The Pleasures of War

By Jacqueline Dent

A thesis submitted to fulfil requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Government and International Relations

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

The University of Sydney

2025

Statement of Originality

This is to certify that the content of this thesis is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted for any other degree or purpose.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work, and that all assistance received in preparing this thesis and all sources have been acknowledged.

Jacqueline Dent

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The idea of *The Pleasures of War* brewed for a few years, and I am incredibly grateful to the people who helped me bring it to life.

I would first like to thank the respondents who gave me their time to discuss their experiences in Afghanistan. It was revelatory to hear about the intricacies of your lives and what it was like to live in such a fascinating, complicated, and dramatic place. For many of you, and for me, Afghanistan was a life-changing experience.

This research was supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program (RTP) Fee offset.

Throughout the PhD process, I have been guided by brilliant women. Enormous thanks go first to my primary supervisor, Professor Sarah Phillips, who, with grace and good humour, consistently pushed me to go further and deeper with this project. Not just a lamp in the night—you've also been a glowstick! You were always open to my rants and doubts, and it has been a wonderful intellectual journey under the guidance of such a cool, esteemed, and courageous thinker. I will miss our regular discussions about war theory, global affairs, academia, Yemen, ISIS, our children, adventure, and life in general in your cosy office.

I also want to thank my secondary supervisor, Dr Laura Shepherd, for your genuine kindness and for always opening new pathways in my thinking whether through suggesting interesting literature or by example in your own scholarship. You have long been an intellectual trailblazer in IR.

A very special thanks also goes to the one and only Dr Megan MacKenzie, my original supervisor. This project would never have happened without you taking me on as a student and championing the idea

in the first place. You are an original, bold, and witty scholar, and you taught me the importance of holding fast to one's compass in academia. While I was devastated when you left Sydney for Vancouver halfway through my thesis, we have remained dear friends.

While this thesis is not a feminist project, it has been shaped by feminist IR. I do not know where IR would be without this scholarship, which I believe tells a far richer, more compelling, and less boring story about global politics. One of the things I love most about academia is being inspired by the ideas of other scholars and building on their work. I thus want to acknowledge all the scholars who work in this space and who, for decades, have done a lot of the heavy lifting to shift the field.

Next, I would like to thank my best friend Jodi Thiessen for always egging me on. As you put it: "Chip, chip, chip." Yes—one has to keep chipping away at a PhD! I also want to thank my friends Dr Justin Ellis and Dr Saskia Kohnen, whom I turned to in moments of anguish about theoretical frameworks and the "so what" of my PhD when I didn't want to bug my supervisor. You were always both very fun but also a bit strict, which I probably needed! It has been so lovely to talk shop with dear friends who are scholars over a meal. I also send many thanks to Dr Rebeka Freckleton, a work colleague—you have always been incredibly encouraging and interested in how I am doing.

Beyond this, I send my love to my wonderful friends who keep life sparkling: Jo Dunlop, Anna Watts, Anna Tregloan, Tamara Dean, Lachlan Menzies, Ian Stromsmoe, Katie Grusovin, Melanie MacKenzie, Kylie Melinda Smith, the Possie gang, and the Charles Sturt Uni crowd. I also want to thank my parents, Elizabeth and Desmond Dent. Dad—I know you always wanted a doctor in the family! A doctor of war may not be the kind you had in mind, but here we are.

I also want to honour Stevie Caskey, a very special and much-missed friend. On one of our playdates before he died, we went up to Sydney University as I needed to return a book—but also because he had never been to the campus. Now, every time I walk past the Quadrangle, I think of us making our dance video to Cypress Hill's "Insane in the Brain". He was always the best and funnest dancer. RIP, beautiful man.

Throughout this project, I have been supported by my partner, Dr George McBain. Your engagement with the project has been extraordinary. While we come from very different fields, I feel lucky to have had your wild intellect by my side, as well as your deep understanding of what doing a PhD involves.

You discovered many curious *pleasure* citations, inspired me in systems engineering, and were always up for analysing, scrutinising, or admiring the work of all sorts of theorists. It was so nice to be able to vent with you about Michel Foucault! You've put up with me spending hours, days, weeks, months, and years in bed writing this. (I try to sit at a desk, but always end up back in bed.) Thank you, gorgeous George!

Finally, I want to thank my young son Ambrose. What a beautiful land you have opened up for me in life. Thank you for being so fun, engaged, and interesting—and for your amusing impersonations of me writing in bed with my glasses on.

What a ride it has been. For me, there is no greater thrill in this life than coming across an idea that triggers thinking and sends the mind wandering. I will truly miss you, my dear PhD, and the world you created in my head.

ABSTRACT

War is often studied through its horrors: death, injury, violence, trauma, barbarity, and destruction. Unsurprisingly, when scholars in International Relations (IR) and related disciplines examine human experiences in war, it is usually in relation to these forms of suffering. However, personal accounts from soldiers, humanitarians, and journalists reveal that war also generates a range of pleasurable experiences. This thesis investigates the overlooked dimension of pleasure in war and the implications of its exclusion from IR. Drawing on interviews with 32 noncombatants who worked in Afghanistan during the most recent war, as well as memoirs and poetry by war workers across various conflicts, this study identifies a wide array of pleasures that are largely absent from IR discourse, including job satisfaction, emotional connection, meaning, purpose, excitement, pride and more. These accounts reveal that pleasure, far from being an anomaly, permeates daily life in war. By centring the experiences of war workers who report feeling good in war, this thesis challenges dominant narratives that reduce war to fighting and trauma. It seeks to expand what counts as legitimate knowledge about war and highlights the moralism embedded in war studies. Excluding pleasure from the study of war allows war to be framed as something that only sadists or sociopaths could enjoy. This thesis proposes that to truly understand war, we must take its pleasures as seriously as its horrors. Pleasure is as intrinsic to war as pain and death, and ignoring it purifies war in a way that helps make it more palatable. War is easier to comprehend when it is exclusively awful. I argue that by focusing only on its terrible aspects, vast as they are, we offer ourselves a comfortable, sanitised version of war that may even contribute to its endurance.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

AI use

During the prepartion of this thesis, I used Chat GPT, Co-pilot and Word at various points as an editing tool. Where text was modified by generative AI, the content was reviewed for possible errors, inaccuracies, and bias. I takes full responsibility for the submitted thesis and can ensure the work is my own and has used generative AI within the parameters of use.

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

INTRODUCTION

Anything is better than to have nothing at all happen day after day. You know that I do not love war or want it to return. But at least it made me feel alive, as I have not felt alive before or since.

—An unknown French woman in the Resistance after World War II.

(Gray 1970, xii)

War is often, and rightfully, studied by its horrors—death, injury, violence, trauma, barbarity and destruction. Unsurprisingly, when scholars in International Relations (IR) and many other disciplines examine human experience in war, it is usually in relation to these forms of suffering. Yet, as the anonymous French resistance fighter observes in the opening quote, war can also be a place that makes one feel "alive" (cited in Gray 1970, xii). While we may instinctively recognise her pleasure and acknowledge that others like it can exist in war, these sorts of experiences remain largely unspoken and unexamined in IR, a field that centres the study of war. Across a range of other disciplines, pleasure is also rarely centralised or explored; it is an element of war that scholars have turned a blind eye to (De Lauri et al 2025).

Thus the goal of this thesis is to explore the absence of theorising about pleasure in IR, despite the fact that personal accounts of war describe swathes of it. I do this by examining a wide range of wartime pleasures, both on and off the battlefield. My analysis draws on interviews I conducted with noncombatants who worked in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2019 during the prolonged U.S. conflict, as well as memoirs by soldiers, war journalists, and humanitarians, alongside poetry and interdisciplinary scholarship from a number of conflicts. How can pleasure be so present in these sources yet so absent in war scholarship? I argue that this gap reflects limitations in how war is understood ontologically—particularly the emphasis on fighting and injury—as well as how scholarship tends to adopt a moral approach to its study. Because pleasure permeates the record of war (though not in IR scholarship), examining it offers fresh insights into how war is understood.

Across disciplines, war is still widely studied, almost without exception, as traumatic, stressful and dangerous. There is also a lot of despair and subsequently, it is framed by "moral and normative understandings of war as deeply tragic" (De Lauri et al 2025, 3). Centering pleasure as part of wartime experience challenges dominant understandings of what we think war is and opens up a more honest reckoning with what war involves. By focusing only on trauma and violence, we are not telling the full story of what it is to experience war. I argue that the effect of excluding pleasure from the scholarly record is, perhaps ironically, that it helps to purify war and make it more palatable. This is because if war is represented as a terrible last resort and a necessary evil, we expect that only bad things will happen there. In other words, war is easier to comprehend when it is exclusively awful.

Therefore, I propose that by discussing only the terrible aspects of war—vast as they are—we offer ourselves a comfortable, sanitised version of it. Excluding pleasure also allows war to be framed as something that only very "sick" people with major problems would enjoy. But if we look more deeply at pleasure in war, we find that in a considerable body of documentary material, pleasure is a normal part of the fabric of war. Pleasure in war is a very real phenomena —yet is seldom spoken of explicitly.

This introductory chapter will provide the background to the research, and then examine the aims, objectives, and research questions. I will look at the significance of the study and then provide an outline of the rest of the thesis.

What is pleasure?

But first, how am I defining pleasure? As a concept, pleasure has captured the attention of philosophers, historians, monks, artists, psychologists, psychoanalysts, artists and countless others for centuries, largely because humans find different things pleasurable. Some of us love the smell of incense; others enjoy gambling or going on long bushwalks. As Michel Foucault declared, "Pleasure—nobody knows what it is!" (Foucault 1984, 359).

What is notable is that for something that is about feeling good, pleasure is often connected to feeling bad. Pleasure and pain seem to go hand in hand. As Colin Mercer puts it: "Pleasure … almost always invokes its chosen antonym. This is perhaps the point about its 'profound ambiguity'" (Mercer 1983,

95). Pleasure is also often seen as a bit of a problem; it is common for people to have “guilty pleasures”.

This ambiguity and connection to pain was evident throughout the research process. Whenever I told anybody about studying the pleasures of war, there was often a long pause. People were often taken aback and needed to think about it. They may have mentioned friendship but they also brought up soldiers enjoying killing and raping. When presenting the progress of my research to fellow students or faculty members, pain was also often mentioned. Or the pleasures were reframed as insidious in some way. Pleasure was also seen as an inappropriate thing to study in relation to war. One scholar told me, for example, that I was “whitewashing” war. While I privately thought the opposite, the comment still made me feel guilty—a feeling that has often arisen with this project.

It was curious that pleasure was rarely a “feel good” pleasure—the delight people experience in making enduring new friendships, seeing exotic landscapes in a foreign land or finding meaning in life. It was typically a dark, problematic kind of pleasure, which made sense, particularly in relation to soldiers. After all, their role in war is to engage in lethal violence. But what about the times when they may also simultaneously had spells of experiencing camaraderie, playfulness, euphoria and meaning in their lives? And what about war doctors, journalists or humanitarians? What are we to make of their “good” pleasures in something as bad as war?

Aside from being judged personally, am I thus expected to judge others who report pleasure in war? Laleh Khalili raises the complexities of how to frame pleasure, wondering if it can be understood “as everyday practices, as a politics of the present moment, or conversely (or simultaneously) as mechanisms of being co-opted into a broader apparatus of consumerist ideology and capitalist complacency?” (Khalili 2015, 583). Pleasure itself is always up for judgement; pleasure in war even more so.

To define pleasure, I draw on philosopher Aaron Smuts, who argues that a common theme in pleasurable experiences is that they all “feel good” (Smuts 2011, 242). Throughout this thesis, “pleasure” will thus refer to the range of “feeling good” sensations reported in the literature I studied and the interviews I conducted. This expansiveness of pleasure is found in Leonard Katz’s definition, where he proposes that it includes, “the affective positivity of all joy, gladness, liking, and enjoyment—all our feeling good or happy” (Katz 2008).

It is also important to clarify two points about how I approach pleasure, which exists on a spectrum. First, I am not focusing on the so-called "bad" or painful pleasures in war—such as people finding enjoyment in killing, rape, or watching executions—which have been explored by some scholars (see Tomforde 2025, Bourke 2000, Baaz and Stern 2009, Kühne 2011). As Neta Bar and Eyal Ben-Ari (2005) point out, enjoying killing is not "identical" to other types of pleasures in war. If you imagine a spectrum of pleasure, killing and raping are, at least for some, at one end. Instead, for this thesis, I am concerned with what might be called "good" pleasures, which would be at the other end: the sense of purpose that war can bring, the bonds of friendship formed in extreme conditions, the thrill of travel and seeing the world. These pleasures are intertwined in the violence of war, and these "good" pleasures are what I am trying to document. For soldiers, however, these "good" pleasures they may experience (camaraderie, thrill, purpose) are fraught, given that their primary role, as noted earlier, is to kill.

Second, as this article is situated within IR and not in psychology or psychoanalysis, I will not delve into the theories of pleasure that exist within these fields. While they may offer some insights into the phenomena, the goal of this thesis is to offer preliminary thinking around pleasure in war in IR. I take a similar approach to the editors of a collection of essays on pleasures under the Nazi regime , who opt to not have "analytical limits" on pleasure because of its "fluidity" (Swett et al 2011,4).

Background

In 2012, I was studying for a Master of IR at the University of New South Wales. Unsettled, restless, bored, I had thrown myself into my studies, as I was a bit lost after working overseas with international organisations for a few years—two "missions" in Afghanistan, one in North Ossetia in Southern Russia and one in Pakistan. The serious and international nature of my studies was keeping me sane in Sydney, a peaceful city which felt so far away from the intensity, excitement, highs and lows of where I had been. As part of my degree, while researching for a short paper on women on the frontline, I stumbled across the opening quote from the unknown Frenchwoman in the Resistance, where she said that war made her "feel alive" in ways that she had not felt "before or since". She made the statement to the philosopher J. Glenn Gray after World War II. I was startled. I had not been providing intelligence and sabotaging as Resistance Fighters did, but I felt exactly like this woman. Her words were my words; her voice through time articulated my dilemma. In Afghanistan, I had indeed

felt very alive like I never had before. Here in Sydney, I was partly dead. Was her experience of yearning for war common? I emailed my lecturer, asking if she knew anyone who had written about the thrill of combat and women having positive experiences in war. My lecturer replied that she did not know of any.

I wondered who this woman was who had been so enlivened by war? I looked deeper into Gray's *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle* (1970) and found he had an unusual back story. In 1941, on the day he got his paperwork to go to war, he was also awarded his PhD in philosophy from Columbia University. He spent the next four years in various theatres of World War II as an intelligence officer. He returned to university life in the US and became a professor, and a translator of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. His *Warriors* book was based on his diaries from the war and his time back in Germany during the 1950s.

While there was no more information about the Frenchwoman, Gray's book threw open a door. Here was a military man focusing on the many, many pleasures he experienced in war, on page after page. He writes of the intensity of watching bombs explode; of an interesting encounter in the woods with a deserter; of being kissed by a random woman in the street. He describes war as having "secret attractions ... the delight in seeing, the delight in comradeship, the delight in destruction". He points out that war offers a dramatic contrast to the dullness of ordinary life:

> People are often bored with a day that does not offer variety, distraction, threat and insecurity. They crave the satisfaction of the astonishing. Although war notoriously offers monotony and boredom enough, it also offers the outlandish, the exotic, and the strange (Gray 1970, 29).

I had not seen spectacular scenes of the magnitude that Gray wrote of—watching D-Day landing under fire, living through an air raid, the bombardment of the French Riviera —but my time in the war-ish space of Kabul was often dramatic. I define war-ish as not being on the frontline but living in an environment that sometimes feels, sounds and looks a bit like war. Suicide bombs echoed through the city and people were often killed. I sat in traffic next to large military tanks and often worried that I would be kidnapped by the Taliban or a criminal gang. My home and office were surrounded by barbed wire, and we were often in "lockdown" when an attack was happening somewhere across the city. There were soldiers with guns and many streets were blocked with large tan-coloured HESCO

defensive barriers. Afghan colleagues came to work, fearful of death threats they had received; others lost their family members in all manner of violence. A close colleague's brother was killed in a suicide bombing, and when he went to the morgue to identify him, he was only able to find body parts. If I travelled out of Kabul to nearby Gardez or further afield to Kandahar, security mandated that I travel with a group of armed Afghan soldiers. This war-ish space made me feel very alive at times.

The words of the Frenchwoman and Gray prompted me to hunt out scholarship about the war worker ecosystem I encountered in Afghanistan, one that was filled with Afghan colleagues and expatriate journalists, humanitarians, embassy staff, restaurant owners, soldiers and mercenaries from around the world. I wondered if they shared my sense of feeling "alive" because of where we were and what we were doing. I worked with people from France, Burkino Faso, Australia, the Philippines, Britain, Sudan, the United States (U.S.), Tajikistan, Pakistan, Armenia, Nigeria and many, many other nations. Later, when I was to interview war workers from a similarily diverse pool of nations, many of them also spoke of feeling alive and experiencing a range of other pleasures that will be explored in later chapters.

However, I couldn't find much academic scholarship in IR, or other fields, about the possibility of these people having good times in such situations. I looked at other conflicts and found a similar silence. Instead, the research into the lived experiences of war focused profoundly on the negative— the psychological impacts, such as PTSD and trauma; the dangers involved in the work; and a range of geo-political critiques of humanitarian interventions. I began to wonder why my experience, and the experiences of the Frenchwoman and Gray, was not in the academic literature. Were we just anomalies? Were we evil people in some way? And what about all the other people who went to World War I and II, and Vietnam and all the other wars. Did they sometimes enjoy it? U.S. government figures show that an estimated 15% of U.S. veterans from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars experienced PTSD (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs 2025). But what about the other 85%— were they fine?

War brings benefits

In terms of the construction and survival of states, war has always had many surprising upsides. In a letter that Sigmund Freud wrote to Albert Einstein in 1933 on the topic of "Why War?", the psychoanalyst has argued that war could paradoxically bring peace and unity, citing the example of

the Roman empire, their conquests "brought that boon, the pax Romana, to the Mediterranean lands" (Freud 1933). Charles Tilly sees that for invaders, coercion brings many advantages, including "money, goods, deference, access to pleasures denied to less powerful people" (Tilly 1990, 71). Benjamin Ginsberg has explored how many of the great hegemonic empires such as the Egyptian, Chinese, Roman and the U.S. have engaged in many wars and managed to develop high cultures, dynamic economies and places of scientific learning (Ginsberg 2014, 9). The historian Margaret MacMillan demonstrates that much progress and change has been prompted by war, some which many of us would find beneficial, including greater law and order, democracy, improved education and better lives for women (MacMillan 2020, 4). Thus while some IR scholarship looks at the benefits of war, more broadly, it is studied at a state or big picture level. Futhermore, realist, liberal, and constructivist approaches in IR tend to frame war in terms of violence, strategy, and statecraft. They overlook the role of the individual and especially the good times they may have experienced.

So what about the experience of war on an individual level? This is where we have a curious disjuncture. For while pleasure in war is not discussed in IR scholarship, it seems that it is explored almost everywhere else, particularly in relation to soldiers. It is in the endless supply of Hollywood war movies where soldiers bravely endure the battlefield with their friends, forging lifelong bonds—a camaraderie which will be explored throughout this thesis. It has been documented in ancient texts and war poetry for thouands of years. Hesiod's *Works and Days*, a poem dating from 700 BC, writes of warriors from the Bronze Age who, "loved the lamentable works of Ares [the God of war and courage] and deeds of violence" (Hesiod, Work and Days, Hes.WD 145). In Greek mythology, it comes to life in the tryst between Ares, the god of war, and Aphrodite, the goddess of love. It is reflected in the fact that the ancient Greek word for combat shares the same root as the word for "rejoice" (Nadelson 2005, 114).

The 15th century commander Jean de Bueil is effusive about his time during the 100 years' war in the chivalric romance *Le Jouvencal:* "War is a joyous thing: one hears and sees many good things and learns much of value in war. One loves one's comrade so in war" (de Bueil cited in van Creveld 2008, 107). Five hundred years on, German soldier Ernest Jünger [1], who spent four grueling years in World

[1] The soldier and writer Ernst Jünger and the journalist Sebastian Junger will be referred to by their full names throughout this thesis to avoid confusion.

War I trenches, declares that “war, for all its destructiveness, was an incomparable schooling of the heart” (Jünger 1996, n.p). Afghan fighter Abdul Salam Zaeef recalls often erupting into the *atan*, a traditional dance, during his years fighting the Russian war. He exclaims of the time: “What a happy life we led!” (Zaeef 2010, 26). During the most recent Afghan war, British soldier Patrick Hennessey remarks of the satisfaction of battle. The endorphins kick in and “everyone's faces read the same high” (Hennessey 2010, 196); at night, he is content as he settles into to binge the American drama *Grey’s Anatomy*. While likely not watching TV, the Taliban also share the intensity of trench warfare, as documented in this extract from the poet Jawad: “Hot, hot trenches are full of joy /Attacks on the enemy are full of joy/ Guns in our hands and magazine belts over my shoulders;/ Grenades on my chest are full of joy” (Jawad 2012, 156).

And pleasure is not just on the battlefield. Ernst Jünger recalls countless moments of play, leisure and camaraderie during World War I:

> We met for coffee in the dugout of one or the other of us every day, or sat together in the evening over a bottle or two and smoked, played cards, and comported ourselves like soldiers of fortune. Those pleasant hours in the dugout outweigh the memory of many days of blood and dirt and exhaustion (Jünger 1996, 59).

Soldiers also refer to the pleasure they find from looking good in uniform. In 1918, US General George. S. Patton wrote to his wife:

> I have the leather on my knees blanked every time I ride and my spurs polished with silver polish. In fact I am a wonder to behold (cited in Hillman 2004, 166).

Noncombatants also discuss enjoying war. British war journalist Anthony Loyd’s aptly titled *My War Gone By, I Miss it So,* a 1999 memoir about his time in the Bosnian and Chechen wars, documents many moments of pleasure, from his love of being in battle to enjoying downtime with colleagues:

> You could have a good time in Stara Bila that summer, providing you had not been born in the place ... The fighting spilled further into the hills around us; they glowed with burning villages at night, and echoed with firefights by day. We sometimes watched it over barbecues (Loyd 1999, 91).

British war surgeon David Nott explores the hell of the frontline but is equally effusive about his time in war. After working in Sarajevo in the Balkan conflict, he realises he has found his calling:

> It was a strange mix of altruism, wanting to help others, and pure selfishness – chasing the high of intervening to save lives, but also living my own life closer to the edge (Nott 2019, 55).

After being in Syria, he writes:

> ... the mission epitomised everything I had come to crave in such work—the satisfaction of making a difference, of helping ordinary people; the challenge of self-reliance when working in an austere environment; the camaraderie of dedicated people who share your values and the odd bit of danger just to spice things up (Nott 2019, 30).

Please is also laced throughout the 2004 memoir *Emergency Sex and Other Desperate Measures* written by Heidi Postlewait, Kenneth Cain and Andrew Thomson. Working for the UN in Somalia, Postlewait enjoys beers, getting promoted and intense "emergency sex" after being shelled:

> ...Yusuf and I get up and run around to the safe side of the building. And then the strangest things happens. I want to rip my clothes off, rip Yusuf's clothes off, and just fuck him right there ... Now. An emergency. Emergency sex ... As we pass the Somali tea shacks lined up empty along the road, I pull him into one and grab him and kiss him as hard as I've ever kissed anyone, unzip his pants, and pull him into me. My head is pounding and I feel a need to howl (Cain, Postlewait and Thomson 2004, 132).

This small sample illustrates the core of the argument pursued throughout this thesis: that pleasure is everywhere in the narratives of people who have been to war but IR is ignoring it. Whether through the intensity of combat, camaraderie over barbecues near the frontlines, dancing, sex or the fulfillment of living life with meaning and doing a job with purpose, war buzzes with pleasure. All in all, these positive experiences challenge the dominant narrative of war as exclusively a site of trauma, and indicate the need for scholarship to engage in this area.

What is war?

When I talk about pleasure in war, how am I defining war? This is not a straightforward task as war is as mercurial as pleasure. It's meaning is "unstable and problematic" (Mansfield 2008, 3) but it is most often studied by drawing on a Clausewitzean notion of fighting (Nordin and Öberg 2015, 393). As he put it: "War is nothing but a duel on a larger scale" (Clausewitz 1984, 75). Nearly two centuries later, fighting is also central to much thinking in war. In 2011, Tarak Barkawi and Shane Brighton published an influential article that helped establish the subfield of Critical War Studies (CWS). They called on scholars to re-centre war in the study of IR, aligning with Clausewitz in arguing that "fighting is that which thematically unifies war in general and in particular... and no ontology of war can exclude it" (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 135). In response, CWS scholars generally define war as what I would describe as: 'fighting plus something' (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, Holmvquist 2013) or 'probably fighting plus plus plus' (Nordin and Öberg 2015) or not fighting at all (Gilks 2025). Barkawi and Brighton, for example, see war as along the lines of 'fighting plus having broader social effects', declaring that: "While destructive, war is a generative force like no other" (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 126).

This thesis also considers fighting, some form of antagonism or aggression, the "duel", as intrinsic to war but at heart, it primarily draws on the work of Christine Sylvester who argues the need to centre individual experience in the study of war. Sylvester is critical about the way IR as a discipline has traditionally had an "abstract level of analysis" in relation to war, and has focused on "states, organizations, laws, norms, discourse and the like" (Sylvester 2013, 1).

As she puts it:

> ... war cannot by full apprehended unless it is studied up from people who experience it in myriad ways and not only down from abstract places of International Relations theory (Sylvester 2012, 483).

Sylvester defines experience as the "physical and emotional connections with war that people live – with their bodies and their minds and as social creatures in specific circumstances" (Sylvester 2013, 5). Furthermore, while war is traditionally studied in relation to fighting, she defines war as a "politics of injury" (Sylvester 2013, 3).

I focus on fighting but I'm also looking at the broader experience of war, and this thesis is in what I would describe as the "fighting plus plus plus" camp. This could also be framed as seeing war as having "plural ontologies" (Nordin and Öberg 2015) or a "galaxy of different ontologies" (Pili 2020). I take this approach to resist the "one thing" notion of war. It also keeps open the debate on the "underlying principles" of war (Nordin and Öberg 2015, 398). In essence, I see that war is a human endeavour where the fighting creates multiple connections between a wide spectrum of people, emotions, experiences and concepts—including pleasure. A plural/ galaxy approach to the ontology of war captures all of this.

Crucially, thinking about war beyond just fighting and by examining experience, it helps stress the point that many people work in war zones and it has many non-combative elements. We typically think of war as soldiers on the battlefield or traumatised and dead civilians. But soldiers work alongside many noncombatant military support staff and contractors including medical, administrative and logistics personnel.[2] Away from the military, war work also includes humanitarians, diplomats, journalists, analysts, mercenaries, businesspeople, restaurant and bar managers, and many international, NGO and think tank staff and contractors[3]. This cohort is just as much part of war as soldiers and this thesis explores their pleasures.

The mainstream representation of war

[2] People have gone to war to make a living for centuries. In late 15th- and 16th-century Germany, for instance, camp followers known as the *Tross* accompanied Landsknecht mercenaries, providing essential support. Today, this dynamic is captured in the military concept of the "tooth-to-tail ratio." One study found that since World War I, only 32.5% of U.S. Army overseas deployments have involved combat troops—a proportion that continues to decline. This suggests that the majority of military personnel at war are not frontline fighters (McGrath 2007).

[3] There is generally no clear way to quantify how many of these individuals go to war. For instance, efforts to determine the number of people who went to Afghanistan during the 2001–2021 war remain fragmented and incomplete. A snapshot of figures shows that around 130,000 International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) troops were deployed there during the peak of the war in 2010 (Pfeifer and can der Lijn 2021). Alongside this, according to Heidi Peltier, the U.S. Department of Defence paid various companies around $108 million in contracts for work performed in Afghanistan. She describes military contracting as the "Camo Economy", one which is much obscured (Peltier 2020). Swathes of humanitarians, bureaucratic, diplomatic and media personnel were also on the ground from 2001 to 2021. Again, there are no firm numbers. The United Nations Assistance Mission (UNAMA) alone deployed between 217 and 427 internationals in this period, peaking in 2011 (Pfeifer and can der Lijn 2021). It is estimated that between 2000 and 2014, 891 international and Afghan NGOs operated in Afghanistan (Mitchell 2017).

There are many camps in the study of war and they understandably tend to be dark. Realism, one of the dominant approaches in IR—especially in the realms of security and military affairs—adopts a gloomy view of human nature and international conflict. John Mearsheimer, an influential realist theorist, plainly says that realists are "pessimists", and "they see no easy way to escape the harsh world of security competition and war" (Mearsheimer 2014, 34). Barkawi and Brighton opt to centralise fighting (Barkawi and Brighton 2011) while feminist war scholars focus on individual experience (Sylvester 2011, 2012, 2013, Parashar 2014). While CWS and feminist IR examine war with much-needed new perspectives, the field also tends to take a despairing approach to war. As aside from a theoretical grounding in fighting and injury, which will be discussed in later chapters, the experience literature frames war as a site of suffering and pain (Penttinen 2013, Dyvik 2016) while CWS is equally grim and is "characterised by a normative pessimism" (Wilks 2025, 2). The result is that no IR literature directly theorises the concept of pleasure in war, particularly in relation to individual experiences.

It should be noted that some IR scholarship has touched on forms of pleasure. Elina Penttinen, for example, has centralised the concept of joy in IR, and proposes a, "U-turn from the illness approach or the ontology of suffering inherent in international relations especially with regard to the study of war"(Penttinen 2013,13). Instead of examining suffering and trauma, she explores healing and well-being in relation to women's experiences of war in Bosnia and genocide in Rwanda as a way to recognise "the plurality of life experience" (Penttinen 2013, 13). She also looks at "agency, capability and resilience" of Finnish women volunteering for the war effort in World War II (Penttinen 2013, 101). She points out the need to realise that experiences such as finding meaning, joy and exhilaration are not "irrelevant or suspect in the serious discipline of international relations" (Penttinen 2013, 102). Penttinen, alongside Katherine E Brown, also examines military humour and civilian jokes as a pathway to broaden our perspectives on war, again raising the point that humans are not "only helpless fragile victims of war or emotionless desensitised killing machines part of the industrial-military complex" (Brown and Penttinen 2013, 124).

Julia Welland focuses directly on joy and pleasure in war through studying three war novels. She explores three themes— bodily pleasures, collective joys in rallies and pleasure found in everyday moments—and argues that we can shift our perspective away from seeing war as all-encompassing or the sole defining experience of those affected by it. As she put it: "…war is never the only thing going

on" (Welland 2018, 437).[4] Meanwhile, Synne Dyvik found in studying Norwegian military memoirs that they show "gendered assemblages of pleasure, pain, enjoyment and suffering" (Dyvik 2016, 144). Dyvik argues that accounting for the many ways soldiers feel in their bodies—and how these experiences are shaped by their gender and the fact they are collectively felt—helps IR to be "better equipped to understand war's continued seduction and continuation for those who choose to practice it"(Dyvik 2016, 144). [5]

In pockets of philosophy, anthropology, sociology, military studies, and psychology, one finds scattered attention to pleasure—sometimes centralised, but often only one part of the research. Soldiers enjoy war because of the camaraderie (Nevarez et al. 2017), and as a path to self-becoming (Pedersen 2017). They have been found to experience excitement and thrill (Brænder 2020, 2016; Gray 1970), admire the spectacle (Gray 1970), and, through "flesh-witnessing," have battlefield epiphanies (Harari 2008). War makes them feel unique (Kuehnel & Wilén 2018), heroic (Lomsky-Feder 2004), and grants them profound existential experiences (Harari 2008, Henriksen 2007, Gray 1970, Hillman 2004).

War journalists are often motivated by thrill and excitement, the drive to get the story, or idealistic reasons (McLaughlin 2016, 9). Dutch journalists, for instance, have gone to war in search of adventure, personal ambition, the opportunity to witness history, and a sense of moral commitment (van der Hoeven and Kester 2022, 268). A sense of purpose and "duty or public service" has also "enriched" journalists' lives (Armoudian 2016, 13). Some enjoy the work because it allows them to travel (McLaughlin 2016, 20, 22), while for others, the frontline serves as "a stimulant" and a key motivation for entering the profession (Feinstein 2006, 47). Going to war also brings international recognition, with many taking pride in the awards they receive (Feinstein 2006, 70).

[4] I do not draw on Welland's work as it she studies novels.

[5] Roxani Krystalli and Philipp Schulz (2022) explore how love and care "sit alongside violence" in Uganda and Colombia but I have not included them in this study as they are focused on victims and survivors and not war workers.

Aid workers describe their work as “addictive” (Roth 2015, 93), and it is conceptualised as a form of “edgework” (Roth 2015, 74). Their roles have also been portrayed as rewarding, driven by a sense of moral duty (Fast 2014, 137) and the desire to make a difference (Roth 2015, 92).

In criminology, Simon Cottee’s review of Sebastian Junger’s book *War*, looks at pleasure in war. He uses the work—a study of a small contingent of U.S. soldiers fighting in Afghanistan—to explore the attractions of war and combat, and whether these would be similarly found amongst insurgents. Cottee argues that war is “often experienced as a profoundly exciting and existentially rewarding human activity” and that Junger’s account offers insights into the drives behind acts of terror (Cottee 2011, 439). Alongside fear and boredom, he finds a range of “joys” for soldiers—excitement, pleasure in killing, comradeship, and meaning and purpose (Cottee 2011).

More recently, work published by the interdisciplinary *War and Fun: Reconceptualising Warfare and Its Experience* (WARFUN) project—largely anthropological—has aimed to dispel the “fog of war” in academic discourse by exploring sensations like thrill, humour, and pleasure (De Lauri et al. 2025). It documents soldiers having fun in war, whether as part of the everyday (Mogstad 2024) or how it is a taboo (Johais 2024). It looks at the positive experiences of child soldiers in Nigeria (Achilli 2024), as well as German soldiers experience of killing in combat, which include moments of joy (Tomforde 2025).

De Lauri points out that while fun seems inconsistent with the gravity of war, it is there. Alongside camaraderie, there are dark pleasures, such as Israeli soldiers live-streaming playing with Palestinian ladies underwear during the war in Gaza in 2024. While governments try to explain that these episodes as not belonging in “normal war”, De Lauri argues “this is exactly what war is” (De Lauri 2025, 176). Government, media and even some scholarly propaganda puts forth an idea of a “well-behaved war” in order to make it more acceptable and whatever deviates from it—a US massacre in an Afghan village, for example—is seen as an “exception”. But De Lauri argues this is not the case. Just as there is brutality in war, there is fun; and the extremes of war can be found outside in ordinary life as well. Significantly, he also points out how fighters are more likely to talk about war for what “it really is (in all its contradictions)” compared with “(some) politicians, journalists, or academics” (De Lauri 2025, 175)—a theme explored in this thesis.

Research problem

In the swathes of literature on the causes of war, ranging from Quincy Wright's epic two volume 1590-page long *A Study of War* to Jack Levy and William R. Thompson's overview of major theories of war, pleasure is not explored or never taken seriously (Wright 1942, Levy and Thompson 2010).[6] [7] In CWS and feminist IR, where scholars examine the ontology of war through fighting, as well as individual experience in ways that have influenced my own approach, the focus remains largely on soldiers with a prevailing assumption that war is fundamentally about the bodily, emotional and social problems it inflicts.

Across a broad range of other disciplines—including psychiatry, medical anthropology, peace and conflict studies, psychology, and others—war is also widely studied, almost without exception, as a traumatic, stressful, and dangerous environment for people to work in. Much more is known about the adverse psychological effects of combat service, particularly clinical problems, than the positive and the personal growth (Gifford 2006, 23), and this leads to a distorted view of war (Antonovsky and Bernstein cited in Gifford 2006, 23). While soldiers may be briefly lauded for being at war—deemed heroic and courageous—when they return, there is a tendency to frame them as damaged goods or as Laura Powell puts it: "…broken people, unlikely to be able to resume their normal work, and many get discharged" (Powell 2014, 167).

Thus, pleasure's absence from IR represents a significant gap in how we understand war. Although this gap spans multiple disciplines, it is particularly troubling in IR, a field that takes war as its central object of study.

---

[6] Wright, however, does point to a lack of pleasure in daily life as a motivator for going to war. He cites Leo Rosten, who remarks in an essay in *Harpers Magazine* in 1935: "As long as men work as addressing clerks or attendants to bolt no, 264, without pleasure, without dignity, without meaning, war offers individual redemption and personal glory" (Rosten cited in Wright 1942 Vol.1, 308).

[7] The prehistorian Ian Gilligan (2024) has conducted one of the more fascinating studies into the enjoyment of war and proposes the reason we do so is because we wear clothes. He argues that among mobile hunter-gatherers, warfare was "less common in socially non-complex contexts and, arguably, warfare was absent where people were routinely naked" (Gilligan 2024,np). He arrives at his theory by drawing on Sigmund Freud's notion of sublimation. As he puts it: "The enjoyment of war has a biological basis (the sexual drive and its sublimation), a social basis in restriction of the sexual drive (hence a correlation with social complexity), and a prehistoric basis in the origin of clothing and sexual shame—hence the archaeological evidence for its prominence in recent prehistory" (Gilligan 2024,np).

Research aims, objectives and questions

Given the lack of IR research and theorisation into pleasures in war, this study aims to do a few things. I will explain my theoretical framework, which will include an overview of war theory that was drawn on for this thesis. Second, I will call attention to the fact that war is largely studied in relation to fighting and subsequently trauma, violence and suffering. Third, I will examine pleasure itself and show how the debates in the pleasure literature, particularly around the politics of pleasure, can offer insights into war. Fourth, I will document some of the many pleasures war workers report in relation to their war experience. Finally, I will demonstrate how the concept of pleasure in war is deeply problematic for everyone involved—those who have experienced war, as well as academics, journalists, and the general public—and how the moralism surrounding war studies likely shapes current thinking about the ontology of war.

The central question of this research project is: "What are the pleasures in war and what do they tell us about war?" Several other questions and lines of inquiry were subsequently borne from the research.

1. Is the concept of pleasure treated as important in the IR literature about war?
2. Why not?
3. Where can this be found instead?
4. Why does its absence from the IR literature matter?

