after war, what determines their socio-political agency in that context?

[Mark Edele]: Again, this is an empirical question. Some veterans are more alike than others – Australian ANZACs, to use one extreme example, were much a more coherent group in terms of age and social background than, say, veterans of the multi-national, multi-generational, multi-class, and gender-inclusive Red Army in the Second World War, to return to my favorite example.[33] The level of social, generational, gender, and national differences within a given veteran population depends on the individual case in question. The extent to which they gain collective agency after the war, likewise, depends on the society they return to, the kind of war they have fought, and the politics of post-war life. These have to be all untangled for each individual case.

Generally, I have become wary of attempts at predicting outcomes for veterans, partially because I have tried, together with Martin Crotty, to construct a matrix of variables to do so.[34] It is still a useful road-map, but things quickly unravel once you move beyond two-case comparisons, of which there are some but not nearly enough.[35]

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[32] On China in comparative context see the path-breaking study by N. Diamant, *Embattled Glory: Veterans, Military Families, and the Politics of Patriotism in China, 1949-2007* (Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, 2009).

[33] On Australia, consult S. Garton, *The Cost of War: Australians Return* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[34] M. Crotty and M. Edele, 'Total War and Entitlement: Towards a Global History of Veteran Privilege', *Australian Journal of Politics & History* 59, 1 (2013), 15-32.

[35] In addition to those already cited: S. R. Ward, ed., *The War Generation: Veterans of the First World War* (Port Washington, N. Y.: Kennikat Press, 1975); C.L. Gibson, 'Patterns of Demobilization: The US and USSR after World War Two', Ph.D. diss., University of Denver, 1983; M. Geyer, 'Ein Vorbote des Wohlfahrtsstaates: Die Kriegsopferversorgung in Frankreich, Deutschland und Großbritannien nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 9 (1983), 230-77; D.A. Gerber, ed., *Disabled Veterans in History* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2000); N. Duclos, ed., *L'adieu aux armes? Parcours d'anciens combattants* (Paris: Éditions Karthala, 2010), now translated as: *War Veterans in Postwar Situations: Chechnya, Serbia, Turkey, Peru, and Côte d'Ivoire* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan,

You will be able to find counter-examples to nearly any conceivable scenario, as we continue to learn in our ongoing project of multi-national comparison. In the final analysis, whether or not veterans find a common voice, acquire a special status, and become influential in post-war life is a political question. And in politics, you can lose even if you have the most favourable conditions. But you can also do well despite an unfavourable context. Historians can reconstruct the histories of such outcomes, but we will not be able to predict them.

[Ángel Alcalde]: As long as previous background and war experiences differ, veterans behave differently after their war experience. Then, I think the processes by which different notions of veteranhood are constructed clearly shape their agency. It was not the same to reintegrate as a defeated veteran into German society after 1945 – where veteran organizations were initially banned, as returning to the victorious United States as part of what subsequent writers have called the 'Greatest Generation'.

[Mark Edele]: And yet, very soon the defeated veterans of Hitler's army did rather well in the Federal Republic of Germany, particularly after they had convinced themselves and others that they were victims of war rather than its perpetrators.[36] Indeed, if we change the comparator, a quite different story emerges, from the one suggested by the example of the GI Bill of Rights. Thus, while the West German state legalized veteran organizations and instituted a fairly generous welfare system for returned soldiers who had lost a criminal war,[37] in the Soviet Union, the veterans who had saved Europe from Nazism and Stalin's state from obliteration saw their benefits dismantled and their efforts

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2012); and A. Brok, 'War, Neutrality and Mobilisation: Securing the unemployed in Germany and the Netherlands 1914-1927', PhD diss., The University of Western Australia, 2013.

[36] T. Kühne, "'… aus diesem Krieg werden nicht nur harte Männer heimkehren'. Kriegskameradschaft und Männlichkeit im 20. Jahrhundert.," in: *Männergeschichte – Geschlechtergeschichte. Männlichkeit im Wandel der Moderne*, ed. T. Kühne (Frankfurt: Campus Verlad. 1996), 174-192; Robert G. Moeller, *War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); S. Goltermann, *Die Gesellschaft der Überlebenden. Deutsche Kriegsheimkehrer und ihre Gewalerfahrungen im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Munich: DVA, 2009).

