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A Critical Discourse Analysis of Military-Related Remembrance Rhetoric in UK

Sport: Communicating Consent for British Militarism

Abstract

Sport has been a major strategic cultural practice used by Western allies to encourage citizens to support and ‘thank’ their governments’ military actors. This increasingly visible intersection of sport and militarism occurred simultaneously alongside the development of propaganda departments by the American and Canadian governments seeking to use sport (and other popular cultural activities) to communicate consent for their respective military actors and actions. United Kingdom (UK) has witnessed many of these campaigns being replicated with a wide range of popular culture practices being utilized to provide public performances of support for its nation’s military personnel. This article critically analyzes “support the troops” rhetoric in UK by discussing a selection of official sporting and political articulations. Of significance is the extent to which those coordinating numerous support strategies for military-related violence (and its political rationale) have incorporated the language and symbolism of UK military-related remembrance, which historically has been viewed as a sorrowful and sombre reflection on the mass slaughter of millions during two world wars. The significance and centrality of on-the-surface-apolitical communication in and of sport as a form of ideological inculcation is illustrated.

Keywords: militarism; sport; remembrance; CDA; Britain

A Critical Discourse Analysis of Military-Related Remembrance Rhetoric in UK Sport: Communicating Consent for British Militarism

The militarisation of everyday culture has a long history (Lutz, 2002; Giroux, 2004). A key feature of everyday culture in many western nation-states is sport which has been shown to be a significant component helping to construct and reinforce militaristic ideology. The everyday use of sport\war metaphors has been powerful in rationalizing the first Gulf War and furnishing “the ideological hegemony of white Western male elites” (Jansen & Sabo, 1994, p. 1). Sport’s internal structures and norms – patriarchal, competitive, and masculine-validating – have been shown to parallel conflict and hinder conflict resolution strategies according to Shields and Bredemeier (1996). The events of 9/11 and the subsequent war on terror provided new contexts in which to understand civil-military relations, with Giroux (2004) suggesting it led to America witnessing “a rapidly increasing militarisation of public space and culture (p. 211). He added “public spaces on the domestic front are increasingly being organised around values supporting a highly militarised, patriarchal, and jingoistic culture” (p. 211). Silk (2012) convincingly extended this argument to sport, observing that the aftermath of 9/11 provided an historic moment:

in which George W. Bush appropriated sport and television, mobilizing the affective realism of the mediated sporting spectacle – the popular – to harness,

educate, and advance, through sometimes (not so) subtle rhetoric, a particular geopolitical trajectory built on economic, military, religious, and ideological domination. This was a moment, then, in which the banal, the sporting popular, was harnessed, politicized, and ... deployed as soft-core weaponry in a hard-core militarized industrial complex, fighting wars (p. 3).

Since 9/11 (and the subsequent invasion/liberation of Iraq by a coalition of US-led western nation-states' military forces), sport has been an even greater strategic cultural practice – “soft-core weapon” - used by the United States and allies to enable and encourage citizens to support and thank their governments' national military actors (see Silk & Falcoux, 2005; Butterworth, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2017; King, 2008; Scherer & Koch, 2010; Silk, 2012; Jenkins, 2013; Kelly, 2013, 2017a, 2017b; Fischer, 2014; Cree & Caddick, 2019). Government propaganda departments *Operation Tribute to Freedom* (USA) and *Operation Connection* (Canada) emerged in 2003 and 2004 and have placed sport and other such patriotism-inducing cultural events at the centre of their “support the troops” initiatives (see Stempel, 2006; Butterworth & Moskal, 2009; Scherer & Koch, 2010). In 2015 freedom of information requests revealed the United States government had paid sports clubs more than \$5 million dollars (combined) for military appreciation events which, at the time, appeared to be organically supported rather than manufactured, commodified and purchased (Mach, 2015). As Silk's (2012) aforementioned quote

implied, such events can be described as an extension of Billig's (1995) "banal nationalism". Billig suggests:

The citizens of an established nation do not, day by day, consciously decide that their nation should continue. On the other hand, the reproduction of a nation does not occur magically. Banal practices, rather than conscious choice or collective acts of imagination, are required. Just as a language will die rather for want of regular users, so a nation must be put to daily use (p. 95).

Likewise, the reproduction of military support requires banal everyday reinforcement rather than consciously created citizen actions if it is to succeed. American sport provides a rich environment for such banal militarism.

