

History doesn't repeat itself but it sure does rhyme.' -Mark Twain

The British Army has recently launched a recruitment campaign aimed primarily at attracting new personnel into the Army Reserves. Designed to highlight the many roles that Reservists can play in uniform and opportunities for both professional and personal development, the 'Normal Days' campaign is the latest in a series of military recruitment drives. Over the last two years, the Army has launched several such high profile campaigns, writes Meghan Fitzpatrick. The current advertising blitz has cost roughly £7 million. The efforts have gone largely unrewarded. According to recruitment figures, 'last year the Army only managed to increase the total strength of the reserves by 20—it was also more than 3,000 soldiers short of its recruitment goal for full time soldiers.'

Commentators have argued that there are several reasons behind the Army's current recruiting woes. Some point to the end of the war in Afghanistan, while others underline the severe cuts that have been made to the defence budget and military capacity. There are also those that argue there is a growing civil-military gap. During the past several decades, they have hypothesized that British civil society has become increasingly invested in an ethos of individual rights and freedoms. This is in contrast to the collective culture of duty and sacrifice promoted in the military. Moreover, they argue that the public has become more risk averse. Informed by the twenty-four hour news cycle, we are alive to the possibility of injury or death that service personnel can face in the execution of their jobs.[1] During a recent speech, Chief of the Defence Staff General Sir Nicholas Houghton expressed deep concern that the country as a whole had lost some of its 'courageous instinct.' [2] It is clear that Army recruitment is currently in a poor state and this is undoubtedly alarming to those in positions such as Houghton. However, there has been something very important missing from the current dialogue surrounding recruitment and personnel. While commentators often treat present developments as if they were new, this is not in fact the case.

Recruitment has been a perennial difficulty for the British Army over the past few centuries. Helen McCartney of the UK Defence Academy has pointed out that, 'the British public has traditionally maintained a distant relationship with its armed forces.' [3] Furthermore, 'in contrast to other militaries, the British armed forces have never had those deep ties with their society that derive from being used as a means to earn citizenship or as a tool to inculcate national values.' [4] Historian Brian Bond has also argued that as a country, Britain is 'profoundly anti-militarist.' [5] He has traced the origins of this sentiment to the rise of Oliver Cromwell and the use of armed force to threaten the state in the seventeenth century. [6]

With the rise of conscript armies in the nineteenth century, Britain never developed an equivalent to the French levée en masse or similar systems as employed in other regions of continental Europe. As an island nation, there was simply no need. British ambitions were projected abroad using a skillful combination of naval power and ground troops who were strategically deployed to police distant corners of the empire. Consequently, service life was not something with which many British civilians were familiar. Moreover, the Army had a reputation for recruiting criminals and the least wanted members of society throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. During the Victorian era, soldiers were very poorly remunerated and there was little effort to bring their 'pay into line with civilian improvements.'^[7] Discipline and punishment could also be severe.

Significant reforms were made in regards to enlistment practices and standards of welfare beginning in the 1890s. Be that as it may, recruitment remained difficult. An unprecedented number of new recruits flocked to the colours during WWI and WWII. However, the majority of those in uniform perceived themselves as 'citizen' rather than 'career' soldiers with a long-term stake in the military. Furthermore, conscription was eventually necessary in both cases. In the aftermath of WWII, National Service recruits saw themselves in much the same light as their predecessors. In an article published in 1950, Flight Lieutenant GE Lanning of the RAF argued that most National Servicemen saw their time in uniform as an 'interruption' to civilian life.^[8] Since National Service officially ended in 1961, the Army has continued to struggle to attract and retain the necessary personnel.

As the threat of a major campaign or national emergency recedes, recruitment figures inevitably drop in response. Outside of wartime, the Armed Forces are a hard sell. A military career requires a higher level of dedication than is often the case in other occupations. Recruitment campaigns have historically focused on appealing to a potential recruit's sense of adventure. The Army's current website points out, 'new research, commissioned as part of...the recruitment campaign, has revealed that more than one in four Londoners feel that challenge and excitement are missing from their day job.'^[9] In other words, joining the Regulars or Reserves is a solution to the malaise of everyday civilian life. This is a familiar refrain and sounds eerily similar to earlier campaigns. Posters from the 1920s and 1930s also declared, 'Are You Found of Travel? See the World at Government Expense by Joining the Army,' and, 'The Finest Job in the World: Work and Play All Over the Globe—Join the Army.'^[10]

By acknowledging that declining recruitment figures are part of a larger repeating cycle, I am by no means defending or advocating a sense of apathy when it comes to military capacity. The British Armed Forces are the smallest that they have been since the mid nineteenth century and in an increasingly dangerous world. This is simply a call to be more realistic that there has always been a gap between civilian and military values and for those in positions of authority to be more historically minded in the recruitment process. If MoD and Army officials were to read

the words of their predecessors, they would find startling similarities and perhaps be able to learn from their costly missteps. As an organization, the British Army has been accused of being reactive and failing to learn from its own past. Recruitment is but one area where history can and should be considered as a factor in shaping the future. While the world has changed significantly over the past century, senior officers both past and present contend with many of the same problems from austerity to ensuring that the Armed Forces are adaptable and can respond to a wide variety of threats. Decades may separate them but they have more in common than they could possibly know.

[1] Anthony Forster, 'Breaking the covenant: governance of the British army in the twenty-first century,' *International Affairs* 82, No. 6 (2006), pp. 1043-1057.

Helen McCartney, 'The military covenant and the civil-military contract in Britain,' *International Affairs* 86, No. 2 (2010), pp. 411-428.

[2] General Sir Nicholas Houghton, 'Annual Chief of the Defence Staff Lecture,' Royal United Services Institute (17 December 2014).

[3] McCartney, 'The military covenant,' p. 421.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] Brian Bond, 'Recruiting the Victorian Army 1870-92,' *Victorian Studies* 5, No. 4 (June 1962), p. 331.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 332.

[7] *Ibid.*, pp. 331-332.

[8] GE Lanning, 'National Service,' Royal United Service Institution Journal 95, No. 578 (1950), p. 257.

[9] 'Reserve recruitment campaign launches,' British Army (16 Jan 2015), <http://www.army.mod.uk/news/26868.aspx>

[10]

<http://www.ebay.co.uk/itm/Vintage-1920s-British-Empire-Army-Recruitment-Poster-A3-Reprint-/151092123280> 'Recruitment in the British Army,' http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Recruitment_in_the_British_Army

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