[37] J. Diehl, *The Thanks of the Fatherland. German Veterans after the Second World War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Frank Biess, *Homecomings. Returning POWs and the Legacies of Defeat in Postwar Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); and B. Schwelling, *heimkehr – Erinnerung – Integration. Der Verband der Heimkehrer, die ehemaligen Kriegsgefangenen und die westdeutsche Nachkriegsgesellschaft* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh Verlag, 2010).

at organization blocked.[38] So what matters is not victory or defeat, but the post-war political context, and the outcome of post-war political struggles.

[Grace Huxford]: Coming back to the previous question, to some extent, the division between those who have experienced war and those who have not is stronger than that *between* veterans. This is often associated with what Yuval Harari labels *'flesh-witnessing':* the belief that those who felt the discomfort and *sensory* elements of military experience have a distinct experience of warfare.[39] So I think that is where the most obvious distinctions are drawn. However, throughout the twentieth century, we do see current service personnel reflecting on past exploits of veterans. Kevin Foster, for instance, has shown how George Orwell, fighting in Spain in 1936, always has one eye on the First World War generation that preceded him.[40] So I think there is certainly more to be said about how serving soldiers view veterans and differentiate themselves from their past heroics. The second part of this question is particularly interesting in cases where veterans have struggled to obtain agency or 'voice'. Collective grievances are important in determining that struggle for agency: for example, Clare Makepeace has charted how former British Far East Prisoners of War (FEPOWs) successfully lobbied for compensation from the Japanese in 1951.[41] In the case of national service conscripts in Britain, perceived injustices over pensions have been particularly important in mobilising veterans around a common cause. Once again, it comes back to comparison though, as these veterans looked back to the past experiences of previous generations of service personnel and their treatment by the state in comparison to themselves.

[Gary Baines]: By way of answering this question, I wish to pick up on Olivier's earlier point that veterans do not necessarily have a monopoly on the war experience. This is certainly true. Civilians have been affected by war throughout the twentieth century. But it is worth noting that many veterans believe that their experiential knowledge of war –

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[38] B. Fieseler, "The Bitter Legacy of the 'Great Patriotic War.' Red Army Disabled Soldiers under Late Stalinism." In *Late Stalinist Russia. Society between Reconstruction and Reinvention*, ed. Juliane Fürst (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 46-61.

[39] Yuval Noah Harari, *The Ultimate Experience: Battlefield Revelations and the Making of Modern War Culture 1450-2000* (Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke and New York, 2008), 7.

[40] Kevin Foster, *Fighting Fictions: War Narrative and National Identity* (London and Sterling VA: Pluto Press, 1999), 13.

[41] Clare Makepeace, 'For "ALL Who Were Captured"? The Evolution of National Ex-prisoner of War Associations in Britain after the Second World War', *Journal of War & Culture Studies,* 7, 3 (2014), 260.

my restatement of Harari's concept of 'flesh witnessing' that Grace mentions above – entitles them to ownership of the narrative of any given war. This claim is typically expressed by way of the soldiers' mantra: 'We were there'. Veterans almost always reckon that their experience affords them a privileged understanding of war. The corollary is that commentators uninitiated in combat and armchair critics (including scholars) who have conducted research from their ivory towers are dismissed with the injunction: 'How can you understand? … You were not there.' This amounts to an assertion that the authority of the soldiers' witness can and should not be challenged. Following Stéphane Audoin-Rousseau and Annette Becker,[42] I would argue that first-hand experience or knowledge alone does not entitle veterans to speak about war. Conversely, a lack thereof does not disqualify the historian from doing so. We must reject the notion of a closed and self-fulfilling circle of understanding and truth. So I am cognisant of the fact that as an historian and a veteran, that mine is far from the last word on war but that my dual identity enables a multi-perspectival approach to the 'Border War'.