United Kingdom has witnessed many of the American and Canadian campaigns being replicated with a wide range of popular culture practices being utilized in order to provide public performances of support for its nation's military personnel. Saturday night television shows, national beauty competitions, military-related music albums, military branded food products, newly formed military charities, and military-centred invented traditions such as Armed Forces Day have combined to normalize and communicate consent for British militarism (see Kelly, 2013 and Gee, 2014). And in tandem with the US and Canada, this multi-agency collection of practices positions sport as a key cultural arena in which similar and apparently coordinated messages of

support the troops are being expressed. Illustrating this strategy, one of the many newly invented sport-military partnerships to emerge during this period was *Tickets For Troops*, which facilitates the gifting of tickets to military personnel for sporting and cultural events. In helping with its UK launch, British Lance Corporal Johnson Beharry explained his interpretation of the partnership's significance and meaning:

This is a fantastic idea and it is heartening and uplifting for any serving soldier or ex-soldier to know that people really appreciate the work they do and this is a brilliant way for demonstrating respect for our Armed Forces (cited in Sports Journalists' Association, 2009).

Such statements have become normalized in relation to these military-related events. But what do *appreciate* and *respect* mean in such contexts? Addressing this and related questions is crucial for illuminating the relationship between language, ideology and power. For instance, in this and many similar cases, language articulates related – yet significantly different – messages in ways which dissolve their difference to conflate respect with appreciation for “the work they do”: In other words, by way of language articulation, *acts of violence* performed by British military personnel under instruction from the British government based on its foreign policy objectives, become euphemistically neutralized as ‘work’ that is then claimed to be appreciated by the wider UK public. It has been argued that “British military violence and war are, in part,

made possible through everyday embodied and emotional practices of remembrance and forgetting” (Basham, 2015, p. 1). These cultural performances of “respecting” and “appreciating”, and their public and official interpretation being used to evidence public support for “the work” the British military do, represent some of the everyday embodied practices making British military violence possible – especially if such messages can be articulated in ways that facilitate *forgetting* the political motivations and human costs inexorably related to some (or many) of the actions carried out by the military actors being venerated. Indeed, Billig (1995) partially enables us to understand such processes of selective amnesia by drawing on Ernest Renan’s (1990) much earlier work suggesting that forgetting was “a crucial element in the creation of nations” (cited on p. 37). Billig’s attention here was specifically on intellectuals and the construction of the nation, but the conceptual principle also applies to constructed representations of British militarism (in and beyond intellectuals).

Historians creatively remember ideologically convenient facts of the past, while overlooking what is discomfiting ... Forgetting is not fortuitous; nor is it to be blamed on the absent-mindedness of particular scholars. Instead, it fits an ideological pattern in which ‘our’ nationalism ... is forgotten: it ceases to appear as nationalism, disappearing into the ‘natural’ environment of ‘societies’ (p. 38).

Performing an equivalent selective amnesia around what to “respect” and “appreciate” regarding British militarism, British officials continually assume and assert that support for British troops is apolitical (despite discursively framing it as politically infused) and disconnected from any overt militaristic ideological position. While such emotive language is central to these debates it is rarely critically analyzed. A rare exception is Stahl’s (2009) work in an American context in which he argued that, following the Vietnam war, America experienced:

[a] massive reorganization of the public’s understanding of war and its dominant justifications. This new rhetoric of deflection mainly relocated the rationale for war from external objectives to the internal struggle to protect the soldier (p. 536).

Reorganizing the British public’s understanding of the war on terror has similarly relocated the focus away from the geopolitical ideological goals of the UK government (“external objectives”) to the individual soldier/troop. Such reorganizing has invoked the language of “appreciating”, “respecting”, “remembering”, and “supporting” British militarism through the reductionist rhetoric of (“the troops”). Stahl (2009) argued that in the post-Vietnam war period in America, the rhetoric of support the troops had two key elements. Both deflection and dissociation work, he argued, “to discipline and mute public deliberation in matters of war” (Stahl, 2009, p. 533). This article shifts attention to United Kingdom offering a critical discourse analysis of “support the troops” rhetoric in

the UK. It does this by discussing a selection of official sporting and political articulations which have been perhaps the most publicly prominent. Of central significance is the extent to which those planning and coordinating numerous support strategies for military-related violence (and its political rationale) have incorporated and re-positioned the language and symbolism of UK military-related remembrance, which historically has been viewed as a sorrowful and sombre reflection on the mass slaughter of millions in European trenches during World War I and the defeat of fascism in World War II. A key site for such support has been the historically interpreted (and widely lauded) apolitical world of sport. Recent events and movements – such as Black Lives Matter and Take a Knee – have explicitly exposed the political utility of sport. Analyzing the intersection of sport, media, and military in this emerging context enables us to build on and extend the existing body of work in these combined fields (Silk & Falcoux, 2005; Butterworth, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2017; Scherer & Koch, 2010; Silk, 2012). Specifically, it permits a critical account of the use of sport for ideological purposes in United Kingdom. Revealingly, during a period in which sport’s non-political position has been exposed to be a façade, it also illustrates the sustaining power of the communication of sport as a form of ideological inculcation while still clinging to the pretence of being apolitical.