My research draws on expressions of pleasure found in memoirs, poetry, media articles, a small body of academic literature, as well as a survey with 119 people and in-depth interviews I conducted with 32 noncombatant war workers in and around a war-ish space in Afghanistan.

By examining this literature, I will argue that because so many war workers report having a range of pleasurable experiences on, off, or adjacent to the battlefield, the idea that war is a place solely of trauma and suffering is far too simplistic. I argue that by documenting them, not only do we learn more about war, we enrich its ontology. We also can begin to examine the politics of pleasure in war—are individuals or the state are driving war? Is it normal or an aberration? By leaving pleasure

out, we are not only failing to fully understand war, we are also shaping it an idealised war—one of pain and suffering, and only "bad" pleasures. For as we will see, the French resistance fighter from World War II recalling being so "alive" in war—the unknown woman who started this project—was certainly not alone in her feelings.

As mentioned, this work answers Sylvester's call to include individual "physical, emotional, and social experiences" (Sylvester 2013, 2) in the ontology of war. However, while Sylvester frames war as injurious and violent, I argue that we must also make space for the good pleasures amidst this pain. Additionally, I hope to broaden the idea that war is more than just soldiers fighting, and is in fact an everyday experience (Parashar 2013) in a "vast sprawling" process (Nordstrom 1999, 21), and that violence isn't always an "encounter", but something people live in (Mognieh 2017). I want to fill out and give more depth to the landscape of war because scholarship often treats war as a monolithic, ill-defined concept—a vague blob without any specificity. I also need to closely decribe "war" as some will suspect pleasure isn't possible possible in "war".

Finally, by putting pleasure in the picture, I hope to show the moralism evident in war studies and to open up the landscape of what is considered acceptable to study about war—including the good experiences people have. Penttinen set out to focus on joy and healing in IR after finding that she was continually focusing on suffering, violence and rape, which, she says, "are the correct materials" for a feminist scholar such as herself (Penttinen 2013, 3). I am not taking such a concerted approach but still I have two goals. The first is to show that while pleasure is missing in the study of war in IR, it is found in many other places. But second, I hope to shift the despairing framework and approach. War is a very human endeavour and we need to examine the pleasures people experience because they are part and parcel of war, and can tell us something about the nature of war.

Beyond the offensiveness, immorality or indifference, pleasure can be technically challenging to explore because in instances where good pleasures are acknowledged, war workers themselves are often wary of it as they know it is deemed problematic. It was notable in the interviews how some respondents felt awkward at the idea and how memoirists also recognised it was an issue. In academia, to discuss and explore pleasure or positive experiences in war is also approached with reticence and in need of qualification.

This thesis concludes that the sidelining of pleasure in war serves to make war more acceptable, not less. The horrors of war—its death, violence, cruelty, and mayhem—are easier to process if we assume that everyone is suffering. But if people can find pleasure in war and some even have the time of their lives, what does this reveal about human nature or, at least, about the reasons why war is so common? Perhaps we dismiss such responses as belonging to the "other," reassuring ourselves that *we* couldn't, and wouldn't, be like that in war. But the record suggests otherwise and if anything, reveals that pleasure in war is normal.

Outline

In chapter one, I map out the methodology that I designed for my research, which was borne from my own experience of working in the humanitarian sector in Afghanistan over three periods between 2005 and 2011. As there is such a dearth of literature in IR about pleasure in war, this chapter explains how I used a ranges of sources to document pleasure.

In chapter two, I discuss the theoretical framework which has guided this thesis. As pleasure is not theorised in IR, there is currently no frame for the phenomena, so I have engaged with a range of scholarship to tell the story. This chapter outlines the theoretical basis of the project by examining how war is defined and understood. I begin with the challenge of defining war, followed by a discussion of the traditional framing of war as fighting—and its key consequence, injury. I then explore alternative approaches, which I call 'fighting plus plus plus'. These include theories that propose multiple ontologies of war, allowing space to account for pleasure as part of the war experience. Next, I turn to feminist IR scholarship—particularly the work of Sylvester—which centres experience, the everyday, and embodiment. Finally, I examine critiques of moralistic or prescriptive approaches to studying war. Scholars like Penttinen offer more affirmative perspectives that help reframe how war can be written about—including its more positive aspects. Throughout, I draw on reflections from people who have experienced war, grounding theory in lived experience.

In chapter three, I will discuss the tendency in war studies to focus on everything but pleasure. I attribute this partly to the centrality of fighting—and its correlate—the "politics of injury" (Sylvester 2013, 3) in thinking, which leaves little space to consider pleasure. When pleasure is addressed, it tends to relate to darker aspects such as sexual violence, rather than being explored in different terms. Some scholarship acknowledges a wider range of experiences, but pleasure is often treated as

peripheral—mentioned in passing or placed at one end of a spectrum, such as "exhilaration to mutilation" (McSorley 2014, 107). While emotions like pain, boredom, and anger are examined, pleasure rarely receives the same attention. This chapter argues that while trauma-focused accounts are vital, the near-total absence of "good" pleasure creates a distorted picture of how war is experienced.

In chapter four, I explore pleasure itself and how it can be problematic. While I've defined pleasure simply as "something that feels good" (Smuts 2011), this chapter approaches it as both a conceptual and political phenomenon. This is necessary because IR war literature has provided few tools for thinking seriously about pleasure in the context of war. I thus wondered if pleasure theory itself might offer some clues. How do we make sense of "feeling good" in the midst of something so destructive? What does pleasure in war actually mean? Though often assumed to be personal, pleasure is always judged—morally, politically, and socially.

In this chapter, I offer a brief overview of how pleasure has been theorised across philosophy, history, and cultural theory—acknowledging that a full survey is beyond the scope of this thesis. I also explore the politics of pleasure, including how states and ideological frameworks across the political spectrum have tried to regulate or control it. Finally, I examine how pleasure might be understood in the context of war, and discuss whether it is a matter of individual agency or shaped by institutional and state forces. Does personal pleasure sustain war? This chapter argues that pleasure is entangled with broader political and cultural forces and offers insight into how this can play out in war.

In chapter five, I look at noncombatant pleasures gleaned from my interviews and a variety of other sources, particularly memoir and some scholarship. Together, they reveal some of the many ways that pleasure in war is experienced and understood. The pleasurable experiences reported by non-combatants demonstrate that, while the concept is largely overlooked in IR, there is rich material elsewhere to draw from.

In chapter six, I discuss the various ways that soldiers report experiencing pleasure across several conflicts. While soldiers have unique pleasures, particularly in relation to combat, they also have shared positives with noncombatants. Again, the pleasures reported by soldiers highlights how IR is missing a major element in the story of war.

Chapter seven aims to show that academia and the public resist, reject, critique and avoid recognising pleasure in war; it is a problematic and seemingly immoral concept. As was evident in the interviews and memoirs, for those who have been in war, it is an equally challenging notion to discuss and examine. I explore the problems with pleasure in several steps. These include looking at the suspicion surrounding the study of war within IR and the general taboos around pleasure in war. I also examine how war workers are aware of the taboo and respond to it with a mix of guilt and defiance. Despite this, many still want to share their pleasurable experiences.

In my conclusion chapter, I demonstrate that while pleasure is missing from mainstream IR scholarship, it exists almost everywhere else. Aside from documenting the pleasures of war, it also seeks to understand why it is not being discussed or examined, and how this impacts on scholarly understanding of what war *is* and, possibly, why it occurs. Ultimately, I argue that pleasure is a reality of war. Some soldiers, war journalists and humanitarians who have been in war tell us stories that challenge the dominant conception of war as a site solely of suffering and trauma.

Like all research, my own experiences have shaped this thesis. My understanding of war and pleasure was shaped by living in conflict-affected countries. Thus while my own conceptions initially started this research and informed my approach, I have been left surprised, fascinated and at times startled at the depth and richness of the "good" pleasures some people report having in war.

Chapter 1

METHODOLOGY

Discussing pleasure in war presents a stark departure from our typical discourse about it. Not only does pleasure seem offensive in the context of war, it is a difficult thing to measure or assess due to its highly personal nature. In sociologist John Law's list of the "textures" of the world that are difficult to describe—because they may be "complex, diffuse, and messy"—"pains and pleasures" appear first (Law 2004, 2). Thus, when planning the methods and methodology necessary to build a framework to study pleasure in war, there was limited scholarship within IR and other fields to draw from. Examining experience and emotions in IR is not straightforward either. With emotions, for example, as Simon Koschut has pointed out, there are many challenges in how to study them ontologically and epistemologically, including how to conceptualise them, what methodological approach to take and how to move from individual to a collective levels of analysis (Koschut 2022).

Despite these tensions, however, I still felt the question of pleasure in war was a topic worth tackling. Thus, in the words of Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, who calls for a rethinking of empirical research in IR, this thesis is "an irreducibly partial and perspectival endeavor", and one in which "the result appears somewhat one-sided" (Jackson 2008, 131). It is one-sided because this work emerged from a specific positionality—my own experience—and deliberately focused on pleasure, setting out to understand why it was missing and to document it. It embraces its partiality as a way to spotlight what is often ignored or sidelined in conventional war studies.

In this chapter, I will explore my research philosophy, and the rationale for employing a qualitative and interpetative approach to finding answers to my questions. I will first look at the scholarship that served as a guide in exploring pleasure, as well as my own positionality. Following this, I will go into detail about the research type and the varied methods that I used in this research, which included a Qualtrics survey; interviews; and analysis of memoir, poetry, media stories and academic research which featured pleasure.

Research philosophy

My research philosophy consisted of four guiding principles. The first was the need to take an interpretivist approach to understanding people's experiences of war. The second principle was that because pleasure has been so understudied in IR, the best approach was to draw on innovations in IR and adopt an "anything goes" methodological approach (Aradau and Huysmans 2014, 607). This involved taking inspiration from feminist IR literature which draws on a variety of sources (see Sylvester 2013, 2015 and Penttinen 2013). The third philosophical approach was to not take a structuralist view of war experience but centre individual agency. Finally, I was cognisant that there is a "correct way" to think about war. I will now explain each of these four points in greater detail.

The starting point was an interpretivist approach, which argues that facts are not purely objective but are understood through personal perspectives and backgrounds, influencing how people perceive the world. Interpretivism involves "reflective assessment of the reconstructed impressions of the world" (Sarantakos 2013, 40) and for this reason, is relevant to my thesis, which focuses on people's experiences of war. A core principle of interpretivism is "to work with these subjective meanings already present in the social world; that is, to acknowledge their existence, reconstruct them, and understand them" (Goldkuhl 2012, 138).

An interpretative, qualitative approach allows me to analyse recurring themes across the experiences of a diverse group of war workers, such as journalists, humanitarians, soldiers. While some scholars in CWS have called for a phenomenological analysis of people's experiences in war (Narozhna 2022, Gilks 2025, Brighton 2011), I am not engaging in deep individual interpretation.

Anything goes

Second, I needed to take an "anything goes" approach and not use a standard methodology. Law proposes that in some instances, "we are being told how we must see and what we must do" with our methods (Law 2004, 4). As he points out, while standard methods are "often extremely good at what they do", they are also not well adapted to the "study of the ephemeral, the indefinite and the irregular" (Law 2004, 4). This aptly describes pleasure in war, where experiences vary greatly and no two wars are the same. I could have used one of many standard quantitative scales to measure people's pleasure in war, but I did not see how pleasure could be quantifiable. I also could have solely

read memoirs from war workers, but I wanted to go wider and felt an eclectic approach was better suited to capture the expansiveness of pleasure as found in personal accounts of war. Law calls using material from different sites of inquiry as "method assemblages", which is "a combination of reality detector and reality amplifier". These assemblages "detect, resonate with, and amplify particular patterns of relations in the excessive and overwhelming fluxes of the real" (Law 2004, 14).

Within IR, Claudia Aradau and Jef Huysmans have built on the work of Law, and refer to an "anything goes" approach to method, which similarily guided this work. They define it as:

> … experimentally connecting and assembling fragments of ontology, epistemology, theories, techniques and data through which subs tantive effects are obtained (Aradau and Huysman 2014, 598).

I took this approach out of necessity. For example, when looking for how my pleasurable experiences in Afghanistan—and those of the people I interviewed—were articulated in the war literature, I found little. Instead, I found helpful insights in other disciplines, such as Dean S. Hartley III's 2021 systems engineering approach to conflict, which articulated my thinking around the "war-ish" setting, it's expansiveness and how there are many people at war with an array of emotions and actions. When thinking about how to theorise pleasure in war, I found answers in literature that engaged with pleasure itself (Smuts 2011, Khalili 2015, Solnit 2022).

Methodologically, this thesis was also inspired by feminist IR scholars Sylvester (2011, 2013) and Penttinen (2013), who advocate for work that engages with a wide range of literatures, discourses, and approaches to studying the experience of war. Sylvester, for example, uses an exemplary text methodology, which involves drawing on a range of frameworks. She incorporates "nuggets of insight on war as bodily and emotional experience in IR" (Sylvester 2013, 3), as well as feminist texts, literary sources, testimonial accounts, novels, and ideas from related academic fields to build a portrait of war experience. Crucially, Sylvester also examines different strands of thinking about war within IR 'camps'—realism, new wars, constructivism, and critical IR—to show how, while these approaches argue in abstractions, "people lurk as shadows and ghosts" (Sylvester 2013, 11). By melding these varied perspectives, she is able to "juxtapose competing frames of analysis in pursuit of new ways of thinking" (Sylvester 2013, 3). She likens this approach to the "art-making logic of collage" (Sylvester 2013, 3).

Penttinen uses a range of sources such as "testimonials, biographies, fiction and film of war experience" to tell the story of women surviving and engaging in heroic deeds in war (Penttinen 2013, 16). Weary of studying the trauma and suffering of war, she looks for the experience of "healing and well-being" in a range of locations (Penttinen 2013, 16). She interviewed women Finnish police officers working in international peacekeeping and crisis management , and looks at a collection of women's memoirs and images from World War II Finland to spotlight the positives.

Having also to rely on such a wide range of sources, I encountered research about war workers that was not always clearly aligned or compatible in terms of focus, methodology or context. For example, when the lives of war workers—whether soldiers, journalists, or humanitarians—were examined, there was often a lack of specificity regarding the context of the conflict they were involved in. For instance, while there was some research into the experiences of humanitarians, it was not always clear whether they were living in an active war zone, low intensity civil conflict, or a broader crisis or emergency settings. The exact conditions of their daily lives—what it was like, where they lived, if they could walk the streets, whether there were explosions—were not explained. I found this problematic because the lack of specificity made it difficult to interpret, compare, or generalise findings, particularly any mention of positive ones. There is a big difference between being in a country where one city is experiencing daily aerial bombardment, for example, and working in a nearby city that is not being targeted. Similarly, when trauma or PTSD was discussed, the literature often left the circumstances that led to a war worker's mental health challenges, or placed them in danger, vague or underexplored.[8] Thus, in response to this lack of contextual and methodological clarity, I characterise these ambiguous spaces in the literature as "war'ish" — neither clearly situated within active conflict zones nor entirely outside of them or in and around a frontline.

[8] Kenneth E. Miller and Andrew Rasmussen point out that research into the psychological impact of armed conflict is narrow in that it examines "the relationship between direct war exposure and mental health" (Miller and Rasmussen 2010, 9). While their work does not specifically focus on war workers, they outline a key tension: the ongoing debate between trauma-focused versus psychosocial approaches to understanding how war affects people. They recognise that direct experience of armed conflict has "profound effects", but also stress it leads to all other daily stress connected to "poverty, social marginalization, isolation, inadequate housing, and changes in family structure and functioning"(Miller and Rasmussen 2009, 8).

Furthermore, as pleasure is not specifically addressed in much of the literature, I included research that could be interpreted in this way. For example, I drew on studies that touched on motivations for going to war (van der Hoeven and Kester 2022) or what was "fun" about it (Mogstad 2025, Johais 2025). Fun is defined as "a source of light-hearted pleasure or *enjoyment*; to provide amusement or entertainment" (Oxford English Dictionary). While fun is more associated with play, it is undoubtedly a form of pleasure and for this reason, the research into fun in war was relevant to this thesis.

Individual agency

For me, the CWS literature at times took the life and spirit out of people in war. An example of this is the constant use of the term "bodies" to describe people in war, which I will touch on later. Tanya Narozhna, citing Andreas Ringmar, argues that in Barkawi and Brighton's influential approach, humans are reduced to "bleak, two-dimensional characters determined entirely by forces beyond their control; they are puppets on structuralist strings, formed by language, by power and by language-as-power" (Ringmar in Narozhna 2022, 218). This thesis takes a different tack and seeks to instead foreground individual agency in shaping the experience of war. Anthropologist Nigel Rapport argues that individuals possess an "existential power ... over and against an impersonal, social-structural or institutional power" that is often emphasised in the social sciences (Rapport 2003, 5). He describes people as having the capacity to pursue "a certain life-project," and that they understand the meaning of their lives through the pursuit of specific goals, often with "robustness, power and independence" that can escape the influence of external forces (Rapport 2003, 5). In a similar vein, Thomas Randrup Pedersen's study of Danish soldiers takes a "self-driven" outlook (Pedersen 2017, 10). While I do not wholly take the same approach, these perspectives were useful guides. I wanted to avoid using subjects as discourse and was more interested in centring how individuals talk about pleasure in the war environment.

The "correct way" to study war

A final element guiding the methodology that underpins this thesis is the awareness the topic is somewhat taboo and goes against the "correct way" to study war. Scholars have noted there are dominant approaches to studying war, which are shaped by norms and moralities (De Lauri et al 2025, Pedersen 2017, Gilks 2025, Penttinen 2013).

I know about the taboos because I regularly felt uneasy about my topic. As I wrote this thesis, I would read harrowing stories in memoirs or see graphic footage of dead bodies in Gazan hospitals on my social media feeds, and wonder whether this was an appropriate topic. As the Ukranian writer and fighter Pavlo Matyusha remarks: “Happiness in war sounds almost like a betrayal of suffering” (Matyusha 2022). In addition to the comment that an emphasis on pleasure is “whitewashing” war, I was also scolded on multiple occasions. An acquaintance recommended I get in touch with an Australian foreign correspondent, who had done some work in conflict areas and when I did, she wrote a scathing email about the fact that I was addressing this topic in the first place. In another instance, I was looking for war memoirs in the war section of the annual Chancellor's Committee Book Fair at the University of Sydney, and struck up a conversation with a young man about my PhD topic. As we flicked through books together discussing the topic of pleasure in war, an older man at our table scoffed at me and said, “Pleasures in war! I doubt that!”. My PhD supervisor Sarah Phillips said she always enjoyed watching me tell strangers at workshops, conferences and in academic hallways what my topic was, and then feeling the air leave the room while fellow scholars gathered their thoughts about how to respond, or sometimes, how to mask their horror.

These kinds of experiences are common among those who take an alternative approach to studying war, and I will return to these taboos in greater depth in chapter seven. Other scholars have encountered challenges and I was particularly inspired by Penttinen’s study of joy in IR. While we take very different approaches, I related to some of her experienes and critiques.

Her work essentially argues that “there is more to war than suffering” (Penttinen 2013, 4) and rather than focusing on violence and trauma, she foregrounds “aliveness, healing and joy” at the heart of IR (Penttinen 2013, 3). It was initially inspired by when presenting her research at a feminist conference on police officers’ success in crisis management, she encountered resistance. “Why was it so questionable to focus on what was working well in crisis management and so acceptable to focus on what was going wrong?” (Penttinen 2013, 17).

While I do not aim to focus on what is working well, I draw on her work in four ways. First, I build on her desire to create a “new picture of war experience” (Penttinen 2013, 73) which challenges the idea that positive ones are “somehow irrelevant or suspect” in IR (Penttinen 2013, 101). Second, I am interested in her documentation of some pleasures in war, including Finnish police women who serve

in Kosovo in a post-conflict setting and find a sense of purpose in their work, as well as the purpose, meaning, exhilaration and joy experienced by women who serve in the Lotta Svärd, a women's volunteer organisation active during World War II in Finland.

Third, I align with her critique of "(feminist) IR" as framing the world as an "ontologically exploitative and oppressive place" focused on vulnerability and weakness (Penttinen 2013, 15). Penttinen links postpositivist feminist IR approaches to scientific realism, arguing that both operate within an "anti-humanist and anti-foundationalist paradigm" (Penttinen 2013, 14). In this view, both reject the notion of stable human subjects and universal truths, seeing the world as governed by structures of oppressive violence rather than human agency. Penttinen also points to the disciplining of war thought more generally, particularly in feminist IR, where the study of war is "somehow suspect" and there is a particular approach to take i.e. "the unexamined belief that war is inherently bad" (Penttinen 2013, 84). She observes that certain assumptions—such as the idea that women must be studied primarily as victims—have become foundational to the "correct" way of researching war in feminist IR. This framework, she argues, ultimately silences the experiences of women who find war to be a positive or empowering experience (Penttinen 2013, 116).

Finally, Penttinen spotlights a broader dilemma with critique, arguing that IR is a "circulating practice" where research into what is wrong with the world is then critiqued by another scholar. She calls this "self-serving," with academics claiming to "proclaim an objective or clearer view of the reality of international relations than those lay persons in the midst of it" (Penttinen 2013, 29). In this thesis, I try my best to avoid that cycle in a few ways. First, I am not trying to explain what is wrong with the world. Second, I seek to build on aspects of feminist work and suggest an alternative path, rather than damning them for not exploring pleasure. I am reluctant to critique feminist and critical scholars for not examining pleasure, since they remain the only branch of IR that seriously engages with individual experience in the first place.

Alongside Penttinen, other scholars raise the role morality plays in how we think and study war. In philosophy, war has long been treated as a moral problem (Pili 2020), and this perspective also influences IR, even though it is often unacknowledged. These moral expectations about how war should be understood significantly shape what we come to know about it. In relation to fun in war, de Lauri et al (2025) stressed the norms and moralities need to be challenged to get a full picture.

Soldiers' moralities around war, for example, are often treated as uniform, failing to acknowledge the plurality of their perspectives (de Lauri et al. 2025).

This silencing personally impacts war workers who have been in and around war with some soldiers feeling they cannot talk about their pleasures in war, which includes having fun (see Mogstad 2024, Johais 2024). The anthropologist Kenneth MacLeish has explored the cultural narratives around "how to feel about war", which also includes the problematisation of American soldiers' psyches (MacLeish 2019, 277). MacLeish's shows how interventions into the lives of soldiers—such as the framing of PTSD as "moral injury" and resilience training to help soldiers deal with the stress of battle—aren't just responding to war's psychological effects but shape how are they seen and integrated into public discourse.

As mentioned in the introduction, one scholar's comment that I was "whitewashing" war got me thinking about Paulo Ravecca and Elizabeth Dauphinee's observation of the rise of the "innocent-selves" in academia (Ravecca and Dauphinee 2022, 37) and the "neoliberal mandate for moral self-promotion" (Ravecca and Dauphinee 2022, 38). I came to see that ignoring or dismissing something like pleasure was problematic, particularly as adopting an innocent approach to a topic can "obliterate complexity and lead to perilous forms of simplification and dogmatism" (Ravecca and Dauphinee 2022, 37). It is seemingly more acceptable to say "war is so terrible" than to explore what workers might enjoy about war. This tendency towards "innocence" —whether intentionally or unintentionally—is evident in war scholarship and will be discussed in later chapters.

Positionality

Positionality is the stance or position a piece of research makes in relation to the "social and political context" of the study, and can affect every part of the research process and results (Rowe 2014, 628). This requires that the researcher acknowledge, and give allowance to, their "views, values, and beliefs about the research design, conduct, and output(s)" (Holmes 2020, 2). As mentioned, I lived in Afghanistan and this research topic emerged directly from my experiences there. I lived in Afghanistan from 2004 to 2005, again in 2008, and visited in 2011. According to positivist science, this may be seen as "bias" but in interpretivist research, as Dvora Yanow writes, knowledge is produced "not through disembodied reason but through the situated context of the 'knower' producing it", particularly in a "community of meaning" (cited in Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2015, 10).

Therefore, I cannot offer an entirely neutral account of pleasure in war but I did reflect on my positionality in relation to the people I interviewed, the approach I took and the final arguments. For example, Maggi Savin-Baden and Claire Howell Major argue that acknowledging positionality comes in three key ways: "locating the researcher in relation to the subject, participants, and research context and process" (Savin-Baden and Major 2013, 71). I will now briefly tackle each of these elements.

I acknowledge several ways in which I am personally connected to this subject. I have lived and worked in conflict zones with the United Nations but never been injured or faced death directly. As a journalist, I have written on the anti-war movement for mainstream publications, as well as participated in many anti-war rallies. War, as a topic, has long interested me—driven in part by a perhaps naïve hope of understanding how it might be prevented. Entering academia later in life, I did not quite connect to the cynical, overly discursive, and at times narrow theoretical approaches to war I encountered. These stood in contrast to my personal experiences and to those of others I know personally who work in this space. My discomfort with those frameworks significantly shaped the perspective taken in this thesis. I found it difficult to relate to the overwhelming "darkness" and often bleak portrayal of humanity in some scholarship, and recognised that pleasure might offer fresh insights into the complexities of war. [9]

In some ways, I was part of the "scene" I was studying. I knew four of the interview participants, and while I had not met the others beforehand, I was familiar with the general contours of their living and working conditions in Afghanistan. I believe my own experience in that context helped build trust and encouraged participants to speak openly. Additionally, because this was an academic project rather than a media interview, respondents may have felt more comfortable being candid in their reflections.

[9] Penttinen has critiqued the wider academic tendency to focus on negativity and this isn't limited to IR; it reflects a broader issue across the humanities and social sciences. Anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner has coined the term "dark anthropology" to describe the tendency in her field for scholars to focus on the "harsh dimensions of social life (power, domination, inequality, and oppression)," as well as depressing and hopeless subjective experiences (Ortner 2016, 47). This darkness is also apparent in IR.

Research type

This thesis takes an exploratory, and methodically varied approach to understanding pleasures in war. While a qualitative, interpretivist approach often raises questions of rigour—particularly in relation to data analysis, which is not always as straightforward as in quantitative research (Putra 2023, 8)—I found it best suited to the material I was studying. To create a richer database of pleasure in war—and out of necessity—I used a variety of methods and data, backed by the idea that personal experience is a pathway to better understanding war (Sylvester 2013, Brighton 2011). This project therefore draws on a range of sources and methods to tell the story of pleasure in war and how it is missing from IR, which I will now outline.

Desk-based search

I could not find many pleasures in war in usual scholarly databases and was eager to document how it was missing more precisely. My methodological approach to looking for the absence of pleasures of war in mainstream IR literature was informed by Sarah G. Phillips and Daniel J. Tower's work tracking the wildly different understandings of Islamic State expressed in mainstream and Iraq-based discourses (Phillips and Tower 2025). They argue that mainstream discourses suggest that the group's rise was connected to its internal capabilities, while Iraq-based discourses suggest its success was also partly tied to facilitation by its state or state-like opponents. To assess the presence or absence of these claims in mainstream discourses, the pair conducted a desk-based search to create a database of influential literature about Islamic State (determined through citations or place of publication). Each source was then searched for mentions of the claim that the group was facilitated by its state opponents.

To track how pleasure has not been examined in IR war literature, I conducted a desk-based review of articles published between 2000 and 2025 in top-ranked journals in the field. Drawing on SCImago (SJR) and Google Scholar, I compiled two sets of journals: SJR's Top 20 in Political Science and IR, and Google Scholar's Top 20 in IR.[10] I searched for the keyword "pleasure" in the title and full text in each

[10] The SJR top 20 journals in political science and IR are American Journal of Political Science, American Political Science Review, International Organization, Political Analysis, World Politics, British Journal of Political Science, West European Politics, Political Science Research and Methods, International Security, Perspectives on Politics, New Political Economy, Journal of Conflict Resolution,

of these journals to find how often it appeared and, where it did appear, whether it was used to describe the experience of war. Doing so revealed only two relevant articles: Julia Welland's 2018 *Joy and War: Reading Pleasures in Wartime Experiences*, a piece that examined three war time novels, and Simon Cottee's *Fear, boredom, and joy: Sebastian Junger's piercing phenomenology of war* (Cottee 2011), which is a review of Junger's book.

Some scholarship in the IR journals touched on pleasure in relation to why people sign up for terrorism (Hegghammer 2010, Cottee and Hayward 2011). Four papers briefly cited Elizabeth Wood's notion of "pleasure in agency", a concept related to the rewards of joining a successful rebel movement (Wood 2003). But that was it; the lack of engaged scholarship on pleasure in relation to people's experiences of war highlighted how underexplored the topic is in IR. I recognise there are limitations to this search as different terminology may have been used—"enjoy" for example, though searching for such a widely used term would have been unweildy.

I was not able to be as systematic in my search for the term "pleasure" in books published within the discipline of IR over the same period because the number of titles is overwhelming, and they are not centrally catalogued in the way that journal articles are. However, I used a number of different methods to find sources beyond the key journals. First, I searched "pleasure and war" in Google Scholar to allow results from a range of epistemic communities. In IR, only two relevant articles emerged: Victoria Basham's study on how gendered emotions like boredom and joy shape British soldiers' experiences and sustain military violence (Basham 2015), and Dyvik's analysis of gendered experiences in Danish military memoirs, which touched on pleasure (Dyvik 2016) [11]

Electoral Studies, Journal of European Public Policy, Political Psychology, Review of International Political Economy, Politics and Society, Democratization, Journal of Peace Research, Global Environmental Politics. The Google scholar Top 20 journals in Diplomacy and IR include Review of International Political Economy, International Organization, Foreign Affairs, Journal of Peace Research, International Affairs, Journal of Conflict Resolution, Journal of Democracy, International Studies Quarterly, Third World Quarterly, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, Global Policy, Terrorism and Political Violence, European Journal of International Relations, Journal of European Integration, International Studies Review, The Review of International Organizations, Geopolitics, Review of International Studies, Contemporary Security Policy, The Pacific Review.

[11] I am not claiming that there is no other work simply that this is what my search found. Furthermore, searches in different countries will yield vastly different results.

Beyond IR, scholars in anthropology, sociology, history, psychology and military studies have documented soldiers finding pleasure in war and this research has been mentioned in the introduction. Beyond other fields, some literature on pleasure in war came to me by chance. The psychologist James Hillman's 2004 *A Terrible Love of War*, an unconventional exploration of humanity's enduring attraction to conflict, which draws a lot on myth, was given to me by an anti-war activist.

I will now discuss the other sources I turned to in order to explore and understand experiences of war.

Memoirs

War has inspired an extraordinary cannon of literature, poetry, music, film and many other creative endeavours, including memoirs. Researchers in a variety of fields, including IR, have studied war memoirs to gain insights, which range from the mundane to making major extrapolations on world politics (Greig 2018, Syvik 2016). While they are seen as knowledge production artefacts, scholars have broadly taken three different views of them. They are described as unscientific; as authorative and legitimate sources of information; or as having wider social significance (Curtis et al 2022). They can be critiqued in terms of their "truth-telling or representation of memory" but they are ultimately no different from other data sources (Duncason, Jenkings and Wooward 2017, 535). Military memoirs are a "significant source of secondary data about the lived experience of military personnel" (Jenkings and Rachel Woodward 2014, 339). Meanwhile, memoirs by war journalists emerge from "authentic experiences" (Korte 2008, 17) and although "close to reportage and comment ... some have more obvious literary ambitions" (Korte 2008, 17). Some wariness is also necessary for memoirs "portray war correspondents' work as frenetic, occasionally insensate, yet ultimately heroic"(Pedelty 1995, 29). With humanitarian memoirs, they have broadened the expansion and interpretation of the humanitarian industry and given the public an understanding of the nature of the work (Bauman 2019, 83). With these memoirs, however, there is often a trope of naivety—a stumbling person who goes to a foreign land and through trials, sets up a new organisation (Bauman 2019, 96). Scholars have also examined the larger geo-political meanings gleaned from humanitarian-focused memoirs, which range from insights into themes and tropes of the state-building process (Smirl 2012) to

producing destructive narratives about the war on terror and that poorer nations are seen as backward (Ali 2010).

A particularly challenging element with all memoir was choosing which ones to consult. Matilda Greig, in her analysis of memoirs by British, French and Spanish veterans of the 19th century Peninsular Wars, point out that war memoirs are "very awkward and unwieldy sources from a methodological point of view"(Greig 2018, 294) for a multiplicity of reasons, including the fact that in her field alone, there are just so many of them. From my own perspective, one reason I found them unwieldy connects to the ontology of war. As discussed earlier, it was important for me to get a sense of the "war" they were in. What was the context? Were they fighting for their homeland? Were they covering the war as a journalist because they were looking for purpose? Had the soldier been conscripted? Were there explosions every hour, day or month? The contexts in which individual characters with their own motivations expressed pleasure were crucial to understanding.

I followed several criteria in selecting the nine texts. [12] First, I chose memoirs with a strong literary style and works that I found articulate, lucid, and compelling. Second, I prioritised works listed as "classics", which were well reviewed, influential or bestsellers, drawing on the notion of "popularity and endurance" (Chouliaraki 2014, 600). Third, I included memoirs spanning different conflicts to show that pleasure persists across time and place. Fourth, I selected narratives that reflect multiple domains of war—both on and off the front lines. Fifth, all texts were non-fiction. Finally, I wanted non-Western voices and included Abdul Salam Zaeef—an Afghan who fought against the Russian invasion and later became a Taliban minister—even though his memoir is not entirely set in wartime. While obviously not representative of the entire canon of war writing, these works captured a diverse

[12] The memoirs I studied include *The Storm of Steel* by Ernst Jünger (1996 edition), *War* by Sebastian Junger (2010), *Reflections on Men in Battle* by J Glenn Gray (1970), *The Junior Officers' Reading Club* by Patrick Hennessey (2009), *My Life with the Taliban* by Abdul Salam Zaeef (2010), *My War Gone By, I Miss It So* by Antony Loyd (1999), *It's What I Do: A Photographer's Life of Love and War* by Lynsey Addario (2015), *War Doctor: Surgery on the Frontline* by David Nott (2019) and *Emergency Sex (And Other Desperate Measures)* by Kenneth Cain, Heidi Postlewait and Andrew Thomson (2004).

range of perspectives. Unfortunately, I did not find as many suitable memoirs written by women that suited all the criteria but did find some scholarship.[13]

Poetry

I was not expecting to use poetry but did so out of necessity as I was eager to capture more non-Anglo experiences. Acknowledging poetry's ability to encapsulate experiences, I turned to *Poetry of the Taliban* (Strick Van Linschoten and Kuehn, 2012), a collection of over 200 poems that covered poetry from the Soviet-Afghan War (1979–1989) as well as from the more recent Afghan conflict.

Sally Gradle has argued more broadly that poetry allows us, "to hear the tread of another through their experiences and it compels us to explore a different way of capturing social science research" (Gradle, cited in Faulkner 2019, 1). Julia Ribeiro sees war poetry as "models of and models for experience" (Ribeiro 2018, 117). While there is poetry from many cultures that could have been used to explore pleasure in war, I chose the Taliban's poetry as it was set in Afghanistan, it aligned with the context of the interviews and some of the memoirs,[14] and included work by a range of poets.

I read the nine memoirs and the poetry, and cherrypicked passages that solely referenced pleasure in war, dividing them up into themes, which I will explore in later chapters.

Ethics

I received ethics approval from the University of Sydney [15] and want to raise a few elements about the process that influenced the nature of the project. When I first discussed the project with ethics staff, I was advised that I had to be upfront with respondents that I was interested in the pleasures of war and provide a list of questions that were to be rigidly adhered to. I was a bit disappointed in this approach as I had hoped to tease out the idea. Berg and Lune describe this practice as "over-sharing",

---

[13] There are many strong narratives about working in the humanitarian sector but they do not include working in a war or conflict setting. For example, Jessica Alexander's *Chasing Chaos: My Decade in and Out of Humanitarian Aid* (2013) covers her work on emergencies, including running a camp in the Darfur and working on the aid effort in Haiti. In relation to soldiers, many of the memoirs were ghostwritten or co-written.

[14] Sebastian Junger's work is set in Afghanistan and Patrick Hennessey's is in parts.

[15] Ethics was approved under the title "The Pleasures of War" and the project number is 2019/234.

whereby the specifics of the research is elaborated in an in-depth manner (cited in Putra 2023, 3). The respondents who signed up for the Qualtrics survey and agreed to be interviewed were thus people who related to the idea of pleasures in war. It would have been preferable to frame the survey as "Experience in war" and then find out about pleasures.

By providing a list of questions that I had to stick to, I also felt I was disrupting the process of learning about somebody's experience. The ethics committee also said I had to offer psychological counselling in case a respondent was traumatised by my queries. I felt offering counselling sent a message to respondents that there was something traumatic about speaking about pleasure in war. That said, I was cognisant of the harm that research can do.

Many scholars have long critiqued the ways in which positivist research principles are privileged over interpretative ones in ethics committees, which include submitting specific questions and the assumption of harm. In reality, the potential for injury is often less to do with research and more connected to "issues of expectation, interpretation, and representation" (Jacobson et al 2007). Having spoken to respondents about their positive experiences in war, it would have been easy to interpret what was said in any manner of ways— they were colonisers, elites, thrill seekers or that deep down they were traumatised but in denial. If I were a respondent, I would personally find this harmful or annoying if it wasn't my conception of the experience. Some respondents raised a number of moral qualms about being in Afghanistan, including critiques around humanitarian and media work. But these issues were raised in relation to pleasure in war, it was in the context of a long interview, filled with many other ideas and comments. When it came to designing my project, doing interviews and interpreting it, I was thus very conscious of my subjects and maintaining the integrity of how they conceived their world.

Why interviews?

I conducted 32 interviews with people who had lived and worked in Afghanistan. I will first explore the justifications for conducting interviews and then the process. Interviews are a suitable source of knowledge, as they are essentially informed by Max Weber's notion of understanding or getting "inside the heads of those being studied" (Travers 2001, 8). Aside from collecting facts and beliefs, in-depth interviews also provide deeper information, which is often about personal matters such as "an individual's self, lived experience, values and decisions, occupational ideology, cultural knowledge, or

perspective" (Johnson 2001, 104). Interviews are playing an increasing role in understanding how elite actors understand their worlds in IR (Markiewicz 2024). But as Roxani Krystalli argues, within IR, there is "a broader distrust among certain academic circles of life story as a piece of legitimate, credible evidence, of narrative as a way of knowing" (Krystalli 2013, 173). I also wanted to interview people as I have worked as a journalist for most of my working life and was comfortable in using this method of data collection.