[Grace Huxford]: A lot of our answers so far have obliquely referred to veterans' collective identity, which is an important area to analyse in greater detail. So, beginning with veterans' associations, are they a useful window to approach veterans as a whole?

[Olivier Burtin]: Veterans' groups are a very useful window into veterans' history: they provide us with insights into how veterans related both to each other and to the larger civilian population. At the same time, we should keep in mind that they are not necessarily representative of the larger veteran community. This is not surprising: after all, veterans' groups typically account for only a fraction of the total veteran population.[43] As I have said before, these groups also often advocate for one specific sub-group of veterans— defined by their disability, race, gender, or else—and therefore should not be construed to speak for all former soldiers. Neither do they necessarily speak even for all their members: as can happen in any large organization, the leadership of veterans' groups may fall into the hands of a small minority of committed activists whose interests do not align

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[42] Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *1914-1918: Understanding the Great War* (London: Profile Books, 2000), 28.

[43] In the US for instance, even the largest such group (the American Legion, with nearly 2.4 million members) accounts for barely more than 10 percent of the total veteran population of about 22 million.

with those of the majority of their membership (they may be more conservative and respectful of the status quo, for instance).

[Grace Huxford]: From an oral history perspective, veterans' associations are vital both practically and historically. From a practical perspective, they often act as 'gatekeepers' who can provide access to veterans and helpful support in contacting members. More historically, their formation and character are vital in understanding the post-memory of conflict: the formation of the British Korea Veterans Association (BKVA) in the 1980s is a fascinating insight into the evolving memory of the conflict. But we should be aware of those who do not identify with or take part in this associational culture.

[Mark Edele]: Yes, veterans' associations are important foci of research for historians of veterans, but we need to avoid conflating them with veterans as a whole. For one, we need to ask what share of veterans are actually organized. Secondly, we need to find out what share of these organized veterans then are active in the organizations and hence make their voice heard. Do certain veterans not join organizations? Why do they join or why do then not? These are all empirical questions with diverse answers, depending on the cases we investigate. And they are sometimes surprisingly hard to answer with any level of certainty.

[Ángel Alcalde]: I would agree that one should not confuse veterans as a whole with the community of associations' members. Historians should be extremely wary of generalizing assertions such as 'veterans supported the government', just because the hegemonic veteran organization in that country stated loyalty to the authorities. Processes by which certain groups of individuals are prevented from joining veteran associations are precisely an important part of veterans' history. But in modern history, associations are still crucial in observing veterans' history, at least in societies where such sociability exists. We should not forget, nonetheless, the history of veterans in regions of the world where associative life was much more limited (such as former regions of the British and French Empires) or thwarted by authoritarian regimes (like communist China or Spain in

the 1940s).[44] State-run veterans' organizations are something different to veterans' associations.

[Gary Baines]: While I agree that the study of formal veterans' associations is instructive for understanding their part in politicking and the dynamics between groups, Winter has noted that at the interface of formal organizations of civil society and informal networks of family and kin there exist what he has termed 'fictive kinships' such as veteran networks.[45] Such networks operate in the 'real world', as well as in cyberspace. Indeed, I discovered that SADF veterans employ social media to tell their stories and so cultivate a sense of belonging to a (defunct) institution and an imagined white nation. Their withdrawal from the public sphere results in their retreat into private enclaves or discursive laagers. Here they converse with family members in the home, or with friends around the outdoor ritual of the *braai* (barbecue), or with white compatriots and expatriates in 'virtual pubs' (i.e. internet forums such as chat rooms). These closed communities simulate a different time and reality, and create the space for the performance and rehearsal of nostalgia. Such self-segregated socialisation fosters the construction of a mnemonic community that share group or collective memories. There is evidence to suggest that US veterans of the Vietnam War engage in similar activities. So while I cannot generalise about this development, these observations might have a wider relevance to our understanding of the collective identities of veterans.

[Olivier Burtin]: To stimulate our debate on veterans' collective identity, I'd like to approach the issue from a slightly different and more provocative angle. Is it possible for historians to examine military veterans in the same way that E. P. Thompson looked at English workers, as a separate 'class'? [46] What are some of the factors that contribute to the formation of a distinct class consciousness among veterans? In what ways are veterans different from (or similar to) other classes such as workers, small businessmen, professionals, etc.?