Ideological Contexts Underpinning the Sport and Military Relationship

The British Public Don’t Support the Troops Enough

In 2007 - the year that British military charity *Help For Heroes* emerged, and one year before red poppies began appearing on the jerseys of most British Premier League football clubs - senior British military commander General Dannatt lamented that the British public don't support the troops enough (Dannatt, 2007). Dannatt's comments came amid increasing questions of legality around the 2003 invasion/liberation of Iraq – resulting in three official UK inquiries – ultimately leading to an ex-British secret service (MI5) chief claiming that threats of terror on British streets were increasing rather than decreasing as a direct result of British military action in locations such as Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria (Manningham-Buller, 2010). This was also a period when the British government and military leaders (including Dannatt) feared public support to be wavering as a result of British troops returning home disfigured or dead. For example, in discussing the English town (Wootton Bassett) that had become known nationally for commemorating the dead British military personnel being returned home from conflicts abroad, Dannatt warned, “the Wootton Bassett factor runs the risk of undermining morale of the population at home and fueling the bring the boys (sic) home agenda” (Cited in Gee, 2014, p. 29). Echoing these sentiments two years later, the British Chief of Defense Staff Jock Stirrup complained that the Taliban's bombs were less threatening to the morale of British troops than “declining will” among the public to see the war won (cited in Gee, 2014, p. 29). These comments become more significant in relation to sport and communicating consent for British militarism because they were made the same year that

Tickets For Troops emerged. Consequently, two of the highest profile and most successful military charities, both of which utilised sport to offer support for servicemen and women, emerged in the same respective years that two separate senior British military chiefs publicly lamented a lack of support for British military. Revealingly, in terms of language use and the framing of preferred interpretations, Stirrup added, “support for our servicemen and women is indivisible from support for this mission” (cited in Gee, 2014, p. 29). Connecting support for military actors to support for military actions in this way raises questions about the meaning of support the troops activities, the charities providing such support, and the sports which support them. British Prime Minister, Tony Blair made similar ideologically-loaded pleas for the public to make seamless connection between support for soldiers and support for military violence stressing “the armed forces want public opinion not just behind them but behind their mission; [we should] understand their value not just their courage” (cited in Gee 2014, p. 29). Extending the sentiments further still to include freedom and way of life, another British Prime Minister David Cameron assimilated British citizens into supporting the military by discussing another recently invented tradition - Armed Forces Day (1) - stating:

these initiatives have the full support of the nation ... [Armed Forces Day is] an opportunity for the nation to pay respect to those fighting for our freedom and way of life (see Sky News, 2013).

Such public pronouncements from high-level officials may be more fully understood – ideologically and contextually – by considering that the UK’s Ministry of Defense released a report in the same year of the Prime Minister’s comments warning of an increasingly “risk averse” public who need to be “won over” (cited in Gee, 2014, p. 31).

Thus, when yet another Prime Minister, Theresa May implored British citizens to “support all that the troops do” (cited in Elgot, 2016) in conjunction with the poppy being displayed on national football jerseys, such pronouncements were part of an overarching political and military intersection seeking the manufacturing of militaristic consent. For example, connection is continually made between the ontologically separate *support for troops* and *support for military action*; military action which includes politically opposed/supported military violence - sometimes euphemistically described by public figures in Britain as mission, work, duty, and service - carried out to fulfill the British state’s politically infused foreign policies. This umbilical connection is often made, and in these noted examples, given the most senior official endorsement by one of Britain’s most senior military generals, a Chief of Defense, and three consecutive Prime Ministers.

Shifting Interpretations of UK Military-Related Remembrance From a Symbol of World Wars to Current Militarism

During this period in which UK officials lamented what they perceived to be unsatisfactory support for British militarism, the most visible representation of the

manufacturing of militaristic support has been the coordinated and purposeful re-articulation of the meaning and interpretation of remembrance and its primary signifier the (red) poppy (2). Debates about the meaning of the poppy have occurred as far back as the immediate aftermath of the First World War (Basham, 2015; Iles, 2008). The poppy originated in 1921 at the behest of British military actor Field Marshall Earl Haig as a symbol of remembrance and means of financial support for ex-military personnel (see Poppy Scotland, 2016). It is perhaps British remembrance's most visible representation given its status as an omnipresent and ubiquitous symbol in the weeks leading up to Armistice Day on November 11th and Remembrance Sunday (3). During the Remembrance Sunday ceremony, the red poppy occupies a central role as the symbolic offering carefully and solemnly placed at the foot of the ceremonial stone monument to the war dead (the cenotaph) by royalty, politicians, commonwealth representatives and military personnel collectively performing a highly choreographed and hierarchical ritual of longstanding tradition. The poppy and its accompanying symbolic performances of remembrance have traditionally been perceived by many as remembering those who have suffered as a result of military conflict – most commonly connected to the two world wars - but its meaning remains fluid and open to interpretation and this is perhaps a major reason why there have been such purposeful, coordinated and public attempts to define its meaning for British citizens (as opposed to merely permitting people to place their own meaning/s on such symbols). In recent

times, British remembrance has signified a conflation of remembrance, sorrow, pride and gratitude towards both past and present military actors and actions. It is increasingly being connected – most notably but not exclusively by careful use of language - to supporting those British military actors recently engaged or currently engaging in military violence in locations such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria. This shift in emphasis from remembrance for those who fought fascism in WWII to appreciation and support for current and recent British-state military was officially recognised (and encouraged) during the 2016 poppy campaign conducted by the Royal British Legion. Officially branded “Rethink Remembrance” the RBL stated:

