Opinion – UK Militarism Can (and Must) Be Resisted

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ELLEN MARTIN, APR 1 2025

Keir Starmer's commitment to militarism is unwavering. Labour have demonstrated, including through their increase in military spending, militarist rhetoric, and commitment to militarist institutions, such as the arms industry, that they are ideologically 'in thrall to war … influenced by and caught up in military ways' (Eastwood 2018: 46). Starmer's linking of militarism with economic growth is nothing new; military intervention and war preparation in Western countries have long been driven by a desire to defend, develop and expand liberal economies, such as empire, markets, and trade (e.g. see Edgerton 1991; 2008; Mabee 2016). However, the suggestion that greater military spending will create jobs, help small businesses, and promote regional equality, distorts that much of the benefit will be for the largest arms companies and the weak connection between investments in militarism and job creation (given it is a high-tech and minimal labour industry). It also obscures the much stronger benefits of investing in areas such as green energy and welfare, both of which the government is cutting.

Labour's militarist policy and rhetoric also poses a serious moral problem for world politics. The age-old equation of more military spending with greater security reflects the hegemonic myth that war and violence are necessary to defend the nation state (or, indeed, allied nation states) from external threats. The justification of war as a means to achieve particular desirable ends, including national survival and economic security, means that war and violence are prioritised as solutions to societal problems, leading to continual preparations for the possibility of war. This obscures the ways in which militarism produces and embeds vulnerability, insecurity, marginalisation, and hierarchy in the countries targeted by the British military and UK weaponry, as well as within the UK and the countries it arms. War, and preparations for war, cannot be morally justified in terms of a singular act with reference to means and ends (e.g. in the name of securing the nation state and its economy), because of their devasting consequences far beyond the instrumental calculations that make war possible (Hutchings 2018). That the lives of marginalised people, namely women and sexual minorities, are consistently destabilised long before, during and after officially defined 'wartime', is an important illustration of this. Seeing war and militarism as morally problematic conditions, rather than acts, is essential in acknowledging their economic, political, social, cultural, and environmental consequences . In spite of the hegemony of the myth of militarism, my research, which focuses on exploring how militarism operates in public discourse, indicates that dispersed individuals are willing to question and reject militarist relations of power. Reflecting on this, I argue that the hegemony of militarism can (and must) be resisted.

My doctoral research finds that many people support but also question, resist, and ignore, dominant discourses of militarism online and in their everyday spaces. The dispersed nature of critical voices does appear to restrict more impactful resistance (that an organised movement or collective phenomenon might possess) and means that these voices are easily demonised, both of which are central to upholding militarist culture principally because there is no alternative. However, with people willing to question and even reject militarism, encouraging more impactful anti-militarist resistance is not unfeasible. Dispersed resistance can inspire others, gain recognition, evolve into more collective actions, and drive change through the continuous construction and reconstruction of counter-narratives. In this sense, 'what looks like "individual" resistance might become a collective phenomenon when carried out in patterns' (Lilja, Vinthagen, and Wiksell 2022: 41-2). Whilst militarist discourses often constrain everyday resistance, the fact that many people disrupt these discourses suggests that fostering a bolder anti-militarist resistance—which cannot easily be dismissed or portrayed as extreme—is not unachievable. Like other ideologies, militarism is not fixed and depends on new generations pledging continued support. Shifting dispersed resistance against militarism into more collective, active forms would align with growing resistance to power structures and the promotion of

progressive values, as evidenced by the increasing critical perspectives among younger generations. Social change must be understood by examining the relationships between different forms of resistance and the patterns in their repetition, including how organised resistance can stimulate more radical public discourse, and vice versa. To this end, a robust, collective politics of resistance requires difficult conversations and resistance at multiple levels. Opposition must include the recognition that war and militarism are conditions, the interrogation of national identity formation (e.g. war memories and myths), the refusal to support the troops, and ultimately, the abolition of the military. More impactful resistance also requires resistance through multiple modes of action, including more direct forms and everyday pressures and activism.

Given that instrumental arguments for military spending retain the culture of militarism as a potentially positive force, resistance must be centred on challenging war *as a condition* rather than an individual act. Given that national identity formation is central to the normalisation and legitimation of war and martial violence, resisting militarism requires the disruption of these cultural constructions. The just war myth is part of Britain's 'mythologised history', which frames particular past wars as just and thus 'convinces us that present and future wars can also be just' (Fiala 2008: 15). The commitment to war as sometimes just, which is most evident in the construction of World War Two as the 'Good War' in public and political discourse, is central to the legitimation of further violence because it justifies war in terms of apparent desirable ends. This obscures that war is a condition that inherently produces and embeds violence, insecurity and exclusion, far beyond the spatial and temporal boundaries of 'wartime'. Constructing a bolder politics of resistance against war and violence therefore relies on the deconstruction of the cultural memory of past wars as noble and just. This requires difficult conversations, including the questioning of emotional responses and attachments to British national identity and memories of war, finally acknowledging Britain's violent history, and breaking down illusions that war keeps people safe. It includes the uncomfortable, and potentially hurtful, deconstruction of the myth of World War Two as honourable, confronting and opposing its romanticisation in public life. Practices of commemoration must move away from narratives of sacrifice, heroism, justice and freedom and towards explicit recognition of the horrors, violence, hierarchies, and long-term consequences of war.

Rejecting martial violence will also require that we resist the societal pressures to support British military personnel. This is because of the central role that appeals to 'support the troops' play in minimising critique of war and violence (Millar 2022). One way this could be achieved whilst still ensuring the fair treatment of military personnel, who often need material support because of their military service, would be through the renationalisation of veteran care, as part of a strong welfare system, rather than this being the responsibility of the charity sector (Christoyannopoulos 2023). This is because framing military personnel as a social cause places pressure on civil society to demonstrate that they care, which undermines deeper critical reflection of the political decisions which lead to their suffering. Discursively, refusing to support the troops needs to be focused on re-politicising martial violence by emphasising the voices of its victims rather than solely on the treatment of British military personnel.

Ultimately, the rejection of militarism also requires abolishing the military. Abolition is overwhelmingly framed as out of the question in public and political discourse because military violence is framed as unavoidable and, at times, desirable. This means that resistance to war and violence will always be restricted because an inability to even engage with the question of abolition means that we are likely to continue to turn to militarist approaches to solve our problems. Although there are clear obstacles to fostering stronger anti-militarist resistance, success at one level will increase the chances of success at others. More impactful resistance requires action through multiple channels, ranging from direct forms to everyday conversations, pressures, and activism. For example, encouraging a greater number of people to recognise militarism as harmful to British society would significantly increase the appeal of abolition. At the same time, strengthening dispersed resistance—such as opinions shared online and in public spaces—against war and violence would likely motivate more individuals to engage in organised forms of resistance. This could create a positive cycle of resistance, sparking more conversations, fostering more radical public discourse, and leading to greater participation in collective action. Resisting militarism is both necessary and entirely possible, relying on the convergence of various types and levels of resistance, as well as their sustained repetition over time.

About the author:

Ellen Martin (she/her) is a PhD candidate in the School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies (SPAIS) at the University of Bristol, UK. Her research is situated within critical military studies and feminist international relations. With the aim of interrogating and destabilising military power, she explores the relationships between public discourse and the production of war and violence. Ellen is particularly interested in the diverse ways in which war and violence are performed in liberal societies, including through support, disengagement and resistance.