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[44] G. White, 'The Politics of Demobilized Soldiers from Liberation to Cultural Revolution' *The China Quarterly*, 82 (1980), 187-213; Á. Alcalde, 'War Veterans and Fascism during the Franco Dictatorship in Spain (1936-1959)', *European History Quarterly*, 47/1 (2017), 78-98.

[45] J. Winter, 'Forms of kinship and remembrance in the aftermath of the Great War' in J. Winter and E. Sivan, eds, *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 40-1, 47-54.

[46] E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966).

[Ángel Alcalde]: The concept of 'class' has specific economic and material connotations, and in this sense I believe it is very difficult to observe war veterans as a separate group – separated from other classes – because the variety of socio-economic and material circumstances that characterize them is huge. So, I do not think observing veterans as a 'class' is useful. What is illuminating is realizing how veterans as historical actors sometimes perceived *themselves* as a single 'class'. It is true that demobilized veterans often felt threatened in socio-economic terms. Historian Bruno Cabanes, exploring First World War veterans' demobilization, has suggested the idea of a 'moral economy of demobilization' (an idea that directly relates to Thompson).[47] Veterans may widely share economic or material interests, such as obtaining pensions. However, there were always huge differences in social and economic status between officers and soldiers. After the First World War, socialists and communists often tried to approach veterans by making a distinction between proletarian soldiers and bourgeois officers. Antonio Gramsci even wrote about the revolutionary role veterans should have.[48]

In my view, as Antoine Prost argued, it is difficult to equate veterans to workers or any other 'social class'. I prefer to talk about veteran *identity*, rather than class. Historically, some veterans developed a strong awareness of forming a distinct group that cut across social and national boundaries. On occasions it was said, 'Veterans of the world, unite!' However, these projects often had the purpose of concealing or dissolving much clearer socio-economic differences. European fascists, for instance, gave more prominence to the community of the war experience while condemning the class struggle. In short, although historical actors sometimes viewed veterans as a separate class, historians should not fall into the same trap.

[Gary Baines]: I am of the view that age and generational distinctions are more useful when it comes to disaggregating veterans. The cohort of white males conscripted into the SADF between 1966 and 1989 has been called the national service generation (NSG). Generation here does not signify the co-existence of similarly aged people as much as it denotes their sense of belonging to a group with a shared historical consciousness.[49]

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[47] Cabanes, *La Victoire Endeuillée*; E.P. Thompson, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', *Past & Present,* 50 (1971), 76-136.

[48] [Unsigned editorial] "I reduci di guerra", *L'Ordine Nuovo* (Turin), I, 27 (22 November 1919).

[49] K. Mannheim, 'The Problem of Generations' in Karl Mannheim, ed, *The Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1952), 286.

Personal narratives fashion the macrobiography of a generation and, conversely, the generational macrobiography produces a shared consciousness that shapes the personal narratives.[50] Thus there is mediation between personal memories and those of the generational unit. Although conscripts were all white males of a similar age, they came from a cross-section of society and responded in a variety of ways to their military experience. Some were career soldiers but most were conscripts. So I do not presume that the veteran community speaks with a singular, coherent voice.[51]

[Olivier Burtin]: As I said, I used this comparison mostly to provoke discussion: of course, I recognize that war veterans are not a 'class' in the strict Marxian sense of the word, as referring to a group of individuals sharing a similar relationship to the means of production. As we've said before, veterans are not defined primarily in economic terms but by their shared experience of military conflict. Where I think that Thompson's approach can be useful, though, is in getting us to see the concept of 'class' in a broader sense, as referring to a group of persons conscious of sharing common material interests that distinguish them from the rest of society and engaging in collective action to advance the same. Veterans can sometimes fall into that category. For instance, in my own research on veterans' politics in the mid-twentieth century U.S., I have found interesting evidence that some factors encouraged the growth of a class consciousness among former soldiers. Veterans who felt most different from civilianstended to be older, to be active members of a veterans' organization, to draw some form of veterans' benefits, and to have a lower economic or educational status.[52] While we should of course be cautious in applying these results to other periods and places, they do point to a simple yet interesting observation: that individuals tend to define themselves as veterans when they need the benefits associated with this status the most—which ties into what Grace said at the beginning of our roundtable about the role of age. Going a step further, this suggests a causal link between public policy and identity formation: the prior existence of material

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[50] E. Ben-Ze'ev and E. Lomsky-Feder, 'The Canonical Generation: Trapped between Personal and National Memories', *Sociology*, 43, 6 (2009), 1048.