There’s a new generation of veterans that need your support. This year, The Royal British Legion is asking the nation to *Rethink Remembrance* by recognising the sacrifices made not just by the Armed Forces of the past, but by today’s generation too... For many people, Remembrance is associated with the fallen of the First and Second World Wars. While we will always remember them, the Legion wants to raise awareness of a new generation of veterans and Service personnel that need our support. (Royal British Legion, 2016).

This marketing campaign explicitly and officially extends the traditional historical articulation of sorrowful remembrance to include seeking *recognition, support* and *awareness* of the actions (“sacrifices”) of British military actors.

Methodological Framework

Trying to understand the campaigns to encourage British citizens to recognize, support, appreciate and respect British military personnel without considering the social and political conditions in which these campaigns and the language used to frame them emerged – and which were central to their emergence – would result in partial interpretations conducted in a de-contextualised vortex. In the context of “support the troops”, the language of support, appreciate and respect represent emotive discourses inextricably interwoven into the official national narratives in ways which make it problematic to artificially dissociate them from their contextual origins (of an alleged “war on terror” and its associated military violence and human sacrifice).

In considering the political potency of the language used to support the troops in the UK, this article applies a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to a selection of key sport and militarism-related events. Machin and Mayr (2012) stress that CDA:

assumes that power relations are discursive. In other words, power is transmitted and practised through discourse. ... exposing strategies that appear normal or neutral on the surface but which may in fact be ideological and seek to shape the representation of events and persons for particular ends. The term ‘critical’ therefore means ‘denaturalising’ the language to reveal the kinds of ideas,

absences and taken-for-granted assumptions in texts. This will allow us to reveal the kinds of power interests buried in these texts (pp. 4-5).

Language offers insightful representations of permitted collective values and legitimized cultural norms within societies (and cultural groups):

[Language] cannot be an individual matter because we cannot make up the rules of language individually, for ourselves. Their source lies in society, in the culture, in our *shared cultural codes*, in the language system (Hall, 1997, p. 34, *my emphasis*).

Locating and understanding these shared cultural codes is central to understanding the sport and military intersections in the UK. As such, accurately reading language requires an adequate understanding of the social, material and ideological conditions in which it emerges and indeed relates to, not least because in these cases at least, such language was (and is) deemed necessary and relevant *because* of these conditions in the first place. As Philo (2007) acknowledges:

language [is] linked to wider social processes and how individual meanings and communications relate to conflict and divisions within society as a whole. [Therefore] the issue then [is] not to look simply at the descriptions which were offered of the world in a specific text, but to look at the *social relations* which

underpinned the generation of these descriptions (p. 5, *my emphasis*).

The social relations underpinning support the troops initiatives in the UK – both in and beyond sport - have witnessed three crucially significant and simultaneous developments which are inter-linked and which frame the critical discourse analysis offered in the remainder of the article (4). First, sport has emerged as one of a multitude of key popular cultural activities to have been utilized to encourage and facilitate support the troops messages. Echoing the voices of British Prime Ministers and senior military leaders, the messages emerging from sport in Britain have been similar. Evidencing this, three of the most high-profile sporting examples representative of the current sport-media-militarism nexus in the UK are discussed. – 1. Remembrance Poppies on football shirts; 2. Help for Heroes and Sport; 3. The Invictus Games. Whilst they are briefly sketched as individual cases, their communicative power is the result of cumulative reinforcement of identical messages on numerous - sport, cultural, political, military and media - levels. Therefore, their ideological power should be considered on this basis, which is why, following the case studies, a summary discussion contextualizes them collectively.

Given sport is merely one component among many in this phase of popular culture being utilized to socially influence our emotions and responses to militarism, we should avoid de-contextualized abstractions. This requires viewing the sport-media-military intersections as contextually circumscribed cultural practices. Indeed, this is precisely

why, while sport is of central significance to this article, the discussion thus far has outlined the two wider social and political contexts underpinning it: Increasing concerns from senior British state officials about dwindling public support for both military actors and their (violent) actions, and the re-articulation of UK military-related remembrance (and its primary signifying symbol, the red poppy) from symbols of sorrowful reflection on two world wars to representing support, appreciation and thanks to current British military personnel. Furthermore, I suggest the rhetoric of such messages is extended to represent support for the highly controversial wars being conducted too. As argued here, this re-articulation gathered momentum and became an established ideological message reinforced by a range of sporting and political officials in Britain in response to British military and political spokespeople lamenting a lack of public support for the military.