Recruitment

I began by conducting an online Qualtrics survey, which served as a recruitment tool for more in-depth interviews with noncombatants. I could have just done the survey but did not think exploring pleasure in war in a quantitiative way was appropriate. According to philosopher Martha Nussbaum, the complexities of human experience make pleasure a difficult sensation to understand. She observes that when it comes to interrogating pleasure:

> …it would not make sense to ask people to rank all their pleasures along a single quantitative dimension: this is just bullying people into disregarding features of their own experience that reflection would quickly reveal (Nussbaum 2012, 339).

So, while recognising the philosophical constraints of "coding for pleasure", there were several advantages to doing an online survey. The main advantage was that it could be easily distributed to people worldwide. Other benefits of online surveys include low cost, speed, efficiency, and direct data entry. There are also disadvantages, which include not being able to verify who fills it out (Sue and Ritter 2007, 7).

I built a Qualtrics survey, which required careful consideration. There are limitations to using surveys, which includes the perception it is junk mail, sampling, unclear answering, impersonal, privacy issues and response rates (Evans and Mathur 2018). A literature review found response rate is closely related to "who the sponsors are, what the topic is, and how long the survey takes to complete" (Fan and Yan 2009, 133). The review went on to specify that academic surveys have higher response rates than commercial ones, that "high salience" topics have better responses and that 13 minutes or less is considered the ideal length.

Salience and keeping a survey brief were considered when designing it. Good questionnaires are "short, unambiguous, and meaningful to the respondent" (Sue and Ritter 2007, 38) and the final survey consisted of 29 questions in English. The questions were a mixture of ticking a box, picking a number from a scale of 0-10, and open-ended.[16]

As this project is interested in war workers in Afghanistan over a certain period, I used purposive sampling. To mitigate issues around sampling, the survey was sent out through trusted and varied channels, which were likely to attract quality respondents. These channels included posting a description of the project to a Facebook page called "50 Shades of Aid", which has over 25,000 members. The group describes itself as "a global support group for aid workers, open to all professional working aid workers around the world".

The project description was posted on 26 July 2019. I also posted it to my personal Facebook page. I alerted professional and personal contacts to the survey via Facebook messages and email. These contact details were obtained through my own networks, various professional groups and publicly available email addresses on the internet. The fact the survey was wholly voluntary and people were under no obligation to answer the questions was stressed in the email.

"Snowballing" was deployed to engage with other possible interviewees from a broader network. The technique has its pros and cons—its strengths lie in the fact that people "trust those referred to them through the network" but it suffers from a lack of randomness (Gusterson cited in Klotz 2008, 98). While snowballing does not reach the general population, it is a good method of reaching defined, targeted groups (Sue and Ritter 2007, 33). I foresaw that some of the respondents may have held positions within government departments, including foreign affairs, aid and defence, as well as within international organisations such as the United Nations. To mitigate any impact this may have had on their speaking, all subjects were given the choice to be anonymous or named in the online survey.

The goal of this online survey was two-fold. Initially, it was to collect quantitative and some qualitative data, and then to find respondents who would be open to doing a more in-depth interview. At the end of the online survey, I provided a box where interested people could enter their

[16] Another reason I conducted a Qualtrics survey was to gain experience with survey design and implementation. Academic jobs are highly competitive, and it was considered important to develop basic skills in quantitative research and surveys, which dominates U.S. IR scholarship.

contact details, including email, skype handle or phone number. This information was used to contact people to arrange a time to talk further.

Survey results

The survey ran from 26 July 2019 to 6 May 2020 and 147 people responded. A total of 119 people were eligible because they had:

a) Lived in Afghanistan or currently lived in Afghanistan for at least one year.

b) Answered the question "Did you have positive experiences of war?"

An estimated 61.34 percent women (n = 73) and 37.82 percent men (n = 45) filled out the survey. Most of the respondents who answered the question about place of birth and citizenship were from the U.S. Most respondents were aged between 45 to 54, followed by those in the 35 to 44 age bracket. Twelve of the respondents were currently based in Kabul, with the majority having lived there for more than five years and working for an international organisation. A further 107 respondents had lived in Afghanistan at some point. The majority had been based in Kabul (69 percent) and lived in Afghanistan for one to three years (33.3 percent).

There was a fair sample of people—just over 25%—who had lived in different cities throughout the country including Herat, Mazar, Kandahar, Kunduz and Badakshan. Some people were in Afghanistan in the 1990s but the majority were stretched over the period 2002 to 2020. People came and went. Others stayed one year, five or six. One respondent lived in the country for 25 years. Those living in Afghanistan at the time of the survey said they were working for an international organisation (58.33%), NGO (25%), as a photojournalist (8.33%) and as "other" (8.33%). Those who had worked in Afghanistan formerly said they worked for international organisations (33.64 percent), "other" (28.04%), NGOs (15.89 percent), as journalists (10.28 percent), government employees (10.28 percent), a photojournalist (0.93 percent) and as a private security contractor (0.94 percent)[17].

[17] The "other" included people either having a job not in the list or multiple roles. The not listed jobs were varied and included roles such aviation contractor and book researcher. For people who held multiple jobs over time, they included, for example, working for a private consulting firm and then an NGO, as a journalist and then at an NGO, and "child of aid workers, then returned to work for NGO and UN".

Respondents were asked to rate their experiences using a scale. When asked how they would rate overall experience in Afghanistan, the mean response was 7.8 out of ten. When asked "How would you rate your professional life in Afghanistan?" The mean response was 7.92. Finally, when asked "How would you rate your social life in Afghanistan?", the mean response was 7.08 out of ten. When asked if they had positive experiences, 118 people said yes and one person said no. In terms of positive experiences, people could fill in a box, and the answers were extraordinarily varied. A word cloud showed the common words to be: Afghanistan, people, work, professional, meeting, colleague, country, friends, job, culture, good, life, travel and amazing.

Question 23 asked: "Are there any positive experiences you'd like to add?" A small snapshot of the answers included:

"Learning about myself".

"I would [go] back to Afghanistan tomorrow to live and work, wonderful country, people and rich culture."

"Appreciating a simpler life where luxuries taken for granted elsewhere in the world aren't available but nor are they missed."

"An up close view of resilience. Life changing for me."

"AS SENSE OF PURPOSE, DOING SOMETHING THAT MATTERED."

"While I didn't travel widely through Afghanistan, my time living in Jalalabad for 3 months was an amazing experience. The countryside was truly magnificent and the people, welcoming and hospitable".

"multicultural working environment."

"living through and seeing historical events, escaping death"

"Sincerity of Afghans. Afghan weddings. Long-term friendships formed"

"Access to quality booze in the UN compound"

“Everything - there is magic in this country. People go out of their way to help you. Yes, there are those looking for something, some benefit, or the like, but to me this is not the norm. I have one incredibly negative professional experience, but it's helped me see why ‘some’ people dislike Afghans. This was/is however, a one off for me.”

“In this little box?”

At Question 24, respondents were asked if they were open to “being interviewed further about your positive experiences in Afghanistan” and if they said yes, were given the option to be contacted via email, mobile, Skype or other.

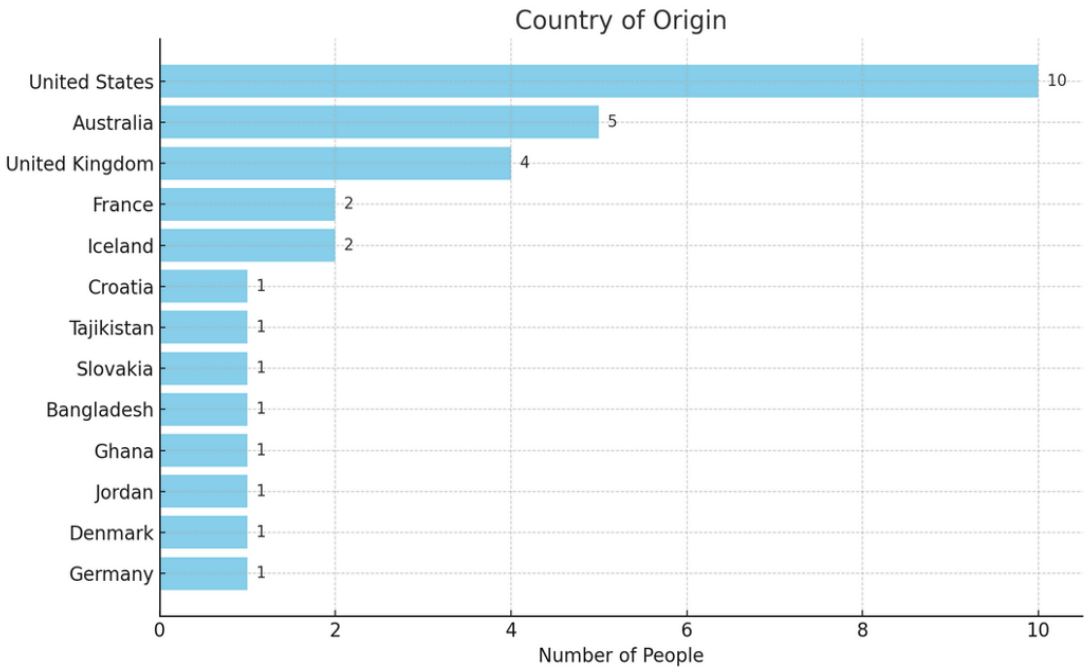
The interviews

From the Qualtrics survey, 74 people indicated they would like to be contacted. Of this cohort, 32 were interviewed. The conversations usually took between 45 minutes to one hour and a half. They were conducted via Skype or Whatsapp and recorded with the respondent’s permission. Some of the respondents opted to be named but I chose to make all of them anonymous. While some scholars see face-to face as the best choice, telephone and video interviews have their advantages, including privacy and providing the space for more candid answers (Broache 2022, 558). For this study, online platforms such as Skype and Whatsapp were the most workable way of conducting the interviews as respondents were based all over the world—Afghanistan, Australia, United Kingdom, Italy, Myanmar, Germany and many other nations.

The gender divide was fairly split between 17 women and 15 men. They came from diverse backgrounds in terms of their work and time spent in Afghanistan.

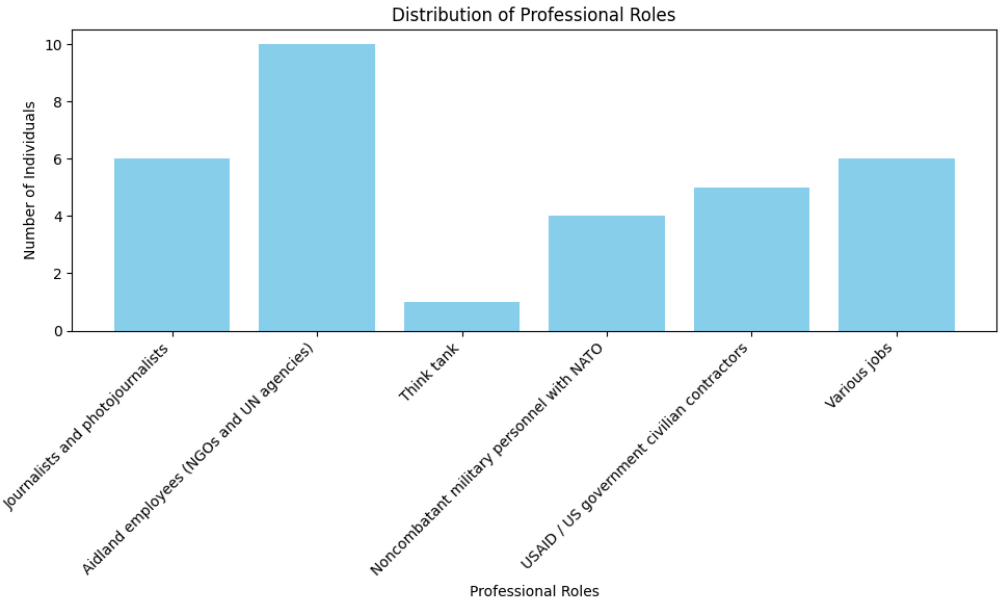
Their country of origin is shown below:

Table 1: Survey respondents country of origin



They had a variety of jobs:

Table 2: Survey respondents distribution of professional roles



Some had mulitple jobs stretched over a period of time. I won't list them as it may identify the respondents but some moved between NGO and US contracts; university and the private sector; and in and out of the military.

Some respondents had first worked in Afghanistan in 1992 while others were still in the country. They had or were living in Kabul, Herat, Gardez, Mazar and many other cities throughout the country, including remote areas. Their living conditions ranged from high-security UN or military compounds, to secure houses with armed guards and other security measures, to ordinary homes with no guards at all.

The level of experience ranged from young people starting their careers with NGOs to very senior managers within government bureaucracies. Interestingly, many of the respondents had come and gone from the country—they had left and opted to return for another role.

The questions they were asked relevant to the study include:

1. Can you tell me about your job in Afghanistan?

2. What is/was your experience in Afghanistan like on the whole?

3. What is/ was your job like?

4. What is/was your social life like?

5. Are / were there advantages to your career going to Afghanistan?

6. Were there financial advantages to you going?

7. Did you get to travel around Afghanistan or in the region? Was any of it enjoyable?

8. Did you make significant friendships or work connections?

9. Did you find Afghanistan an interesting place to live? Did you enjoy the food or other aspects of the culture?

10. Did working in Afghanistan give you a sense of purpose? Did it feel worthwhile?

11. How did the lifestyle in Afghanistan compare to other periods of your life?

12. As I've explained, this research is about understanding whether people experience pleasure in war. Do you think it is possible to experience pleasure while living and working in a war zone?

13. How do you feel about the idea that it is possible to experience pleasure in war?

14. Did you ever conflicted about your positive experiences?

15. What is war?

I will discuss the responses to types of pleasures people experienced in Chapter 5, which is concerned with noncombatant experience. How the respondents felt about pleasure in war will be examined in Chapter 7. The responses to the question "what is war?" will be used in Chapters 2 and 3.

Data analysis

I took an interpretative, thematic approach when analysing the qualitative interviews. Yanow best summarises the many ways that an interpretive approach suited my research when she writes:

> They [interpretivists] are concerned with understanding the lifeworld(s) of the actor(s) in the situation(s) being studied, but they also reflect on the problematics of (re)presenting those lifeworlds and those meanings, including the role of the researcher as an actor in doing so, and they engage the role of language and other artifacts in constructing and communicating meaning and social relationships in those lifeworlds (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2015, 23).

As the questions were borne from my personal experience, it helped frame the themes. From here, I closely read the transcripts, "flagging recurrent patterns, variations on themes, and quotable passages" (Gusterson 2008,107). It was very important that when interpreting the work, I took what they said seriously, and their experiences were seen as a legitimate starting point for theorising. This inductive approach meant that I was listening, and by doing so, found the way they all the respondents chose to speak about war—focusing on pleasure—was very different to the literature.

Validity of research

While adopting an "anything goes" methodology as described by Aradau and Huysmans (2014), I had scaffolding in place to ensure my research was valid. Following an interpretivist tradition, I will now outline the aspects of Peregrine Schwartz-Shea's four first order terms, which were a useful set of criteria in evaluating my research. While she describes the criteria as "suggestive, rather than a definitive representation of usage in contemporary interpretive empirical research" (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2015, 131), she also collated them from reams of interpretative method. Her four first order concepts are trustworthiness, thick description, reflexivity, and triangulation and three second order ones include auditing, negative case analysis and informant feedback (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2015, 131). I will go into detail about how my research fits the first four order criteria.

Trustworthiness

Schwartz-Shea says trustworthiness is a way for researchers to make sure their work is "self-consciously deliberate, transparent, and ethical" and serves as an "umbrella term" for elements such as thick description, reflexivity and others below (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2015, 131). As she puts it: "'Trustworthiness' draws rhetorical power from its relational quality. If 'I trust you' or 'I trust this study,' it follows that something more can be done than would otherwise be the case" (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2015, 131).

According to Tami Jacoby, feminist research has developed a range of methods to manage the research-researched relationship and they do this through "reciprocity, transparency, and involvement" (Jacoby 2006, 166). While my project was not feminist, I related to these notions. Furthermore, power dynamics were not a major issue during interviews as I felt—as discussed earlier—they were more likely to arise when it came to analysing the data and producing a thesis or through an "interviewer's monopoly of interpretation" (Brinkmann 2022, 81).

However, due to my background in journalism and knowledge of the complexities of sharing work before publication, I was reluctant to go as far as to let respondents read my thesis beforehand. Instead, I felt trust and reciprocity could be set up by sharing personal information and allowing the informants to ask questions (Jacoby 2006, 166). I was open with the subjects about my past

background in Afghanistan and how I had been inspired by own experiences to come up with the research topic.

Thick description

The next criteria of Schwartz-Shea's in evaluating research is thick description, which is essentially the "piled up structures of inference and implication" (Clifford Geertz quoted in Yanow and Schwarz-Shea 2015,131), whereby using words, researchers impart people's experiences. By using thick description, "the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals are heard" (Denzin 1989, 83). Thick description was used throughout my research project by quoting tracts of interviews with subjects, and text from memoir and poetry. In these tracts, participants went into detail about the various ways in which they experienced pleasure in war. These various narratives captured nuances that show the researcher's interpretation is backed by evidence in the thick description (Yanow and Schwarz-Shea 2015, 132).

Reflexivity

In interpretative research, there is an emphasis on reflexivity over objectivity, and an awareness of the role of the self in all phases of the research (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2015, 138 and 133). While reflexivity is now a common term in IR scholarship, there is some ambiguity about how it is practiced (Amoureux and Steele 2015, 1-2). At its heart, however, is the notion that it "the researcher understands him or herself to be the means, the instrument used, to produce the research study" (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2015, 133).

My "self" was embedded in this research in many ways. During interviews, aside from asking questions, the respondents and I would shift into comfortably discussing "the old days", or later, when I listened back to our discussions, I could hear the silence of my listening, hear my empathy or my fervent agreement with what they were saying.

Initially, I felt compelled to conceal my past experiences in Afghanistan, fearing they would taint the study and undermine its credibility. I tried to adopt the role of a detached scientist, rigidly adhering to the preapproved set of questions outlined by ethics, striving to maintain objectivity in my interviews.

However, my participants were often eager to “have a chat”, which seemed like the more natural thing to do.

Triangulation

Triangulation involves understanding a phenomenon using at least three different analytic tools and suggests multidimensionality in research (Yanow and Schwarz-Shea 2015, 134). I chose to triangulate my research question by utilizing a variety of sources. While this enhances the validity and trustworthiness of my research, the motivation stemmed from the frustration at not finding pleasure in academic work or in English, prompting a broader search for relevant material.

My prior involvement in Afghanistan gave me a sense of confidence in understanding the positive aspects, leading me to make assumptions about others' experiences. However, as the research unfolded, I began to both relax and broaden my perspective, gaining insights but also feeling a sense of uncertainty creeping in. What struck me as extraordinary was the diversity of narratives shared by participants in interviews and what people had written in their memoirs, which challenged my preconceived notions about pleasure in war.

These varied perspectives not only enriched my understanding of the topic but also prompted deeper reflections on the nature of war itself. Importantly, the disparities between respondents' viewpoints and mine contributed to the validity of my work; I wasn't merely seeking affirmation of a preconceived thesis. Instead, I was finding richer, different and more fascinating material about pleasure than I could have ever imagined.

Chapter 2

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Pleasure in war has not been theorised within IR, and there is currently no established model for understanding the phenomenon. As Barkawi and Brighton point out, war itself has not been systematically studied as an object of inquiry in IR, meaning analysis often "amounts to a grab bag of disparate topics cobbled together from a variety of disciplines and sources" (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 131). This characterisation aptly describes both the challenge and the shape of this thesis.

Accordingly, the theoretical "grab bag" I draw from includes scholars in IR, anthropology, CWS, systems engineering, and people who have experienced war firsthand. While these sources differ widely in ontology, epistemology, and method, they collectively contribute to building a database of pleasure, and help create a framework for understanding it. As outlined in the previous chapter, this is, in practice, an "anything goes" approach, held together by a commitment to taking individual experience seriously.

The chapter proceeds in three steps. First, I explore how war is defined and theorised, drawing from academic literature, interviews, and memoirs to underscore the difficulty of pinning down a single definition. Second, I turn to feminist, anthropological, and CWS scholarship that focuses on individual experience, embodiment, the everyday, and phenomenology. These literatures provide important ideas for thinking about war from the standpoint of those who live through it—and sometimes find pleasure too.

Next, I engage with scholarship on the ontology of war, beginning with accounts that centre fighting before exploring alternative models such as 'fighting plus plus plus'. This leads to the concept of *ontologies* of war, which, when combined with fighting/experience/individual-centred approaches, helps account for pleasure as a valid and meaningful dimension of war. I draw on the work of systems engineer Hartley whose framing of war as a complex adaptive system gave me a relatable conceptual picture of war that had strong parallels with with the experience/everyday literature. By melding these strands of scholarship, I aim to build a framework that accommodates this multiplicity and show that war workers are not merely passive victims, traumatised warriors or discursive constructs, but people living within and part of the everyday sprawl and dynamics of war—where all sorts of things

happen, including pleasure. In this section, I will also use ideas and observations from people who have been in war, which are crucial if one is to discuss the experience of war.

Defining war – war as an elusive concept

It is important to take a few steps back and begin by discussing how extraordinarily complex a task it is to define war in the first place. Clausewitz describes war as "more than a true chameleon" and a "paradoxical trinity", blending primordial violence, chance-driven creativity, and rational subordination to policy (Clausewitz 1984, 89)[18]. Quincy Wright, who spent 15 years studying war with contributions from hundreds of scholars concluded in 1942 that an "adequate definition of war is not easy to construct" (Wright 1942, 685). As mentioned in the introduction, Nick Mansfield points out that war's meaning is "unstable and problematic" (Mansfield 2008, 3). He further asserts that war is only ever understood in relation to something else—be it society, sovereignty, authority, politics, love, peace, friendship, or another factor (Mansfield 2008, 162). What he is saying is that war is always embedded in broader social and emotional systems—it is not just a standalone event or tool.

A bit like Mansfield, Giangiuseppe Pili describes war as, "a highly vague predicate which stands for a relation" (Pili 2020, 238), suggesting that war is not a clearly defined object or event, but used to describe relationships or interactions. He remarks that the debate over the nature of war remains unresolved, and provocatively asks: "One gunshot is not a war, 2 gunshots are not a war... are 1 million gunshots a war?" (Pili 2020, 238).

Perhaps war is too hard to pin down. Anders Theis Bollmann and Søren Sjøgren challenge the notion that war has an "immutable nature," asserting instead that its essence is fluid and variable (Theis Bollmann and Sjøgren 2023). Barkawi and Brighton observe "war's recalcitrance as an object of knowledge" (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 133) while Hartley argues that just when we think we understand war, "someone does something unexpected, changing the nature of war" (Hartley 2021, vii). Some scholars reject the idea of settling on an essence of war altogether, proposing a "strange,

[18] The full quote from Clausewitz is, "War is more than a true chameleon that slightly adapts its characteristics to the given case. As a total phenomenon its dominant tendencies always make war a paradoxical trinity--composed of primordial violence, hatred, and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force; of the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam; and of its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason alone".

paradoxical and provisional ontology that is consonant with the confounding mutability of war" as war is essentially an "obdurate mystery"(Bousquet, Grove and Shah 2020, 100).

War defies description

Memoirists also find war hard to describe. Humanitarian Heidi Postlewait, in *Emergency Sex,* senses her friend Dr Andrew Thomson understands war in ways she doesn't and says he talks about it, "like it was a privilege to learn of war" and that he has "some insight into the mystery you don't" (Cain, Postlewait and Thomson 2004, 70). World War I Soldier Ernst Jünger also recalls this mysterious element of war. After seeing a man, streaming with blood, he remarks: "The war had shown its claws and torn off its pleasant mask. It was so mysterious, so impersonal ... it was like a ghost at noon" (Jünger 1996,3). War Journalist Loyd captures the vague and indescribable nature of war when he reflects on his arrest and detention in Sarajevo during the Bosnian War in the early 1990s. When he is mysteriously set free, he asks his captor who is responsible. The captor says:

> "Listen …. these are difficult times here. Some of today's heroes are yesterday's criminals." Then came the words I was to hear a thousand times during the conflict, the short-circuit dismissal of any attempt to analyse the confusion, the air of resignation accompanied by hunched soldiers and raised hands. "What can you do?" he said. "It's war" (Loyd 1999, 28).

Thus, scholars and memoirists acknowledge that war can be vague, mysterious, and usually understood only in relation to something else. But when efforts are made to settle on a theory of what is war, it is also carved up in too many ways to list. War is a moral problem (Pili 2020). War has a historicity to it (Barkawi and Brighton 2011). Extraction and struggle over the means of war created the "central organisational structures of state" (Tilly 1992, 15). War is a site of revelation and epiphany (Harari 2008). War can only be understood through myth, and how it has been written about in mythology and literature (Hillman 2005). Contemporary war is virtual or hyper-real (Baudrillad 1995). War is connected to the architecture of the international system (Mearsheimer 2001). The West is trying to make war more "humane" through the use of technology (Coker 2001). We live in a post-heroic age, where militaries are reluctant to inflict casualties on their troops or the enemy (Luttwak 1995). It goes on and on.

Take the most recent war in Afghanistan, for example, which has invariably been described as asymmetric, an insurgency, a counter-insurgency, hybrid, a "castle" war, a guerilla war and more. [19] The respondents I interviewed invariably called it a "different kind of war", "a third kind of war," and "the right amount of war." In the collection of Taliban poetry, the poets describe the situation as "jihad" which, in this volume, almost always suggests combat. Suffice to say, there are many ways to look at war.

War as experience

People who have been in and around war often speak of "knowing it". In *Emergency Sex,* human rights lawyer Kenneth Cain, goes to Israel for a semester break and experiences the stress of a Scud missile attack warning. Back at Harvard Law school, his fellow students are watching the Gulf War on TV and lecture him about the war, Arab politics and the US in the Middle East. He notes:

> They master the details bloodlessly, as though war is an arcane point of corporate tax law. The fact that I was just there offers no barrier to their compulsion to display certainty and omniscience (Cain, Postlewait and Thomson 2004, 22).

[19] The war in Afghanistan is studied through many different lenses. For example, the war has been described as asymmetric, a "David and Goliath" type of conflict where weaker opponents frustrate a stronger opponent "by applying what strengths it has to its opponent's weaknesses" (Ewans 2005, 1). Others examine it through the lens of the U.S. military taking a counterinsurgency (COIN) approach to the fighting, which emphasised a "population-friendly aspect" whereby civilians in the insurgents territory were seen as a tool in victory—hearts and minds, and public opinion were crucial (Mujahid 2016, 47 - 8). The war has been also described as hybrid, a new term to describe a type of conflict in which many modes of warfare are deployed, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, and terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder (Hoffman 2007, 8). For the West, the war had two objectives in Afghanistan: a counterterrorism campaign against AQ and nation-building (Salt 2018, 105). From the perspective of the Taliban, it was a guerilla campaign and armed jihad (Jones 2020, 2), a fight "for Islam and resistance to occupation" (Malkasian 2021, 5), with their goal to get the US to withdraw (Boghani 2020). So in another framing, depending on which side you were on, it was either an insurgency or counterinsurgency. During the 20-year period the Coalition occupied Afghanistan, the country was also in a state of civil war as various organised groups fought over political control (Tripodi 2024, 549). It has also been classified as "Castle warfare", which similar to Vietnam, saw strong points scattered around the country, with victory found in taking them or holding them (Hartley 2021, 60).

War journalist Loyd writes of taking bad photographs of fighting but also critiques how people perceive war:

> My shots were clumsy and empty: blurred figures running with guns; even the firing looked cardboard, meaningless. I had been there, I knew the reality. Friends there knew it. They were all wise enough to know what might lie behind a fuzzy shot of a soldier running. But people who had never been to war? Their understanding of combat was the Hollywood version, in which you watch one man fire and the other man fall, a tandem you hardly ever see in war, and if you do the chances are it happens too quickly to get on film (Loyd 1999, 109).

In 2010 in Norway, a military scandal erupted over a news article with soldiers saying that "war was better than sex" and a video on YouTube depicting them chanting to Valhalla, a place dead warriors go in their afterlife in Norse mythology. Afterwards, Major Rune Wenneberg remarks that while the scandal was troubling, it gave the public a sense of the "real military reality" (Dyvik 2016, 138). What all these anecdotes show is that "being" in war brings a sense that experience creates a very particular knowledge about it.

Within IR, feminist scholars kickstarted thinking about individual experience in war, and much of the recent scholarship on the everyday aspects of war is indebted to them (Solomon and Steel 2017, Sylvester 2011). In her seminal 1990 book *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*, Cynthia Enloe shows that by looking intimately into the lives of women, seemingly mundane aspects of the international system is exposed: "…a disco can become an arena for international politics" (Enloe 2014, 24). Enloe expands the 70s feminist rallying cry that the "personal is political" to the "personal is international," pressing the issue of how individuals are all international actors (Enloe 2014, 256).

In recent years, war has been theorised in relation to concepts such experience, everyday life, the body, emotions, and phenomenology—each offering distinct but often overlapping approaches to understanding people in war. This corporeal turn in IR is seen as an important shift away from thinking about war exclusively in terms of fighting (Narozhna 2022). Perhaps unsurprisingly, given this broad pool of literature, there is also no universal approach about to how to pin down individual experience, emotions and bodies. Given the overlapping, similarities, and differences between this literature, for my purposes, it was tricky working out in which 'box' to ultimately put pleasure in. For

example, what is the pleasure of friendship? Is it an experience or an emotion? If I am in combat, exhilarated with a friend, is it an emotion, an experience, or something that is embodied? Perhaps the fuzziness of experience/embodiment is inevitable as articulating embodied experience is a struggle (Bulmer and Jackson 2015, 3).

Theory of experience

The theoretical bedrock of this thesis is thus Sylvester's notion of experience as an ontology of war (Sylvester 2011, 2012, 2013). Her critique stems from the way wars are selectively studied—typically through the "heroics and tragedies" of "statesmen and their nemeses" (Sylvester 2013, 17). She examines the theories of influential realists John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, arguing that they frame war primarily in terms of state logic and power. The experiences of ordinary people, she writes, "appear as ghosts fleetingly haunting the abstract discussion," but only when they want to make their arguments more convincing (Sylvester 2013, 20). While she does not state it explicitly, I interpret this critique of realists and other major schools of IR though—which tend to overlook the individual in war—as suggesting that abstract arguments alone cannot fully explain war.

For Sylvester, "war as experience" is conceived as a concept and set of practices that have been neglected by IR. As mentioned in the methdology chapter, she builds the case of war as experience through the logic of a collage, pointing out that this patchworking makes the meaning of war and experience more "complicated" (Sylvester 2013, 3). These experiences are "collected through accounts of how variously located people live, work and die in international relations" and that in feminist IR it is:

> … women's and men's experiences with/in war often centre on the embodied person – that is, around what happened to her body, and how her or his body operates in war zones and in distant countries perpetrating war overseas (Sylvester 2012, 496).

In Sylvester's reading, the "body" is central to war and is a "unit that has agency to target and injure others in war" (Sylvester 2013, 5). Thus, instead of fighting, she switches the frame to focus on injury. She goes onto list the various ways that bodies experience war physically—such as wounds, falling, feeling sick—that are mainly violence-related (Sylvester 2013, 5). She says elsewhere:

> Bodies in war zones get shot, raped, mutilated, beaten and killed. They starve, dehydrate, freeze and fall ill from impure water or improper sanitation. Damaged buildings can collapse onto them, or they can be burned or electrocuted on fallen power lines or in gas explosions (Sylvester 2012, 496).

But war is not 100 per cent bad. She mentions laughter (Sylvester 2013, 2) and notes that people can experience "joy" in war, drawing on Yuval Noah Harari's notion of combat flow, where soldiers enjoy being deeply focused during the challenge of combat (Sylvester 2013, 106). She also illustrates ways that "bodies" experience war that I would argue are pleasurable—although she does not say as such—which includes "writing about war, filming moments of war, photographing war" (Sylvester 2013, 5).[20] But in the main, her approach to war experience is focused on violence, defining war as a "politics of injury" and that injury is the "content of war not the consequence of it" (Sylvester 2013, 3 – 4).

Significantly, Sylvester explores war experience as being more than just soldiers on a frontline, and that there are "many locations and types of war experience" (Sylvester 2012, 496). People experience it at varying distances, from medics who are at a "slight distance" to people who are at a "farther distance" but active through producing war material, writing about war, or as politicians and protestors (Sylvester 2012, 496).[21] Her approach is broad, emphasising that people who count as participants are those "who have experiences and agencies related to war" (Sylvester 2013, 4). She is thus calling on scholars to recognise that war affects humans, that people matter in war and we all do

---

[20] The notion of bodies are a central concern in the experience literature. Some scholars have directly engaged with Sylvester's war-experience-through-the-body via the notion of embodiment. The body is not only 'a sensing physical entity that can touch war' (Sylvester 2011, 1) but is also crucial to the functioning of war itself, needing thousands on the ground for it to carry on in places like Iraq and Afghanistan (MacLeish 2013, 11). Kevin McSorley also proposes a new ontology of war which is deeply tied to our physical and emotional states (McSorley 2013). I have intermittently drawn on the *bodies* literature as it is often interchanged with experience/ embodiment. While I recognise the physicality of war, as mentioned earlier, I don't like the term "bodies" and prefer people, humans etc. My rejection of the body terminology is also connected to my desire to not align with some IR theories behind the body, which are indebted to Foucault's notion that bodies are "directly involved in the political field" (Foucault quoted in Dyvik 2016). I find this Foucauldian approach too abstract and oppressive. People are more complex, and capable of far more than such accounts suggest.

[21] From this "slight distance", I am assuming that Sylvester sees the heart of war as a frontline.

not experience it in the same ways. Examining war is also multi-disciplinary and can take many theoretical approaches. But as she points out, she does not want to "nail down" experience in relation to war (Sylvester 2012, 498). Sylvester's work recognises how war is fundamentally a human experience and it is, therefore, a theoretical space where I can directly plant pleasure in IR.

Emotions

Although I do not draw on the emotions literature in IR extensively, it is relevant to the idea of pleasure in war—particularly in relation to the question of whether emotions fuel global politics and, in this instance, war. Like experience, emotions are also notoriously difficult to define and pin down in research. While fear and hate are generally accepted as implicit motivators in world politics, and are central to IR theory, other emotions are often not considered (Crawford 2000,118). When studying emotions in IR, there is a tendency to focus on the emotions of elites and state actors, and how they influence international politics. For example, Todd Hall (2011) has examined the role anger played in the 1995 to 1996 Taiwan crisis. But generally, individual emotions in war are not examined. The rare example is Parashar, who explores how anger, "a deeply experienced individual and social emotion" (Parashar 2015, 73), is politicised and responded to collectively. Using poetry, a swathe of different scholarly analyses of the emotion, along with her own encounters with combatants, she analyses what anger does to people and communities, particularly women, and finds that anger is an emotion of "moral legitimacy and imagination" (Parashar 2015, 81), and that it is not necessarily negative as it creates considered thinking and doing. Outside of IR, analysis of Norweigan soldiers experience of *brakkesyke* (literally 'barracks sickness', a distinctive Norwegian word for boredom) shows while it can be dangerous state of mind for a soldier because it can impact on their readiness for fighting, it is also generative and creative (Mæland and Brunstad 2009). Fear has been seen as dangerous in war as shaky hands means men couldn't shoot properly and it infects other men (Bourke 2001, 316).

It is for these reasons, there are questions around what emotions can do, and what role they play in war, and how they "matter to the study of global politics" (Åhäll and Gregory 2015, 2). Within IR, there are also questions around whether emotions impact on global politics individually or collectively (Clément et al 2018, 5-6). The extent to which people's emotions and experiences—particularly pleasurable ones—play a role in war will be discussed in later chapters.

The everyday

The war journalist Martha Gellhorn was in Madrid in 1937 during the war and her journalism captures how, despite the bombs intermittently dropping into daily life, people go about their business:

> Later, you could see people around Madrid examining the new shell holes with curiosity and wonder. Otherwise they went on with the routine of their lives, as if they had been interrupted by a heavy rainstorm but nothing more. In a cafe which was hit in the morning, where three men were killed sitting at a table reading their morning papers and drinking coffee, the clients came back in the afternoon (Gellhorn 1998, 21).

She goes into a shoe shop and, "... after the third explosion, the salesman says politely: "I think we had better move farther back into the shop. The window might break and cut you" (Gellhorn 1998, 21).[22]

The "everyday" is a significant when thinking about war and this thesis draws inspiration from IR scholar Swati Parashar, and anthropologists Lamia Moghnieh, Sami Hermez, and Carolyn Nordstrom, all of whom have conducted fieldwork on violence in war and theorised the daily lives of people living through it. For laced throughout the memoirs and interviews, is everyday life.

Parashar argues that an ontology of war is captured in the "daily and mundane lived experiences of people and in powerful emotions that constitute 'self', community and the 'other'' (Parashar 2013, 615) and because wars can last years, they can be a "state of being" (Parashar 2013, 621). She argues that the focus on the causes and impacts of war in IR—and the use of quantitative tools—neglects that people who "fight/suffer/live" in war have knowledge about it and insights into why they happen (Parashar 2013, 618). Like Sylvester, she sees IR as a field that "steadfastly refuses to acknowledge people, experiences and emotions" (Parashar 2013, 617). She describes bodies as alive in war as "there is life amidst death, survival amidst destruction, music, drums and celebration amidst sounds of explosions" (Parashar 2013: 619). They are also "dead, decapitated, abused, brutalized"(Parashar

[22] I did not include Martha Gellhorn in the analysis as the book is a collection of articles over the period of her career. It is more reportage and not personal. Neverthless, her work offers interesting insights into the ontology of war.

2013, 621). This “state of being” in the “everyday” can stretch over several generations and become a “world of its own” (Parashar 2013, 620).