[51] G. Baines, 'Shame, blame or reaffirmation? White conscripts reassess the meaning of the "Border War" in post-apartheid South Africa', *Interculture*, 5, 3 (2008), 214-27.

[52] These were the results of a survey of nearly 3,000 U.S. veterans conducted by the firm of Elmo Roper in October 1954 for the President's Commission on Veterans' Pensions (also known as the Bradley Commission, after its chairman Omar Bradley). See *Veterans in Our Society: Data on the Conditions of Military Service and on the Status of the Veteran*, 84 H. Prt. 261 (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1956), part III.

benefits associated with that status can encourage veterans to self-consciously identify and organize as such. Political scientists are familiar with this dynamic: Andrea Louise Campbell, for instance, has shown how the creation of Social Security in the U.S. led to the rise of the elderly as a powerful interest group (and not the other way around, as one might have thought).[53] The same could be said for veterans' pension programs: their existence tends to encourage veterans to mobilize as a separate group to defend them. The broader point here is that the process of class formation (again, I'm using this term loosely) is not only inherently political but historically constructed and contingent. As E. P. Thompson demonstrated for the English working class, veterans both *make* themselves and *are made* into a class.

[Mark Edele]: I agree with Ángel that veterans cannot be understood as a social class in either a Marxist (including Thompsonian) or a Weberian understanding of the term. They are neither a group with an approximately similar position vis-à-vis the means of production, nor are they a group with an approximately even distribution of life chances. Nevertheless, as Olivier observes, the question of whether or not veterans form a social group is central to any social history of veterans. Some have used 'identity' to describe such groupness, but this term is a bit too fuzzy for our purposes.[54] My own attempts to find a way to talk about the social cohesion and social action of veterans led to two terms: 'status group' and 'entitlement group'. The first I took directly from Max Weber, who has developed a clearly articulated distinction between status and class. If a class is a group of people who share similar cultural, social, and material resources, a status group shares a special esteem by members of the larger social formation. This esteem is expressed in special privileges, in modern societies often institutionalized in law.[55] The problem was that in the Soviet case before 1978 veterans did not really form a status group – there were no laws giving them preferential access to goods and services and until 1956 there was not even a legal organization representing their interests (outside Ukraine, which formed something of an anomaly for a while). Nevertheless, veterans often acted in concert, driven by a shared sense that on the basis of their wartime sacrifice

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[53] A. Louise Campbell, *How Policies Make Citizens: Senior Political Activism and the American Welfare State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

[54] For a devastating critique of the term see R. Brubaker, and F. Cooper, 'Beyond Identity', *Theory and Society* 29 (2000), 1-47.

[55] M. Weber, *Wirtschaft Und Gesellschaft. Grundriss der verstehenden Soziologie. Studienausgabe.* 5th, rev. ed. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1990), 177, 179-80 (part 1, ch. 4, §§ 1, 3).

they were entitled to better treatment than they received.[56] I called this an 'entitlement group'.[57]

This choice of words has proved somewhat confusing to some readers. In English 'entitlement' can be used as a synonym for 'status', while I meant to distinguish claims to special treatment from their institutionalization. What I tried to capture is that in the Soviet case the sense of entitlement they shared allowed veterans to act in concert even if they did not have an organization or arguably even did not share a sense of identity as veterans (an 'imagined community', to use another overused term). Eventually, and for fairly complex contextual reasons, this uncoordinated mass movement was successful and a legal status was instituted in 1978: the entitlement community had become a status group.[58]