How does this re-think remembrance message connect ideologically and linguistically to wider military and sport intersections? What – in the context of military violence - do recognition, support, and awareness mean? In considering these questions, we discuss the use of sport in the UK for military and remembrance-related purposes. There are two primary reasons for this approach: First, sport has been shown to be a central component of a coordinated campaign in the UK making it a significant arena in which military-related propaganda functions, posing legitimate questions around the politicization of sport (and other cultural practices). Second, when sport has been utilized for military remembrance and related purposes, there is ample evidence of

official military figures, politicians, media commentators and sporting officials defining the meanings (or more accurately interpretations) of remembrance, support for troops, and military-centered appreciation and respect in similar ways to facilitate incorporating the wider UK public into appearing to endorse and promote official interpretations. Critically analysing the communication of sport permits an evidence-based analysis of an ideologically-loaded topic grounding the theoretical and substantive claims empirically rather than politically.

UK Sport, Remembrance and Militarism

Football Shirts and Poppies

The first illustrative sport example involves football shirts and remembrance poppies. Britain's most popular and culturally revered spectator sport was utilized in 2008 when the Royal British Legion began what has become an annual tradition of asking football associations in England and Scotland to encourage member clubs to display the poppy on matchday shirts to coincide with Remembrance events. This newly invented tradition has resulted in debates surrounding the political nature of the poppy and remembrance-related displays. Three high-profile examples capturing such debates have occurred since this invented tradition emerged. First, when representing various English football clubs, Irish footballer James McLean opted out of wearing the poppy on his playing kit citing British military violence in Ireland as his reason (see Daily Express, 2018) (5).

Second, some supporters of Celtic Football Club – a club whose large fan-base has historically comprised many of the Irish-Catholic diaspora in Scotland and whose collective fanbase tends to express Irish republican sympathies - have staged various protests against the poppy being placed on their club’s shirts, citing British military violence in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Ireland as the reasons (See Kelly, 2019 for extensive discussion of this). The Daily Express (2018) reported “anger” at McLean’s “poppy shame” and the Daily Mail (2010) reported “the shame of Celtic”. Whilst these media responses were typical of British mainstream media reports, the dissenting voices remind us of the breadth of discursive terrain regarding this kind of issue. The third example relates to the UK football associations being reprimanded by FIFA in 2017 for displaying the poppy on playing kits breaching Law 4.4 relating to “political, religious or personal slogans” (IFAB, 2016). This example crystalizes the debate regarding the (a)political reading of the poppy and remembrance and is significant for two main reasons – First, it involved an official voice (world governing body) rather than group of supporters or individual athlete challenging the use of the poppy in a football context. Second, while such challenges – like acts of dissention – may be viewed as revealing a breadth of discursive comment on the politics of the poppy, the vigorous and defensive responses by the British state’s apparatus (government, mainstream media, sporting organisations) to such comments is a reminder of both how they wish the poppy and remembrance to be interpreted, and their determination for this to happen.

Illustrating the contested interpretations of such symbols, a number of officials in Britain responded to FIFA's actions by denying the poppy or its wider signifiers (such as remembrance and "support the troops") are political. Scottish secretary David Mundell asserted "this isn't a political gesture; it's a gesture about paying respect" (Mundell, 2016). Condemning FIFA's application of its own rules as "inexplicable" he rejected the world governing body's authority to legislate its own sport, adding FIFA "should duck out of the issue" (Mundell, 2016). British Prime, Minister Theresa May described the ruling as "utterly outrageous" (cited in Elgot, 2016). Through her official spokeswoman, May continued to deny it was political by paradoxically conflating remembrance with support for current military violence noting: "We continue to believe that footballers and fans should be able very clearly to show their support for all that our armed forces do" (ESPN, 2016). Three points are worth noting here regarding the articulation of language. First, British citizens are assimilated into one whole group. Second, this enables British military actors ("armed forces") to be framed as belonging to individual British citizens (with the use of "our"), simultaneously shifting responsibility for military actors onto the (reified) British public. Third, it therefore follows that if one is assumed (accurately or not) *and expected* to support "all" that these military actors do, questions and judgement of the ideological justification of the governing political party's foreign policy objectives, the physical outcome of these

objectives, and the military action performed in their pursuit are displaced by solidarity with soldiers.