I draw on Parashar’s notion of the everyday as it articulates experience in war across time and space, and not necessarily on the frontline. Her use of individual experience in war in the context of daily life is useful, particularly because her methods draw on field work and interviews with female soldiers involved in armed militancy in Indian administered Kashir and the Tamil insurgency in Sri Lanka (Parashar 2014). Through these interviews and case studies, Parashar shows how war shapes many aspects of people’s daily lives, and that for women in Kashmir who were active participants in the armed groups, there needs to be a more complex and nuanced understanding of their roles—one that goes beyond binary frameworks of “agency” versus “victimhood” or “good” versus “bad” (Parashar 2014, 175).

Parashar’s approach focuses on the gendered and often traumatic aspects of war experience, building on Sylvester’s notion of war as a “politics of injury”. However, she briefly explores Penttinen’s approach of looking at “joy and being alive” in IR (Parashar 2014, 184) and raises the question of wars being “joyous” for some people. It appears that it can be, for between victimhood and agency, there are “stories of survival, hope, joy and of the politics of subversion and purpose” (Parashar 2014, 184). Parashar next provides an expansive list of these joys, melded with the pains, which include:

> ... LTTE women ... joining the militant movement to escape the hardships of poverty, of reliving their dream of a ‘homeland’, of escaping the harshness of violence at ‘home’, of escaping ‘homelessness’ to finding a ‘home’, of avenging their humiliation by security forces, of finding real joy and camaraderie in the training camps, of love, romance and desire, of realising their potential, and of utmost despair, anger and humiliation at their marginalisation in the post- war environment. In Kashmir too, women had different stories to tell; of the romantic love and longing for the militant with the gun, of songs celebrating martyrdom and also mourning, of hiding guns under their beds and militants in their homes, of nursing the wounded mujahideen, of encouraging sons to fight, of leading protests against the Indian state, of celebrating their religious identity with much fervour, and of politics and activism that they believed would change their world and win them self-determination (Parashar 2014, 184).

While her work is not focused on pleasure, Parashar's study sees the everyday, lived experience of war as offering new insights. She argues that studying the lives of women fighters helps us "better interpret the world [and] understand the gender codings in wars and conflicts" (Parashar 2014, 184). Crucially, her research implicitly reveals that pleasure is part of this complex picture.

Living *in* violence

Moghnieh's anthropological scholarship from Lebanon also looks at the everyday, and is relevant in three key areas to the theoretical approach I have taken. First, she gives context to human experience in war. Second, she emphasises that even with violence, there is a spectrum of suffering across the landscape that is war. For Moghnieh, dominant tropes frame violence as something that abruptly "wounds and injures our humanity" and "produces a universal response of suffering" (Moghnieh 2017, 26) when this isn't always the case. Third, she challenges the dominant framing of war violence as a momentary "encounter", instead urging a shift toward understanding it as "living-in-violence", which is a sustained way of life that people are embedded in (Moghnieh 2017, 24).

In her ethnography, she tells stories about everyday life in war. In one, she recounts being a child swimming in a pool with her family when they begin to hear shelling in the distance. While everyone else leaves the pool, her father urges them to keep swimming, and begins "teaching us, while shouting over the intermittent sound of the shelling, how to read the sound of the bombs". She says "reading" this violence produced knowledge about the nature of violence and its livability (Moghnieh 2017, 28).

During a wave of political assassinations in Lebanon in 2005, Moghnieh and her friends decide to get drunk whenever a bomb explodes. "We refused to stay at home feeling afraid of what was to come next and to ruminate over the explosions" (Moghnieh 2017, 32). Later, in 2012, a large bomb explodes and she decides to continue with a planned hair appointment. She arrives at the salon to find it empty and is suddenly embarrassed that she has not cancelled it. She returns home and feels like crying, fed up with the bombs and explosions. She finds the fridge empty and wonders whether she should buy more food in case the violence escalates. "Will the roads be closed in protest? What about my plans of going out tomorrow night?" (Moghnieh 2017, 32). These vignettes offer several insights. First, there is not a universal way to suffer, which has parallels with pleasure—there are all sorts of them. Second, the landscape of war experience is expansive. Third, life goes on in war.

Her research also reveals how local communities resist international humanitarian models of classifying their experiences of violence as traumatic. She remarks that these organisations had a hard time finding traumatised subjects after the July war in 2006 as people were more interested in "resisting and standing firm" (Moghnieh 2017, 29). This comment underscores that while people who have not experienced war think that "all war is traumatic" and create programs to address that trauma, people on the ground may feel differently.

Moghnieh's discussions of varied narratives and experiences of violence allows for a new framing beyond the trauma/resilience binary that dominates how violence is typically studied (Moghnieh 2017, 36). While she focuses on the violences of war, she offers glimpses of normality, and the pleasures of getting haircuts and drinking with friends. The idea of "living-in" war and the variety of ways that people suffer have parallels with people "living-in" war and experiencing pleasure.

"In the meanwhile"

Sami Hermez articulates a somewhat similar experience of the war in Lebanon as Moghnieh but applies a different interpretation. He tells the story of having a burger with his friend Dima in downtown Beirut when she remarks that their lives are like "superhero comic strips". In one frame, there is fighting and then in the next slide it says 'In the meanwhile'.

As Hermez puts it:

> While the war went on above and around us, while the displaced tended to their lives, "in the meanwhile" we ate at Roadster, had meetings, went out for a drink, worked on humanitarian relief operations, and conducted our everyday lives the way we saw fit (Hermez 2017, 2)

He points out that, "in the interstices of war, people still live their lives" and that war "does not necessarily erase either daily actions or emotions, and certainly does not erase feelings of love" (Hermez 2017, 2). Within war, there is a "normal trajectory" of "new life, death, laughter, happiness, and sadness" (Hermez 2017, 3). His work not only highlights how people live ordinary lives amid violence, and can include pleasure, but also how the "in the meanwhile" captures the anticipation of fighting—an important consideration when thinking about life in a war zone and the need to understand war as more than just moments of combat, bombing, or kinetic exchange.

Everyday agency beyond the frontline

Nordstrom's ethnographies of war in Mozambique over a period of years exposes the daily realities of life in conflict—many of them harrowing.[23] While she looks primarily at violence, there are three main points with her ethnographies I found useful, particularly in relation to the expansive landscape of conflict. First, the everyday is revealed in the many characters who live in war, which includes children, nurses, arms dealers, journalists, pornographers, soldiers, artists, doctors and many others (Nordstrom 1997, 1999). Second, she observes that *war is not just a frontline*. I have mentioned her notion of the "vast sprawl" of war, about which she elaborates:

> In classic political science and media analyses, the term warzone is a circumscribed place. It is a battlefield that can be marked on a map, and it contains soldiers locked in combat with opposing soldiers, and the hapless civilians that get caught in the crossfire. When I first began to study war from the frontlines, I looked for this warzone. Finding it proved difficult ... I now speak of warzones – not as places but as vast sprawling processes where the tragedies of individuals' lives at the frontlines intersect with a host of transnational realities (Nordstrom 1999, 21).

Her description of war zones as "vast sprawling processes" is particularly useful because in the memoirs and interviews, people reported pleasure in a variety of conflict settings. Third, her everyday of war is not just about violence but also how people cope and adapt in war and get on with their lives. Basically, people have agency. Of course, many people suffer and die in the most appalling circumstances but they also rebuild. As she describes it: "From the broken bodies and the ashes of burned towns in Mozambique, I have seen people forge themselves and their worlds in new and vital ways" (Nordstrom 1997, 198). [24]

Taken together, the scholarship of Parashar, Moghnieh, Hermez, and Nordstrom reveals the layered nature of everyday life in war and foreground a spectrum of experiences. This body of work provides

[23] Nordstrom's study on the "politics of invisibility" during the Mozambique war in the late 1980s and early 1990s highlights how little information emerged about human rights violations against children. Her work documents harrowing violence inflicted on young girls during the conflict.

[24] While Moghnieh critiques this binary of trauma/resilience, Nordstrom does recognise that scholars have "few tools" for understanding resilence because "we seldom see sheer creativity" (Nordstrom 1997,199).

an essential foundation for thinking about the broader emotional and experiential landscape of conflict, and how pleasure can – and does – exist in it.

The individual

I will now discuss approaches which centre individual experiences. I found this scholarship useful as it focuses on the individual's agency in war and does not attribute their experiences to institutional frameworks or power structures. While usually focused on soldiers specifically, it holds some relevance to other war workers. The anthropologist Pedersen has explored the positive experiences of Danish soldiers in the most recent war in Afghanistan. Building on Harari's work on war as a "revelatory experience", Pedersen finds that soldiers seek the battlefield as "exceptional sites for learning revelatory truths about self and world" and that they are chasing "warrior dreams" (Pedersen 2017, 8).

Pedersen's work useful is useful in digging deeper into positive experiences of war. He concedes that while it these "dreams and desires" are a question of "culture or nature, man or beast", he opts to take an existential approach (Pedersen 2017, 23). As a result, Pedersen's empirical work foregrounds the soldier rather than the military institution in relation to their experiences. He points out that while most social sciences approach the human individual as "society-driven" and subscribe to a structuralist and post-structuralist view, he provides insights into soldiering as "self-motivated rather than as socially driven" (Pedersen 2017, 10). This idea of being self-motivated to go to war is a useful tool when examining the political implications of pleasure, which I will do in later chapters.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology, broadly defined as the "study of structures of experience, or consciousness" (Woodruff 2018), has been taken up by a small but growing group of scholars as a way to interrogate war (Brighton 2011, Narozhna 2022, Gilks 2025). As Tanya Narozhna proposes, "it directs analytical attention to embodied experiences," and "underscores the critical importance of the lived body, or 'our being-in-the-world'" (Narozhna 2022, 213).[25] While I do not aim to theorise the "body in war"

[25] While Narozhna theorises the body in war, she only does so in relation to violence, trauma and suffering, and draws on Sylvester's "politics of injury" to make the point. As I will show, there are pleasures in war and her theorisation of the body leaves this element out.

directly, I draw on phenomenological perspectives to the extent that they centre human experience.[26]

I found particular inspiration in the work of Mark Gilks, who uses phenomenonology to theorise that war occurs because "we embody it" (Gilks 2025, 1) and it is "fundamentally our doing" (Gilks 2025, 2). He builds this claim in two ways. First, he draws on Heidegger's view that human beings are the origins of ontic structure— that is, we would have no war if it were not for humans. Second, he finds inspiration in philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's idea that existence is always embodied. From this, Gilks argues that war is not an external force that we suffer from, but something we do. By making humans "the agents of war", he shifts thinking of war away from "understanding war not primarily as a tragic fate but as our shameful doing" (2025, 1). He also says that if we want to talk seriously about ethics or responsibility in war, we need to keep human agency at the centre— otherwise, war becomes something abstract or unaccountable. As he says, "humanism is in need of critique, not rejection" as by recognising, for example, that technologically advanced warfare is our doing, we might "banish it ... as our wrongdoing" (Gilks 2025, 8). In essence, the blame for the mess of war is ours and we "choose it" (Gilks 2025, 8). Or as he puts it: "…human war is a distinctively human phenomenon which must be problematised at the level of human ontology" (Gilks 2025, 3)

His ideas were useful in a number of ways. He stresses that war cannot be studied through discourse— war is something we do and embody. Gilks critiques the norms around suffering and proposes "a normative optimism through the implication of our individual and collective agency to disembody war" (Gilks 2025, 3). That is, in my reading, he is saying as humans embody war, we can stop it.

He also recognises that war is not always necessarily destructive, and critiques the work of Narozhna, arguing she sells the phenomenological approach short by:

[26] This body of scholarship also avoids structural, post-structural, or discursive abstraction. In this small pool of scholarship, Barkawi and Brighton's 2011 piece highlighting the need for a more sustained study of war—which I will discuss later—has been critiqued for focusing too much on discourse.

> … implying it would have nothing to say about how war facilitates and can be an expression of agency, how it generates meaning (for some), and how it creates communities and occasions the opportunity for meaningful intersubjective encounters (Gilks 2025, 10).

While this thesis is not a phenomenological work, Gilks' work is significant for placing the human at the centre of war. It pushes against the dominant focus on suffering by proposing that humans do war—and thus have the power to stop war—and acknowledges that war can have benefits. [27]

This section has outlined the key theoretical and empirical work that has helped me think about *war as experience.* Alongside the memoirists, feminist IR scholars such as Sylvester and Parashar, anthropologists like Moghnieh, Nordstrom and Pedersen, and phenomenologists including Gilks and Narozhna show that war is not simply a series of battles or strategic decisions between states—it is lived and it is felt. This scholarship is crucial to exploring individual experiences and while there is a tendency to focus on suffering, fear, and trauma there are also glimpses of agency, joy, and meaning. I build on this foundational work to explore a lesser-examined aspect: pleasure.

The ontology of fighting

The next body of work that helped frame my thinking is connected to the ontology of fighting. In memoirs, interviews, and existing scholarship, individuals—including soldiers and embedded journalists—often describe experiencing pleasure in fighting. In this section, I provide background on the centrality of fighting and explore key debates about how it is conceptualised within the ontology of war.

But before moving forward, I would like to briefly mention that in CWS, there is a clear division between how scholars think about "fighting" itself and how they think about "bodies" in war —almost as if they were two distinct categories in how to approach the topic of war.[28] While not all fighting is

[27] There is much to explore in Gilks' work but it is not the remit of this paper to undertake a phenomenological analysis. But a few areas worth exploring are the different ways humans are agents in war and carry on the tradition. Some humans do war more than others; other humans try very hard to stop war. I would argue we "are" war in different ways.

[28] Mark Gilks' proposes an ontology of *Being-against* as an alternative to the Clausewitzian war-as-fighting ontology. He doesn't go into too much detail but says he inverts Heidegger's notion of "Being-with" to "ontological structure of enmity in war" (Gilks 2025, 1).

embodied—like drone strikes—fighting generally involves people and it also impacts them. For my purposes, fighting and experience are important for two reasons. First, many personal accounts of war vividly describe pleasure in fighting in deeply physical terms that are tied to direct or indirect participation in combat. For example, in memoirs, individuals enjoy holding and firing weapons or watching the drama and spectacle of battle; in interviews, respondents such as embedded war journalists describe the frisson of travelling with troops. I recognise there is a critique in CWS that there is too much focus on fighting but I need to account for it, and it is one of many experiences in war.

The second reason I include fighting is because I see it as crucial to an ontology of war. While some accounts of war in IR critique the focus on fighting, I believe it cannot be ignored. At the same time, war is not only about fighting. I also wonder whether pleasure has been excluded from IR partly because of its association with fighting—how could anyone enjoy fighting? Yet, people do, as many accounts of war reveal. Thus, in this section, I explore scholarship that considers an ontology of war in relation to fighting.

Fighting is a central part of war's definitions and thinking. As mentioned in the introduction, Clausewitz saw fighting as central. He described war as "a duel on an extensive scale" (Clausewitz 1984,75), likening it to wrestling where each party seeks to dominate the other (Clausewitz 1984, 75). For him, battle is the central means of war, running "through the whole web of military activity" (Clausewitz 1984, 96). Anatol Rapoport, the mathematician and psychologist known for his work in game theory, and who wrote the introduction to Penguin's 1968 edition of Clausewitz's *On War,* opted for three common theories of war: the cataclysmic like fire or an epidemic, the eschatological akin to a mission, and the political, where it is like a game of strategy, such as chess (Rapoport in Clausewitz 1968, 16). While these three big themes risk oversimplifying the nature of war, what is key is that Rapaport's reductionism reflects Clausewitz's enduring influence on the Western conception of war as fundamentally involving fighting.[29]

This focus on fighting is not unique to dictionaries and scholarship; it is also echoed in the memoirs and commentary of many war workers. UN worker Cain, who works as a civilian attached to

[29] Just as many scholars propose that any account of war must include fighting, it seems a Western account of war cannot be possible without Clausewitz!

Peacekeeping forces says of the violence in Somalia: “Only civilians would imagine that you can keep the peace in a hot war without fighting” (Cain, Postlewait and Thomson 2004, 166). When reflecting on the dangers of her job, freelance war correspondent Francesca Borri, remarks that the only paid opportunities for her are on the frontline, “Because the editors back in Italy only ask us for the blood, the bang-bang” (Borri 2013). War journalist Loyd sees that fighting is “key to the whole thing. No point going to war unless you fought, was there?” (Loyd 1999, 66). British solider Hennessey consistently yearns to fight and laments when it doesn’t happen. Without being “in” a fight, he could never know what war really is and “couldn’t answer all the questions we thought might get asked of us at ‘war’”(Hennessey 2009, 152).

Sometimes the description of war is more visceral. War surgeon David Nott is in a bar in Sarajevo when a drunken man begins harrassing him about being a war tourist:

> “You don't know what it's like!” he shouted. “You don't know what it's like to live in a war zone! I'm going to show you!” And with that, he reached over for the switch, turned out the lights in the restaurant and started banging his chair on the floor and going around the room hammering his fists on the wall. “This is what it's like!” he yelled, the chair going bang bang bang on the floor (Nott 2019, 78)

In the interviews I conducted, the ontology of war was also often connected to fighting. When Respondent 16, a North American female working for USAID, was asked if she was living in a war zone in Afghanistan, she said that she was because:

> I felt the explosion when US soldiers were killed by a suicide bomber a couple blocks away ... That was my first week ever in Afghanistan ... It wasn't a weekly occurrence but it was a regular occurrence. Things went boom.

Other respondents remarked that they were not in a war because they were not personally under bombardment. Respondent 2, a male European in the private sector, said:

> I think it doesn't need to be the front line—the two-way range. It doesn't need to be that.... but it surely is not a permissive environment to move around in. When I think of a war zone, I

> think of downtown Aleppo during air strikes. That's a war zone—people who are terrified for their lives in their houses, with a huge amount of suffering and a huge amount of devastation.

Intensity is also an element in fighting. War correspondent Loyd finds Chechnya is "like nothing I had ever seen before" due to its magnitude:

> In terms of the scale of violence, fear and horror, it left anything in my experience so far behind as to make it almost insignificant. You can grade conflicts according to intensity if you desire: low, medium and high. Chechnya blew the bell off the end of the gauge, and revealed an extreme of war to me that I had no conception of. Afterwards my understanding of conflict was never quite the same again. It was indeed a glimpse from the edge of hell (Loyd 1999, 235).

The potential for fighting

War is sometimes also defined in relation to the *potential for fighting.* Writing in 1651, the British philosopher Thomas Hobbes remarks that, "war consisteth not in actual fighting, but in the known disposition thereto during all the time there is no assurance to the contrary"(Hobbes 1996). Barkawi and Brighton also remark that its ontology is connected to "fighting or its immanent possibility" (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 135). Hermez's work also stresses the anticipation element in war. He spends one night in military jail on suspicion of being a spy and can hear bombing in the distance. The experience makes him realise that the "anticipation of political violence" plays a part in war and is necessary to explore to "deconstruct a homogeneous idea of what war is and isn't" (Hermez 2017, 3).

Respondent 10, a female European communications consultant working for NATO, also spoke of this anticipation: "I think the experience of war in many ways, is that kind of knowledge that something bad can happen, but it's not happening constantly". [30] Respondent 19, a female Australian consultant working for a U.S. contractor, also spoke of this potentiality:

> ... they used to always say there is a Toyota Corolla cruising around full of explosives and it's like, well, every car is a Toyota Corolla. So every time you go on the street you take life in your own hands whether you're in a car or not .... That was a constant war zone every day. And the

[30] Respondent interview on February 3, 2020.

> fear of kidnapping, fear of explosion, fear of IED ... That constant state of fear ... is not normal within a city ... [31]

Respondent 15, a female European human rights worker, also spoke of the threat element and described the situation in Kabul as being “the right amount of war”.

> I think the Kabul experience for most of us— you had the frisson of the threat of violence nearby but it didn't necessarily impinge on your daily life, except as a slight anxiety rather than a palpable threat to your life. So I think it was in that sense the right amount of war ... I suspect most people quite enjoyed the raised eyebrows of people living back in their home countries or the people they were telling, you know, I live in Kabul because it sounds quite daring, but the reality was a little bit less so.[32]

Thus, when it comes to studying war, I believe fighting is crucial—the actual “encounter”, its possibility and the impact it has on the everyday. I will explore the pleasure found in these spaces of war in later chapters, but having shown how people are involved in, impacted by, connected to, or living in the shadow of fighting, I will next turn to examining how war is more than just fighting. This is an important idea because, while some scholars acknowledge it, it is often missing in our broader culture, which tends to think of war as just a collection of explosions.

Fighting plus plus plus

When Barkawi and Brighton rebooted discussions about war in critical war studies in 2011, they placed fighting at the core of their ontology, arguing: “Fighting is that which thematically unifies war in general and in particular—‘war’ with ‘wars’—and no ontology of war can exclude it” (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 135). Building on Clausewitz's ideas, they propose, however, that fighting has two aspects. First, it shapes how we understand war through its “historicity and immediacy” but also “exceeds the terms of that immediacy” (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 136). The violence of war creates and transforms people, and this "excess" is central to their understanding of what war is.[33]

---

[31] Respondent interview on March 6, 2020.
[32] Respondent interview on February 24, 2020.
[33] Barkawi and Brighton draw on the work of philosopher Emmanuel Levinas and argue that this "excess" refers to the way organised violence extends beyond mere combat, as it “casts into motion” subjects who are “alienated” but who also come to “know themselves and the world in new ways”

I draw on their work in a few ways. First, they see that fighting must be included in any ontology of war, which this thesis does as well. Second, they position experience as crucial too, observing that Clausewitz's focus on the chaotic "unmaking of certainties" was shaped by his own experience as a soldier and what he witnessed of the Napoleonic wars (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 139). While they largely frame the experience of war as violent—"Those who experience a war encounter its particular violences and their cumulative impact" (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 134)—they also see it as generative, which could be interpreted as positive. Ontology of "fighting" plus "remaking" and "generative" experience does two things. First, it suggests that war can be more than kinetic exchange. Second, the remaking and generative aspects could mean that war brings pleasures to people.

But does war have to be just the "one thing"? The short answer is no. As mentioned, Clausewitz famously conceived of war as a "paradoxical trinity" of interconnected forces: the violence and emotion of the people, the chance and creativity of the commander and army, and the rational control of policy as directed by the government (Clausewitz 1984, 89). This conception backs the idea that war is not necessarily reducible to combat alone. Recent work in CWS also continues to push against narrow definitions.

Nordin and Öberg reject the singular focus on fighting and instead argue for new ontologies that reflect war's reliance on procedures and processes rather than traditional combat (Nordin and Öberg 2015, 399-408). However, they do not outright reject fighting and propose the need to find new ontologies of war "complementing the notion that war is fighting" (Nordin and Öberg 2015, 408). Caroline Holmqvist explores fighting and its excess, noting that "fighting always exceeds 'fighting'" (Holmqvist 2013, 537). She too is suggesting a galaxy approach—there is a lot going on. Elsewhere, she proposes that war can also be an ideological project by making political moves such as state-building, an idea she argues is left out of contemporary accounts of its ontology. Using the example of Afghanistan and Iraq, she shows how in 2009, Secretary of Defence Robert described the wars in Iraq

(Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 136). They suggest that war's capacity to unmake and remake social and political orders reinforces both its destructive and generative powers (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 126). The pair develop the concept War/Truth, a term for this process where war produces knowledge and power structures, but also threatens and exposes the fragility of those same systems (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 139).

and Afghanistan as “nation building under fire” (Holmvquist 2012, 229). Together this work gives a glimpse of the many interesting ways in which war has been conceived as more than just fighting—not just experientially but conceptually.

The idea that war is more than just fighting is apparent in non-Western theory. *Unrestricted Warfare* by Colonel Qiao Liang and Colonel Wang Xiangsui, published in 1999, is widely regarded as a work of Chinese military theory, though it is not an official doctrinal text of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). The two air force political officers argue that war has become ‘unrestricted’ and is no longer solely about the military and armed forces—it involves using all non-military, lethal, and non-lethal methods. reject fighting at the core of war, mocking the traditional notion of a “battlefield bathed in flames” and argue the contemporary battlefield is now “virtually infinite”—in space, in the sea, in invisible electromagnetic spectrum space, and in human hearts (Liang and Xiangsui 1999, 41). Russian theorists also have a similar ‘war-is-everywhere’ approach. Oscar Jonsson, in his analysis of Russian strategic thought, argues that contemporary approaches increasingly incorporate nonmilitary forms of conflict, including informational, ideological, economic, subversive, and diplomatic strategies (Jonsson 2019, 5).

Another inspiring form of fighting plus plus plus was somewhat surprising to me. Unexpectedly, one of the more compelling examples of a multiple-ontology approach to war comes from systems engineering. Hartley’s (2021) ontology of war presents an abstract yet pluralistic framework that captures the layers of war.[34]

Drawing on U.S. warfighting doctrine, particularly *Joint Operations,* Hartley show that the ‘operational environment’ includes six domains: political, military, economic, social, information, and infrastructure or PMESII (See below). Each domain has its own links and nodes (Hartley 2021, 3), forming a dynamic web. The diagram below offers a useful visualisation of the complexity—and more importantly, suggests the many locations where pleasure might also reside within war. [35]

[34] While I have avoided abstraction in this thesis, Hartley’s approach is different. He aims to explain and manage how war systems interact dynamically whereas someone like Michel Foucault’s abstractions, for example, are critical and historical.

[35] *Joint Operations* also accounts for the many other elements and levers that are engaged in war – Diplomatic, Informational, Military and Economic (DIME), as well as the domains of cyber and cognitive superiority (Harley 2021, 6).

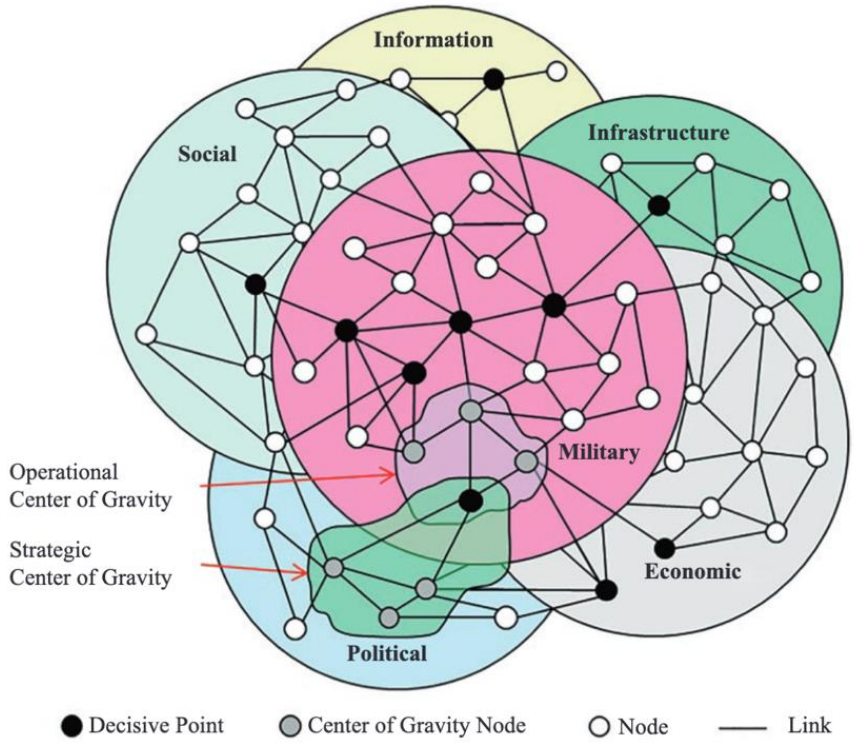


Figure 1: PMESII diagram

When I saw this image, I thought: “This is war”.

Hartley, curiously, does not use the term “war” and instead opts for “modern conflict”, which he defines to include conventional and unconventional combat (Harlety 2021, vii).[36] He has argued

[36] It was notable how the respondents didn’t want to call what they were in ”war” but preferred the term ”conflict”. As mentioned previously, they called it a “different kind of war” and “the right amount of war” amongst different descriptions. For example, Respondent 8, a male North American reporter described Kabul as a “fairly safe country capital with lots of security in it, that experienced the occasional insurgent attack, but it's not what I consider to be a warzone”. Meanwhile, Respondent 29, a female Australian journalist said: “I was living in a war zone for sure. I mean, one day I was up on the roof after a blast blew out all the windows … I was with the manager of the house and the cleaner, and we were walking around on a flat roof, where I used to do all my television crosses, and there's something and I said ‘What's that?’ And the manager said, ‘We think it's a suicide bomber’. So we had a big chunk of the suicide bomber on the roof. And I thought, of course, it's got to go somewhere”. In Taliban poetry, the writers certainly see war in Kabul, which is consistently evoked as a site of anguish and a target.The poet Hayatullah Khaksar stated: “Kabul smells of gunpowder, it brings me to tears…” (Khaksar 2007) while Hafiz Ikramuddin remarks: “Oh Kabul! We will clean you from these black faces!” (Ikramuddin 2008).

conventional conflict is ”over“ and today‘s conflicts don’t fit into a neat box. War is many, many things. As he put it:

> It may include combat operations. It may include multiple conflicting parties. It may have a time span measured in years. It may be confined to a single country or span a continent. It certainly includes social and cultural behaviour issues and the parties to the conflict may not all play by the same set of rules. Regardless of the details, unconventional conflict is real and messy and appears to be here to stay (Hartley 2021, vii).

To make sense of this complexity, Hartley outlines a vast ontology organised around three main categories: actors, actions and “object relations” (Hartley 2021, 390 and 401). The category of actors is expansive and they operate like “multiple players playing different board games at the same time on the same board, all interacting” (Hartley 2021, 65), suggesting a complex and unpredictable world. [37] Actions span nine categories and cover “interventions, events and ongoing processes”(Hartley 2021, 126). [38] Finally, and perhaps most strikingly, Hartley includes a category called “Object relationships,” which catalogues emotional and affective states such as “has feelings for,” “loves,” “is loved by,” “is controlled by,” “likes,” and “talks with” (Hartley 2021, 391). While putting these sorts of emotions and relationships into boxes is easily debatable, they signal that war—and even its definition— is not devoid of emotion and is saturated with feeling.

Although Hartley’s framework is primarily concerned with the structural, unpredictable dynamism of war, it helped me think about war experientially. First, it recognises that war is far more than fighting, and encompasses social, political, economic and other terrains. Second, his ontology includes a wide array of actors, actions and feelings, which can account for the many war workers that experience pleasure.

---

[37] His 24 “key leader actors” include international and local journalists, business and NGO individuals, bureaucrats, contractors and many others (Hartley 2021, 109). A further 15 other “individual actors” are of “temporary importance”: NGO workers, contractors, and advisors such as economists and agronomists.

[38] While categories such as *striking* and *conflict* cover military endeavours, others articulate a broad range of realities—*information* relates to persuasion and observation; *human affairs* involves distribution of aid and providing sanitation; and *economic actions* include running businesses and running cultural events. This expansive view of action captures the diverse way that people participate in and make sense of war.

While Hartley's system may appear too abstract when expressed in his diagram, reducing experience into tidy categories, I did not find this the case with the way he described it textually. He describes modern conflict as a complex adaptive system, meaning it exhibits emergent properties—qualities that arise from interactions within the system but cannot be predicted from its individual components alone (Hartley 2021, viii). Rather than excluding human experience, his model recognises that it co-evolves with the system. War is not a static structure imposed on people; it is shaped by the people within it[39]. As such, pleasure is not merely *in* the system—it is the system.

While coming from a very different disciplinary viewpoint, I found Hartley's systems engineering approach to war—particularly his advocacy for an adaptive, multiple ontology framework—resonated with some of my aims in terms of exploring experience. Hartley challenges singular models of war, instead proposing a flexible framework that accounts for the complex, layered realities of conflict. His systems-based perspective also details the human embeddedness of war, albeit through an alternative epistemological route.

I suggest that a multiple-ontology approach, which combines experience /the everyday/ the human in war / fighting /the complex system offers a way to take seriously the idea that war is many things, including pleasurable. These approaches reflect war's realities and how they are shaped by many people, relationships, organisations and their experiences.

In sum, war cannot be reduced to a single ontology. A plural approach acknowledges that war is shaped by more than fighting, and that it is experienced, anticipated, managed and— what I will show—enjoyed in different ways. This framing better captures the diverse experiences of those who live through it.

In conclusion, this chapter has analysed some of the thinking that has shaped this thesis. I began by looking at the issues with war's definitions, which have traditionally been focused on fighting. The "war as experience" literature has been theoretically important, in particular the work of Sylvester and others who argue that individual experience, the everyday and phenomenological approaches are

[39] This idea is reminiscent of Gilk's notion that war is not external force but something humans do.

important tools to use when thinking about war. I also explored ontologies of fighting and how crucial it is to think of war as so much more.

Chapter 3

NO PLEASURE PLEASE

When you think about war, what do you see? It may be soldiers trudging in a sweaty Vietnamese jungle, huddled in a harrowing World War 1 trench in France, or engaged in a heart-stopping gun battle in the carcasses of buildings in an obliterated Syrian city. The common thread to these scenes? Men with guns shooting at each other; a moment of violent encounter. Some soldiers die, their corpses left to rot in haunting poses on the battlefield or sent home, their coffins draped in flags. Many make it home and are celebrated as heroes, while others return physically and spiritually scarred, doomed to live under the cloud of PTSD. Civilians may appear in your mind too: crumpled, crying, cowering, or splayed on the ground dead, their lives cruelly extinguished through no fault of their own. This visceral image of war—full of death, violence and suffering dominates our understanding of war.

Yet war also comprises a range of elements, characters, landscapes, and sensations—including pleasure. Why, then, has pleasure—a fundamental aspect of human experience in wartime—been largely excluded from IR and related epistemic communities? If pleasure and pain are inextricably linked, why do we know all about the pain? In this chapter, I delve deeper into the normative portrayal of war in IR as a site of suffering—sometimes other emotions—but rarely pleasure.

I first examine some feminist IR and CWS literature that opts to theorise war through injury. While some war studies literature does recognise that a range of war experiences exist, it only ever nods to pleasure. I next explore how the various professions in war are usually studied in relation to problems, such as mental health issues. I will next look at how when pleasure is addressed in IR, it is in relation to morally troubling forms such as sexual violence. Finally, as a contrast, I will show how war memoirs do not focus solely on the negative aspects of war but instead offer a world of experience, which includes a lot of pleasure.

In sum, this chapter exmaines how IR theory and other war research tend to conceptualise war primarily through its human cost, and often pathologising those who have experienced it or framing their work as problematic. While scholarship into the toll of war is vital, this framing is nonetheless

limiting: war workers do experience pleasure, and current academic accounts rarely address this in a sustained way.

Was as fighting—and injury

Sylvester's conception of people's experiences in war is primarily in relation to injury, defining war "in terms of its massive capacity to injure people and communities" (Sylvester 2013, 112). Other experience scholarship also positions war as a social institution which solves or seeks to solve disputes through "collectively violent, armed techniques of injury" (Sylvester 2012, 492)[40].

Sylvester's theorisation of experience in war builds on Elaine Scarry's often-quoted claim that "war is injury" (Scarry 1985, 12) and that its purpose is to "alter (to burn, to blast, to shell, to cut) human tissue" and to "alter the surface, shape, and deep entirety of the objects that human beings recognize as extensions of themselves" (Scarry cited in Sylvester 2013, 66). Scarry's notion of "war as injury" is foundational in other feminist, critical and other literatures concerned with experience, embodiment and war.[41] Her ideas are sometime paired with Sylvester's "politics of injury". For example, Narozhna, in developing a phenomenological framework for understanding lived experience in war, draws on both Scarry and Sylvester to articulate what she calls the "violent politics of injury" (Narozhna 2022, 224). The body in war is theorised only in connection to force and brutality:

> ... the everyday of fighting marked by iterative air-strikes, drone attacks, patrols, and adrenalin-rushing combat; the everyday of civilian life in the war zones with recurrent lootings, detentions, kidnappings, tortures, and sexual violence, often committed in front of the family and community members (Narozhna 2022, 226).

Parashar also theorises war by drawing on Sylvester's "politics of injury", and Scarry's notion of war and injury.

[40] Some of this research Sylvester cites includes MacKenzie 2012, Baaz and Stern 2009, Zarkov 2007 and others.

[41] See Heath-Kelly 2013, Narozhna 2022, McSorley 2014, Parashar 2014, Gregory 2015 among many others. Curiously, it should be noted that Scarry's approach to the structure of war is two-pronged—her two premises are that war is injury AND contest (Scarry 1985, 63 to 91) but scholarship seems to solely focus on the injury element.

This approach is echoed in other epistemic communities. Sociologist Kevin McSorley (2014), for example, lays the groundwork for an "embodied sociology of war" by drawing heavily on their ideas. He says there is a need to examine the body in war as it is transformed in numerous ways "from exhilaration to mutilation" and while he touches on a possible pleasure ie. exhilaration, his paper is largely focused on "brutal modes" of war (2014, 107). More broadly, when the experience of war workers is explored, it is typically framed in relation to the violence and its dark impacts. In what follows, I explore how these themes appears across various professions, noting how violence remains central and pleasure is rarely touched on.

Soldiers

Within IR, it is predominantly feminist scholars who study experience. They often focus on women soldiers and tell their stories through interviews and other ethnographic methods (Sylvester 2013, 10). This research has been significant and unique as it has offered important new insights into war, particularly in relation to how women experience it, which is often harmful. Megan MacKenzie's in situ interviews with female soldiers in Sierra Leone, for example, expose violent and variant experiences in war, in particular serious gendered problems with post-conflict reintegration programs (MacKenzie 2011, 76). Parashar examines the lives of women fighters in Sri Lanka and Kashmir, and how the "narratives are fundamentally gendered" (Parashar 2014, 6). The women soldiers from both guerilla groups recount daily horrors, trauma and violence inflicted by state forces.