These terms were originally developed for the Soviet context, where greater restrictions on self-organization and expression applied than in democratic contexts, but they also proved productive for our comparative work. The biggest conceptual issue we are struggling with in our multi-national comparison at the moment is one particular aspect of status which I had neglected somewhat in my earlier work: the fact that the immediate community the veterans are embedded in might recognize their special status even if the state does not (as was often the case in the Soviet Union). Or the locals might scoff at veterans despite the fact that there was state discourse honouring them (as was sometimes the case in China). We try to capture this distinction by the terms 'horizontal' and 'vertical' status.[59]

[Grace Huxford]: Although many of our examples have spanned the twentieth century, the post-1945 period clearly raises particular questions in veterans' history. Compared to previous time periods, what do you think were some of the distinguishing features of post-1945 veteranhood?

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[56] M. Edele, *Soviet Veterans of the Second World War: a Popular Movement in an Authoritarian Society, 1941-1991* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), Chapters 7 and 8.

[57] M. Edele, 'Soviet Veterans as an Entitlement Group, 1945-1955', *Slavic Review* 65, 1 (2006), 111-37.

[58] M. Edele, 'Collective Action in Soviet Society: The Case of War Veterans', in *Writing the Stalin Era: Sheila Fitzpatrick and Soviet Historiography*, ed.by Kiril Tomoff, Julie Hessler and Golfo Alexopoulos (New York: Palgrave, 2011), 117-32.

[59] Diamant, 25-6.

[Ángel Alcalde]: In Western countries there was a clear evolution in veterans' affairs after 1945. Sometimes historians compare the history of veterans after the First and Second World Wars, by taking these two different periods as self-contained and hermetically separated periods. Of course, there are differences and similarities between the situation of veterans in these periods. However, one cannot disregard the very obvious fact that the second post-war period came after the first. There is a historical continuity. In this sense, in 1945 historical actors were acutely aware of how veterans had been treated, and how they had behaved, in earlier times. There was, therefore, a process of learning. In the realm of international veterans' organizations, there were important differences in the political language employed, on the one hand, by FIDAC and CIAMAC in the interwar period and, on the other hand, the one put forward by the World Veterans Federation after its creation in 1950. The failure of FIDAC and CIAMAC in preventing a new war was a bitter lesson learnt by peace-oriented veterans in the period after the Second World War. Policymakers dealing with veterans' demobilization after 1945 also tried not to repeat the errors committed after 1918. The GI Bill and the splendid privileges American veterans enjoyed after 1945 cannot be understood without taking into account interwar veterans' protest movements. The work of historian Stephen Ortiz shows clearly this continuity.[60] There were also important technical improvements that eased disabled veterans' rehabilitation. So, probably it was easier to be a veteran in some post-1945 societies than after 1918. But the situation of veterans dramatically changed from one country to another, at least in Europe. As regards to the rest of the world, post-colonial countries for instance, veterans' issues also changed substantially after 1945, given the decolonization context. This is still a topic that needs to be investigated.

I would also add another point: 1945 was certainly a watershed in veterans' history, but I think another important watershed was Vietnam. The Vietnam War dramatically changed Western perceptions of veterans as political and social actors. New realities and stereotypes emerged, in connection with anti-war and pacifist movements. After that, the experience of being a veteran also changed. Historicizing all these processes of change from a long-term perspective is something that partially remains to be done.

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[60] S.R. Ortiz, ed., *Veterans' Policies, Veterans' Politics: New Perspectives on Veterans in the Modern United States* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012); *Beyond the Bonus March and the GI Bill: How Veteran Politics Shaped the New Deal Era* (New York: NYU Press, 2009).

[Olivier Burtin]: In the US, I can see at least three things that distinguish the post-1945 years from earlier periods. First, the historically high proportion of former soldiers in the total population, higher than even after the Civil War (13 per cent in 1950 compared to 8 per cent in the late nineteenth century). Second, the prestige that their associations enjoyed, at least for a time. In the aftermath of the Second World War, groups like the American Legion or the Veterans of Foreign Wars were among the most important mass-membership associations in American politics, as influential as labor unions or religious denominations. Third, this was the first time that the U.S. federal government tried to help able-bodied veterans readjust to civilian life (with the 1944 G.I. Bill of Rights), as opposed to just taking care of disabled veterans or rewarding them with programs such as land grants.