Articulating a similar conflation of remembrance, poppies and current military violence, Scotland and England football associations recently had specially adapted national team replica shirts made with the red poppy sewn into the breast and placed alongside their respective national flags. Embroidered alongside this powerful symbolism was the phrase, “*serving their country: The British forces & Scotland [England] national team*”. It is important to remember that such messages are produced as part of a wider set of ideological and linguistic practices to which they simultaneously self-reference and reinforce. Put simply, these messages both form and reflect social structures in an illustration of what Fairclough (1992) described as constituted and constitutive. A cursory lexical analysis reveals that by communicating “serving” on these football shirts, the poppy, remembrance and football are united in articulating *current* military actions while connoting such actions as non-violent, sanitized “service” for the country (as part of the United Kingdom nation-state). Connecting the poppy to current military action is particularly significant because the language and communication – or to borrow from Hall (1997) - the “shared cultural codes” of remembrance such as the red poppy, appreciation, respect and almost universal support for “service”, have been replicated in re-packaged discourses around British sport and militarism. In other words, service, respect, support and appreciation

for “all the work they do” are long-established and sacred shared cultural codes ideologically located in world wars remembrance which have elided into the post-“war on terror” discourses of UK militarism. Consequently, soldiers invading/liberating Iraq and conducting military violence in a host of other countries are fused together by the red poppy and its carefully articulated descriptors with those who defeated fascism blurring most of their respective distinguishing features.

Help for Heroes

The second illustrative sporting example involves the charity *Help for Heroes*. Formed in 2007 – the same year General Dannatt and others lamented what they perceived to be a lack of public support for the armed forces - the charity states:

Help for Heroes supports Regular and Reserve Personnel and Veterans who have suffered injuries or illness during, or as a result of, Service which impacts on their daily life. The Charity also helps their close family and dependents (see Help for Heroes, 2020, *original capitalization*).

In one of its campaign posters, the charity juxtaposed serving British military personnel (in uniform and with visible disfigurement) alongside a fully kitted out England (male) football team replete with both ‘teams’ running single file opposite one another in a visual communicative nod to footballers emerging from the pre-match tunnel to play a

match. Underneath the powerful image was juxtaposed the phrase “different duties same pride” (see England Footballers’ Foundation, 2014). Communicating a moral and patriotic equivalence between people who kick a football and those who kill and die - both articulated as doing their respective work for their country - this message implies that, just as service and support for one’s national football team are expected, so too are service and support for military personnel and their “duty”-led actions.

The utilization of sport by *Help for Heroes* to manufacture pride being expressed (and assumed) in relation to current military action (service) was further extended by their 2009-2010 sponsorship of England’s Football League. Chairman of the governing body, Lord Mawhinney welcomed the sponsorship by incorporating Britain’s football supporting public into showing appreciation for military violence stating:

[t]he contribution being made by our armed forces around the world is truly humbling. The football for heroes week will provide an excellent opportunity for supporters to show their appreciation for the outstanding work being done (see Sun Online, 2010).

The Invictus Games

Such work is often re-articulated as virtuous and patriotic, rendering it both immune to criticism and worthy of support. In a parallel development to the 2010 formation of the

Warrior Games in the United States, the UK witnessed the invention of the Invictus Games (IG) in 2014 (see Cree & Caddick, 2019 for a detailed account). Formed by British Royal Family member, Prince Harry, the IG website states:

The word ‘invictus’ means ‘unconquered’. It embodies the fighting spirit of wounded, injured and sick Service personnel and personifies what these tenacious men and women can achieve post injury. The Games harness the power of sport to inspire recovery, support rehabilitation and generate a wider understanding and respect for those who serve their country (Invictus Games Foundation, 2020 original capitalization).

In explicit recognition of the non-sporting power of sport, and repeating what most (if not all) of the other civil-military initiatives have requested from the British public, the IG seeks to use sport to communicate support through “understanding” and “respect” for military personnel. This articulation of language, however, performs two interconnected functions here. First, military violence and military ideology are linguistically transformed into service. Service on behalf of a (grateful) nation is venerated by patriotic citizens. For example, during the inaugural Games opening ceremony, the BBC reported:

There were also ceremonial displays by military units including the King’s Troop Royal Horse Artillery. Invictus Games chairman Sir Keith Mills told the ceremony ... When Prince Harry conceived the Invictus Games he hoped they would be an inspiration for all of those that have been wounded, injured and sick

while serving their countries (BBC Online, 2014).

Thus, military violence - and the related human tragedy for those both engaging and experiencing that violence – is linguistically anchored as “serving their country” permitting, nay seeking, public endorsement. Second, the machinery of war is re-positioned as a tool to contribute to the carnivalesque spectacle of the event. The aforementioned BBC article noted the opening ceremony of the first IG began with “God Save the Queen, followed by ...a flypast by the Red Arrows (UK military fighter jets) (BBC Online, 2014). This powerful conflation of UK Royal Family, military iconography, sport, and national patriotism combine to offer rich rhetorical reinforcement of UK state militarism.

