



Military Culture: European

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Attitudes and policies toward homosexuality and gay and lesbian personnel in European militaries vary widely. Several countries allow gay men and lesbians to serve openly and have granted them the same rights and privileges as their heterosexual counterparts. Other countries neither ban nor support gay and lesbian service members, and a small group continue to ban homosexual personnel outright.

The countries that have become most tolerant of homosexuality include the Netherlands, Denmark, and Norway. The most restrictive include Turkey, Greece, and Italy. Countries such as Belgium, France, Switzerland, and Germany lie somewhere in between on the spectrum of acceptance of homosexuality in their respective military cultures.

Great Britain is a unique case. In 2000, it lifted its long-standing ban on gay and lesbian service members, falling into line with the other Northern European countries. Yet many scholars and military officials have long characterized the British military as inhospitable to sexual minorities.

Both the British and Dutch militaries have received much critical and scholarly attention--the first for its recent and somewhat surprising decision to lift its ban, and the second for its thirty-year history of allowing openly gay and lesbian personnel to serve in its military.

Even though these countries do not represent the experiences or attitudes of all European militaries, they do suggest a trend toward ever greater integration of homosexuals in the military.

Countries that Ban Homosexuals

Greece, Turkey, and Italy explicitly ban military service by gay men and lesbians, yet each country does so for subtly different reasons. Tellingly, in each of these countries, the larger culture has yet to accept homosexuality fully.

In Italy, gay men are currently exempted from military service. Prior to 1985, the military considered homosexuality a crime and punished those who committed homosexual acts. In 1985, the law changed, and the military began to classify homosexuality as a disease or condition and to exempt gay men and lesbians from military service on those grounds.

In modern Greece, homosexuality is not culturally accepted, and its military does not tolerate openly gay personnel. Greek law explicitly bans homosexuals from serving openly, and there has been little public discussion about changing this law.

Similarly, Turkish culture is not accepting of homosexuality. Officially, the Turkish military views gay men and lesbians as threats to the armed forces and discharges them for indecency if they are discovered.

Countries with Laissez-faire Homosexual Policies

Scholars describe France and Belgium as countries that have adopted laissez-faire approaches to homosexual personnel. That is, they do not officially exclude them, but they also do not explicitly guarantee their right to serve.

In Belgium, the military accepts gay men and lesbians into service. However, if the behavior of an individual who is gay or lesbian causes problems, that individual is subject to discipline or discharge. In some cases, homosexual personnel have been transferred from their unit if they have been too open with their sexuality.

The Belgian military also continues to reserve the right to deny gay and lesbian personnel high-level security clearances, for fear they may be susceptible to blackmail.

In France, indifference characterizes the official attitude towards homosexuals in the military. Although homosexuals are not banned from French military service, it is recognized that they may face greater challenges than their heterosexual counterparts. Thus, they are allowed to opt out of military service if they wish by declaring themselves unfit because of their sexual orientation.

Commanders and psychiatrists can also discharge gay and lesbian personnel if they feel they are disrupting their units and cannot fit in.

Full Tolerance of Gay and Lesbian Personnel

The Netherlands is the most tolerant of homosexuality of the European militaries. It has integrated gays and lesbians more fully than any other country. Yet Dutch scholars and activists continue to call for even greater efforts to remedy the subtle problems that remain.

Since the cultural revolutions of the 1960s, the Netherlands has been known for its general cultural tolerance of homosexuality, which has in turn influenced the military's policy on gays and lesbians.

Marion Anderson-Boers and Jan van der Meulen report that since the 1980s the Dutch people have largely come to a consensus on the issue of homosexuality. They note that polls have repeatedly shown that more than 90 percent of the public agree with the statement, "Homosexuals should have as much freedom as possible to lead their own lives."

The only exception to Dutch tolerance has been on the issue of gay adoption. In 1994, 53% of the population believed that gay and lesbian couples should not be able to adopt.

However, research on the Netherlands and homosexuality suggests that the Dutch "tolerate [homosexuality] at a distance." That is, sexual minorities are protected under law and tolerated in society, but many individuals still feel uneasy toward gay men and lesbians and continue to believe stereotypes about them.

In the 1970s the Dutch military ceased to consider homosexuality a reason to prevent individuals from entering the military. This policy change coincided with larger legal changes in the Netherlands, which included changing age of consent laws for same-sex contact to 16, the same as for heterosexual contact, and incorporating an anti-discrimination clause addressing sexual orientation in the Dutch constitution.

Yet officially allowing homosexuals to serve was only the first step in creating a more tolerant military culture. The Dutch military formed a working group called Homosexuality and Armed Forces to improve the climate for sexual minorities. In the 1980s, this group became the Homosexuality and Armed Forces Foundation, a trade union that continues to represent gay and lesbian personnel to the ministry of defense.