[Grace Huxford]: In the British case, the post-1945 period is one of ambiguity, in terms of both terminology and status. The establishment of peacetime military conscription between 1948 and 1960 also problematized who was seen as a 'veteran' in this period. I'd also argue that this is a period of important linguistic change too: as Nigel Hunt notes, the 'creation' of PTSD in 1980 as a medical disorder gave a new lexicon for understanding veteran experience.[61] These frameworks persist through the present-day and pervade many cultural representations of military life.

[Mark Edele]: In much of the developed world, after 1945 fighting in war became a minority experience. The end of mass mobilization and the rise of more restrictive war making widened the gap between veterans and civilians. This statement should hold true for Europe, the Soviet Union and its successor states, the United States, Australia, and eventually also China. The same can probably not be said for civil wars in Asia, Africa, and now the Arab world.

As far as the Soviet Union was concerned, the context of the immediate post-war years was fairly similar after both World Wars. It was not easier to be a veteran in the 1940s than in the 1920s. Eventually, however, once the veterans of the Great Patriotic War had won a special status, their position overshadowed all other former soldiers. The veterans of the wars in Afghanistan, Chechnya, and now eastern Ukraine never managed

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[61] Hunt, 123.

to get similar recognition.[62] Vietnam did not mark any change in the Soviet context, although Afghanistan is sometimes treated as the 'Soviet Vietnam', and could be used to construct an analogous story.[63]

[Gary Baines]: I agree with Ángel that the Vietnam War represented a watershed in veterans' history – not only for the USA but for other nations, too. The reception and treatment of US veterans following Vietnam was vastly different to their counterparts who had fought in the Second World War. Veterans of the Second World War came to be called the 'Greatest Generation' precisely *because* the American public was uneasy about the manner in which their soldiers had fought (or not) in Vietnam and comparisons between these generations of veterans reflected poorly on the latter. But equally important was the inclusion of PTSD in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM III) in 1980. The American historian Jerry Lembcke has argued that PTSD is a socially constructed category whose meaning is only partly derived from its medical context, and that it has mutated from a diagnostic category to a social trope. He contends that the seductiveness of PTSD caused some US veterans to embrace it as an identity and their comrades to assign it as a badge of honour.[64] Accordingly, they were viewed not only as 'victims' but as 'heroes'. This badge was worn by those who were said to have fought hard and experienced "real" war. PTSD was no longer regarded as a mark of failed masculinity but rather that of the brave soldier who had been on the frontline in perhaps the ultimate display of typically heteronormative masculinity. Whether victims or heroes, returning soldiers appropriated the symptoms of PTSD and a war-story biography that conformed to what they thought family and friends would expect to see and hear.[65] Lembcke's argument has a degree of resonance in post-apartheid South Africa where SADF veterans have readily self-diagnosed themselves with the symptoms of PTSD and claimed victimhood.

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[62] N. Danilova, 'The Development of an Exclusive Veterans' Policy: The Case of Russia', *Armed Forces & Society*, 20, 10 (2009), 1-27.

[63] See, for example: O. Sarin and L. Dvoretskii, *The Afghan Syndrome: The Soviet Union's Vietnam* (Navato: Presidio, 1993). On the struggles of the *afgantsy* see Felix Ackermann and Michael Galbas, eds. "Back from Afghanistan: The Experiences of Svoiet Afghan War Veterans," special issue of *Journal of Svoiet an dPost-Soviet Politics and Society* 1, No. 2 (2015).

[64] J. Lembcke, *PTSD: Diagnosis and Identity in Post-Empire America* (Kentucky: Lexington Books, 2015), xi, 18-19.

[65] *Ibid*., 10.