Outside of IR, there is a vast and extensive body of psychiatric, psychological, suicidology and epidemiological scholarship examining combat soldiers from a medical and health perspective best described as problematic. This includes research into PTSD (see Vasterling et al 2010, Grieger et al 2006, for example), "moral injury" from war (Jamieson et al 2021, Brock and Lettini 2012), suicide and depression (LeardMann et al 2013, Moradi et al 2021) and substance use (Obsorne et al 2022). In the main, the academic and public perception of the experience of war is that it leaves combat soldiers with a range of mental health issues. However, military studies show this is not the case. As mentioned previously, it is estimated 15% of U.S. veterans from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars experience PTSD, whereas the rate is about 2% among Vietnam veterans (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs 2025). In Australia, approximately 8.3% of members of the Australian Defence Force would have had PTSD in the last 12 months and soldiers who have not deployed have the same rate as

deployed soldiers (Australian Defence Force nd). While the majority of U.S. and Australian soldiers are not traumatised, this is not a dominant discourse.

War journalists

A large amount of research has been done on the hazardous experiences of war journalists (van der Hoeven and Kester 2022, 264), and it often explores mental health issues and working in dangerous environments. Anthony Feinstein's 2006 study of war correspondents, many of whom had been on the frontline, documents a litany of harrowing and gory experiences. The emotional toll is also evident with Feinstein finding PTSD in around 29 percent of cases and leading to personal problems such as alcoholism and divorce (Feinstein 2006)[42]. Greg McLaughlin's analysis of war journalists also finds risks of psychological trauma, which impacts on their professional and personal lives (McLaughlin 2016, 15), as well as a range of dangers, including "death, injury, kidnap, harassment and imprisonment" (McLaughlin 2016, 9).[43] Other scholars also describe reporting from the frontline as a "dangerous business" (Foerstel 2006:xiii) and that we have entered "a dark era for journalism", with the profession at a "crossroads" due to the dangers (Armoudian 2017, 1-3).

Media reports also mention the risks of the job. *The Atlantic* reporter Dashiell Bennett said reporting from war zones has never been so dangerous, leaving journalists in difficult positions (Bennett 2013) while *GQ's* Ed Ceaser depicts journalists in warzones as being "like lambs among wolves"(Caesar 2014). As dangerous as a frontline is, the desire to consistently go back is framed as a chronic problem akin to drug abuse—for some of the men and women Feinstein spoke to, the intensity is addictive, and they have become "adrenalin junkies" (Feinstein 2006, 47). As journalist Fergal Keane says about war: "It's just so addictive. So addictive" (Cited in Feinstein 2006, 47).

While the experiences of being a war journalist can be pathologised, it is, however counter-balanced with narratives of the broader social benefits of the role and the sense of purpose it brings. For example, Maria Armoudian's study of war reporters finds most have "endured terrifying, gut-

[42] One could also frame it that 71 percent—well over more than half—are not affected.
[43] McLaughlin's study examines various aspects of the lives of war correspondents, giving equal attention to both the risks they face and their motivations. He did not take a "trauma approach" to the lives of war reporters but instead said he wanted to provide a more "objective impression" in comparison to what is found in memoirs, interviews and fictional accounts (McLaughlin 2016, 3).

wrenching, even life-threatening ordeals in their efforts to deliver stories that they believed were important ..."(Armoudian 2016, 138). [44] This sense of purpose is intermittently achieved when their work catalyses change. But too often,"their experiences were peppered with halting disappointments, debilitating traumas, dashed hopes, and downgraded expectations (Armoudian 2016, 13).

Humanitarians

A large body of scholarship critiques aid work at the policy level, contributing to an overall negativity around the field (See Duffield 2001, Polman 2010). Regardless of whether aid is good, bad or something to be cynical and critical of, there is also an extensive body of humanitarian research which shows the job as dangerous, emotionally taxing, stressful, risky and contributing to mental health and drinking problems (see for example de Jong et al 2021, Thorpe 2020, Fast 2014, Cameron et al 2024, Jachens et al 2016). Country-specific studies show that humanitarians in conflict zones face mental health challenges: in Darfur, both international and local aid workers are prone to burnout and stress (Musa and Hamid 2008); in South Sudan, humanitarian workers self-reported "substantial levels of mental ill-health" (Strohmeier 2018). Psychological studies also highlight that relief workers experience "significant trauma", including frightening situations (Connorton et al 2011). Such are the dangers that Silke Roth describes aid work as a form of "edgework" (Roth 2014, 140)—a job involving voluntary risk-taking.

One study of humanitarians on the Thai-Myanmar border finds nearly 20 percent are depressed and 25 percent report PTSD (Lar Paw et al 2025). Why is it not framed that 80 percent of people are not depressed and 75 percent are not reporting PTSD? [45] Another study of ICRC workers offers another example of how humanitarian experience is often problematically framed. It compares a 2003–2004 survey with one conducted among field staff between 2016 and 2018 and concludes that going on mission is associated with worsening health outcomes due to exposure to violence, accidents, and risky behaviours (Guisolan et al 2022). However, if you look at the figures, the majority do not encounter violence (88%) or have accidents or injuries (92%). In terms of risky behaviour, the majority (63%) do not engage in any. For those that do, the behaviours considered risky could be

[44] On the whole, it is notable that war journalists and the media industry are not critiqued in the same way the humanitarian or private security sector is.
[45] This study did not show how these figures correlate with the general population.

described by some as pleasurable—driving fast, getting drunk, smoking cigarettes, and having more than one partner and unprotected sex.

These studies are representative of a wider tendency in both war journalist and humanitarian research to conceptualise war work as a problematic. While it is important to explore these elements, it mirrors a similar trend in IR of sidelining any beneficial experiences or not even raising them. [46]

Diplomats

A similar issue is evident with studies of dipomats. Some of the interviews I conducted were with staff who worked in the foreign service or where attached to foreign government departments. But more broadly, there is little research into the experiences of diplomats and other government employees who work in conflict areas. However, available research and government reports tend to focus on the significant psychological strain and personal risk working in conflict areas. A 2007 hearing in the U.S. Congress heard that increasingly non combatants were being posted to "actual combat zones", and expected to do their jobs under "perilous conditions" (U.S Congress 2007). As a result, employees may develop anxiety and stress related problems from living overseas, including PTSD. A preliminary State Department study of staff in Iraq found while a large percentage had stress-related symptoms, few met the criteria of PTSD. Later testimony from a union representative, however, suggested PTSD rates could be as high as 40 percent (U.S. Congress 2007).

Other studies also have mixed results on just how traumatic war is for diplomats. Jessamy Hibberd and Neil Greenberg's analysis of British diplomats in Iraq and Afghanistan compared their experiences with those stationed in non hardship posts, and found no significant differences between the two groups. Ninety percent of staff in Iraq and Afghanistan group said "adventure" was the top motivating factor for signing up to these posts while for those working in other parts of the world, the primary motivator was career advancement (Hibberd and Greenberg 2011, 356). Interestingly, the Iraq and Afghanistan group reported their posting was significantly more personally rewarding (91.6%) compared to the overseas group (76.2%). Notably, even though these positive experiences were

[46] I will discuss some scholarship which does touch on the benefits of humanitarian work later but as discussed in the methodology section, in some of the research, the context in which people were working is not clear.

reported, there was no exploration or discussion about them. Instead, the study focused on PTSD symptoms, an indication of how scholarly attention tends to remain centered on the negatives.

In some instances, scholars also note that there is no human toll. Mathias Delori questions the dominant trauma narrative after studying 40 French air pilots. During his project, he interviewed a member of the psychiatric department of the French Air Force, who reported that after conducting hundreds of interviews with pilots and navigators, he had not met "one single person suffering from PTSD linked to killing operations" (Delori cited in Clément et al. 2018, 139). Delori's observations suggest that war is not always negative.

To recap, this section examines how studies into the experience of soldiers, journalists, humanitarians and diplomats in conflict areas generally paint a troubling portrait. The singular focus on injury and suffering leaves little room to consider other experiences, such as enjoying work, finding meaning or just having a lot of drunken sex.

Rape and killing

It was notable when I told people about studying pleasure in war, several immediately assumed it referred to rape and killing. Such acts of violence are undeniably part of war and there is a pervasive sense in public discourse that soldiers take pleasure in them. However, it is a blanket statement to say that soldiers find pleasure in raping and killing during war. Research shows that sometimes they do and sometimes they do not, and it is a complex space. While the aim of this thesis is to focus on "good" pleasures, it is worth briefly nothing some of the research around pleasure in killing and raping.

Within IR, scholars Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern (2009) interviewed FDARC soldiers in the Congo about rape in war. Their research reveals that there are different motivations behind the sexual violence they perpetrated. Some soldiers referred to certain rapes as "lust/need," noting that the act involved pleasure from penetration, whereas other rapes were "evil" and about humiliation. Baaz and Stern's analysis suggests that through factors such as a lack of money, hardship, the horror of war, and a need to prove an "(impossible) masculinity," rape had almost been normalised in the Congo in wartime (Baaz and Stern 2009, 495). Further research with survivors of rape in the Congo also finds varying views on whether they believed the assault was sexually motivated. Some said that

it was; others saw it instead as a weapon of war. Some victims said it was both violent and sexual at the same time. As one survivor remarked: “It can be both sexual lust and to destroy—they go together” (Dolan, Baaz and Stern 2020, 1159).

I could not find specific research into the experience of pleasure in killing in war within the IR literature, nor explicit studies into the experience of killing in itself. The historian Bourke (2000) has documented swathes of pleasures in letters written by soldiers, expressing delight, joy and pleasure in watching enemies die in all sorts of ways. However, more broadly, a close analysis of the “actual act of killing is underrepresented” in scholarship (Tomforde 2025, 127), and it is also hard to know what percentage of soldiers genuinely enjoy it. One often-cited study from World War II suggested that only around 2 percent of combat soldiers were predisposed to be “aggressive psychopaths” (Swank and Marchand cited in Grossman and Christensen 2008). While this claim is debated, other research supports the broader idea that only a minority are willing to kill: for instance, just 1 percent of World War II fighter pilots accounted for 40 percent of air-to-air kills, and ground troops generally showed low firing rates (Grossman and Christensen 2008).

Anthropological research into soldiers’ response to killing also suggests a range of conflicting emotions. A study of Israeli snipers killing Palestinians between 2000 and 2003 found they experienced it “as pleasurable and as disturbing” and were motivated by the belief they were preventing a terror attack or suicide bomb (Bar and Ben-Ari 2005, 150). Bar and Ben-Ari noted that while scholars often assume that enjoying killing is “abnormal and that trauma is the reasonable reaction,” a more open approach is needed when integrating pleasure into analysis, as it is a different type of pleasure—enjoying killing is not the same as pleasure in battle or the “desire for action that many soldiers feel upon embarking on war” (Bar and Ben-Ari 2005, 140). The scholars argue that the violence is “woven into the very fabric of normal everyday life,” and it is not “inherently pathological or traumatic.” As they put it:

> … there are soldiers who may not feel anything during an act of killing but may feel intensely guilty afterwards; and it is possible to kill easily out of deep personal conviction, to enjoy it and to feel guilty at the very same time. All these facts shed light on one of the most hidden arenas of modern war, but which is in fact a common one among soldiers (Bar and Ben-Ari 2005, 151).

Maren Tomforde's study of German soldiers in the more recent Afghan war also finds soldiers experience and process killing "in highly contradictory ways". The range of emotional reactions spread, "from the lust for combat, elation, sexual desire, and triumph on the one hand, and feelings of guilt, compassion, and remorse on the other hand". After a fight, soldiers are "happy to have survived and maybe even to have killed the enemy". However, in most cases, "unsettling" thoughts and questions about what it meant—as well as guilt—arise after time has passed. As one soldier tells her, they begin to see "an ominous component of hopelessness" in the killing (Tomforde 2025, 127).

Theodore Nadelson was a clinical professor of psychiatry and chief of psychiatric service at Boston Veterans Administration Medical Centre in the U.S. In his 20 years of treating Vietnam veterans, he found that "natural-born killers" were rare (Nadelson 2005, 58) and his study goes into detail about how "killer" soldiers were more problematic to their unit than the enemy. Nadelson, however, says that for most ordinary men, "it is possible that the intense excitement generated by carnage will dazzle them ... they can get pulled into it during combat and find it exciting" (Nadelson 2005, 58).

From the available evidence, it appears that the vast majority of soldiers are not "psychotic" and there is little evidence that the enjoyment of raping and killing is widespread. Instead, any pleasure experienced from these acts tends to occur alongside a broader mix of emotions, which range from the banal to fear and guilt.

Marginal pleasure

While there is a focus on distress and the darkness of war, in this section I will discuss how scholarship does at times recognise pleasure as part of a spectrum of war experience. Others touch on pleasure as part of the spectrum but do not delve deeper into that observation. Parashar notes, for example, that: "War is ugly, brutal, gory and exhilarating for participants, observers and analysts alike in every period of history" (Parashar 2014,1) but her work largely focuses on the difficult experiences of women in war, rather than the exhilaration that might also experience. In a meditative essay on the human in war, Tarja Väyrynen and Eeva Puumala interview Puumala's grandmother Ester about her memories of the war in Finland which are sad and, at turns, joyous and playful (Väyrynen and Puumala 2015), recalling the observation by Dyvik that war covers an "assemblage of pleasure and pain" (Dyvik 2016, 142). Sylvester recognises people enjoy it albeit with a touch of disapproval by pointing out that, "some people embrace war, get addicted to it, celebrate it, and keep lining up for it

by displaying horrendous weapons at arms fairs or by becoming iteratively mercenary" (Sylvester 2011, 2).

Scholars from other disciplines explore the diversity of experience of war and look beyond adversity. MacLeish's ethnography of life on a US military base finds soldiers reporting accounts of war which are "exhilarating, terrifying, ludicrous, inscrutable, satisfying, tragic, righteous, meaningless, surreal, or even humorous" (MacLeish 2013,11). MacLeish shows that the public narrative around how war is experienced—as a place leading to moral injury and PTSD for soldiers—does not paint the whole picture, and instead describes the soldiers as "vulnerable" (MacLeish 2013, 16). Anthropologist Nordstrom, as mentioned earlier, also gives weight to people's capacity to rebuild their lives amid conflict, to undertake "a remarkable process of revitalisation ..." (Nordstrom 1997, xviii).

The ethnomusicologist J Martin Daughtry examines the Iraq conflict to understand how people hear war. Daughtry invents the term "belliphonic"—a fusion of the Latin word for war "bellum" and the Greek term for voice "phone"—to describe the cacophony of weapons, vehicles, generators, sirens, music listened to by soldiers, and bombs exploding, "the imagined total of sounds that would not have occurred had the conflict not taken place" (Daughtry 2015,6). His work reveals an extraordinary range of reactions to sound, including "fear …. frustration, defiance, exhaustion, anger, protest, acceptance, and many other intelligible states and logical reactions within the civilian populace" (Daughtry 2015,154). Sound itself is also used as a tool of violence to injure the bodies of hostile civilians.[47] But Daughty also finds a range of surprising pleasures associated with the belliphonic. When hearing a nearby explosion, Iraqi civilians—usually young men—experience exhilaration and a rush (Daughtry 2015, 154) while US servicemen report feeling a "euphoric thrill" from the sound of their weapons-in-use (Daughtry 2015, 182). [48]

[47] The Long Range Acoustic Device (LRAD), for example, can cause permanent damage, and can confuse targets, as well as produce aches and "shitting"—for this reason it is known as "the poo sound" (Daughtry 2015,240).
[48] As I will show later, spectacle is a common pleasure in war for soldiers.

A galaxy of experiences

The memoirs and poetry I analyse cover a range of experiences, emotions and encounters. The works are filled with the horrible aspects of war but they are not often the central theme; it is notable how different their war stories are from what is found in scholarship.

War journalist Loyd spends months living with a family near the frontline in Sarajevo, a time of many mixed feelings:

> Sometimes we were afraid, sometimes depressed. We laughed a lot, and were often bored. We drank enormous amounts of coffee and smoked thousands of bitter-tasting Drina cigarettes (Loyd 1999, 35).

At times, he says it is hard to describe one's feelings as "emotions are so contorted in war" but that "... you do not know how you feel in situations, there is no single word to describe the swirling kaleidoscope…" (Loyd 1999, 96). Although Loyd intermittently suffers psychologically—feeling upset, horrified, and shocked by the violence and brutality he witnesses—he does not linger on these emotions and at no point mentions suffering from PTSD or being traumatised. Loyd, a long-term heroin user, is clean in the Balkans, but uses the drug in London whenever he is on a break. He describes using heroin to help him cope with the contrast between war and peace not as a result of the horrors of what he has seen: "In getting wasted in London I could simply transcend the whole contradiction, and with it all the questions it might have posed" (Loyd 1999, 275).

In terms of his fellow reporters, he describes them as "a clan of damaged children; a concentration of black sheep .... Some carried the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder like an inconsequntial sidebar to a deeper malaise" (Loyd 1999, 82). He mentions instances of depression but it is not the dominant feature of his war story. In fact, his depression appears to be connected to yearning to be in war:

> I reran the reels of the past four years through my mind feeling depressed, constantly seeking out friends to post-mortem the whole thing again and again in the hope of recapturing even a tiny part of its heady glowing rush, of putting it into some kind of context (Loyd 1999, 4).

The pleasures that he misses—adventure, the thrill of battle, the friendships, the intensity—will be documented in later chapters.

The collection of Taliban poetry edited by Alex Strick Van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn (2012) is a kaleidoscope of the many experiences of war. While the poets constantly invoke the toll of violence, humilitation and suffering, their works are also laced with nostalgia, outrage, resistance, honour, pride, romance and even wine; there is so much more to their experience beyond fighting and despair.

Take “Pamir” by Faizani, where the striking beauty of the mountains, and a deep love of home and resilience, is woven together with the ravages of war:

> I know the black, black mountains;
>
> I know the desert and its problems.
>
> My home is the mountain, my village is the mountain and I
>
> live in the mountains;
>
> I know the black ditches.
>
> I always carry a rocket-launcher on my shoulder;
>
> I know the hot trenches.
>
> I always ambush the enemy;
>
> I know war, conflict and disputes.
>
> I will tell the truth even if I am hung on the gallows; I know the gallows and hanging.
>
> I don't care about being hot or cold; I know all kinds of trouble.
>
> I am the eagle of Spin Ghar's high peaks;
>
> I know Pamir's canyons.

I walk through it day and night;

I know the bends of Tor Ghar.

Bangles are joyful on the girls' hands;

I know swords.

Those who make sacrifices for religion;

Faizani, I am familiar with such young men.

(Faizani 2012)

In the joint aid memoir *Emergency Sex* by Cain, Postlewait and Thomson (2004), the group documents a range of stressors in the job: fear of being killed, sleeplessness, and many moral and ethical quandries. There are many instances of intensity but the trio do not write about being left deeply traumatised by these experiences. Instead, the stress and feeling of being overwhelmed is momentary and does not appear to last for long periods. Cain, for example, is evacuated from Somalia to Nairobi and spends time in a hotel room while he waits for a connecting flight. “I'm not depressed exactly. I just don't want to move or speak—just stare. I'm content watching the ceiling fan. I'd prefer not to leave this room,” he writes (Cain, Postlewait and Thomson 2004, 200). Later, Postlewait is worried about Thomson in Rwanda after he comes across a field of corpses with their feet cut off. “It was nothing that a bottle of vodka and a caress couldn't contain, but I don't think there's anyone in Rwanda to do that for him” (Cain, Postlewait and Thomson 2004, 214). Thomson, overwhelmed as he digs up mass graves from the genocide in and around a church in Rwanda, momentarily ponders throwing himself off the bell tower. But he recovers:

> Once I get back down, my faith all cut up and my knees turned to jelly, it doesn't seem so bad after all. My feet back on solid earth, more oxygen down here maybe. Fewer hallucinations, farther from God. I glove up and plunge back into the grave ... (Cain, Postlewait and Thomson 2004, 244).

At times, it seems as if their depression is borne from *not* working in a conflict zone and being back in the “real world”. Heidi visits Andrew who has left “the field” and is working as a doctor at UN

headquarters in New York. She notes how miserable he appears: “He looks so pale and thin ... It’s obvious New York is killing him” (Cain, Postlewait and Thomson 2014, 213). Heidi’s biggest trigger for depression is not war either; it is when living in Haiti, her fiancée is accidentally electrocuted and dies.

Surgeon Nott documents many, many intense and absolutely terrifying experiences; his book is an important record of the appalling horrors of war and its impacts across the board. His time in Aleppo, Syria where he conducts countless surgeries on civilians under constant bombardment and lives with the real fear of being kidnapped by ISIS is harrowing. In Gaza, in one shocking situation, he and a fellow surgeon are about to start operating on a dying little girl, injured from a blast, when they are ordered to evacuate for fear of an airstrike. He stays but reflects on his pending death: “Maybe this was the moment it ended” (Nott 2019, 200).

Back in England, he suffers a series of breakdowns and recognises he is “not in a good place” (Nott 2019, 232). Seated next to Queen Elizabeth II at a lunch, he is “perilously close to a panic attack” (Nott 2019, 233) and barely able to hold himself together. With help, “I began to deal with my problems” (Nott 2019, 235). But from here, he does not face a life of trauma. Instead, he writes about getting married, starting a charity, campaigning to lift the siege in Aleppo, having two children and continuing to work in emergency surgery. These life experiences should not be taken to mean that he has no psychological difficulties but they do highlight the diversity and richness of the war experience which are missing from war scholarship. It is no way not all bad.

Conclusion

This chapter aimed to highlight that IR scholarship (and other war studies research) largely frames war as a site of trauma and suffering. In IR, war is often theorised from an ontology of fighting and injury, and as having largely negative affect on war workers, in particular soldiers. Other fields similarly see people who have worked in war as suffering from different forms of psychological distress. Pleasure in the context of “bad” ones such as rape has, however, been taken seriously. Some scholarship describes war experience as spanning a continuum that includes pleasure, though this aspect is rarely explored. In contrast, war memoirs and the poetry inherently take a much broad approach by exploring the highs, lows and in between moments. Psychological distress is discussed but is not the crux of the story; it happens and the memoirists move on.

But while IR focuses on the negatives of war, in the next two chapters, I will consider the many pleasures noncombatants report in war. But first, we need to look at pleasure itself.

Chapter 4

A word on pleasure

Pleasure is the only thing worth having a theory about.

Oscar Wilde

There are four chief pleasures, a saying among Afghan men goes: of the hot bath, of a youth with his friends, of a man with a woman, and of seeing one's son grown to manhood.

cited in Katz 2016

From Oscar Wilde to a quip from Afghanistan, the quotes above illustrate the philosophical and cultural weight of pleasure—it is something universal yet so varied. While I have defined pleasure as something that "feels good" (Smuts 2011), in this chapter, I will delve into pleasure as a conceptual and political phenomena. The spectrum of pleasure is expansive so how can we theorise "feeling good" in such a terrible thing as war? What does pleasure in war tell us? Unfortunately, there is currently no clear answer. As Lisa Bhungalia points out in her study of laughter and humour in Palestine, it is "invariably difficult, if not impossible to reach any kind of definitive speculation" on the topic (Bhungalia 2019, 389). The only clear answer is that in the innumerable ways it has been theorised and politicised, pleasure as a concept teeters between being suspect and life-affirming. Though pleasure is personal, it is often judged. Even outside of war, pleasure is fraught. In war, it is even more so, where it feels instinctively problematic.

This chapter will first will give a brief overview of the ways that pleasure has been defined. As a concept, it has been examined across many fields, but I will focus on explorations in philosophy, history and cultural theory. I will then discuss the politics of pleasure, and how states, and the left and right wing of politics have sought to manage pleasure in their own way. Finally, I will examine the politics of pleasure in war, particularly in the debate around whether individuals have agency in their pleasure or whether it is always shaped and managed by the state and other institutions. There are no

clear answers with pleasure but this chapter shows how pleasure, which is often seen as suspect, intersects with other political, institutional and cultural forces.

Pleasure 101 – a conceptual overview

To better understand how pleasure might operate in war, I begin by surveying how it has been examined. In broad terms, there are two ways that pleasure has been explored since ancient times. First, there are conceptual discussions around what pleasure is. Second, there are the taxonomies of the diverse types of pleasures that humans can experience.

What *is* pleasure? As philosopher Smuts put it: "… if pleasures can be as different as circles and squares, why do we call them all by the same name?" (Smuts 2011, 242). Nussbaum also raises many questions about pleasure, asking whether it is a "single thing, varying only in intensity or duration", or "Is it plural, containing qualitative differences?" She further asks if it is a sensation or "something more like a way of attending to the world, or even a way of being active?" (Nussbaum 2012, 336). Aristotle conceived pleasure as "unimpeded activity" and something that comes from activity "like the bloom on the cheek of youth" (Cited in Nussbaum 2012, 338).

Defining pleasure

As noted previously, I have settled on Smuts' definition of "feel good" pleasure, because it offers a straightforward, intuitive framework for thinking about what pleasure is and what it does. Smuts argues that:

> Pleasurable experiences are not pleasurable simply because we prefer them, desire their continuance or think them desirable; rather, we prefer them, desire their continuance, and think that they are desirable because they feel good. What's common about all these experiences? They feel good … The experience overall has this quality, this tone or hue. It cannot be cleanly extracted from the experience itself (Smuts 2011, 254).

Many of the respondents and memoirists used "enjoyment" and "happiness" to describe their positive experiences of war. It is for this reason, I use "pleasure" as an umbrella term to describe the variety of positive experiences people report to have in war. As Leonard Katz says of pleasure more broadly:

> Pleasure, in the inclusive usages important in thought about well-being, experience, and mind, includes the affective positivity of all joy, gladness, liking, and enjoyment—all our feeling good or happy (Katz 2016).

There is also a large canon of pleasure literature inspired by psychoanalysis, which explores it via Sigmund Freud's pleasure principle or Jacques Lacan's notion of *jouissance.*[49] Tracts have also been written on the differences between pleasure, enjoyment, *jouissance* and happiness. I raise these other terms because "pleasure" is not the only way to articulate that something "feels good". As mentioned, with such vast thinking on this concept—and no settled definition— my goal is not to come up with a prescriptive way of describing pleasure in the context of IR, but rather to use a definition that is relatable and, at least conceptually, easy to understand with respect to war.

Different ways we feel pleasure

The second debate about pleasure is related to taxonomies—the different kind of pleasures people experience—and scholars and historians have divided pleasure up in all manner of ways for thousands of years, which I will now touch on.

For example, *The Choice of Hercules* by Prodicus is an ancient fable which articulates a number of different sources of pleasure but divides them into two types: sensation-style pleasures versus civic pleasure (Xenophon). Interestingly, it is connected to pleasure in war. In the story, a mythological hero Heracles, son of Zeus, is approached by two different women, each offering two vastly different paths in life. The woman known as "Happiness" or "Vice," as she says her enemies call her, attempts to lure him with life of ease, pleasure and free from trouble. She tells him:

> Make me your friend; follow me, and I will lead you along the pleasantest and easiest road. You shall taste all the sweets of life; and hardship you shall never know... First, of wars and

[49] Ariane Bazan and Sandrine Detandt says jouissance describes "a human tendency to seek, beyond the mere pursuit of pleasure, for that which brings the subject into danger or for that which sabotages his life". It explains "why people are addicted to harmful, or even lethal, substances – e.g., why people cannot stop smoking even after being diagnosed with lung cancer" (Bazan and Detandt 2013, 1).

> worries you shall not think, but shall ever be considering what choice food or drink you can find, what sight or sound will delight you, what touch or perfume ...

"Virtue" tells Heracles that she knows his parents and that he is known for having a good character. She suggests a life of duty, hard work and immortal fame. "For of all things good and fair, the gods give nothing to man without toil and effort," and, reeling off a list of actions he must take, includes some that relate to war:

> ...if you essay to grow great through war and want power to liberate your friends and subdue your foes, you must learn the arts of war from those who know them and must practise their right use.

In the end, Heracles decides to take the high, virtuous road (Xenophon). The fable serves as a reminder of the different ways we can experience pleasure and the paths to feeling it.

In the medieval context, the taxonomy is also varied: pleasure can be bodily, an intellectual or spiritual experience (Cohen-Hanegbi and Nagy 2018, xiv - xvi). The 18th century philosopher Jeremy Bentham is more detailed, sketching out 23 simple pleasures "…which human nature is susceptible to" (Bentham 1781), as well as 12 pains.[50] The contemporary philosopher Thomas Hurka describes four pleasures:

1. A simple physical pleasure that goes with eating chocolate or sunbathing.

2. An overall good mood.

3. The pleasure "that" something happened, like a child taking its first step or that Liverpool scored a goal.

4. The pleasure "that" something happened but bigger picture—"that" one's life is going a certain way (Hurka 2009).

[50] The pleasure include nine related to senses—taste, intoxication, smell, touch, hearing, seeing, sexual, health, novelty. The other 14 are the pleasures of wealth, skill, amity, having a good name, power, piety, benevolence, malevolence, memory, imagination, expectation, associations between pleasures and relief.

Thus, in this small snapshot, pleasure can be conceived as two, four, 14 or 23 different types. I show this small pool over time to point out the complexity of pleasure itself and the many ways it can be defined and articulated, which is relevant when examining it in the context of war.

In the next section, I will look at how pleasurable experiences intersect with the state and politics.

How to frame pleasure politically

Barkawi and Brighton (2011) argue that speaking about war is always political. I suggest the same holds true for pleasure, because it raises the question: can pleasure ever be apolitical, or is there always something else at work? Is it something that people simply experience or is it actually regulated, enabled, and disciplined by the state or other structures of power? These questions point towards a central challenge in analysing pleasure— should it be approached through individual experience, or through structural or state-level frameworks—or both? As the definitions and multiple taxonomies of pleasure show, there are endless ways that people individually experience pleasure. Each to their own, in a sense. But this raises a difficult question—how is one to judge some else's pleasure? As Frederic Jameson asks:

> ....if what people today imagine to be pleasure is nothing but a commodity fix, how to deal with that addiction? Who is to break the news to them that their conscious experience of leisure products–their conscious 'pleasure' in consumption—is in reality nothing but false consciousness? Indeed, even further, who has the *authority*—and in the name of what?—to make such an assessment? (Jameson 1983, 3)

Khalili, in her exploration of the politics of pleasure as experienced by young Palestinian refugee women promenading along the Beirut seaside, also reflects on the complexity of interpreting pleasure. She asks if they can be understood:

> …as everyday practices, as a politics of the present moment, or conversely (or simultaneously) as mechanisms of being co-opted into a broader apparatus of consumerist ideology and capitalist complacency? (Khalili 2015, 583).

Both Jameson and Khalili caution against simplistic moral or ideological readings of pleasure, and their questions matter because in scholarship, pleasure is not always thought of as simply a "feeling".

Pleasure has long been embedded in political thought and state practice. When Thomas Jefferson wrote the American Declaration of Independence in 1776, he mentioned happiness as a founding political right:

> ... all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness (Jefferson 1776).

Jeremy Bentham, writing not long after in 1789, pushes for the principle of utility, arguing that the object of all legislation must be happiness. Years later, he amends it to the "greatest happiness principle". In Bentham's view, government's role was to maximise happiness or pleasure and if an action produced unhappiness or pain, it was wrong (Bentham 1789). Colin Mercer, inspired by Michel Foucault's work on the regulation of sexuality, sees Bentham's approach to pleasure as "the first stage in the introduction of individual pleasures into the field of documentation and social regulation" (Mercer 1983, 91). In other words, pleasure became something the state could observe, manage and control.

The state has long been heavy handed and socially managed pleasure, particularly when it comes to sex, drinking, gambling and leisurely pursuits. Some pleasures are considered legitimate and acceptable, while others are not. Some are moral, some are immoral. As Foucault argues, power and pleasure are not oppositional but mutually reinforcing each other in a "perpetual spiral", as they "seek out, overlap and reinforce one another" (cited in Lawlor and Nale 2014).

Chas Critcher draws historical parallels between the gin craze of early 18th-century Britain and modern concerns about binge drinking, arguing they both reflect similar moral panics about people enjoying themselves. The freedom to pursue pleasure "become problematic when they create disorder on the streets and costs to the state" that lead to restrictions that "denies the essence of the activity" (Critcher 2011, 42). Mercer also notes how in 18th- and 19th century Britain, working class recreations such as annual fairs and blood sports came under state scrutiny for moral and economic reasons (Mercer 1983, 88). Drawing on Foucault, he suggests that like sex, when it comes to pleasures and recreations, there is an interest in "defining, regulating and locating them in their appropriate sites" (Mercer 1983, 89).

Pat O'Malley and Mariana Valverde argue that pleasure becomes a problem for the state when it conflicts with the expected image of liberal subjects, who are supposed to be rational, reasonable and independent (O'Malley and Valverde 2004, 27). Pleasure, they argue, is also a tool for governance. It is acceptable when aligned with reason and respectability—"for moderate middle-class wine lovers, the cocktail set and the quiet toper in the rural pub" (O'Malley and Valverde 2004, 26). But when associated with problem behaviours such as addiction or working-class drinking, pleasure is either denied or pathologised, and used to legitimise various forms of control such as medical treatment or policing. They note that government discussions around drug and alcohol use are largely silent on pleasure as a motive. Instead, they tend to frame such behaviours as "characterised by compulsion, pain and pathology" (O'Malley and Valverde 2004, 26). This notion has clear parallels with war—pleasure is rarely recognised as a motivator and when it is, it is seen as problematic.

The state can also use pleasure for darker purposes. Swett et al (2011, 1) argue that Nazi Germany used pleasure as both a means and an end: it used material comforts, plays and carnivals, and a sense of belonging, among many tools, to keep civilians on their side. They argue that the Nazis knew how to channel emotions to mobilise people, "largely through the accumulation of small pleasures and satisfactions that created a diffuse sense of well-being and group cohesion" (Swett et al 2011, 7). This aspect could be relevant when it comes to pleasure in war—do international organisations, governments and the military similarily create environments of "small pleasures" to maintain war workers morale, motivation or ideological alignment? Rather than being a simple reprieve from violence, these small pleasures may function as subtle tools of governance and emotional management. In this sense, pleasure does not stand in opposition to war—it may be one of the ways war is made palatable and even desirable.

This section has shown how the state can regulate, manage and discipline pleasure, and some theorists propose how this intersects with people's lives on an individual level. What one enjoys, how one enjoys it, and whether it is celebrated or criminalised can be connected to power in some way.

Having explored how states and institutions can regulate pleasures, I now turn to how pleasure can function within politics more broadly. Rebecca Solnit argues that political movements—particularly on the left—have been prone to taking a puritanical approach to pleasure. She traces this to a deeper discomfort with beauty and enjoyment in certain strains of progressive thought.

She illustrates this discomfort with beauty by recounting the origin of the phrase “bread and roses”, a political term connected to women’s suffrage which dates to 1910. Solnit recounts the story of how it came about, explaining that women’s suffrage campaigner Helen Todd, having spoken in a rally in Southern Illinois, spent the night with a farm family. The next morning, over breakfast, “the hired girl” Maggie told Todd that, “If you want to know what I liked the best of all in the whole meetin’ it was that about the women votin’ so everybody would have bread and flowers too” (Solnit 2021, 90).

Basically, “bread and roses” represented the idea that women should use their political voice to make sure everyone had the basics in life such as bread but also the higher, enriching aspects of “roses”. However, according to Solnit, the “roses” element —beauty and pleasure— has not always sat well with the political left. She argues that the left has “never been short on people arguing that it is callous and immoral to enjoy oneself while others suffer”. This view is puritanical, as it suggests “one has to offer ... austerity or joylessness, rather than some practical contribution toward their liberation”. She adds that underlying all of this is a utilitarian ideology where, “pleasures and beauties are counter revolutionary, bourgeoisie, decadent, indulgent and the desire for them should be weeded out and scorned” (Solnit 2021, 91). Solnit sees the “bread and roses” as an argument for something more,

> ...about that what makes our lives worth living is to some degree incalculable and unpredictable, and varies from person to person. In that sense, roses also mean subjectivity, liberty and self-determination (Solnit 2021, 92).

Solnit’s critique is important for understanding how politics can shape pleasure in different ways. First, it highlights how pleasures are legitimised or shamed, which are relevant in the context of war. For example, soldiers enjoying fighting against an authoritarian regime or an opposing state may be either welcomed by a supporting population or shamed by opponents. Second, Solnit highlights that pleasure, beauty and joy are not only legitimate political goals but also part of life. If war workers are enjoying themselves in their daily lives, is that problematic?

While Solnit observes an aversion to pleasure on the left, philosopher Todd McGowan, whose work looks at psychoanalysis, Marxism and cultural theory, sees this as what politics is about—it is shaped by what people enjoy. People don’t just believe in ideologies, they enjoy them. Using Solnit’s example, he would argue that those on the left are likely to enjoy their puritanical position. But for

McGowan, the left and right compete over enjoyment. [51] Politics and political campaigns promise specific types of enjoyment to attract voters. As he puts it: "Enjoyment actually plays a determinative role in what a society looks like" (McGowan 2022, 4).

While the left enjoys the politics of the universal of equality and solidarity, the right is focused on the particular and depends on some people not just being "left behind but actively ostracised" (McGowan 2022, 9). He uses the example of Donald Trump who, in his 2020 presidential election campaign, gave his supporters permission to:

> ... beat up protestors with impunity, identify with racist police violence, or wear a baseball hat that would offend polite liberal society ... Trump's own transgressions turned him into a source of enjoyment for his followers (McGowan 2022, 4-5).

Solnit and McGowan's scholarship suggest that pleasure and enjoyment are central to how political identities are formed and mobilised. While the state can take a top-down approach with managing drinking for example, politics are also driven by the pleasures they promise—or deny. The pair do not write directly about war and conflict but in translating it, I think their work shows that pleasure can motivate people in war in many ways.

It can help people feel better about destroying the "other". It can give people pleasure in the promise of fighting for the kind of life they believe their community deserves. The notion of "bread and roses" reminds us that even in the harshest circumstances, the pursuit of dignity and pleasure remains a vital and worthy human impulse. Recognising this tension between agency and state control challenges simplistic judgments about pleasure in conflict zones. Engaging with the literature on pleasure—especially its political dimensions—offers fresh insights into war and underscores the notable absence of pleasure in war studies. Pleasure can be fuel for war, it can be manipulated for particular purposes or it can be the end goal.

[51] McGowan makes a firm distinction between enjoyment and pleasure."Enjoyment involves going beyond the givens of the social order in a way that pleasure does not. While it might be pleasant to drive fast, it is enjoyable to block the traffic flow for the sake of protesting a new fuel tax" (McGowan 2011, 3).