The IGs offers rich symbolism of the patriotic body and its relationship to the imagined nation. As Pullen et al. (2020) insightfully observed in relation to the Paralympic Games, the production of “hypervisible” and “marginalized” (p.716) bodies is largely achieved through mediated editorial practices. Whereas the hypervisible Paralympic bodies in Pullen et al.’s study may have been successful medal winning bodies, the hypervisible bodies in the Invictus Games are inevitably the militarised ‘supercrip soldiers’ still ‘fighting’ for Britain -albeit on the sporting field. These Games show the possibilities open to those damaged bodies who return broken and disfigured from the battlefield. The rich rhetorical power of the sport-media-military intersection is

captured by individuals disabled as a result of willingly putting their life on the line for queen and country triumphing from adversity to reposition their damaged body as still functional, productive, and most importantly, patriotic receiving national acclaim and respect from a nation and its Royal Family. The IG works to render such military figures as hypervisible. They are an example of what Mitchell and Snyder (2015) (cited in Pullen et al 2020, p. 719) termed “ablenationalism” – having the ‘right’ kind of disability and offering the ‘right’ kind of response to it – in this case, as functional, useful patriots. Meanwhile those who remain broken, jobless, homeless, and/or with major mental health problems remain partially or “in-”visible. (6)

Discussion

Understanding that sport and popular culture events have been used as stages to incorporate citizens by proxy into showing understanding, support, and appreciation for military violence (euphemistically sanitized as “contribution” and “outstanding work”) is important because it exposes the intimate – yet often less-than-explicit - synergies between government, foreign policy makers, militarist ideologues and sporting governing bodies, inviting questions on the extent to which citizens and sporting organizations (and their athletes and fans) are acting freely or - with the help of coordinated communication practices - being manipulated as part of strategic political machinations.

Sport is a powerful propaganda tool: It represents a sacred site of national expression and identity. It is viewed and presented as pure, heroic and virtuous in and of itself. However, there remains a central paradox at the heart of these debates.

Many of the aforementioned examples [of militarism being venerated in Britain] are banal and perhaps as a result of this and the hegemonic power to render them apolitical, have witnessed no major dissention. ... However, this opens up the debate to consider the hegemonic power to contain resistance in both popular and high cultural activities where the political is embedded as the banal (family entertainment) and where resistance is predetermined as poor taste (ceremonies) (Kelly, 2013, p. 730).

In other words, sport's everyday apolitical façade offers effective camouflage for those using it for political purposes. Yet even when sport is widely accepted as being politicized in relation to UK militarism and remembrance, resistance remains contained as a result of such causes and symbols representing ceremonially sombre significations which dissuade dissenters for fear of being branded unpatriotic, anti-democratic (in opposition to 'freedom' and 'democracy') and/or disrespectful as James McLean and supporters of Celtic FC experienced (to varying degrees).

In considering the intersection of sport, media and militarism in the UK, the illustrative examples presented in this article are significant for four related reasons:

- (1) Communication strategies explicitly extend the meaning of remembrance by broadening it out beyond the two world wars, asking citizens to recognize the death and injuries (sacrifices) experienced by today's military actors, seeking to raise awareness of current military personnel.
- (2) Recognition and awareness are linguistically extended to articulate respecting, supporting and being grateful for current military actors, raising questions about what support of the actors actually represents. Does it include support for their actions and outcomes of action and/or the political ideology ('war on terror') underpinning their actions?
- (3) Sport is used to communicate explicit political and ideological framings of British military violence and to encourage British citizens to interpret such violence in politically infused and uncritical ways accompanied by the associated shared cultural value that British military violence is virtuous, necessary and/or desirable.
- (4) Sport facilitates UK remembrance in promoting these ideological imaginings and there is a seamless connection continually communicated between the noted ideological constructions and the red poppy that frames our freedom as consequential of and dependent on military violence.

Competing claims surrounding the meanings and interpretations of remembrance in the UK are exacerbated by the Royal British Legion and public officials linguistically

connecting the poppy to military ideology, military actions and current military actors – each of which exist because of political statecraft - while maintaining it is non-political. Phrases such as help our heroes and support the troops are difficult to oppose and, consequently, they function as rhetorical devices that camouflage political ideology by way of “lexical absence” (Machin & Mayr, 2012). That is, absenting terms or facts we would expect to find as part of such discourses. For example, it seems unequivocally the case that if such phrases did not replace the more pointed – and factually incisive – phrases such as *support British militarism, British government foreign policy and British military violence* and *support disfigured soldiers having to rely on charity* then it would be quite untenable to claim British remembrance, the red poppy, Help For Heroes, The Invictus Games, and other constituents of support the troops articulations are apolitical. Considering the official function of many of these military initiatives is providing financial support to injured and/or dependent military personnel, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that they are political on these grounds at least. If one agrees that even a basic definition of politics involves “a series of activities through which it is decided, often by negotiation but frequently by force, who should get what, where and how” (Bairner et al., 2017, p. xx), then it is a reasonable assertion that the use of sport to endorse military violence and fund ex-military actors is political. In citing Gillis (1994), Basham (2015) discusses military-related remembrance, noting:

In helping make sense of the present, all such ‘memory work’ is ‘embedded in

complex ... power relations that determine what is remembered (or forgotten), by whom, and for what end' (p. 2).

