Guest Editors’ Foreword

By Tibor Szvircsev Tresch & Eva Moehlecke de Baseggio

This is the second special issue\(^1\) of *Res Militaris* on “Recruitment & Retention” based on the ERGOMAS working group (WG) conference held in Zurich under these writers’ direction on July 12-13, 2016, when 19 papers in total were presented and discussed by researchers from 13 countries.\(^2\) The topics on which the conference centred included: how successful is the recruitment of rank-and-file and professional military personnel in contemporary armed forces? How to satisfactorily include personnel of immigrant and minority backgrounds? How can military personnel retention be improved?\(^3\) The present ERGOMAS number presents the second wave of selected papers from that conference. It comprises seven contributions.

Since the transition to all-volunteer armed forces that have to attract and acquire their personnel on the labour market, research about recruitment, whether successful or not, has gained in importance. Of particular interest as remedies for general or selective military manpower shortfalls is the recruitment of specialists and inclusion of minorities, which pose stiff challenges since, for very different reasons, these two less than central groups are often difficult to motivate to pursue military careers.\(^4\)

In all seven articles offered, recruitment and retention are broadly defined. The first piece, penned by Beatriz Frieyro de Lara and Carlos Navajas Zubeldia, looks back to the year 2001, when the Spanish government decided to allow foreign recruits into the Spanish Armed Forces. Special attention is given to the reasons which led it to take this step, and the successive modifications brought to initial plans. The profile of foreign-born service members and the impact that the entry of foreigners had on Spain’s all-volunteer force as a whole are examined.

In their article on Belgium, Valérian Lecoq and Philippe Manigart state that the military should better inform young people on the qualifications required for the whole range of positions to be filled within the organization. They arrived at this conclusion after interviewing young unemployed persons of Belgian origin as well as from ethnic-cultural minorities about their job expectations. Their sample allows them also to compare the views of unemployed young women on job conditions in the armed forces. Thus, particular focus bears on whether young women from ethnic-cultural minorities differ from native females as regards their views of Belgian Defence.


\(^2\) Belgium, Canada, Switzerland, Germany, Netherlands, USA, Spain, Argentina, Greece, Sweden, Denmark, Israel, Taiwan.


\(^4\) A more detailed theoretical overview is presented in the first special issue’s Foreword.

Published/ publié in *Res Militaris* ([http://resmilitaris.net](http://resmilitaris.net)). ERGOMAS issue n°5, November 2017
The topic of Gregor Richter’s contribution is medical officers in the German Armed Forces. Focusing on the retention of these highly-skilled service members, he identifies factors that influence their decision-making process when the time comes (after 17 years of service) for them to choose whether to apply for full careers or quit the organization. Gender, experience of missions abroad, and incentives in tune with typical work-related needs and values of medical staff are important aspects that in part effectively affect their propensity to go for permanent career status. But one factor appears to be even more crucial for retention: military identity, as postulated in Charles Moskos’ Institution/Occupation Model.

Shira Rivnai Bahir and Meidad Avidar address the particular situation of Israeli conscription policy in light of the main trend towards all-volunteer forces in the West and elsewhere in the last decades. Far from suspending the draft, Israel has decided to hold fast to its broad recruitment strategy involving a majority of the population in the country’s defence. Hardly any meaningful public discussion exists that would question this approach. As shown by the authors, even among teenagers, support for military service is remarkably high. Young men and women see their legal duty to serve in uniform as a normal part of their life trajectory. Though it analyzes alternative discourses, this article gives insights into the common reasoning behind such attitudes.

In the fifth article, Henning Sørensen probes the development of recruitment and retention practice in Denmark’s Armed Forces to ascertain whether it has fitted the “military activism” of the last 25 years against the backdrop of what he sees as problematic civil-military relations at the political level. Looking at personnel composition, military expenditures, decreasing numbers of military installations, division of labour at the top (notably through the change that has affected the functions of the chief of the defence staff), recent trends in officer recruitment and education as well as retention policy, he argues that the emphasis laid on “efficiency” under the influence of private sector-type management practice disguised as “professionalization” has now gone too far, and is bound to depress the military’s professionalism and its ability to perform overseas missions effectively (especially in light of the deployment problems he sees ahead).

Li-Chung Yuan’s piece deals with Taiwan’s military and its transition to an all-volunteer force, which started in 2009 and was due for completion by the end of 2016. This transformation has so far been more difficult than anticipated – far more so than in Western countries which preceded Taiwan along that road. Recruitment is the problem, for a variety of reasons. However, defence leaders discovered after a while that they could rely to a significant extent on the country’s only ethnic minority, the Aborigines, to fill the ranks. This is because the Aborigine group combines in concentrated form the social characteristics of those whose propensity to enlist is higher than average: poor socio-economic status, low educational levels, residence in rural areas or small towns, taste for challenges, and encouragements from families and relatives undeterred by the armed forces’ poor social standing in Taiwanese society. The author goes on to investigate the factors that bear on youths’ enlistment decisions.
In the final article, Johan Österberg presents the Preparatory Military Training (PMT) project, a labour market programme jointly initiated in 2012 by the Swedish Armed Forces and Public Employment Service. Such a project aimed to attract long-term unemployed people originating from outside the EU, or born in Sweden of such immigrant extraction, to undertake ten weeks of training and practice in the barracks of the Swedish armed services. The military’s objective (in contrast to that of the Public Employment Service, whose raison d’être is to facilitate entry into the labour market) was to tap that group for possible later recruitment, notably because the Swedish Armed Forces require expertise in non-European languages and cultures on overseas operations (not least in Islamic countries). Though PMT by and large failed to attract as many participants as anticipated and to generate a significant number of later enlistments, it was successful in most other respects. Participants and officers alike expressed satisfaction with it; PMT allowed the military to reach out to a much sought-after target group, and strengthened its brand image as an attractive employer; it contributed, albeit on a small scale, to a better integration of cultural minorities, among whom perceptions of the Swedish military changed in a positive direction. The Public Employment Service noted with satisfaction that three months after completion of their ten weeks of training, most participants had found jobs or were pursuing further studies. As it happens, the project was discontinued after two years for external reasons, turning it in retrospect into a short-lived experiment. Yet, the author believes that in light of the need to make the military more representative of society, the lessons drawn from PMT can be of use in the new context of Sweden’s return to conscription.

Happy reading!

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