Scholars debate as to whether pleasure or variants of it can be framed as an act of resistance in war. Bhungali analysis of laughter and humour in Palestinian occupied territories sees it as refusal to normalise the "conditions of subjugation" (Bhungali 2019, 387), as well as a way for people to reclaim their humanity and a space for themselves (Bhungali 2019, 400). Khalili's exploration of the politics of pleasure is centred around young Palestinian refugee women promenading along the Beirut seaside. Like Bhungali, she says framing it is not straightforward but argues against seeing what they are doing as consumeristic or a betrayal of politics. Instead, their pleasure is a break from a world of work, their marginalisation and the docility expected of them as Palestinian women (Khalili 2015, 595). Khalil also pushes against academics who are "adjudicating" the lives of marginalised people, holding these women to lofty standards and expecting them to be austere in their commitment, while not applying the standards in their own lives (Khalili 2015, 596). What I see these scholars sharing is the importance of recognising agency in everyday joy, without reducing it to resistance or complicity. Could it also be that the pleasures people experience in war are an escape from the day to day of ordinary life? Perhaps pleasure is defiance.

The politics of pleasure in war

In this section, I propose possible ways to think about individual pleasure in the context of war. Are wartime pleasures spontaneous and personal, or are they shaped—and even exploited—by state and military structures? As Jameson and Khalili point out, it is not straightforward to evaluate the legitimacy of pleasure. This is particularly true in war: is it understandable, condemnable, or politically useful? What is clear is that while pleasure can be politically regulated, it also resists political categorisation.

In the memoirs, poetry, scholarship, and amongst those who responded to my survey and did interviews, war workers appear to have a sense of agency in the pleasures—it was their decision to take part in particular conflicts.[52] They were also there for many different reasons: to make a difference, to test themselves, to make money, to find friendship or fight for a higher purpose.

[52] It should be noted that in the soldier's memoirs, none of them were conscripted or forced to fight.

Yet while war workers may appear to be free agents experiencing pleasure, the state is also managing the pleasurable aspects of war. At the extreme end, soldiers are managed to the point that they are expected to enjoy war. For example, since the September 11 terrorist attack in 2001, the U.S. military has shifted towards a more positive psychology approach to how soldiers prepare for war, influenced by psychologist Martin Seligman (Lang 2022, 43). Seligman advised that the military had put too much energy into treating PTSD and trauma, and suggested they focus more on prevention through a resilience and growth model (Lang 2022, 44). By doing so, soldiers would bounce back from adversity and it would "increase the number of our soldiers who grow psychologically from the crucible of combat" (Seligman cited in Lang 2022, 44).

Other initiatives, such as the U.S. Army's Comprehensive Soldier Fitness (CSF) program or CSF2, helped soldiers, workers and their families cultivate "habits of mind that will assist them in coping with and succeeding amidst the stresses of war" (MacLeish 2019, 289). According to MacLeish, instead of framing war as "a traumatising, injuring or disordering force, war appears an opportunity for thriving and self-realisation" (MacLeish 2019, 294).

Soldier pleasure has also historically been managed through R&R breaks from the theatre of war. As Debbie Lisle shows, soldiers in France during World War I took trips to London and Paris. Official R&R rotations "were embedded even further within military logistics during the Second World War" (Lisle 2016, 97). Soldiers were rotated out of the frontline in Europe and the Pacific and sent to nearby sites for leave. During the Vietnam War, they were entitled to a period of R&R designed to "boost morale by giving soldiers a break from the war zone" (Department of Veterans' Affairs 2025).

Personal reflection

On a personal note, it is difficult to assess the pleasures I experienced working in Afghanistan. Drawing partly on Khalili (2015), I wonder if my pleasures were an "everyday" thing or if I was simultaneously being co-opted into a broader apparatus of war? While I was stressed a lot of the time, I also had a strong sense of purpose, made many new Afghan and international friends, loved the adventure, made a good wage and learned a great deal professionally. I worked on food aid projects that had direct benefits for the community, particularly women, and intermittently raised money for other smaller projects outside of work. I also enjoyed the intensity and the overall sense of being in a place with "edge". But were these pleasures wrong or immoral because they were in a war

context? While many of the Afghans I worked with throughout the country were opposed to the Taliban regime and welcomed the international community, for other Afghan groups, I was part of a military occupation during wartime. As Hafiz Ikramuddin wrote in the poem *Kabul is set on fire*, "A hot bazaar of cruelty is being made out of beautiful Kabul … Nobody can tell the foreigners to stop what they're doing, A few hired slaves are ruling the country …Everyone is invited to the trench" (Ikramuddin 2012). Were international institutions taking advantage of my pleasures and managing them so I would stay? Was I being co-opted into the "war on terror"? By working in war, was I fuelling it or selfishly "feeling alive" and living out my own dreams?

The ways I could experience pleasure in my daily life were explicitly shaped and managed by the UN's numerous security rules and regulations. A security briefing landed in my inbox every day, providing an update of the various bombs, threats, thefts, and murders that had taken place across the country. As there were so many threats, there were a lot of security rules: the types of homes I could live in, the offices I could work in or visit, and the restaurants I could go to all had to be compliant with Minimal Operational Security Standards (MOSS).

Certain restaurants and bars were "cleared" and approved. Visiting public places was limited and only "point shopping" was allowed, which was defined as going directly from the car to the shop. Walking in the street was not permitted. If 20 or more international UN staff wanted to attend a social gathering, it needed to be cleared by security. Loud music and rowdy behaviour were discouraged as they were considered culturally insensitive.

Despite these constraints (or because of them?), I still found many pleasures—socialising, enjoying my job and meeting new people. Every six weeks, I was given a week of R & R to leave Afghanistan and relished the opportunity to explore the region, as well as travel to Europe. The international effort created space for sanctioned pleasures—such as going to restaurants, hosting parties, or browsing the bazaars. Without opportunities for pleasurable experiences, it is unlikely that international organisations could have attracted international staff to work in Afghanistan and sustain their operations.

The regulations surrounding pleasure could be interpreted in several ways: necessary measures to protect staff from kidnappings; irrelevant, since workers had power over their own pleasure (whether reading in bed, talking to family over Skype, watching pornography, BBQing, or pottering around their

compound); or a form of power designed to sustain the work force necessary to conduct a war. In reflecting on my own experience, I see how deeply embedded my pleasures were within the politics of war, yet I also resist reducing them to mere manipulation by institutions. It doesn't have to be one or the other—perhaps it was somewhere in between.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the nuances, taxonomies and politics of pleasure to present the many ways that pleasure can be deployed or personally experienced. In relation to war, what does pleasure do? Is it normal or abnormal? Is it inspiring? In terms of my own agency and the pleasures driving me, while I didn't kill anyone, I must wonder how complicit I was. If everybody refused to work in war, would it go away?

For example, studies have shown that for soldiers, better friendships reduces the likelihood of experiencing PTSD (Nevarez et al 2017). And if soldiers have the pleasure of great friends and do not have PTSD, are they likely to return for another tour of duty? Similarly, if camaraderie and the bonds of military service contributed to the "success" of war fighting units (Hamwey et al 2021), to what extent do these pleasures sustain, or perhaps even generate, war? Dyvik sees the potential for this. In her studies of Norwegian military memoirs, she observes that war is a space where people experience "complex gendered assemblages of pleasure, pain, enjoyment, and suffering," and that these experiences contribute to "war's continued seduction and continuation for those who continue to practice it" (Dyvik 2016, 144).

Chapter 5

Noncombatant pleasures

Your negative is maybe extremely negative, but your positive is amazing. [53]

Respondent 6, a female European NGO worker

I was living in London, working at the international news agency Reuters. It was a busy, frantic newsroom but I needed a shift, a glitch to happen in my life. I did not want a predictable pattern. I did not want to spend day in, day out, in front of a computer in an office. I wanted to know something else. I was bored of media too—the very narrow versions of reality and the constant focus on drama. I had long yearned to be a war correspondent but I was not quite sure how to get there with the backing of a major news agency. I would have to likely work at Reuters for ten years before that happened. I had briefly freelanced in Cairo, Egypt but it felt a bit scary at times, particularly after vaguely threatening encounters with government officials.

I had heard the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) hired journalists to be their press people in various duty stations around the world. I went to Rome for a holiday and visited the WFP headquarters, where I met the Deputy Director of the communications department. At the time, she said they didn't need someone with my skills. But then, months later, I got a call asking if I would like to go to Afghanistan. I said yes.

Just five weeks later, I was in Kabul, as a Public Affairs Officer, beginning what came to be the most intense and interesting job of my life. A few years after I left, I was having a coffee with an old hand from the UN and lamented how much I missed it. He remarked that having these sorts of jobs in the field corrupted one's life. "You'll never find a job like it again," he said.

[53] Respondent interview on February 3, 2020.

Individual pleasures of war

What are the ways war workers feel pleasure living in conflict areas? This is not apparent within IR and many other disciplines that research war. In this chapter, I look at some of the individual pleasures that noncombatant war workers report experiencing in war in interviews, memoirs and some scholarship.

For the respondents who lived and worked in Afghanistan, the conflict setting was often seen as a great job. Professionally, they found purpose and a sense of accomplishment in engaging work, gaining new skills and career growth. Some received personal recognition and financial rewards. Personally, they formed deep friendships and came to know about Afghanistan, its people and its culture. They travelled. They also experienced "symbolic rewards" —the honour and prestige that goes with working in war (Levy 2007). The respondents also reported pleasure as being something that was part of life and not necessarily about "war". That said, for some, the edge of living in Afghanistan meant the pleasure was in some ways linked to the war as well.

The Qualtrics survey that I conducted with 119 participants included a "word cloud" of the common words that they used to describe their time. They words were: Afghanistan, people, work, professional, meeting, colleague, country, friends, job, culture, good, life, travel, and amazing. They are a reminder of the elements of pleasure, many of which spill into each other and are intertwined. They ultimate create a picture of an overwhelming, unforgettable life experience.

Alongside these pleasures, the war workers all spoke of difficult times in Afghanistan. They were also plagued by moral ambiguities about what they were doing, including benefiting from a troubled situation, and broader issues related to their work in general. Yet, significantly, many of these pleasures were echoed in memoirs and scholarship— the professional and personal rewards were similar but unique to each unique war.

It is important to reiterate that people reported significant ambiguity about whether they were definitively "in" war? Their responses varied: some denied outright that they were, while others struggled to define the situation, and a few distinctly said they were indeed in "in" war.[54] This

[54] The 32 respondents were based throughout Afghanistan at various times between 1996 and 2019. They lived in many different cities and contexts—some houses and offices had barbed wire and

confusion about describing the situation in Afghanistan reveals broader issues around the ontology of war and research into how people experience war.

The chapter continues as follows. First, I will discuss the various pleasures as identified in my interviews and memoirs, dividing them into pleasures on "the frontline" and "away from the frontline". I present it this way because war is often conceived solely in terms of combat, but noncombatant war workers are also on the front lines—whether they are reporting it or performing other roles—and they enjoy it.

War also happens away from the "frontline" —and, indeed, not all wars have clear frontlines – and these "away" pleasures will also be divided into professional and personal experiences. Each "pleasure" theme has its own section and is presented with interview results first, then memoir, and insights from scholarship.

The frontline

Being in or near battle brings pleasure for some non-combatant war workers. For those who had experienced the front, there was a particular excitement in being amid flying bullets and exploding shells, or in situations where they were shot at.

Respondent 28, a male European journalist,[55] often embedded with troops in Afghanistan and described being in the middle of fighting as "great". He recalled travelling in a vehicle carrying soldiers, fuel and ammunition: "We were sitting in an open top bomb driving at people who were shooting at us. It was quite exciting," he laughed. He said that when the fighting started, he was not scared because, "It was just adrenalin". Respondent 5, a female European journalist and film maker, [56]

armed guards, others not. Many respondents heard or felt explosions, three had friends and colleagues killed and two experienced direct suicide attacks on their offices. However, there was no clear answer as to if they were in "war". Nine said "no" they weren't in war while nine found it hard to define where they were, remarking it was "a third kind of war" (Respondent 7) or a "different kind of war" (Respondent 1). Five said they were "not really", "likely not" or "sometimes" at war. Three respondents said they were in a war zone as there were suicide bombs, targeted killings and poverty while another three preferred to call the situation as either "war affected" or as a "conflict zone". Respondent 16 said they were "pretty much" in war as "things went boom". For three of the respondents, it was hard for me to define what they thought.

[55] Respondent interview on May 8, 2020.

[56] Respondent interview on December 20, 2019.

spent time in combat zones where, on separate occasions, she was embedded with either American troops or the Taliban. She enjoyed being shot at from both sides, and said that through the experience she came to understand war through the position of not shooting a gun: “When you are standing there, and people are fighting around you and shooting at you—you are always with one side,” she said, adding that she felt “pride” that she had this experience. “I was not shooting myself but I was thinking, ‘This is war’”. Her relationship to battle was push and pull. “It was okay at first and it was crazy and adventurous, and I liked it. And after some time, it became more difficult and I was too scared”. Despite her fears, she went back again for more.

Her desire to return to battle is not unusual—in memoir and scholarship, war journalists report being drawn to it, and describe the allure of combat, often using the language of drug use. As war journalist Chris Hedges put it, “The rush of battle is a potent and often lethal addiction, for war is a drug ...” (Hedges 2003, 3). When US war photographer Lynsey Addario is in the Libyan conflict, the car she is in pulls off to the side of the road and her colleague Tyler leaps out of the car to take photographs. She observes that he is buoyed by a “rush of adrenalin I knew well—that feeling of satisfaction when doing reporting that few others would dare do” (Addario 2015, 11). The BBC’s Jeremy Bowen says of his time in a fight with bullets in El Salvador that once it is over, “it was fantastically exciting. That was the first big burst of the war drug, pulling me towards addiction” (cited in McLaughlin 2016, 19). Journalist Fergal Keane recalls that ‘‘what I got out of war was a buzz. You don’t ever feel more alive” (cited in Feinstein 2006,47).

For war journalist Loyd, battle is something he runs towards, as it is “the ultimate frontier of human experience” (Loyd 1999,136). He describes the adrenalin of being in an intense situation as a “wash” and “wave” (Loyd 1999, 229 and 309). He survives a near-death experience, and recalls waking up for three consecutive mornings laughing and that he “... stayed high on adrenalin for the rest of the week once the last vestiges of dread had gone ... war is like a hard-drug abuse ...” (Loyd 1999, 310). He provides a detailed and compelling portrait of his time on the front towards the end of the Balkan war that is worth quoting in full to get a sense of the intensity of the pleasure he experiences. Given permission to work alongside the Bosnian Muslim commander Atif Dudaković , Loyd writes:

> ... glorious days followed, a halycon time in which we saw war by day, grinning inanely at each other on account of the signed authority from Dudaković that permitted us drastically to

> multiply our chances of being blinded, maimed or killed alongside his troops, and got smashed out of our faces in Bihać at night. There was no other place in the world that I would have preferred to be; no other company I would have chosen; no event I could more have wished to witness than the one I watched. There can be few instances in life that a man is lucky enough to feel so at one with his time and place. It would have been a good moment to die ... I took the freedom and light that the fighting offered, feeling truly earthed with the Bosnian war once more. It was like falling in love again, a heady sensual rush that I wished only to clasp unquestioningly ... (Loyd 1999, 303).

The thrill can also be connected to watching "history in the making". When war reporter Addario is in Libya she sees fellow photojournalists leave, saying it isn't worth it. She questions whether she is insane to stay:

> What am I doing here? But there were other days when I felt that familiar exhilaration, when I thought, I am actually watching an uprising unfolding. I am watching these people fighting to the death for their freedom. I am documenting the fate of a society that has been oppressed for decades. Until you get injured or shot or kidnapped, you believe you are invincible (Addario 2015, 7).

It is not just war journalists who report enjoying the experience of being under fire. In the opening paragraph of his memoir, British war surgeon Nott says that he has an "addiction" to being in conflict areas. While he partly does it to help people, he sees that it is also about "the thrill of just being in those terrible places" (Nott 2019,1). On his first mission in Sarajevo, he is shot at for the first time in his life while travelling with a patient in an ambulance. Once the shock fades, he has to:

> .... confront another emotion that was more surprising, even a little disturbing. I felt elated, exhilarated, euphoric. I had never felt more alive; it was as if I had been reborn. I had come close to being killed, but that only made it more exciting. If I could cope with this, I thought, I could cope with anything (Nott 2019, 82).

Years later, he is operating in Yemen when one of his colleagues is shot through a window, and the bullet misses Nott by about six inches. The team quickly operates on their injured colleague, who survives and Nott muses on "another close shave":

> Why did I keep putting myself in these situations? Once they've had a brush with real danger, I guess some people shiver and think, Never again, while others think, Wow! I had discovered I was definitely in the latter camp. I can't deny I get a kick out of taking the controls of a plane or a helicopter[57], or performing surgery in a war zone: the risk is part of the appeal. And it is undeniably addictive. It is a physiological reaction, as well as an emotional one. The trick is knowing when to stop, as any ex-junkie will tell you (Nott 2019, 116).

As the years go by, after being in war, Nott often struggles as he tries to settle back into his job as a surgeon at various London hospitals. His mother dies:

> ...I was disillusioned, bereft even. There was nobody I wanted to be with, and I realised I never felt so alive as I did on a mission... (Nott 2019, 290).

It is clear that these non-combatant war workers experience excitement, adrenalin, and pleasure on the frontline. For journalists and medics alike, being under fire feels exhilarating—something they return to despite their fears. The frontline for those reporting and conducting medical aid is vivid, purposeful, and deeply alive.

Away from the frontline

I will now turn to the various themes of pleasure away from the frontline—the "everyday" as documented in the interviews, memoirs and some scholarship. It is important to stress that this "everyday"(Parashar 2013) is crucial to the ontology of war—it is here where life goes on but in the context of "living-in-violence" (Moghnieh 2017). The pleasures were wide-ranging and included engaging work and purpose; intense and long-lasting friendships; earning a good wage and saving money; Afghanistan and its culture; and how normal it was.

Engaging work

It was striking how much the respondents liked their jobs. When asked about the positives, the responses could best be described as effusive. They described their work as "really interesting", "very interesting", "very, very interesting", "extremely interesting", and "hugely interesting". It was

[57] Nott is also a pilot.

"diverse", "different", "worthwhile", "hugely significant", "rewarding" and "hugely rewarding". People got "the adrenalin thing" and found it "intense". "We were experiencing something special".

Respondents enjoyed working with Afghans, and seeing the positive outcomes for the country, such as creating jobs. It was a place about "learning" and had "a lot of meaning". One could do work they were "passionate" about. It was "exciting", "great, fun and interesting, sometimes dangerous".

It was stressful too, as well as "boring", "mundane", "dangerous", "a grind", "challenging" and a place of "utter misery" in parts. But amid this, respondents found a lot of pleasure. "Sometimes I wish it could have been more boring. I really enjoyed it". "It was such an extraordinary time for so many of us that we were relatively big fish in a small pond". "I kind of felt pretty lucky that I was doing the job that I was doing. And I was actually quite sad when it all ended".[58]

As Respondent 32, a male European UN worker remarked:

> On the whole, it was life changing. It was a really valuable experience. I don't regret it for a minute. It was exciting and rewarding. And a very interesting culturally and rewarding and inspiring context in which to work.[59]

As Respondent 15, a female European human rights worker said:

> I'd say overall, it was an incredibly enriching experience. I learned a huge amount professionally. I felt privileged in getting to know a little bit about a very complex and extraordinary country at a very critical moment in its history. I made lots of Afghan friends, I made some very deep friendships with some of the internationals there which remain a significant part of my friend circle today. And yeah, it was one of the most extraordinary and intense periods of my life.[60]

[58] This collection of quotes are from the 32 interviews I conducted between Dec 12, 2019 to July 1, 2020.
[59] Respondent interview on July 1, 2020.
[60] Respondent interview on Feb 24, 2020.

With work overall, there were patterns in how some respondents found pleasure, which I will now go into detail about. Their jobs gave them gave them meaning and purpose, they felt pride in the impact of what they did, there were opportunities to learn, as well as career progression.

Meaning and purpose

When asked explicitly, "Did working in Afghanistan give you a sense of purpose? Did it feel worthwhile?", many of the respondents said that it did, and for a range of reasons. For some, it was about improving conditions for the Afghan people through projects such as enhancing the health system, roads, and schools; advancing the situation for women and girls; or influencing the U.S. military to change its policies on night raids and airstrikes. Others felt meaning in their work by creating career opportunities for Afghans, as well as providing good salaries. Many of the respondents, however, were cautious about overplaying what they had achieved.

Some of the journalists had a strong sense of purpose in relation to the stories they were telling. Respondent 5, a female European journalist and film maker, said that even though she knew she couldn't change the situation in the country and "the world was looking away", she had a good conscience that she was doing her job, "to present a fair situation to the French audience".[61] Respondent 20, a male Australian journalist and photographer felt like his work in Afghanistan "definitely matters more than what I was doing before I came here". [62] Respondent 8, a male North American journalist, found meaning through monitoring how foreign money was being spent:

> We thought that it was important to write, to experience and report back what we were seeing what other people were seeing and doing. There were tens of thousands of military lives on the line, of diplomatic lives on the line. There was obviously billions of dollars being spent on behalf of in my case, the American people. So I thought the watchdog responsibility of a journalist was extremely high in this location and it was easy to have a sense of purpose.[63]

[61] Respondent interview on December 20, 2019.
[62] Respondent interview on March 6, 2020.
[63] Respondent interview on January 17, 2020.

Respondent 29, a female Australian journalist, said while she wanted to think she made a difference and informed people, "I'm just not so sure". [64]

Humanitarian workers also felt there was purpose to what they were doing and sometimes saw the impact. Respondent 15, a female European human rights worker, said while "some of us were probably parasitic on this culture ...there were certainly moments where my work felt incredibly valuable". [65] She discussed how a constructive relationship was developed between a small group of human rights people and the American military over the airstrikes and night raids which were killing and civilians:

> That was an amazing moment in career terms, because in the human rights world, often the impact of your work is pretty intangible. You are just one of many, you know, pistons and cogs turning. And it's very hard to claim impact without total hubris.

The human rights worker provided feedback on U.S. military operational directives, which were implemented and led to a reduction in civilian casualties. She said to this day she looks back on that portfolio of work as something that "definitely had some impact". [66]

Respondent 4, a European male contractor to USAID, saw first-hand that his job was helping more women find employment [67] while Respondent 26, a male South Asian NGO worker, saw benefits in the health sector. "I feel that the work that we put in it's easy to see the result and it's easy to see how it makes a difference. It's been wonderful".[68]

Respondent 9, a female Central Asian UN employee, felt the projects she implemented had long-term impact. Fluent in Dari, she was able to speak with local women, who helped her develop more effective projects. She would return over the years and could see they were still sustainable and running well. "People were very happy with that," she said. "And this is something which gives you a feeling that you did something nice, something useful".[69]

---

[64] Respondent interview on January 17, 2020.
[65] Respondent interview on Feb 24, 2020.
[66] Respondent interview on February 24, 2020.
[67] Respondent interview on December 21, 2019.
[68] Respondent interview on March 18, 2020.
[69] Respondent interview on January 21, 2020.

Respondent 18, a male North American with USAID, felt more of a sense of accomplishment in the early days of working in Afghanistan:

> War is a terrible thing, but if you can help people find a way out, if you can help people find ways to reconcile and forge peace, I feel like that's an imperative, or maybe it's just a calling ... But if I can contribute to helping them get past war and back to normal lives, raising children, running businesses, growing beautiful fruits and vegetables, that'd be awesome.[70]

Respondent 2, a male European in the private sector, felt that his business was doing more than some aid projects, "because I was employing and paying people that I knew a lot of people were benefitting from". [71]

In terms of purpose, it was notable that some respondents felt they got more out of Afghanistan than Afghans did. For example, Respondent 10, a female European contractor for NATO, remarked that her presence in Afghanistan, "probably made a difference for a ... very small, tiny group of people. It definitely made a difference to me". [72]

A sense of purpose is also clear in the memoirs and scholarship. The US war photographer Addario writes that while photography is how she makes a living, her job feels more like a responsibility, or a calling (Addario 2015,15). CNN reporter Christian Amanpour says she has been motivated by a "deep conviction that the stories I cover are important and absolutely need to be told...stories such as the genocide in Bosnia and Rwanda" (Cited in McLaughlin 2016,21). War correspondent Hedges argues that despite war's "carnage", it "can give us purpose, meaning, a reason for living" (Hedges 2003, 3). While the focus of this thesis is war workers more broadly, Hedges observes that civilians in the 1990s Bosnian war admit that the terrible days of living in hunger, suffering, being shelled and under threat were "the fullest of their lives" (Hedges 2003,6), and they "wished it all back ... I did too (Hedges 2003,7). He writes:

[70] Respondent interview on February 22, 2020.
[71] Respondent interview on January 20, 2020.
[72] Respondent interview on Februrary 3, 2020.

> Many of us, restless and unfulfilled, see no supreme worth in our lives. We want more out of life. And war, at least, gives a sense that we can rise above our smallness and divisiveness (Hedges 2003, 7).

While Armoudian (2016) finds war journalists see their job as a calling, another study of Dutch journalists reports they downplay the role of "purpose" and there is a common notion that they "should not talk nonsense about ideals" (van der Hoeven and Kester 2022, 277). This group debunks the "myth of Western war journalists as heroes". War journalist Jan Eikelboom says reporters claiming they do war reporting on moral grounds "don't speak the truth" while another anonymous journalist remarks it is "bullshit" to suggest they do the work to "show the world what's going on. No, you do this work entirely for yourself"(van der Hoeven and Kester 2022, 277).

Surgeon Nott writes of deep meaning and purpose in operating in terrible circumstances. After a Syrian patient recovers, he feels pride every time he sees him again (Nott 2019,29). Living in Aleppo under very dangerous conditions, he manages to improve the skills of the local surgeons and it is an obvious source of pleasure for him: "We grew more and more ambitious, and patients who in most war zones would be merely patched up were offered major surgery" (Nott 2019, 178). He also yearns to return to Syria, as he has "come to crave in such work the satisfaction of making a difference, of helping ordinary people" (Nott 2019,30). In the Darfur, he travels to a remote area to operate on wounded rebel soldiers, using a concrete block as a table. Surrounded by 100s of people watching, he remarks:

> It was surreal, but oddly enjoyable, and I thought to myself, *This is what humanitarian work is all about.* Helping people who can't help themselves and taking a risk to do it (Nott 2019, 89).

Humanitarian Andrew Thomson also discusses the meaning he finds in the wars he works in. As he struggles with the horror of digging up mass graves from the genocide in Rwanda, he also uses it as a time of reflection. Sitting in a church where hundreds were massacred, he is overwhelmed as he imagines the brutality that the victims endured. But he has to stop thinking about it and go back to work:

> I glove up and plunge back into the grave, where there's hard labor to be done, not the body and blood of Christ for my sins but ten more cadavers. It's salvation through exhumation, a new creed (Cain, Postelwait and Thomson 2004, 244).

Learning

More than half of the respondents found pleasure in their jobs as they were learning new things. As Respondent 6, a female European NGO worker said:

> It was extremely interesting. It was really rewarding to learn from the different field teams in different provinces because you could learn a bit more about what was happening in Afghanistan, especially in terms of agriculture, in terms of drought, in terms of natural resource management, and how women in rural community could be empowered through involving them in agriculture and international resource management. [73]

Respondent 31, a male African working for the UN, said he learned a lot in Afghanistan as the years of war had left nothing working and they had to start from scratch: "It's a big experience". [74] Respondent 2, a male European in the private sector, said he didn't have much experience managing people and, "certainly learned a lot along the way, not least about myself, but about the country itself, the people that are working there and the people that are part of it ..." Respondent 3, a female North American working with US contractors, said she found it "enlightening". [75]

Workers also enjoyed passing on knowledge. Respondent 23, a female European NGO worker, who worked in Afghanistan for over 25 years, held several roles during that time. She described it as a "huge learning experience that enabled me to help the people ... to advise the people I was working with". [76] Respondent 17, a female North American consulting to USAID, said the Afghans were "fantastic to work with for the most part" and "were interested in learning, they were interested in teaching you as well about them, their culture, their lives and their history ..." [77] Respondent 10, a

[73] Respondent interview on Februrary 2, 2020.
[74] Respondent interview on May 30, 2020.
[75] Respondent interview on December 20, 2019.
[76] Respondent interview on March 11, 2020
[77] Respondent interview on February 18, 2020

female European contractor to NATO [78], said her work was so interesting that she went on to do a PhD in what she discovered there.[79]

In the memoirs, surgeon Nott constantly discusses his love of teaching. He returns from Syria "happy" about training surgeons "who would carry on helping the people of that desperate country" (Nott 2019, 185). He also loves learning. In a remote part of Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, Nott performs a caesarean and discovers the baby's head is stuck. His heart racing, he is worried the mother is going to bleed to death. A local nurse steps in, puts his fingers behind the baby's head and pops the vacuum. "It's a trick I will never forget," he writes (Nott 2019, 93).

Enjoying working hard

Another surprising theme was that some respondents enjoyed working hard. Respondent 11, a male European NGO employee enjoyed the long hours:

> I'm a workaholic. So I quite liked the idea that I could work a lot and that that was legitimate, that no one would frown and say, aren't you working a bit too much ..."[80]

This hard work also meant he didn't feel guilty about earning a good income or having a gin and tonic at brunch with friends and colleagues. "I don't feel bad about doing that. Because I know that for 16 hours a day, six days a week I was trying to do good for people," he said.

Respondent 3, a female North American contractor for NGOs and US agencies, remarked that people who were drawn to Afghanistan had a "workaholic side".[81] Respondent 32, a male European UN staff member, found living on the compound in Kabul was a "wonderful place if you want to indulge your inner workaholic". He said with few distractions in terms of family or paying bills, "you can work as much as you want and you can work all the time if you like" and then socialise. "That's what a lot of people do, they work very hard and they socialise hard".[82]

[78] Respondent interview on Februrary 3, 2020
[79] I have also been inspired to do a PhD from my experiences.
[80] Respondent interview February 12, 2020.
[81] Respondent interview December 20, 2019.
[82] Respondent interview on July 1, 2020.

Career progression and recognition

Afghanistan led to better work options. Respondent 28, a male European journalist, enjoyed seeing his career prospects improve. “In a very selfish way, yes. It is, without a doubt a career path that does accelerate people's careers”. He said it was a struggle getting airtime covering smaller, obscure wars and the risk wasn’t worth it:

> Whereas in Afghanistan the amount of airtime committed to covering that country because of my country’s involvement in it—it was very much worthwhile the trade off with the risk and the discomfort in order to tell the story and that led to professional acknowledgement, awards and praise and increased salary and plaudits and all the rest of it.[83]

Respondent 5, a female European journalist and film maker, also said Afghanistan helped her career. She recalled before she left for Afghanistan she was trying to be a film maker back home and she was “probably not good enough” as it was very competitive. But because she had the “courage to leave and travel—there was a positive point for my career”. By being in Afghanistan, things became easier. Editors-in chief and other people “are more impressed with reporters going to some sort of war zone or conflict areas”.[84]

Respondent 8, a North American male journalist, said being in Afghanistan made his work very visible:

> My stories were well received; they were probably judged as being well written and interesting. And that creates a lot of visibility for you inside your own organisation and allows you to move up the ladder, and it puts a very strong mark on your resume for future years.

He said his experience in Afghanistan led him to his current role.[85]

For Respondent 15, a female European human rights worker, having worked in Afghanistan gave her credibility.“It's definitely a valued experience to have worked in that kind of context,” she said. It also

[83] Respondent interview on May 8, 2020.
[84] Respondent interview on Dec 20, 2019.
[85] Respondent interview on January 17, 2019.

helped that she specialised in conflict-related human rights. “The fact that I'd lived in Afghanistan for several years was definitely an advantage within that field”.[86]

Respondent 14, a female European working with NATO, said she had an elevated status after leaving Afghanistan:

> I can sense that it gives me a lot of street credibility, like immediately when people hear that I've been in Afghanistan, I jump up a level and they sort of give me a lot of credit for it ... It looks impressive on the CV, basically.[87]

Working in Afghanistan also helped careers as it meant workers showed they could handle demanding situations. Respondent 11, a male European NGO worker, gained a clear advantage from his experience in Afghanistan and his unusual Pashto language skills:

> Showing that I can live under hardships and that I can cope with that over several years, has opened a lot of doors that I wouldn't have if I had studied Arabic and stayed in Lebanon for six months.[88]

Respondent 31, an African UN worker, remarked that having worked in Afghanistan for a few years, meant “you can survive anywhere”. He later went to Ethiopia, Pakistan, Somalia and South Sudan. He said it helped his career as he could work anywhere as he had emergency experience.[89]

Symbolic rewards

Yagil Levy describes soldiers as getting “symbolic rewards” from their jobs, which include the honour and prestige that goes with being in war (Levy 2007). For workers in the interviews and in scholarship, going to war similarly brought kudos and recognition, which made them feel good about themselves.

Respondent 20, a male Australian journalist, said as Afghanistan was seen as a risky place to work, one got greater recognition as a professional.[90] Respondent 5, a female European journalist and film

[86] Respondent interview on February 24, 2020.
[87] Respondent interview on February 21, 2020.
[88] Respondent interview on February 12, 2020.
[89] Respondent interview on May 30, 2020.
[90] Respondent interview on March 6, 2020.

maker, said she felt “heroic” in Afghanistan.[91] Respondent 15, a female European human rights worker, found being in a place like Afghanistan made her feel self-important, as she had access to a “different echelon of society than your day-to-day existence in your home country”. She said it made her “feel like you're—if not at the heart of things—but on the edge of the heart of things”.[92]

In the memoirs, the journalists and humanitarians do not really explore the honour and prestige of the job. But in other contexts it is apparent. The American journalist Walter Cronkite once quipped that, “nothing in the field of journalism is more glamorous than being a war correspondent” (cited in McLaughlin 2016, 36). The war journalist Sebastian Junger also raises it in an interview. "It is glamorous," he says. "No point pretending it's not. When I said I was a waiter, which I had to say for about ten years, the response from women... well, when I said I was a war reporter, the difference in response was pretty unmistakable" (Caesar 2014, Para 14).

War journalists often gain international attention for their work, and find pride in these awards (Feinstein 2006, 70). Dutch journalist Wim Eikelboom remarks, “War journalism is the quickest way to journalistic fame. The circumstances may be difficult, but the story is up for grabs” (van der Hoeven and Keste, 2022,270). Ana Van Es, a female war reporter says it is “a job which gets you a lot of attention” (van der Hoeven and Keste 2022,270). The acclaim includes many prestigious reporting and photography prizes awarded annually to journalists and war photographers, including the Pulitzer Prize (USA), Walkley awards (Australia), World Press photo (Netherlands), Rory Peck award (UK) to name a few. Freelance journalist Francesca Borri admits that the prizes are motivating:

> …we pretend to be here so that nobody will be able to say, “But I didn’t know what was happening in Syria”. When really we are here just to get an award, to gain visibility. We are here thwarting one another as if there were a Pulitzer within our grasp, when there’s absolutely nothing (Borri 2013).

Symbolic rewards for working as a war journalist are also reflected in prestigious fellowships awarded to journalists, such as the Nieman and Knight-Wallace, as well as giving TED Talks. In 2007, for

[91] Respondent interview on December 20, 2019.
[92] Respondent interview on February 24, 2020.

example war photographer James Nachtwey speakes about his life in a talk entitled: “My wish: Let my photographs bear witness” (Nachtwey 2007).[93]

Surgeon Nott’s work gives him a lot of attention—he is interviewed on TV networks and even seated next to Queen Elizabeth II at a formal lunch (Nott 2019, 232). Some scholarship shows that some humanitarians can experience renown from their work. It is often associated with “altruism” (de Jong 2011, 21) and their families are often proud and encourage them to continue their work (Roth 2011). In the media, they can be framed as heroic and selfless for their work in war zones. Typical headlines include: *Brave British nurse who fights Ebola is a selfless hero to lift our hearts* (Mooney 2014) or *Hunter Hero: Lyn Thorpe, humanitarian aid worker* (Elsworthy 2014). [94]

Financial benefits

While the memoirists did not typically bring up how much money they earned[95] from working in war, many of the survey respondents reported a range of financial advantages connected to working in Afghanistan. Most (though not all) said that they were earning, or had earned, a good wage during their time there.

Respondent 17, a female North American consulting to USAID, described her jobs as “lucrative”. [96] As Respondent 10, a female European contracting to NATO put it:

> The money itself is basically kind of beyond everything I will ever earn in my entire life again, as long as I'm becoming Vice Chancellor of the University, which I probably will not.[97]

[93] A number of journalists and war photographers have given Ted Talks, including Andrew Quilty (Ted Talks 2022), Bel Trew (Ted Talks 2024), Jane Franklin (Ted Talks 2023) and Janine di Giovanni (2013) amongst others.
[94] It would be unlikely to ever see a headline such as *British nurse having most fun, interesting and rewarding time of life fighting ebola*.
[95] It is striking how money is not an obvious topic in the noncombatant memoirs or in scholarship. I suspect this area could be an area to investigate further.
[96] Respondent interview on February 18, 2020.
[97] Respondent interview on February 3, 2020.

Respondent 18, a male North American USAID official, said his salary doubled over the 14 years he worked on and off in the country, starting out at USD$90,000 a year and ending up on USD$190,000. "I was getting lots of money and living an incredible kind of Rudyard Kipling sort of life," he said.[98]

Respondent 25, a male Australian think tank employee, said his job gave him the opportunity to: "buy a nice apartment in Sydney in 2010 and set me up a bit—definitely the money was good". However, he also said that the salary was not a motivation for the job. "I just fell into it and worked out later on that it's actually quite financially advantageous as well".[99]

Generally, it was the respondents working for international organisations such as the UN, government organisations such as USAID and think tanks that were on high salaries. For example, UN workers got a package of benefits. Aside from their monthly salary, they were also given a daily subsistence allowance and a monthly "hazard pay". Every six weeks they went on R & R and were given extra money for their break. Some UN and NGO workers reported either not having to pay tax, or only paying half the tax that they usually would. Respondent 11, a male European NGO worker, pointed out that if he were at home, 54 percent of his salary would have gone in tax. But in Afghanistan, he got to keep it all. [100]

Some workers said they were earning amounts they could never earn back in their home country. Respondent 4, a male European USAID contractor, said he benefited enormously:

> I paid off my debt. I bought my house, I have a nice car and I managed to travel the world and I still don't suffer. I don't have to think month to month to try to cover the expenses.[101]

He added that it meant he could really enjoy his life: "I will not settle for a glass of Prosecco if I can get a bottle of champagne". Respondent 9, a female UN worker from Central Asia, remarked that for people coming from poorer countries, it was a financially beneficial:

[98] Respondent interview on March 20, 2020.
[99] Respondent interview on March 15, 2020.
[100] Respondent interview on February 12, 2020.
[101] Respondent nterview on December 21, 2019.