Remembering military violence as more desirable a foreign policy than non-violent alternatives, labelling such violence as leading to liberation and the protecting of democracy while forgetting that others view these actions as invasions and the destruction of other people's towns, cities, homes, and bodies is difficult to sustain as apolitical. Such "memory work" leads to Gee (2014) explicitly connecting military violence to political preference, explaining:

... the redemptive value attached to [British and U.S. military] violence reinforces facile assumptions that our security depends on military force, rather than on structural justice and an ecology of mutual relationships (p. 45).

Thus, according to dominant articulations of the intersection of military and sport, British military are not protecting the British state's interests or the British state's interpretations of freedom. Such re-presentations strip freedom of its political clothing and camouflage it as an apolitical universally shared virtue. These examples contextualize civil-military relations in Britain as political, exposing official concerns of dwindling public support for military action/violence, and leave little doubt that senior British state officials were acutely aware of the ideological utility of exposing the British public to support the troops

public relations/propaganda. When discussing the sport-media-militarism nexus in Britain today, this context reveals the purposeful intent of political actors to promote an ideological position relating to foreign policy and its associated acts of violence – using sport to win over a risk averse public.

There are clear parallels here with events in America with Silk (2012) noting:

I have focused on understanding more about which (and whose) versions of nation become ‘legitimate’ or ‘authentic’ when national commemoration becomes deployed... Through remembering the existential values, meanings, and ‘authorized,’ collectively held past / present and simultaneously forgetting and essentializing difference and diversity, the rhetoric provided a synthetic and seductive version of America / the American corpus in which difference ... – or perhaps more accurately, contestations over difference – become banished or erased (p. 140).

Conclusion

Britain’s foreign secretary Philip Hammond noted in the aftermath of the Paris terrorist attacks of 2014, that “[A] huge burden of responsibility ... lies with those who act as apologists for them [terrorists]”. Among those Hammond listed as responsible included “parents, schools and community workers” (Hammond, 2015). If Hammond is correct to claim civilians bear a huge burden of responsibility for terrorist activities to which

they had no obvious connection then it begs the question about those who act as apologists for British military violence – as financial backers, ideological propagandists and grateful recipients of the outcomes of such violence, volunteering public and widespread support and thanks. Applying the British foreign secretary’s logic, those using sport to ideologically promote British military and militarism by supporting appreciating and thanking them for *all that they do* bear a huge responsibility, not least to acknowledge such political propaganda being endorsed through sport, utilising and incorporating by proxy their officials, athletes and supporters to facilitate framing such ideological acts as necessary for freedom. It appears that in the UK, remembrance has become uncritically assumed to be an apolitical post-historical act performed in a de-contextualized ideological vortex. Stahl (2009) showed how in the United States support the troops rhetoric deflected public attention away from US government policy towards “the protection of soldiers” (p. 537). He asserted the power of such rhetoric was that it “does not function to justify war. Instead it constructs a war that needs no justification and a citizen who has no business engaging the question publicly (p. 535). He added “[i]n this symbolic context, the civic posture toward the military is one of detached veneration rather than invested political accountability” (p. 548). Britain has – with the help of sport - also communicated consent for its war on terror-related militarism by utilising support the troops discourses to negate need for justification, to cultivate the passive citizen who sublimates political accountability of government into

universal reverence for individual soldiers. It has done this by rearticulating British remembrance's shared cultural codes to re-imagine a military engaging in the virtuous modern-day equivalent of those who defeated fascism.

Notes

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1. Armed Forces Day is advertised as a "family day out" rendering its political and militaristic content and contexts inconspicuous. It has previously been sponsored by BAE Systems, one of the world's largest weapons companies, further compounding the political connections relating to military-related events.
 2. Commonly referred to as "the poppy" the red poppy is used by many Commonwealth countries including Canada as a symbol of military remembrance. The Royal British Legion oversees Britain's annual poppy campaign using a poppy that was originally named after British military general Douglas Haig. The red poppy should be distinguished from alternative remembrance-related poppies such as the white, purple and black poppies which symbolise peace, animal victims, people of colour and conscientious objectors.
 3. There are clearly a range of intersecting factors such as 'race', class, and gender affecting the production and experiences of these social relations. Discussing the sociological nuances of these intersections is beyond this article which limits its attention to a CDA of three of the highest profile sport-military related case studies to be highly mediated in Britain.
 4. While the red poppy continues to be most explicitly connected to Armistice Day and Remembrance Day activities and periods, it has become a symbol used all-year round by Help for Heroes and other military charities.
 5. Manchester United's Serbian player, Nemanja Matic opted out of wearing the red poppy too citing NATO bombings of his homeland.
 6. Various studies have shown ex-military personnel in the UK to be more likely than the general population to suffer depression, alcohol misuse, homelessness, domestic abuse, violence, and criminality (see Rona, Fear, Hull, Greenberg, Earnshaw, Hotopf & Wessely 2007; Walker, 2010).
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