[Grace Huxford]: Gary's point touches on a theme that has underpinned many of our answers: the cultural memory of war. My final question is then: how do veterans and veteran groups interact with or shape the collective memory of post-1945 conflict? I pose this question because in my work I have explored the relationship between collective memory and autobiographical memory, a familiar area to many of us. Alistair Thomson's work on Australian veterans has been particularly notable here, showing how veterans' memories can be shaped by the collective imperatives at the time of an oral history interview.[66] In the case of the Korean War, the Second World War shapes many veterans' viewpoints over their lack of remembrance, but so too do later wars such as the Falklands. It is also important to consider the role of veterans in creating collective memory. Are veterans part of national stories of warfare or excluded from them? In Europe, the passing of the First World War generation has led to evermore ingenious ways of remembering, but the voice of the veteran is now, unavoidably, fixed into a particular narrative. Can veterans' voices subvert these narratives though?

[Ángel Alcalde]: As the tragedies of the Second World War were directly experienced by civilian populations, combat veterans were not any longer the main social group that felt entitled to shape the memory of war. The distinctions between those who had fought and those who had not were much more blurred after 1945. The number of persons actually involved in combat substantially decreased in western societies, so as time passed, the role of veterans in shaping war memory lost prominence. Meanwhile, victims of war gained visibility. Veterans sometimes challenge these narratives, but the centrality of victimhood probably made veterans cultivate their own memories in an increasingly autonomous way.

[Olivier Burtin]: In the U.S., veterans' groups played an active role in shaping the memory of war (as they had since long before the Second World War). They contributed to raising funds for war cemeteries and memorials both at home and abroad; played a leading role in commemorating annual celebrations like Memorial Day or Veterans' Day; tried to encourage the teaching of a certain version of American history in schools; censored public speakers who tried to promote a more radical view of history; and

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[66] A. Thomson, *Anzac Memories*: living with the Legend (Melbourne: Oxford University Press Australia and New Zealand, 1994).

organized pilgrimages to former battlegrounds in Europe, as a way both for their members to visit places they had been to during the war, and to build partnerships with other veterans' groups abroad.

[Gary Baines]: At this point, I would merely wish to return to the concept of mnemonic community which is a useful vehicle for understanding veteran agency in shaping and disseminating memories of their war. Collective memories do not arise spontaneously nor take shape independently of such agency. They are born and shaped by agents, whom we might call "memory makers" or "memory bearers", that include cultural brokers, public intellectuals, teachers, and politicians who are instrumental in the public construction of memory. They select, modify, negotiate and reify particular versions of the past. These agents employ the cultural tools of language and narratives to make meaning. These interpretative codes play a significant part in shaping the views of the past and present that bind the members of a mnemonic community together. They comprise two elements: the schemata, the temporal narrative structure in which individuals construe their memory, and the script, which is composed of existing preconceptions and opinions on issues that pertain to the memory in question.[67] Individuals learn to conventionalize, structure and narrativize their memories in accordance with the dominant social mores and beliefs which prevail in the individual's different mnemonic communities.[68] They relate to the group's shared experiences and memories, commonalities from which identities and narratives are constructed that articulate the individual's self-perception in relation to others. Such constructions are, in turn, contingent upon the reactions of the dominant socio-cultural group towards its manifestations. I believe that this paradigm might be useful in understanding the development of collective memories wherever military veterans might have access to (social) media and the public sphere.

[Grace Huxford]: As we bring our discussion to a close, I am struck by the vibrancy of the field of veterans' history, not just in the diverse case studies referenced by our discussants, but in the wider methodological or theoretical interventions that can be made through it: it encompasses the potentials and pitfalls of comparative history-writing, the

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[67] Winter and Sivan, *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century*, 13.

[68] E. Zerubavel, 'Social Memories: Steps to a Sociology of the Past', *Qualitative Sociology*, 19 (1997), 286.

search for suitably inclusive models of collectivity, and the shifting societal and linguistic assumptions that underpin labels such as 'veteran'. Although our discussants have voiced a range of opinions that might inform our examination and conceptualisation of the veteran, the discussion nevertheless demonstrates the promise that veterans' history holds as a tool through which analyse the changing relationship between war and society in the twentieth century.