> In my view, somebody who is coming from areas like my country or maybe some south Asian [countries] or maybe some other part of the world like Africa, perhaps it is good financially. [102]

Respondent 2, a male European private business owner, said it was "successful from a financial perspective" and that his business went well the entire time it was open.

Another common reason that Afghanistan was financially advantageous was that people were able to save money because they often had nowhere to spend their money, and some also had all if their living expenses paid for by their employer. As Respondent 11, a male European NGO worker said:

> For a lot of people who go it's not just about the money you make, it's also about the money you don't spend. Because you usually are in a place where you get food, you get accommodation, you get travel every once in a while to somewhere [paid for] ... You don't spend money every day. Like even with gin tonics in the garden in Kabul—it's hard to spend a lot of money going out. It's hard to spend money on restaurants, you don't buy a lot of new clothes, you live in a suitcase for four and a half years. It's both about the money that you make and about the money that you don't spend.[103]

For some, working in Afghanistan gave them opportunities to buy new homes, as well as pursue various personal opportunities. Some travelled. Others used the money to top up empty bank accounts after doing a PhD or to pursue further studies. One USAID contractor saw the extra money as a way to live comfortably and safely in Kabul, and to fly business class.

But it was not rivers of gold for everyone. Several of the respondents were on wages comparable to what they would earn back home or sometimes, even lower, and there were varying views and experiences as a result. Respondent 15, a female European human rights worker, said her flatmate could buy a house when she returned to her home country and knew of others in a similar situation. For herself, she felt her low wage was at times a security issue:

> I'd spent a few months trying to go freelance [as a journalist] and found it too scary in a way because you would end up cutting corners with things that made you more secure like secure

[102] Respondent interview on January 21, 2020.
[103] Respondent interview on February 12, 2020.

> taxis. So I think freelance journalists and NGO workers at the cheap end of the scale didn't make much money there. [104]

Respondent 20, a male Australian journalist, earned the same amount in his home country but felt it was worth it as the work was so engaging:

> What I'm able to walk away with at the end of the year, it's pretty similar to what I did back home because the cost of living is less here. The difference is the quality of the work—from my point of view—that I undertake to make that money, which is far more desirable compared to the kind of work I was having to do back home to make ends meet. [105]

Respondent 23, a European woman who worked for various organisations and government agencies, found the high wages inappropriate. She earned different wages over the years but always stayed on the minimum international salary. "I thought the money should be going to Afghans, not to internationals and I still feel that way". [106]

In the memoirs, UN worker Heidi Postlewait is the only person who discusses money in any detail. She decides to go to Mozambique after hearing two men at headquarters in New York talking about signing up for a peacekeeping mission so they could pay for their children to go to college and "calculating mission per diems in different countries" (Cain, Postlewait and Thomson 2004, 29). She moves to Cambodia and details her wages:

> I net about USD $40,000 from my UN salary, plus per diem in Cambodia is $130. Hotel expenses are exorbitant; I need to find a house share fast. If I do, I can save $5,000 a month, pay off all my debt, and six months from now be back at my old job on the Bowery, with $10,000 or $15,000 still left in the bank. No more of this secretary crap (Cain, Postlewait and Thomson 2004, 38).

Later, she mentions a young colleague she worked with in Mogadishu who was killed. Before he died, he used his UN per diem money to pay off his student loan (Cain, Postlewait and Thomson 2004, 188).

---

[104] Respondent interview on February 24, 2020
[105] Respondent interview on March 6, 2020.
[106] Respondent interview on March 20, 2020.

Otherwise, money is not touched on substantially in the memoirs that I examined. War journalist Loyd says he was ok living without heating in the Bosnian winter. “I was fine. I had money. I could eat and I could leave. I could savour discomfort as an experience rather than be overwhelmed by it” (Loyd 1999, 166). Addario indicates that after years of struggling to make money, she does so by selling artistic photos from the Darfur:

> Suddenly I was getting requests to sell fine-art prints of rebels in a sandstorm or of blurred refugees walking through the desert for several thousand dollars. I was conflicted about making money from images of people who were so desperate but I thought of all the years I had struggled to make ends meet to be a photographer, and I knew that any money I made from these photos would be invested right back into my work (Addario 2015, 190).

The surgeon Nott never mentions what he is paid to go on missions but says that he is losing money by not being a surgeon a London. “I was quite hard-up, having sacrificed a lot of income to do my overseas work” (Nott 2019, 187).

There is little research into war worker salaries. While this thesis does not focus on private security contractors, Higate’s analysis of five memoirs written by British private security found money is an appeal for doing the job (Higate 2012, 329). Other evidence suggests that historically, earning a good wage can be a pleasure of war for soldiers, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Personal benefits

Friendships

With the interviews, friendships were a striking pleasure in war. People often lived, socialised and worked together, creating an unusual intimacy. The friendships were subsequently intense, and often formed quickly. They were deep and genuine, and many continued after the mission ended. The respondents also enjoyed meeting people who were like-minded and “kindred spirits”, as well as forming cross-cultural relationships with Afghans. There was also a thriving social scene, particularly in Kabul, which included bars, restaurants and dinners at people’s homes.

Respondents often lived and worked together, and this communal living led to a particular type of closeness. Respondent 12, a North American male with USAID remarked that there was no

distinguishing between the work and social world, "...the two are completely the same".[107] The living situation was family-like. Respondent 21, a female North American military contractor with NATO, said she lived with her colleagues 24/7:

> I say it's almost closer than a marriage because you go to work with them, you eat with them, you often work out with them, you go out to play with them ... And so it's hard to sort of delete that when it's all said and done.[108]

Respondent 32, a male European UN worker, who was based in New York at the time of our interview, remarked that living and working together on a UN compound in Kabul meant he had unique relationships with colleagues who had been in Afghanistan which continued after the mission ended:

> I found that there's quite a lot of people who I used to work with in Afghanistan who are now working here [in NYC], and … without a doubt, I have a different relationship to those colleagues than other colleagues I have worked with elsewhere. I feel like I could pick up the phone to most of them on a personal basis tomorrow in a way that I would not be able to with colleagues I've worked with in other offices, and that just comes from the fact that we are not just colleagues you are also neighbours, you are also bar buddies....you come out of your meetings and then you go to the bar and you're dancing half an hour later. So that creates a very different relationship plus there were also some scares and I think scares bring people together and not just scares ... also some very difficult moments. I mean, when I was there, we lost two colleagues. [109] [110]

[107] Respondent interview on Feb 19, 2020.
[108] Respondent interview on March 10,.2019.
[109] Respondent interview July 1, 2020.
[110] The Taliban attacked a Lebanese restaurant in downtown Kabul and killed 21 people in 2014. A suicide bomber detonated himself and then two gunmen entered the restaurant shooting ("IMF and UN officials killed in Kabul restaurant attack", British Broadcasting Corporation, January 18, 2014.)

He also discussed an attack on a nearby compound:

> So that was very scary for everybody as well because that was a very—we all thought that they were about to come get us. The reason I'm mentioning those kind of things is because when you spend a day in a bunker with your colleagues, it changes your relationship.

Respondents commonly described their friendships as intense—"intensified by the environment", "intense periods of connection" and being of an "intense nature". Respondent 29, a female Australian journalist, described them as "very, very intense and enduring friendships and relationships that I am really grateful for".[111] As Respondent 13, a North American man who worked for an NGO remarked:

> It's a fairly intense work environment, right? ... you're living with these people at the same time or if not living with them, you're you know, socialising with them. You're all kind of part of having this shared experience that's fairly unique and intense.[112]

There was also pleasure in the fact that friendships formed quickly— "fast friends", "you meet someone briefly but you've known them a long time"—but also had "strong bonds", leading to "deep friendships" and "powerful connections". This closeness led to "meaningful connections", "genuine friendship" that were "unique", "very special" and "rare".

Respondent 19, a female Australian consultant working for a U.S. contractor, felt that people had the time to "open up":

> ... you can discuss things, you discuss your life. You're cut off from everything else, you discuss things much more openly than you would anywhere else with people you don't know. [113]

Many of the relationships turned out to be lifelong and the respondents reported they were "still in touch", "friends to this day", and had "never lost contact". Respondent 4, a European man who worked for USAID, said he shared a house with many bedrooms, which were usually filled with around eight or nine colleagues. Their office was a short walk down the road. He said living with colleagues

[111] Respondent interview on January 17, 2020.
[112] Respondent interview on February 19, 2020.
[113] Respondent interview on March 6, 2020.

made the relationships much stronger: “You are forced to learn the good and the bad things about those people. And I think that’s what makes these friendships like family until the end of life”.[114]

Respondent 15, a female European human rights worker, remarked that the friendships she made in Afghanistan were “my most important ones today”. She felt there was a “connective tissue between a lot of my friends circle from that time ...there was a shared set of experiences that run quite deep I think”.[115]

The respondents were also meeting fellow “kindred” spirits— adventurous and risk-taking people who were open to living in a place like Afghanistan. As Respondent 8, a male North American journalist remarked:

> My wife and I both feel that our friendships, the relations that were formed were intensified when we were there because we all had this heightened experience where your senses were just alive all the time because of the unfamiliarity, because of the new experiences, because of the constant presence of danger at some level. It's not like we felt like we were being targeted, but you knew that there was danger all around.
>
> And typically, it wasn't only that shared experience of heightened energy and adrenalin, but it was also the fact that you were meeting people who had the same sort of spirit, who were willing to go into this extremely foreign location and ... perform a job. It takes a certain amount of energy and curiosity and bravery and willingness to explore so you put those same kinds of personalities— like everyone who was there shared those traits to a varying degree.[116]

Respondent 26, a male NGO worker from South Asia, said while he was motivated by career and personal goals, he found that the extreme environment fostered lasting friendships due to the risks:

> I’m not a Florence Nightingale right, and I'm here for my career, I'm working to support my family and also have a better life for myself ... Having said that—when you have extreme

[114] Respondent interview on December 21, 2019.
[115] Respondent interview on February 24, 2020
[116] Respondent interview on January 17, 2019

> circumstances sometimes what happens is that you ... I'll give you an example … if you meet somebody here … You know that this person is ... somebody who is a little bit more of a risk taker or likely to have a more adventurous side … Because you are in the same circumstances, you do make friends here quickly. They do last, I think, like, a long time, because you've both gone through the same experience of being here … Yeah, from a friendship point of view, from a professional work point of view, I think, yes, it is possible to experience pleasure and in this kind of environment. [117]

A vivid social scene

Friendships were also forged in the "bubble" of Kabul's busy social scene, which waned over the years as security deteriorated. There were gatherings at restaurants, bars, dinner parties, brunches, barbecues and group movie nights. People played frisbee, joined motorcycle clubs, walked in the mountains and could attend LGBT events. There was often a lot of alcohol. While there was social freedom, much of it was behind high walls with guards, and within institutional rules due to the threat of violence. That said, people reported having an exciting time.

Respondent 11, a male European NGO worker, recalled that in Kabul, he "experienced some of the most spectacular parties and hangovers I ever had in my entire life".[118] Respondent 15, a female European human rights worker said: "I have to say I danced more in Kabul than any other city I've lived in". [119] Respondent 2, a male European private business owner, said it was the sort of social life "that you could only dream of in the UK to be honest" but also lamented it was almost too excessive at times.[120] Respondent 28, a male European journalist, said it was "party central" but there was an edge:

[117] Respondent interview on March 18, 2020
[118] Respondent interview on February 12, 2020.
[119] Respondent interview on February 24, 2020
[120] I recalled going to a private security contractor party where Afghans with dwarfism were serving drinks. The Afghans would later clutch onto either end of a barbell and the security people took turns lifting them. Offended, I went to an ICRC party nearby.

> There were bars and restaurants that were open at the time. There were car bombs going off, but usually in markets in the mornings or targeting armored vehicles ... There was always the risk that one of these Western restaurants or bars was going to be attacked.[121]

The parties and vibrant social life behind closed doors created an atmosphere in which he quickly bonded with the people he met:

> We had this very intense experience .... you kind of shared something that was very unique and quite dangerous. It was a time that connected you to people quite deeply, which is a good thing on reflection.

Respondents living in cities such as Herat, Mazar, Jalalabad and Badakhsan had a far quieter life. Contractors on military bases often did not have access to alcohol and found themselves enjoying playing cards, talking or getting together to giggle as they read the "Dear Abby" column in the *Stars and Stripes* newspaper. Respondent 14, a female European contractor to NATO, found pleasure in the fact her social life was like when she was younger. There was no alcohol so after a meal or "waffle night", they would sit and talk or play cards:

> It was so nice. You connected to people in a different way. And also because of the intensity of the situation, and we're sort of all on the same boat, you have very personal conversations, emotional conversations even that you normally wouldn't have without being drunk in the real world, so you're connected to people at a different level.[122]

While the memoir *Emergency Sex* (2004) explored working with the UN in the 1990s and included the character Heidi having lots of sex, only one respondent raised it. Respondent 19, an Australian female who consulted to a US contractor, said aside from meeting kindred spirits, she found pleasure in sexual encounters as there were so many available men:

> Most men appeared single and women were in the minority. So you did have a lot of men around you and a lot of sexual tension that was released with a lot of alcohol. Yeah, things happened that probably wouldn't happen anywhere else .... you're in that closed environment

[121] Respondent interview on May 8, 2020.
[122] Respondent interview on February 21, 2020

> and you feel safe within it doing what you do that you probably wouldn't do in other circumstances ... What was that quote there? 'The odds are good but the goods are odd'.[123]

Some people found their life partners. Respondent 32, a male European UN worker, met his wife in Kabul—and their cat. [124]

For some, the social gatherings in the context of violence were poignant. Respondent 6, a female European NGO worker, described a dinner party at her guest house as a "sacred" moment. As she put it:

> I was organising a gathering at my guest house during the weekend and we couldn't invite more than 20 people. The fact that sometimes we were able to just—from different cultures, different countries—be able to gather, share food, share music, share different things together, very, very simple things in life.... The fact that we were able to do that in Afghanistan, whereas all the time people say 'Oh, don't do that, you know, like, God, that will be too dangerous'. Yes, if it was more than 20 people, okay, that would be dangerous but [in this case] it was just enjoying the fact of being together.
>
> And I think you value that even more. It's kind of sacred ... I think if you can experience this small thing, well, I'm happy because I have friends and we are able to have fun, even if we are living in this country where horrible things happen. We are still living.[125]

Respondent 30, a male Australian military contractor, said that as unfortunate as it was, in war he saw the best in people working in Afghanistan:

> I think it's a sad state on human nature that takes something bad for us to be both at our best and at our worst as humans. The camaraderie and the sense of teamwork and all that sort of stuff that comes under working under those stressful situations, it's sad that we have to have

[123] This is the only respondent who mentioned sex. It is interesting how sex in the war context is missing from scholarship and many of the memoirs. However, the two female memoirists Postlewait and Addario, however, do bring up sex and romance. An ICRC study from 2022 touches on sexual partners but in a negative, risk-taking context, which will be discussed in a later chapter. Sex in war is an area that requires further interrogation.
[124] Respondent interview on July 1, 2020.
[125] Respondent interview on February 3, 2020.

> that to get that … the pleasure I derived from the camaraderie and the black humor—I have never experienced it anywhere else. It's kind of universal to all those different places and the most was in Afghanistan. [126]

Friendships were also formed with Afghans. Respondent 15, a female European human rights worker, has "close Afghan friends who will remain part of my life forever".[127] Respondent 5, a European female journalist and film maker, made friends with an Afghan colleague who came to visit her in home country. Respondent 26, a South Asian NGO worker, who was living in Afghanistan during the time of the interview in 2020, had a big crowd of Afghan work colleagues he regularly met up with, as well as Afghan LGBT friends. "These social connections are very meaningful," he said. (I too have remained friends with two Afghan colleagues who fled the country and now live in North America).

After leaving Afghanistan, Respondent 11, a male European NGO worker, kept in touch with many Afghan colleagues via Facebook and a Whatsapp group, sending each other pictures of their children:

> It's a very different kind of friendship but very much something I value and I've gone to the wedding of a colleague in Afghanistan, out in the middle of nowhere ... It's very easy to stay in the Kabul bubble ... so I consider myself lucky that I had the opportunity to connect more. [128]

Similar to the interviews, the memoirs reveal the closeness of relationships in conflict settings. War journalist Loyd also writes of the bond between the journalists:

> They could fight and fuck one another with the abandon of delinquents in care, but they also looked after each other, linked by the altruistic camaraderie common to any pariah group (Loyd 1999, 82).

Throughout much of the memoir, Loyd travels with fellow journalists into stressful situations, and the strength of their relationships is crucial to their survival. In one scene, he sets out with Corinne Dufka, Kurt Schork and other reporters to an area which has been under heavy fighting:

[126] Respondent interview on March 5, 2020.
[127] Respondent interview on February 24, 2020
[128] Respondent interview on February 12, 2020.

> Between us there was a chemistry that seemed to allow us to skate through many of the obstacles ahead. This was essential. Travelling alone, I had sometimes found the strength and freedom to go places that I could not have reached in company … But when alone you carried all the weight of your fears. And there was no other voice to act as a sounding board to help evolve the decisions on which your life could depend … This time, however, I could not have wanted for better company. Riding in two battered Land-Rovers, not one of us was a newcomer who had to be looked after and watched: everybody 'knew' the war, everybody was prepared to expose themselves to high risk, yet no-one was crazed. Not by the standards of the region anyway (Loyd 1999, 143).[129]

Loyd also mentions many locals that he meets and assists him with his work.

Addario says she and her colleagues are "a family. We've seen one another through affairs, through marriages, divorces and deaths" (Addario 2015, 21). At a funeral for her colleague Tim Heatherington, killed by a mortar in Libya in 2011, she spends time with many fellow reporters and remarks:

> ... we had formed an iron bond, inexplicable to those outside our circle. The colleagues who I had spent the decade with—sharing meals of stewed lamb with mounds of rice woven with sweet raisins and grated carrots in Afghanistan, or stale bread in cities overrun by insurgents—had become an essential part of who I was; they were family, and the only people with whom I found consolation at such a desperate emotional time (Addario 2015, 309).

The sense of being part of a family is also found in surgeon Nott's memoir. In Aleppo, Nott builds close friendships with the local surgeons, and becomes a mentor, "even a father figure, given how much older I was than most of my colleagues". They also spend all their time together in close quarters: "We lived together, ate together and worked together" (Nott 2019, 178). He leaves Syria but later returns to his colleagues to continue operating. "We were a family again, and I was enormously proud to be back" (Nott 2019, 212).

[129] Loyd's memoir *Another Bloody Love Letter*—not included in this study—explored the circumstances surrounding the death of his dear friend and colleague Kurt Schork in Sierra Leone. The two were very close and Loyd wore a memorial keepsake necklace with Schork's ashes.

Working under such terrible conditions builds strong bonds. Nott served in Basra, Iraq, in 2007 as a volunteer Reservist with the Royal Auxiliary Air Force. Alongside other military medics, he operates on patients under missile fire, and the "onslaught" of bombs forges a deep sense of camaraderie within the team. "In fact, one of the things that made the mission enjoyable was the camaraderie I experienced as part of a medical military team" (Nott 2019, 70).

There is little research into noncombatant friendship and camaraderie in war, particularly with local people. In the humanitarian space, working together results in "strong and long friendships just as much as the desire to never work together again" (Roth 2015, 91). While relationships could be stressful, they are also "a source of great pleasure and the basis of long-lasting and profound friendships to share challenging situations" (Roth 2015, 101). As mentioned earlier, one study of 30 military health-care providers, including physicians, nurses, medics and others reports that camaraderie and the overall solidarity contributes to the success of the teams (Hamwey et al 2021).

Coming into oneself

Some of the respondents remarked that they went to Afghanistan to test themselves or that being there changed them. Respondent 5, a female European journalist and film maker, said she found it pleasurable travelling to Afghanistan because she wanted to "to try to face danger to do something risky. And I was pushing the boundaries of ... my boundary". She pointed out that while life went on in war, she made "the choice to see war" but it's sure if was "selfish" or "sadistic". Instead:

> To me, it was more something related to the adventure … I compare it to to the cinema because when you watch a great film, all the heroes have a risky moment. They risk their lives all the time. And even though we are not in the movie, life is also like this somehow. And I think there is something in us where we want to be heroic when we go to these places, even though in journalism, you don't want to say it. It's something you want to prove to yourself and when you choose to go somewhere like this …you find joy.[130]

[130] Respondent interview on December 20, 2019.

Other respondents spoke of personal growth. "...it changes you as who you are. It absolutely changes you," said Respondent 4, a male European consultant to USAID. "So my experience and my pleasure of being in a warzone is ... it made me into a better person than I was when I came to this country".[131]

Respondent 11, a male European NGO worker, had previously worked for the military and lived in a tent. In his NGO role, he also lived in basic situations. While he was living on the Arabian Peninsula "in luxury" when we spoke, he knew that he could handle the "exact opposite":

> I don't mind sleeping on the ground for a couple of weeks in some field office in Afghanistan because that's the only safe place to stay … I know that I can do with very, very little and have a very enjoyable life. [132]

Local culture and landscape

For centuries, war workers have travelled far from home to participate in the ecosystem of war, encountering new cultures and landscapes along the way. The 16th century French surgeon Ambroise Paré, for example, wrote "Journeys In Diverse Places", an account not only of war surgery and treatments but his experiences seeing fighting, making money and meeting people in villages across Europe and the Middle East (Paré 1910). The British nurse and businesswoman Mary Seacole, a Jamaican woman who set up a restaurant and bar in Russia during the Crimean war, published her memoirs in 1857. "My first experience of battle was pleasant enough," she writes, and adds:

> Omar Pasha got something for his Turks to do, and one fine morning they were marched away towards the Russian outposts on the road to Baidar. I accompanied them on horseback, and enjoyed the sight amazingly (Seacole 1857).

Many of the respondents appreciated Afghanistan's people, culture and landscape. They enjoyed hospitality in the homes of Afghan colleagues and friends. They attended Buzkhashi games and "unforgettable" local weddings. Despite the cultural barriers, they formed "real" friendships with Afghan colleagues, interpreters and neighbours.

[131] Respondent interview on December 21, 2019.
[132] Respondent interview on February 12, 2020.

Respondent 10, a European woman consulting to NATO, [133] and Respondent 26, an Australian man working for a think tank, appreciated learning more about Islam, a faith intrinsic to Afghan life. [134] Respondent 11, a male European NGO worker, engaged in thoughtful discussions about life, family and in particular arranged marriages, a norm in the culture.[135] Respondent 21, a Hawaiian female contractor to the US military, found the culture quite similar to her own, particularly in relation to families living together. "There were a lot of similarities for me," she said. "I felt like this is a lot like home in some ways". [136]

Respondent 5, a female European journalist and film maker, learned Dari and a bit of Pashto. "I think there were thousands of layers of expression," she said. "It was interesting to me to understand how we could communicate, and I could put myself in their society". She said the "most enjoyable time" was when she would sit with the person she was meant to be interviewing, and talk and drink tea. "These were my best moments … when I was ... everything that's 'out of frame' I enjoyed".

She also appreciated the "different codes, different languages, different accents, even dress" in remote areas:

> They would laugh at my shalwar kameez [local dress] because I was going to Kandahar, and I was wearing a present from somebody, which was a dress made for Ghazni women ... I found that very interesting that there were also regional differences. [137]

Respondent 6, a female European NGO worker, was also drawn to traditional clothes worn by the women. More broadly, she noted that Afghanistan was frequently stereotyped, particularly in terms of culture and clothing, despite its rich and diverse cultural traditions. When she said she was moving there:

> ... I remember one of the first questions someone asked me was like, 'Yeah, but how would you dress there? It might be awful, you know, like everyone has the burqa'. Whereas it's not

[133] Respondent interview on February 3, 2020.
[134] Respondent interview on March 18, 2020.
[135] Respondent interview on February 12, 2020.
[136] Respondent interview on March 10, 2020.
[137] Respondent interview on December 20, 2019.

> only the burqa, it's also like amazing headscarves in different shades, the different colors, the different dresses etc. and the different art and crafts ...

She also remarked that Afghan bread was better than French bread.[138]

Respondent 19, a female Australian consultant working for a U.S. contractor, was fascinated by the culture's poor treatment of women, and said as a female foreigner, she was able to go to every event:

> We always said [as Western women] we were like the third sex ... you had access to women's events and men's events, because you weren't considered one of their women or probably weren't considered much of anything. [139]

Some respondents were struck by the beauty of the landscape. Respondent 10, a European woman contracting to NATO, found it "probably the most beautiful country I've ever been in".[140] Respondent 30, an Australian pilot contracting to the military, said if it wasn't for the war, Afghanistan would be an "adventure traveller's absolute paradise"— "the topography is second to none in the world" and "by and large, the people are terrific too".[141] Respondent 12, a North American male diplomat, found Afghanistan physically beautiful and diverse:

> I think maybe in a war zone, you have a heightened sense of everything around you, including your environment, but I love … the Afghan landscape, the mountains, the deserts, the little villages up the hillside. [142] [143]

---

[138] Respondent interview on February 3, 2020.
[139] Respondent interview on March 6, 2020.
[140] Respondent interview on February 3, 2020.
[141] Respondent interview on March 5, 2020.
[142] Respondent interview on Feb 19, 2020.
[143] Two respondents stridently did not find the country attractive. Respondent 7, a North American working in various roles, including in the private sector and at the local university, said: "The Kabul river was awful. Just everywhere was just dirt and rocks and mud. And so it's difficult to call that beautiful in my book". Respondent 2, a European private sector worker remarked: "I don't mean to sound harsh but I think people overemphasise two things in Afghanistan. One is how friendly the locals are, and two is how beautiful the country is. And I think I would contest both of those. Let's say they are friendly, but they're as friendly as anyone else ... And then their culture isn't particularly inclusive or forgiving. Their culture is actually the opposite to that in most parts of my experience ... And the landscape isn't beautiful at all. There are aspects of it that are nice for Afghanistan".

The memoirists similarly raise an appreciation of the places they spent time in. Surgeon Nott travels to very dangerous and often remote locations to perform surgeries, and consistently encounters people who impres him, as well as beautiful landscapes. He admires Syrian surgeons who continue to work under the most violent conditions. Aside from the people, Nott travels in many exotic locations. He watches dramatic sunsets from the rooftop of a MSF hospital in Atmeh, Syria—"a vast swathe of deep blue, with the occasional wispy cloud"—though he is nearly taken away by a rebel group for photographing it as they think he is recording their fighters (Nott 2019, 16).

Loyd's memoir reads like a travel narrative—page after page introducing new characters, beautiful landscapes and incredible vignettes —except his journey unfolds amid a vicious war. "We rode with them up a winding mountain track high into the mist-laden forests," he writes. "At the edge of a small grass plateau we found a tiny hamlet of three houses, smoking and stinking of burned flesh" (Loyd 1999, 150). Another time he is transfixed by a dead Russian girl, "Alive she was strikingly pretty. Dead she was so beautiful you could have raised an army to sack Troy just for the possession of her casket" (Loyd 1999, 6). Later, travelling with a mercenary and after spending the night sleeping out in the open sky, they arrive in a small town, where his pleasure at the moment is palpable:

> Lights shone from the ground floor of a small hotel on our right, so we stopped there for some coffee, pulling up a couple of chairs to a table still damp with the night's dew. The moment remains so clear in my mind: the stillness of the town in its waking moments, the distant cry of a cockerel, the sense of easy introspection in our mood, the feeling of unfolding and limitless adventure, the flippant shrug of shoulders with which we agreed on the venue to drink coffee (Loyd 1999, 48).

Pleasure as part of life

For the respondents, it was evident that pleasure came in many forms— and it was often very *normal*. While they had differing views on whether they were "in war", they found pleasure in everyday life in the conflict.

Respondent 24, a female European NGO worker, remarked that:

> ... pleasure is not like directly connected or unconnected to the war, it's just like part of your life ... it's maybe hard to have pleasurable moments, but you still want to or they still happen. Right? I would say it's normal in a sense.[144]

Respondent 3, a North American woman who consulted for USAID, described how people carried on with their lives, sharing a story about a friend in Kabul:

> So in one part of the city's there's this massive attack going on, and in another part of the city, there's someone that's trying on shoes, you know. And that's just the reality—people really try to make the best of what they have, and enjoy life.[145]

Respondent 32, a male European UN worker, said that living and working in a warzone was simply daily life, and the pleasures he experienced weren't derived from conflict itself:

> The pleasure derives from the friendships that you make, from experiencing culture, from learning new things ... There's lots of pleasure in all of that. I got an immense pleasure from all that. [146]

Respondent 1, a male European UN worker said that life goes on during war. "Afghans went along with their lives, they were getting married, they were having children and they were having parties," he said. [147] Respondent 17, a female North American consulting to USAID, felt similarly, pointing out that Afghan colleagues would have a baby, "… everybody's happy, and everybody's hopeful, and they're joyful and how can you not enjoy and be joyful for that?"[148]

Respondent 11, a male European NGO worker, found pleasure in war "very human, very natural" and there was nothing wrong with it:

> If you're asking me to dedicate the next decade of my life to go to war zones, from shithole, sorry, to shithole, and dealing with the traumas that you will be dealing with, you have to have an outlet. You have to be able to enjoy yourself and you cannot take on the entire suffering of

[144] Respondent interview on March 11, 2020.
[145] Respondent interview on December 20, 2019.
[146] Respondent interview on July 1, 2020.
[147] Respondent interview on December 12, 2019.
[148] Respondent interview on February 18, 2020

> the world on your own person …. You will lose all perspective and all ability to actually affect that change and that help that you were there to give in the first place. Then you might as well go home and then you've done nothing. [149]

Enjoying "living-in-violence"

Some respondents were drawn to the excitement of being in a conflict area. However, it wasn't a dominant theme. As mentioned previously, Respondent 5, a female European journalist and film maker, was drawn to the danger, "to try to face danger to to do something risky".[150] Respondent 15, a European female human rights worker, remarked that the danger element possibly enhanced "the pace with which you live your life or the vividness of the life that you're living". [151] Respondent 27, a female Middle Eastern UN worker, moved to Cambodia after Afghanistan but found it boring, "because that suspense, you know, and that sense of adventure that I had in Kabul was not there". [152] She next moved to Syria.

For the memoirists, the excitement element is notable and there are too many examples to include. Journalist Loyd recalls spending time in a UN guest house, eating well and "the atmosphere around the table charged with the excitement you always find when normality has unravelled and the arrival of war promises the potential new adventure (Loyd 1999, 225). Journalist Addario asks, "How could I describe that feeling of freedom and exhilaration I had when I was living in the dirt in a place like Camp Vegas, where life's utter necessities, like water, food, sleep and staying alive were all that mattered?" (Addario 2015, 240). Or as journalist Ana van Es remarks, "Let's be frank, war is also just fun" (van der Hoeven and Kester 2022, 269). Humanitarian lawyer Cain arrives in Mogadishu, Somalia on a helicopter, "…a stiff new UN passport and an armed American escort …The desert air and sand blast up into the bird from the downdraft of the blades, and I'm in a movie (Cain, Postlewait and Thomson 2004,104).

[149] Respondent interview on February 12, 2020.
[150] Respondent interview on December 20, 2019.
[151] Respondent interview on February 24, 2020.
[152] Respondent interview on March 2025, 2020.

Conclusion

For the respondents and memoirists, experiencing pleasure while living or working in a warzone appears not only possible—it is unavoidable and an ordinary part of life. For those on the front lines, it involved moments of intensity, connection, and accomplishment. For those living in the everyday of war, it was also an intense space, where vibrant social lives, professional milestones, and emotional intimacy unfolded against a backdrop of violence. At it's heart, war could be described as a great job but also an incredibly enriching life experience.

As Respondent 16, a North American woman working for U.S.AID, put it:

> I was never so aware of the vast depth of human resilience when I was in Afghanistan. It may be a cultural thing because the Afghans always talk about Zendagi—they talk about life and all the songs on the radio are about Zendagi. They're not about love—all our songs are about love—but their songs are about life … They recognise every moment of their life—what a precious gift it is. [153]

For respondents in Afghanistan in particular, pleasure took many forms: the rush of adrenalin, professional fulfilment, friendships forged in compounds and bunkers, and over cups of tea. For many, the work itself was a source of deep satisfaction and meaning. In the everyday of conflict, people continued to find connection, joy, purpose and meaning. Across the material, one theme emerged with clarity: war is alive with pleasure.

[153] Respondent interview on February 22, 2020

Chapter 6

Combatant pleasures

My heart is filled with gladness when I see

Strong castles besieged, stockades broken down and overwhelmed,

Many vassals struck down,

Horses of the dead and wounded roving at random,

And when battle is joined, let all men of good lineage

Think of naught but the breaking of heads and arms,

For it is better to die than be vanquished and live …

I tell you I have no such joy as when I hear the shout

“On! On!” from both sides and the neighing of riderless steeds,

And groans of “Help me! Help me!”

And when I see both great and small

Fall in the ditches and on the grass

And see the dead transfixed by spear shafts!

Lord, mortgage your domains, castles, cities,

But never give up war!

French poet Bertran de Born (1140s – approx 1215)

(cited in Barbara Tuchman 1978, 16)

Trenches

Hot, hot trenches are full of joy;

Attacks on the enemy are full of joy.

Guns in our hands and magazine belts over my shoulders;

Grenades on my chest are full of joy.

The enemy can't resist when he sees them;

Black hair and stiff moustaches are full of joy.

He who fights in the field is manly;

Houses full of black-haired women are full of joy.

We become eager two times after hearing it:

The clang, clang and rockets are full of joy.

Leave the lips and spring, O poet!

Poems full of feeling are full of joy.

Jawad, I say, on the true path of jihad,

All kinds of troubles are full of joy.

Jawad (Jawad 2012, 156-157)

These two poems, separated by nearly 900 years and rooted in vastly different worldviews—a French troubadour and an Afghan fighter—both viscerally capture and celebrate combat: its thrills, pleasures, and transformative power. While some soldiers may relate to intensity of these verses, for swathes of the population, this yearning to fight is discombobulating and inappropriate, a tragic glorification of war. But as offensive as it may seem, soldiers experience a raft of pleasures in war.

In this chapter, I will explore pleasure with insights from memoirs and poetry, as well as from a range of scholarship, including IR (albeit briefly), anthropology, psychology, and military studies. By analysing this material, I will argue there are six main categories of pleasure for soldiers and include camaraderie and kinship; exhilaration and excitement (especially among those exposed to combat or bombardment); spectacle and seeing the world; play and leisure; and renown.

In many instances, these categories are intertwined. For example, achieving goals brings exhilaration; witnessing the spectacle of war can lead to a sense of renown. What this ultimately brings into focus—and what IR often overlooks—is that the ways fighters report pleasure in war often echo what the lone Frenchwoman was trying to tell us all those years ago: that she felt *alive*. While we traditionally understand war, with all its disruptions, as a source of trauma and suffering, for some, it appears to offer so many forms of pleasure that, when combined, they bring intense meaning to existence.

The pleasures of noncombatants are perhaps more relatable, forgivable, or understandable—they are, after all, not killing anyone. But for soldiers, how are we to reconcile the tension between their "good pleasures" and their job, which is to kill and maim? It is not a straightforward question. What is clear, however, is that these pleasures remain largely unexplored in IR. This chapter is structured as follows. I will outline six main categories of "good" pleasures—along with their subcategories—which reflect the depth and richness of these themes.

Sense of purpose

The U.S. soldier and philosopher J Glenn Gray noted that someone who lives long enough to survive war, "is no longer who he was …man as warrior is only partly a man, yet, fatefully enough, this aspect of him is capable of transforming the whole" (Gray 1970, 27). This transformation is evident in the memoirs. Across historical periods and cultural contexts, combatants describe their time in war as

awakening a deeper consciousness, helping fulfill long-held personal or professional ambitions, and offering a heightened sense of purpose rooted in ideals. The changes come about in three key ways: as spiritual and existential revelation; as the pursuit of personal and professional fulfillment, and through a commitment to an ideal.

Harari's analysis of military memoris from the Middle Ages to the present day shows that in the modern era, physically being in war or "flesh-witnessing" provides soldiers with some sort of revelation, "a message for all humanity" (Harari 2008, 11). Diarists have a range of epiphanies, ranging from "religious ecstasy" to "poetic inspiration" and "moments of metaphysical or ideological revelation" (Harari 2008, 154).

This range of epiphanies is evident in the memoirs. The Norwegian soldier Erik Elden, serving in Afghanistan, describes going through his "second great change", where he finds "a new consciousness on a spiritual plane, like the Indian [Native American] tests of manhood where you are exposed to fear, pain and loneliness" (Elden cited in Dyvik 2016, 197). The experience is one of "total focus in the moment and a constant acknowledgement of one's own vulnerability and mortality" (Elden cited in Dyvik 2016, 197). Ernst Jünger has many revelations during World War I. He views the war in existential terms, "that one's existence is part of an eternal circuit, and that the death of a single individual is no such great matter (Jünger 1996, 144). He realises that with the machinery, the poisonous gas, the technology, he is fighting in a new era of war, "Chivalry here took a final farewell. It had to yield to the heightened intensity of war, just as all fine and personal feeling has to yield when machinery gets the upper hand" (Jünger 1996, 109).

