Eyal Ben-Ari. *Mastering Soldiers: Conflict, Emotions, and the Enemy in an Israeli Military Unit.* New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1998. xvi + 159 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57181-145-5.

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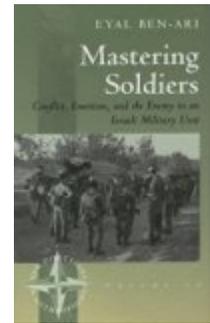
When Soldiers Speak

The soldier's experience has drawn increasing attention over the last several decades from historians, sociologists, and psychologists.[1] *Mastering Soldiers*, however, is unique. It is an ethnographic study of an Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) reserve infantry battalion, an elite unit comparable to the U.S. Army's 82nd Airborne. The author is an anthropologist who served seven years as the battalion's administrative officer. Although his earlier fieldwork had been in Japan, Ben-Ari's reserve duty during the Intifada prompted questions about what being a soldier meant to the reservists, what motivated them, the problems posed by moving back and forth between civilian and army life, and the connections between military identity, citizenship, and masculinity. Responses to an article he published in 1989 dealing with these questions spurred him to expand the study into the current volume.[2] Ben-Ari used his reserve duty periods to conduct the fieldwork on which he bases the book. In addition to his participation in staff meetings, he observed training exercises, took notes during conversations with his fellow reservists, and conducted approximately thirty interviews.

Examining the soldiers' use of language for the "meanings attached to military service," Ben-Ari identifies three folk models of knowledge by which the soldier unconsciously interprets his life in the army (p. 135). These three models–the machine metaphor, the brain metaphor, and the rhetoric of emotional control–operate within a larger combat schema. The machine metaphor is the dominant model, ascribing the characteristics of ma-

chines and industry to the military unit. Examples are references to smooth performance, the certainty that if a unit member is lost the unit will continue to perform efficiently with a replacement, and the use of words like "framework" and "system" to describe how the unit functions. Terms adopted from industry are also used to describe the military's bureaucratic chain of command.

The brain metaphor comes into play when explaining the battalion's ability to adapt to change. Terms of the brain metaphor include "pinhead" to describe an incompetent soldier and "using one's head" or "big head" when commenting on his opposite. Ben-Ari also points out that soldiers who think beyond their immediate duty receive praise for their ability to do so. Although the author sees the machine metaphor as dominant, he asserts that the brain metaphor is necessary to accommodate descriptions of a military unit's capacity for innovation and adaptation.

According to Ben-Ari the utility of these two models is most apparent in descriptions of combat, the point at which a third model–the rhetoric of emotional control–also appears in soldiers' language. Since lack of emotional control can impede the completion of military tasks, the soldierly ideal is composed and confident behavior under pressure. Such rhetoric is significant, therefore, because it is an intrinsic part of the model used in evaluating soldiers and in interpreting stressful situations like combat.

Because combat is the defining milieu of the soldier

and the military organization, these simple models converge to form a complex combat schema. The schema provides a cognitive 'template' for evaluation and interpretation of military culture (p. 48). Ben-Ari contends that every soldier and officer of the battalion subscribes to this combat schema, no matter his duty or rank. Furthermore, its use is common not only throughout the IDF, but in all western military institutions.

Differences exist, however, between the combat schema of the IDF and other western militaries, primarily in perceptions of the enemy. Ben-Ari argues that since more and more of the Israeli Defence Forces has to deal with enemy civilians, its personnel have come to conflate enemy civilians and soldiers, permitting the application of the folk models to enemy populations. This means that the combat schema governs situations not strictly military, producing a more stringent application of the rhetoric of emotional control to confrontations with civilians. The result is that the Israeli military views undue violence against them as aberrant, unprofessional behavior. In terms of the machine metaphor, the offending soldier is considered a malfunctioning part that needs replacing. The machine metaphor dehumanizes, but does not demonize the enemy as Americans did in the Pacific during World War II, and later in Vietnam. This mere objectification of the enemy permits, according to the author, a more rational attitude toward the adversary.

The greatest significance of the folk models may be, however, the connection between the combat schema, motivation, and masculinity. Ben-Ari contends that Israeli men continue to fulfill reserve duty obligations willingly for two reasons. Reserve service provides challenges not available in civilian occupations, and there is a particular sense of unit cohesion derived from Israeli culture. This connection between the Israeli military and society is also apparent in Israeli concepts of masculinity. Military service is a constant in the lives of Israeli males, through formal premilitary training, compulsory service and then reserve duty. Since emotional control is essential to the military definition of being a man, then it also figures in the definition of manhood in Israeli society. Therefore, "the combat schema is also a schema for achieving and reaffirming manhood" (p. 112).

Ben-Ari acknowledges that *Mastering Soldiers* is an explication of common-sense knowledge, a fact that tempts the reader to dismiss this well-organized little volume. Yet, careful reading should prove rewarding. Not only will it provide insight into the meanings behind the soldiers' vernacular, but it will remind us to remain re-

ceptive to the nuances of language. The author's conjectures concerning the relationship between citizenship, military service, and masculinity, however, are based on too little evidence to be entirely convincing. Of the thirty interviews he conducted, Ben-Ari used only the "five or six" he considered the most eloquent, almost all of them with officers and NCOs. In addition, the excerpts he provides from these interviews often do not clearly support his argument. This may be a result of difficulties associated with capturing the connotations of words translated from one language to another, in this case, from Hebrew into English. Similarly, his suggestions that the IDF has developed a completely rational and humane policy toward enemy civilians is unsupported by evidence, reducing the usefulness of his analysis for those concerned with employing military forces in peacekeeping and peace-imposition roles. Throughout the book readers may find themselves wishing for more substantial supporting evidence. While this is a serious weakness it is not a fatal flaw. The insight into soldiers' language as an expression of their understanding of soldiering, citizenship, and manhood that *Mastering Soldiers* allows, and the inspiration for further inquiry it provides, are, indeed, valuable.

Notes

[1]. For a sampling of this scholarship see James M. McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought In The Civil War* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Gerald F. Linderman, *The World Within War: America's Combat Experience in World War II* (New York and London: The Free Press, 1997); Leonard V. Smith, *Between Mutiny and Obedience: The Case of the French Fifth Infantry Division During World War I* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); David R. Segal and H. Wallace Sinaiko, eds, *Life in the Rank and File: Enlisted Men and Women in the Armed Forces of the United States, Australia, Canada and the United Kindom* (Washington, DC: Pergamon-Brasseys, 1986); Charles C. Moskos, Jr., *The American Enlisted Man: The Rank and File in Today's Military* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1970); Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1995); Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Touchstone, 1995).

[2]. Eyal Ben-Ari, "Masks and Soldiering: The Israeli Army and the Palestinian Uprising." *Cultural Anthropology* 4(4): 372-89.

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