Although homosexuals in the Dutch military rarely experience any explicitly aggressive acts against them,

they are troubled by subtle signs of homophobia and cultural insensitivity on the part of their heterosexual colleagues. Gay and lesbian military personnel are highly sensitive to these attitudes and typically respond by not expecting a high level of acceptance from their heterosexual colleagues, at least in terms of their sexual orientation.

Even so, a high level of loyalty characterizes homosexual personnel in the Dutch military. Indeed, research suggests that, given the difficulties they face, "only the most highly motivated, loyal homosexuals will choose a career in the armed services and persist in it."

In spite of the difficulties in fully integrating sexual minorities, the Dutch military continues to work to promote their inclusion. The Dutch military sees its duty as creating "the conditions under which all individuals can function fully." This acceptance of all types of people distinguishes the Dutch military from many other European militaries.

Great Britain's Monumental Shift in Policy

Long considered one of the more restrictive and homophobic of European militaries, the British Armed Forces reversed its position in 2000 and has taken steps in the past few years to create a more hospitable environment for gays and lesbians in its ranks.

In January 2000, the British Armed Forces lifted its ban on gay and lesbian personnel, following a ruling by the European Court of Human Rights. Like the United States, Britain had long excluded gay and lesbian service members and cultivated a military culture that defined itself in opposition to homosexuality.

For example, in 1994, the British Ministry of Defense justified its ban by arguing that "homosexual behavior can cause offense, polarize relationships, induce ill-discipline, and as a consequence damage morale and unit effectiveness."

Yet as increasing numbers of its allies, including Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and some of the European countries discussed above, lifted restrictions in the 1990s, the British policy became less tenable.

Unlike many other European countries, the British military also faced a much more organized gay and lesbian rights movement than many other European countries. This group of activists worked tirelessly to change the policy, and their legal challenges to the ban, which they began in 1994, eventually led to its removal.

The incorporation of the European Union Human Rights Act into British law allowed the legal challenges of these gay activists to overturn the ban. Unlike British legal protections, the European Union Human Rights Act implicitly protects gay men and lesbians from discrimination.

The small group of gay service members who challenged the ban first had to exhaust all British legal channels, but once they did, they were able to take their case before the European Court of Human Rights. Doing so allowed them to invoke the European Union Human Rights Act. The court ruled in their favor and required the British armed forces to reverse its discriminatory policy.

By all accounts, the lifting of the gay ban in the British military has been a success. Unlike those of other northern European countries such as the Netherlands, the new British policy does not explicitly guarantee gay men and lesbians the right to serve. Rather, it states that homosexuality in itself does not constitute grounds for dismissal.

The new British policy establishes a social code of conduct that applies to all service personnel. All service members are prohibited from engaging in social behavior that undermines the trust, cohesion, and operational effectiveness of the military. Such behavior includes unwelcome sexual attention, offensive

displays of affection, or sexual harassment. The policy allows for discretion on the part of the commanding officer to decide what is appropriate.

A leading expert on the policy change, Christopher Dandeker has referred to the new policy as "don't fear it, don't flaunt it," emphasizing the restraint that the new policy requires of gay and lesbian personnel. Even though it allows them to serve, it requires them to privilege their identity and responsibilities as service personnel over their sexual orientation.

In the 2003 Iraqi War, British units, containing openly gay men and lesbians, often fought in joint operations with United States military. There is no evidence that serving with openly gay men and lesbians in any way adversely affected the performance of the American troops.

Russia and Eastern Europe

The policies in many of the countries that comprised the former Soviet Union are unclear and inconsistent. Some, including Estonia and the Czech Republic openly embrace homosexual personnel, while others, such as Hungary, maintain gay bans.

Russia's policy is much less clear. After the fall of the Soviet Union, no official policy existed, even though homosexuality was decriminalized in civilian society.

In 2003, Russia announced a new policy under which homosexuals who had problems with their sexual identity could be drafted only in times of war. According to gay activists in Russia, this new policy continues to allow well-adjusted gay men and lesbians to serve. Yet what the Russian military will do in practice remains unclear.

Part of the difficulty in understanding the military's policies and attitudes toward gay and lesbian personnel in many of the eastern European countries involves a different sense of sexual identity and its place in society. Whereas the question of homosexuality in the military has been highly politicized in the United States, it is not necessarily so in many European countries. Generally speaking, sexuality in these cultures is considered a much more private and personal aspect of one's identity than it is in the West.

Conclusion

Given the many different cultures that comprise the European continent, it is difficult to generalize about European military culture and homosexuality. Depending on the context, gays and lesbians are accorded everything from support and acceptance to silence and stigma.

Yet if the case of Great Britain is any indication of the general movement of European militaries and their cultures, then they are slowly growing more tolerant of gay and lesbian personnel in their ranks and are creating policies to reflect this change.

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