Aside from revelations, war helps some soldiers achieve personal goals. As mentioned previously, contemporary Danish soldiers report going to war in Afghanistan in pursuit of "warrior dreams" to become "true warriors" and to act out a "desire for the real" (Pedersen 2017,23). The soldiers want to be "tried and tested in real life", and the war experience is more "about oneself, one's own desires, one's own dreams" (Pedersen 2017,24). The men are engaged in a "a project of self-becoming" (Pedersen 2017,10). Other scholarship about Danish soldiers in Afghanistan also shows their desire to be chasing personal goals. While they go to war for thrill and excitement, they also see it as a way to develop their professional identity, to gain "real soldier experience" (Brænder 2020,23). One soldier, when asked about his best experience in Afghanistan, says it was entering a firefight, "and you can

see that, that it works ... Well, that you can see that all the boys do their job as they should and that people react as they ought to" (Brænder 2020,38).

The pleasure of achieving personal and professional goals is echoed throughout British soldier Patrick Hennessey's memoirs. When he discovers he is heading to Iraq, he is so excited that he is "practically winking at the model-fit door girl as I swaggered into whichever over-priced bar it was where someone was having a birthday" (Hennessey 2009,113). In his first experience of firing a weapon in war—on patrol in Afghanistan—he notes that the "frozen pallor" on his and his fellow soldiers' faces could be either fear, adrenalin or "just the excitement and realisation that the three-year, ten-year, twenty-year expectation of various military careers is finally being fulfilled" (Hennessey 2009,4).

Some soldiers feel war transforms them. Female guerillas fighting with politico-military organisations in Colombia in the 1970s and 80s recall the experience as empowering and leading to self-improvement. In her interviews, Yoana Fernanda Nieto-Valdivieso finds the women learned new skills, such as nursing or as snipers; they developed abilities they didn't have before such as physical endurance and keeping a cool head (Neito-Valdivieso 2017, 84). 'Olga' says being a guerilla improved her life "as a person, academically, all … even one's physical appearance changes … you became organised, you became punctual … (Nieto-Valdivieso 2017, 85). 'Consuelo' says the experience is liberating: "The guerrilla did unchain women from the pain, especially the peasant women. And gave them other ways of being women" (Nieto-Valdivieso 2017,84).

The women do not narrate or interpet their guerilla life as traumatic but that they are instead "fuelled by a revolution dream" (Nieto-Valdivieso 2017, 79). 'Inés' joyfully recounts a story of escaping a military raid on a house, which includes "jumping from a fifth floor while hanging from a rope" and being recognised for her courage. The story gives her "some level of agency" as it was connected to the happiness she found in her identity as a *guerrillera*, "fighting for a common good, welcomed and respected by the community" (Nieto-Valdivieso 2017, 79).

Other fighters also report feeling more worthy from fighting. Sebastian Junger observes that the soldiers in the Korengaal not only feel alive:

> …but the most utilised. The most necessary. The most clear and certain and purposeful. If young men could get that feeling at home, no one would ever want to go to war again, but they can't (Junger 2009,210).

The personal goals are often idealistic – whether it be fighting for a nation, God or a political cause. Ernst Jünger, a volunteer, is proud to be fighting for Germany and after four years at war, discovers that, "life has no depth of meaning except when it is pledged for an ideal ... we learned once and for all to stand for a cause ..." (Jünger 1996, 316). Injured at one point, he is taken for treatment to southwestern Germany and sees some cherry blossoms, "I felt a vivid pang of home-sickness. How beautiful a country, worth bleeding for and dying for!" (Jünger 1996, 30).

The Afghan fighter Zaeef finds joy in fighting for his religious beliefs against the Russians. Aged 15, he is in Pakistan and his family wants him to stay and stop fighting. "But I was eager to rejoin, eager to follow the call of jihad in my country" (Zaeef 2010, 32). His religiosity fuels his approach to fighting, "We weren't concerned with the world or with our lives; our intentions were pure and every one of us was ready to die as a martyr" (Zaeef 2010,42). A similar sentiment is evident throughout the Taliban poetry collection. In one extract, the poet Ramani declares:

> We are the soldiers of Islam and we are happy to be martyred;
>
> We are the men of the battlefield and we fight on the front lines.
>
> Oh Muslims! Rise up! And March towards the qibla of Sutton
>
> I am Ramani, advising you to get ready; we will reach our goal (Ramani 2012, 141).

Exhilaration from fighting

Across scholarship and memoir, the physical pleasure of war and its nuances are more than I expected. There are many moments of high intensity in the before, during and after of fighting, which is consistently described as thrilling, euphoric, and comparable to the intensity of sex. Gray, writing of his time in World War II, captures a smorgasbord of emotional highs and adrenalin-fueled moments. He describes the intense excitement as his ship approaches Normandy, "Moods of fear, anticipation,

helplessness, praying and cursing, adventure and longing succeed each other like lightning" (Gray, 1970,13). He feels exhilaration during an air raid:

> …a quality of excitement scarcely experienced before or since. Fear may have been the dominant feature of such excitement; rarely was it the only ingredient. In such an emotional situation there is often a surge of and a glimpse of potentialities, of what we really are or have been or might become, as fleeting as it is genuine" (Gray, 1970,14).

When it comes to battle, Gray attributes the euphoria to the group, reflecting that for many soldiers, the "communal effort in battle, even under the altered conditions of modern war, has been a high point in their lives." Despite "the horror, the weariness, the grime, and the hatred," he insists it is an experience no soldier wants to miss:

> "…the feeling is hard to comprehend. Probably the feeling of liberation is nearly basic. It is this feeling that explains the curious combination of earnestness and lightheartedness so often noted in men in battle" (Gray 1970,44).

Decades later, a U.S. soldier in Afghanistan tells Sebastian Junger that combat is an "adrenalin rush":

> I'm worried I'll be looking for that when I get home and if I can't find it, I'll just start drinking and getting in trouble. People back home think we drink because of the bad stuff, but that's not true... we drink because we miss the good stuff (Junger 2010, 232).

Hennessey, also fighting in the same war in Afghanistan, recalls a heady mix of adrenalin and euphoria during an unexpected firefight. Hiding in a trench, he wants to talk about it with his colleague, wondering what could compare:

> …the winning goal-scoring punch, the first kiss, the triumphant knicker-peeling moment? Nowhere else sells bliss like this, surely? Not in freefall jumps or crisp blue waves, not on dance floors in pills or white lines—I want to discuss with him whether it's sexually charged because it's the ultimate affirmation of being alive…" (Hennessey, 2009,192-193).

Hennessey bringing up sex in relation to war is a theme in memoirs, whether it be the feeling of having an orgasm that comes from fighting, or an intense need to have sex. As Vietnam veteran

William Broyle's Jnr put it in Esquire in 1984: "War is, in short. a turn-on" (Broyles 1984). Or as an unnamed Norweigan soldier Alfa magazine in 2010: "War is better than sex" (cited in Dyvik 2016,13). Norwegian soldier Erik Elden writes in his memoir that for men in their twenties: "it is easy to compare extreme battle with sex … it is the closest you get to the euphoric joy when you win a battle" (Elden, cited in Dyvik 2016). Fellow soldier Henning Mella describes the joy as similar to ejaculation, noting: "… if you look at the chemical processes that arise in a person during battle, they are similar to emotions that arise during sex" (Mella cited in Dyvik 2016,143). Sebastian Junger also mentions the sexual energy he detects during his time with the U.S. troops in Afghanistan:

> There was so much sexual energy up at Restrepo that it might as well have been a Miami nightclub, except that the only outlet for it was combat, so that's what the men spent their time thinking about (Junger 2010, 151).

A nearby hill is called "Nipple Rock" and "all I can say is that you'd have to have spent a goddam long time in the valley to see a woman's nipple in that thing" (Junger 2010, 151).

Once the fighting stops, the soldiers also feel incredible. Mella describes feeling "extremely alive, almost joyful" (Mella, cited in Dyvik 2016,143) back at base. One German major tells Tomforde that: "I never felt as good as I did after a fight. I suppose that's because of the release of endorphins. You're just happy that you're still alive and that you've made it through" (Tomforde 2025, 125).

British soldier Hennessey is high:

> ... just as the exhaustion kicks in (and the searing pain in my eye) so do the endorphins so it's all good and everyone's faces read the same high, the lights back on at the end of a massive night in some hardcore warehouse and everybody drenched and no longer as beautiful and cool as they were under the strobe lights but still deeply satisfied (Hennessey 2009,194).

His account is eerily like Ernst Jünger's a century earlier:

> Our faces had an after-the-night-before look, and a lark that rose into the sky and began its trills was an added exasperation. We were in much the same mood as when, after a night of play, the cards are flung on to the table and the windows thrown open to let the cool morning air blow away the hanging cloud of cigar smoke (Hennessey 1996,152).

Intense feelings do not stem solely from combat. Gray recalls U.S. troops marching through liberated Rome and small towns in France, where they are embraced and celebrated. Gray says they "felt like conquering heroes, that delicious, boyish sense of triumph and elation, ridiculous but irresistible" (Gray 1970,11). The "intense nervous excitement," is from the realisation that he and his comrades are "participating in historical events of overawing importance" (Gray 1970,10).

Camaraderie and kinship

The camaraderie, that intense bond forged in war, is a constant theme found in war memoirs (Harari 2008, 70). For World War II soldiers, the love is a component of combat motivation (van der Dennen 2005, 84), and amongst Vietnam veterans, it "aroused in them a tenderness and concern for trusted comrades, and they are often surprised and awed by such great feelings for other men" (Nadelson 2005, 127). The love and admiration soldiers have for their colleagues is also laced throughout the memoirs I studied. Sebastian Junger, reflecting on his time with U.S. soldiers in the Korengal Valley, writes that they "form friendships that are not at all sexual but contain much of the devotion and intensity of a romance" (Junger 2010, 155). The soldier Hennessey wonders at the depth of the relationships, asking at one point,

> …what if I'll only ever be able to have real and honest conversations with the boys in future? What if an invisible curtain has come down between me and all the people and things I thought I held close … (Hennessey 2009, 236).

Later, when Hennessey and his colleagues go to a screening about their time in Afghanistan which features in a BBC Panorama program, he slips away from his girlfriend and sits with his mates: "I could only do this sat next to the boys watch it side by side with the guys who'd fought it side by side"(Hennessey 2009,285).

All the memoirs document the men living in close quarters – they eat, sleep, drink, rest, play and battle together. This constant intimacy creates a bond akin to family, and soldiers describe fellow soldiers as brothers, sisters, mothers and fathers; there is a sense of kinship. Ernst Jünger returns to command his company, his men running to meet him, "led me in in triump. It was like coming back to a family circle" (Jünger 1996, 281).

For some women ex-combatants in Columbia, many joined the rebel movement as children and describe their group as a “happy family” in which caring and solidarity are cental (Nieto-Valdivieso 2017, 82). “The militancy made us siblings … You protect them, accompany them, save them, support them, advise them,” says ‘Patricia’ (Nieto-Valdivieso 2017,82). Spending time together everyday in the life and death situations in the close-knit guerilla community, “strengthened the communal feelings and ties of affection” (Nieto-Valdivieso 2017,82). ‘Lillian’ describes her comrades as family, “My compañeras [female comrades] were my mothers, my compañeros [male comrades] my fathers” (Nieto-Valdivieso 2017, 83). ‘Patricia’, another female fighter, says the militancy “made us siblings …You protect them, accompany them, save them, support them, advise them” (Nieto-Valdivieso 2017, 83).

Taliban fighter Zaeef also evokes the idea of family when he discusses the love he has for his fellow soldiers:

> My God be praised! What a brotherhood we had among our mujahedeen! We weren’t concerned with the world or with our lives; our intentions were pure and every one of us was ready to die as a martyr. When I look back on the love and respect we had for each other, it sometimes seems like a dream (Zaeef 201,42).

A striking feature of the Taliban poetry collection is the admiration the poets have for their fellow soldiers. Many of the poems are passionate tributes, focusing on the bravery, courage, and often deaths of their friends. It is such a strong theme that there are too many poems in the collection to choose from. In an extract from *Trench Friend*, Bismillah Sahar writes:

> May my head and property be sacrificed for you, friend,
>
> O my trench friend.
>
> May my heart’s flesh be sacrificed for you, friend,
>
> O my trench friend.
>
> May I be sacrificed for you—may I be sacrificed for your faith,
>
> You are close in the trench, my faith in you grew stronger,

O my trench friend (Sahar 2012, 59-60).

This feeling of affection and protection raises a noteworthy point. Joanna Bourke's study of letters, diaries, memoirs, and reports from British, Australian, and American soldiers finds evidence that soldiers enjoy killing (Bourke 2000). While controversial, this is an example of a "bad" pleasure often associated with the experience of war and discussed in earlier chapters.

But in contrast to this, Sebastian Junger observes in his time with U.S. soldiers bunkering in the Korengal Valley that the men are not looking to murder. He proposes that "perfectly sane, good men" are drawn back to combat again and again not to kill but the opposite—to protect. "The defense of the tribe is an insanely compelling idea, and once you've been exposed to it, there's almost nothing else you'd rather do," he writes (Junger 2010, 240). He says being part of a group has an "intoxicating effect", which more than compensates for the dangers the group faces (Junger 2010, 240).

I quoted Gray earlier, who describes the exhilaration of being in a group in battle—a feeling that he says could even bring "lightheartedness". He believes that this sensation is born from a soldier discovering the power of being part of the communal, feeling "liberated from our individual impotence … drunk with the power that union with our fellows brings". Soldiers in this situation come to recognise how much of life they've missed out on by staying within the "narrow circle of family or a few friends." In these moments, the self expands, they "sense a kinship never known before. Their 'I' passes insensibly into a 'we', 'my' becomes 'our', and individual fate loses its central importance" (Gray 1970,45).

Ernst Jünger also articulates this powerful group feeling when he notes: "What is more sublime than to face death at the head of a hundred men?" (Jünger 1996,27). In some instances, the camaraderie stretches to the enemy. Jünger finds the English "the most formidable but the manliest and the most chivalrous" (Jünger 1996,xiii) and describes encounters with them where they speak as "sportsmanlike" (Jünger 1996,52).

Another area of friendship is with the civilian population, which is a feature of Ernst Jünger's memoirs. He is billeted with all sorts of local French people that he likes and particularly enjoys the conversations. "My billet was extremely comfortable. It was in the house of a jeweller named Plancot-

Bourlon, and he and his wife were both very friendly" (Jünger 1996,162). Jünger also has romances and sexual encounters with local women. On horseback to see a seventeen-year-old girl called Jeanne, he remarks: "It was an evening of May, as though designed for a romantic excursion. The clover lay in dark red billows over the meadows…" (Jünger 1996,65). He is not alone in his encounters: "Our relations with the civil population, too, were, to a great extent, of an undesirable familiarity; Venus deprived Mars of many servants" (Jünger 1996,119). In one town, the troops are in student-like quarters where, "little romantic adventures were the order of the day" (Jünger 1996, 162).

Different types of relationships with the civilian population also feature in Godfrey Maringira's studies of Zimbabwean soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) war in 1998 to 2002. The scholar, who served in the DRC conflict, discusses how friendships between soldiers and local Congolese are formed in the areas where they are deployed. In some cases, soldiers get to know local people through markets, clubs, and sporting events (Maringira 2024). He also looks at how soldiers go out "beyond the trenches, dressed in civilian clothing" where they meet civilian women and date. They also bring women to the trenches, "as part of wartime companionship". As he put it: "…sex in war is a social practice in the context of war which is characterised by emotions of being humane" (Maringira 2023).

The spectacle

It is claimed that the sight of seeing advancing columns of men under fire prompted the American General Robert E. Lee to remark: "It is well that war is so terrible—we would grow too fond of it" (Lee quoted in Gray 1970,31). War is filled with many incredible sights that are a source of pleasure. Soldiers enjoy watching the maelstrom of battle, and experiencing new landscapes. The pleasurable scenes soldiers witness range from the spectacle of shells bursting to the beauty of a moon hanging over the battlefield. This type of aestheticisation—the arresting spectacle of war or what U.S. Marines in the Vietnam call moments of "eye fucking" (Broyles 1984)—are staples in the war memoirs. The spectacles could be awesome to watch yet in some instances triggered a life altering sense of the world.

Gray sees war as offering, "the opportunity of gaping at other lands and other peoples, at curious implements of war, at groups of others like themselves marching in order, and at the captured enemy in the cage (Gray 1970, 29-30). He argues it doesn't have to all be beautiful either—the ugly can be

pleasing to look at, with war offering "colour and movement, variety, panoramic sweep, and sometimes even momentary proportion and harmony" (Gray 1970,31). Gray, a philosopher by training, theorises that the power of the spectacle in war can never be underestimated, and believes it is born from what the Bible calls the "lust of the eye" (Gray 1970,29). The allure of the spectacle also comes from the "fascination that manifestations of power and magnitude hold for the human spirit". Scenes of battle, "much like storms over the ocean or sunsets on the desert … are able to overawe the single individual and hold him in a spell" (Gray 1970, 33).

Gray consistently encounters dramatic and intense scenes. In one vignette, he is sitting on a rock watching a battle "... the panorama was so far reaching that I could see both the explosion of the guns and where their speedy messengers struck… But it was an interesting, stirring sight." He watches incredible spectacles of combat planes in the sky, which "can nearly sate the eye with all the elements of fearful beauty" (Gray 1970,32).

The wild sights make him swell with intense feelings:

> Yesterday morning we left Rome and took up the pursuit of the rapidly fleeing Germans. And again the march was past ruined, blackened villages, destroyed vehicles, dead and mangled corpses of German soldiers, dead and stinking horses, blown bridges, and clouds of dust that blackened our faces and filled our clothes…Later I watched a full moon sail through a cloudy sky… saw German bombers fly past and our antiaircraft bursts around them…I felt again the aching beauty of this incomparable land. I remembered everything that I had ever been and was. It was painful and glorious (Gray 1970,34)

Ernst Jünger writes so much that he is awestruck by that it is impossible to cover them all within the scope of this thesis. He arrives on the battlefield:

> A magnificent panorama of the battle of the Somme in its opening stages was spread before us. The front-line sectors were veiled in clouds of white and black smoke, and one upon another the shell-bursts towered up into the sky (Jünger 1996,78).

He witnesses a series of houses in a village collapse:

> As though by magic, one house after another was sucked into the earth. Walls collapsed, gables fell, and bare rafters were flung through the air to mow the roofs of neighbouring houses. Clouds of splinters danced above whitish swathes of vapour. Eye and ear hung as though entranced upon this dance of destruction (Jünger 1996, 138).

Sensory

Ernst Jünger also writes of the colours, shapes and smells of smoke in battle—it is yellow, black and white, and forms as "clouds", "swaying clouds", "columns" and "cones" (Jünger 1996). British soldier Hennessey, based in the Upper Gereshk Valley in Afghanistan, describes their flares lighting up the landscape, "…bathing the beautiful river valley in the eerie glow" (Hennessey 2009,161). On patrol, once he stops firing ammunition, he observed: "... the last of the strangely beautiful red firefly tracer has burned out like a shooting star thousands of metres away I peer hopefully into the dark …" (Hennessey 2009,20).

Music also has a role in war[154]. Hennessey consistently discusses the songs they play, a soundtrack adding a touch of the cinematic to their patrols. On their first venture outside the base in Afghanistan, Metallica's 'For Whom The Bell Tolls' beat out 'Too Many DJs Prodigy vs. Enya 'Smack My Bitch Up (Orinoco Flow)' as the song to play (Hennessey 2009, 20). In Iraq, Hennessey and his colleagues argue:

> ... over whether or not rap was the most appropriate soundtrack to this particular war. *Jarhead* was right, everybody needed to move on from the whole Vietnam-rock thing, and it seemed to us that the rampant consumerism of gangsta rap struck a chord with our little oil war, so we cruised the airfield in our own hummer blasting out Big Pun and the Terror Squad and Busta and scaring the hell out of the Danes, who thought it was a drive-by (Hennessey 2009, 138-139).

[154] Spotify users have uploaded war-related playlists and focus on specific conflicts like Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Particular tracks he plays as he jogs around the compound in Afghanistan music "had been perfect then for the bloodthirsty daydreams, what we would encounter … and the imagined bloody fire fight" (Hennessey 2009, 236).

The surreal

For soldiers, another pleasurable part of the spectacle is seeing the surreal and the strange. This includes looking at corpses. After taking a French position on the Western front, Ernst Jünger encountered his first dead soldier, and then realise there were more, "all round lay dozens of corpses, putrefied, calcined, mummified, fixed in a ghastly dance of death (Jünger 1996, 22). He describes this first glimpse of these bodies as "important in the experience of war. The horrible was undoubtedly a part of that irresistible attraction that drew us into the war" (Jünger 1996, 23). Over a century later, Hennessey too wants to see a dead enemy soldier after a fight:

> …. like perverts for death we push forward past the poetic and eerily beautiful sight of bright red blood, exploded heads and twisted torsos against the brown dry poppy and lush green ganja, well-tooled up pakistanis and iranians oozing life into the muddy water of the ditches they ambushed us from (Hennessey 2009, 278).

Gray consistently ponders death and seeing the dead, the sight enthralling him and triggering existential thinking. He passes a "handsome young German man" swaying from a tree, executed by his own troops. Gray cuts the man down and his body falls, "my gaze … caught and held for some minutes by the expression on his regular features. Seldom have I seen a look of greater inner happiness on a human face, dead or alive" (Gray 1970,121). He writes of being "under the spell of the strange":

> I think every soldier must have felt at times that this or that happening fitted into nothing that had gone before; it was incomprehensible, either absurd or mysterious or both (Gray 1970, 15).

He and fellow soldiers hear of a man living alone in the woods and go looking for him, encountering a dead soldier and local people scavenging items along the way. "The macabre aspect of this adventure was like something out of Edgar Allen Poe" (Gray 1970,17). They find the man is an American deserter

who does not want to go back to the front. A few weeks later, near the Italian front, Gray goes for a walk in the hills and meets an old hermit, who doesn't understand the battle in front of him. "Could it be, I asked myself, that he does not know about the war?" (Gray 1970,19). Gray explains World War II, and realising he understands it as little as the old man does, wonders what his philosophy professors really know about life too:

> Their wisdom was almost grotesquely inadequate for the occasion. I knew then that I could rely no longer on them for help; there was no one but myself … There was a rare element of liberation about this experience of strangeness …" (Gray 1970,20).

I discussed revelation earlier, and the strange also inspired new thinking. Gray's revelatory experience chime with Harari's observation of the combat epiphany, where war "released them [soldiers] from their cultural preconceptions and offered them a glimpse of pure truth – whatever it may be" (Harari 2008,156).

Some of these revelations stretch to the spiritual realm. Maringira's study of Zimbabwean soldiers in the DRC explores how soldiers come to understand the local spiritual beliefs of the landscape they are deployed in. They are told by a local village chief that the ghosts they are seeing at night and the many snakes in the area are the "spirits of the land", and that they are friendly. Maringira says the soldiers—who are advised to not kill any snakes—realise this is not part of standard operating procedure but they accept the local attitudes:

> For the local people, snakes in the deployment area were said to be very cooperative and understanding of the soldiers' operations. In a way the soldiers' belief in snakes as spirits … helped the local Congolese establish social relationships with them (Maringira 2024, 92).

Play and leisure

The soldier's memoirs and scholarship bring up swathes of play, laughter, fun and leisure in varying forms. In and around the trenches of the Western Front during World War I, Ernst Jünger recalls many, many episodes of pleasure, which reflect the everyday/living in-violence/the 'in between' of

war. He shares many pleasures with soldiers in and around the trenches, and with locals in the surrounding villages over the four years he is in war.

Compared to contemporary memoirs, it is notable how much alcohol he and his colleagues drink. I counted at least 37 instances of him drinking or mentions of others doing so. Sometimes he drinks before a raid: “Schultz discovered me behind a bush in close confabulation with a bottle of Burgundy that I had brought with me to invigorate me for the precarious adventure and to calm my nerves” (Jünger 1996,159). He is tipsy when they take an English trench: “After half an hour we proceeded, in an exalted mood to which the English rum may have contributed …” (Jünger 1996,230). They celebrate successful engagements: “After these excitements we drank a few bottles of red wine in Sievers’s dugout” (Jünger 1996, 63). They drink the alcohol they find in abandoned houses: “I invited a party of my fellow-officers to drink mulled wine spiced with all the spices left behind by the owner of the house” (Jünger 1996,129). They drink when they left a town: “…we celebrated our departure from Orainville by a tremendous beer-drinking in the huge barn” (Jünger 1996,11).

There are parties: “At night when walking late through the narrow streets one heard the sounds of carnival in every billet” (Jünger 1996, 120). They drink for fun, escapism and to get highly intoxicated: “I must own that we often drank heavily until, indeed, we treated the whole world as no more than a laughable phantom that circled round our table” (Jünger 1996,112). Aside from the constant appearance of bottles of wine and barrels of beer, he also enjoys cherry-brandy, ginger beer, cognac, rum, schnaps, raw spirits, whisky and lots of cups of coffee and tea.

Food is a constant theme. While the men are often hungry and are deprived of decent meals, Jünger—perhaps because he is a lieutenant—intermittently enjoy “hearty meals”. These include “wonderful” bean soup, scrambled eggs and fried potatoes, rabbit, fowl, bully-beef”,”gigantic” pike, bread, “course red jam”, “delicious” peaches, “excellent dishes of eggs”, cocoa and tins of beef. At one point, a “beautiful ration of meat disappeared for good beneath a shower of rubble” (Jünger 1996, 18). They find food in a captured English trench, “all that a gourmet could desire” (Jünger 1996, 267)

Jünger enjoy smoking pipes and cigars. “I often think of those long, meditative November evenings which I spent smoking my pipe” (Jünger 1996,119). “There I sat down on the edge of the steep bank on my cloak, and, lighting a pipe as cautiously as possible, I gave rein to my thoughts” (Jünger

1996,149). “Then I lit a pipe and read the numerous French newspapers lying all round” (Jünger 1996,24). He and his fellow soldiers played many card games, including Skat, Polish Lottery and ‘seven and four’. “At night we drank tea together, play cards, and talked” (Jünger 1996,162). He arrives at the abandoned home of an artisan: “I did what I could to give the right note to my arrival by throwing a pack of cards on the table and my riding-boots on the double bed” (Jünger 1996,300). Other sources of entertainment included rat hunts, “a favourite diversion in the dreary round of trench duty” (Jünger 1996,38).

Jünger write of much laughter, comedy, practical jokes and dark humour. A joke they tell in the trench is about people getting so destroyed by a shell that they are “scraped off with a spoon and buried in the pot” (Jünger 1996,132). One practical joke involves creeping through the trench late at night and shouting “gas mask” and counting how long it takes for everyone to get their masks on (Jünger 1996,45). The soldiers even play make believe war – throwing clumps of mud at each other from specially built small trenches furnished with wire (Jünger 1996,50). He finds slapstick in terrifying moments, describing one instance where the men being shelled are “irresistibly comic, in spite of the danger,” as they scramble and stumble for cover (Jünger 1996, 88). The soldiers also have fun with their weapons, and the atmosphere in the trench is often “quite jolly”. Some find a “malicious satisfaction” in watching shells hit enemy trenches and “delight” in shooting off rifle grenades and mortars. Some men are “hotheads” who are always puzzling over ways to trick to the enemy, such as tying a bell to the wire and a long string to “excite the English”. “Even the war is a joke to them” (Jünger 1996,43).

He spends hours, days and months in the trenches talking and socialising. He regularly meets with fellow officers to drink coffee, enjoy a bottle of wine, smoke, and play cards. “Those pleasant hours in the dugout outweigh the memory of many days of blood and dirt and exhaustion,” he recalls (Jünger 1996,59). As mentioned earlier, he is often billeted or moved into empty homes, where he can relax, although bombs are never far away.

> I was sitting in my billet on the Emmichs Platz in the mood appropriate to the first day of rest, comfortably drinking coffee, when suddenly a monster of a shell, the herald of a heavy bombardment, exploded at my very door and blew the window into the room (Jünger 1996, 56).

The leisures are a counterbalance to the horrors of the war. “The little pleasures that life offered borrowed an unimagined enhancement from the unceasing thunder of the guns and from the destiny whose oppression never left one’s mind” (Jünger 1996, 67).

Hennessey’s memoirs— penned nearly a century later— while not as relentlessly violent as Jünger’s, are equally filled with laughter, games, friendship and leisure. His context is entirely different though— in Iraq and Afghanistan, they live on bases and are fairly cut off from the local society. Still, they find time to relax. Aside from the “lad” jokes and tomfoolery, they watch DVDs—a lot of *Gray’s Anatomy*, in particular—and read books to pass time (Hennessey 2009). The Taliban poetry captures the intensity of what they are fighting for and does not refer to much frivolity. There is one instance, however, where the Afghan poet Feda writes of a day on the battlefield and afterwards, that they “relieve the evening headache with hashish” (Feda 2012, 157).

Travel and adventure

The soldiers’ memoirs read like travel writing which is apt because warfare has “hidden moments of pleasure, leisure, relaxation, and play”(Lisle 2016, 28). Ernst Jünger is relentlessly delighted with the French landscape— admiring the beauty around him, the abandoned houses he stays in and the varied settings in which he drinks and enjoys interesting companionship. Even the front is at times enchanting: “The front line wound through an idyllic meadowland shadowed by small groups of trees and beautified now by the tender colours of spring” (Jünger 1996,143). Hennessey, writing about the Upper Gereshk Valley in Afghanistan, is also charmed by his environment, “…the entire valley spread out below our castle, hazily beautiful and deceptively calm …” (Hennessey 2009,1997).

The collection of Taliban poetry often invokes the beauty of Afghanistan, and the homeland they are fighting for. In an extract, Habibi, writing in the 1990s during the war agains the Russians, declares:

> May I be sacrificed, sacrificed for your high, high mountains,
>
> For your flowerlike chest and pines.
>
> May I be sacrificed for you, my homeland, each region of yours is beauty,
>
> Each of your stones are rubies, each bush of yours is medicine .... (Habibi 2012, 73).

Aside from noting beauty around them, some soldiers fall into the hum of the day-to-day in the context of conflict. Hennessey experiences pleasure in his daily life, which underscores that his war experience is more than just combat:

> It was perfect. I don't mean perfect in any sense of ideal, perfect in any sense that living rough on the front line of a hot and bitter fight could be, but perfect in that it was all so clichéd. The dead man's sandals on the first night, the patrols through thick, head-high fields, the days in the firebase under the sweltering sun, all bandanas and dog-tags and cooling off with dips in the river… The noisy cicada, the occasional braying of the donkey, the trickle of water through the sluice-gates, the long night hours gazing at the sky, picking out the satellites through the NVGs, the Nimrods from the shooting stars and the thrill of a comet or the majesty of the Milky Way, these became our canvas…(Hennessey 2009,186).

Nearly a century earlier, Ernst Jünger, also reflects on the calmer moments amidst the "fatiguing monotony":

> ... there were many pleasant hours even in the line. I often sat at the table of my little dugout, whose roughly planked walls, hung with aspens, had a look of the Wild West, and enjoyed a pleasant feeling of being comfortably tucked away, as I drank a cup of tea, read and smoked while my batman was busy at the tiny stove and a smell of toast rose in the air (Jünger 1996, 46).

Renown

War brings soldiers a unique kind of recognition—from the respect of peers and the community, to medals, uniforms, parades, and decorations, to the symbolic weight of battle scars and the prestige of surviving combat. Clausewitz regularly discusses emotions and remarks that fame and glory are powerful motivators for military leaders, "Of all the passions that inspire man in battle, none, we have to admit, is so powerful and so constant as the longing for honour and renown" (Clausewtiz 1984, 105). As mentioned in the previous chapter, Levy describes this honour and renown as a "symbolic reward" of a soldier's job (Levy 2007, 189). [155] These rewards are often seen in media portrayals,

[155] Aside from symbolic rewards, Levy says soldiers also have material rewards, including access to pensions, housing, aid to go to university etc (Levy 2007, 189). More broadly, it is interesting how in

where soldiers are typically glorified, depicted as “unstoppable heroes in camouflage” (Powell 2014, 167). Soldiers also have recognition from within their own ranks—by having combat experience they “receive a certain amount of respect from their comrades” and are part of an “insider circle”(Tomforde 2025, 127).

Contemporary fighters also feel the benefits. Rwandan soldiers and those involved in overseas peacekeeping missions self-report a feeling of “uniqueness” in their “people’s army, full of heroes” (Kuehnel and Wilén 2018, 166). Israeli soldiers who serve in the Yom Kippur War in 1973 also experience feeling “heroic” (Lomsky-Feder 2004). Meanwhile, female Danish and Swedish soldiers report a range of experiences in Afghanistan, including feeling a sense of honour and worth (Rosamond and Kronsell 2018). As mentioned earlier, female fighters in Colombia also find joy in their identity as a *guerrilleras* through the respect they find amongst their group and in the community (Nieto-Valdivieso 2017).

This pride in being a warrior and identifying as an Afghan mujahed fighter is particularly evident throughout much of the Taliban poetry collection. Qatin captures the bravery, pride, legitimacy, religiosity and fame of being an Afghan fighter: “Look, I am a known champion in history/I am an Afghan mujahed, I am an Afghan mujahed ...” (Qatin 2012, 139). Ramani declares: “We are the heroes of the era and we are the conquerers of every field…” (Ramani 2012, 141).

The poetry often invokes history and how the mujahed will be remembered throughout time. “Blood debt” opens with Abdul Matin Ibrahimkhil saying: “Today, I write history on my enemy’s chest with my sword ... My enemy, go and read the history of heroism...” (Ibrahimkhil 2012, 71). The poets also explore the fame to be found from fighting. As Qatin remarks: “May I be sacrificed for a head that is sacrificed for honour, history will compliment it in the parade of the famous...” (Qatin 2012, 135).

---

the contemporary memoirs, money and wages are not mentioned—perhaps it is the taboo within the taboo. Harari’s analysis of military memoirs from 1450 to 2000 shows that in earlier periods, money was of more interest to mercenaries than the “experience” of war. “It all boiled down to coins, lands, and lucrative posts – what went on inside him was irrelevant”(Harari 2008, 111). For example, he cites the diaries of Sebastian Schertlin von Burtenbach, a senior commander who fights in the 1500s. Terrible things happen—being forced to eat horses, donkey and dogs during a siege, losing all his followers in a battle—but his main interest is how many florins he can make (Harari 2008, 111).

The adulation also comes from the liberated population. In World War II, Gray recalls entering liberated Rome in June 1944, where the adulation is overwhelming:

> Thousands of veterans must remember our entry… as if by magic we were in a beautiful city, full of sunshine and of excited people intent on showering us with favours. In place of the sad and dumpy creatures we had supposed all Italians were, here were fresh-faced, bare-legged, wonderful girls, hungry for men, who seemed to regard us when we first entered the city as akin to demigods … In France, it happened in many a town and city that we felt like conquering heroes, that delicious, boyish sense of triumph and elation, ridiculous but irresistible (Gray 1970,10-11)

Emblems of honour

Pleasure also comes with honours and awards. Ernst Jünger mentions his decorations— he is awarded the Iron Cross of the 1st class and the Knight's Cross with Swords of the Royal House Order of Hohenzollern. While he says he has "peculiar views as to orders and decorations … I confess I was proud to pin the enamel cross with the gold rim to my breast" (Jünger 1996,237). Jünger also counted how many times he has been hit—14 in total, leaving him with twenty punctures, and the ability to "confidently" take his place "in every warlike circle" (Jünger 1996,315). Decorated with gold wound-stripes—a stripe given to soldiers injured in combat— he describes it as a "visible sign of his gallantry" and confesses to sewing it on his coat "with a certain pleasure" (Jünger 1996,315). He asks: " …who would grudge a heart that has so often beaten fast in the excitement of battle for country's sake the adornment of a bit of enamel as the outward sign?" (Jünger 1996,315).

Hennessey raises medals and recognition throughout his memoir. Despite his grandfather being against war, the soldier shows him his first medal, "I knew he was proud" (Hennessey 2009). Although he says nobody joins the Army to win medals, "once we'd been out on a real tour, a war-fighting tour with its own rosette and people performing heroics every day, suddenly we wanted more" (Hennessey 2009,286). He is frank about the validation and respect from peers and senior staff that awards brings:

> …we wanted documents signed in black and white and glinting metal forged with our names to shout to the rafters that what we had done was not wrong, not bad, but glorious and

> heroic, and we weren't sick to feel that it had all been such fucking good fun (Hennessey 2009,288).

He expresses a secret envy that a badly wounded colleague is "back home with the cool story and the cool scar" (Hennessey 2009,205) and later says that "… hell a shrapnel wound is cool as long as it doesn't actually do any damage" (Hennessey 2009,196).

For the Afghan mujahed, honour is immaterial and more derived from serving Islam and achieving the goal of expelling foreign invaders. This sense of honour is evident in many of the poems. In an extract from "A Mujahed's Wish From His Mother", for example, Abu Fazl writes:

> Mother! pray for me, i am going into battle tomorrow;
>
> i am going for Allah's satisfaction, without delay;
>
> battle has many rewards;
>
> Allah will grant me paradise... (Fazl 2012,138)

Looking good

Aesthetics is another way that soldiers feel good; it is a common adage, after all, that soldiers "look good in uniform". As quoted in the introduction, U.S. General George. S. Patton wrote to his wife in 1918, declaring how good he looks:

> I wear silk khaki shirts made to order, khaki socks also made to order. I change my boots at least once during the day and my belts are wonders to see they are so shiny and polished. I have the leather on my knees blanked every time I ride and my spurs polished with silver polish. In fact I am a wonder to behold (cited in Hillman 2004,166).

Hennessey also finds uniforms as attractive. He visits a friend in the mess hall at St James's Palace, where he is in a "bastard-smart uniform surrounded by silver and pretension" (Hennessey 2009, 31). He even finds some of the medals attractive —the Telic medal for Operational Service in Iraq, for example, looks "so good on a tunic" (Hennessey 2009, 111). When reflecting on leaving the military:

> Take the leap, the plunge … away from the safety net and the coddled, built-in sense of importance and the party banter and the uniforms and the excitement and paddle off into the sunset, knowing you'll always gaze enviously at whatever news reports follow (Hennessey 2009,294).

In Afghanistan, while turbans are a potent cultural symbol, they also have a place in warrior identity. In the Taliban collection, for example, Mohammad Wali Armani hopes that "our collapsed turbans rise up once again" (Armani 2012, 120). The turban is often invoked as a source of pride in connection to military prowess, alongside swords, daggers, bullets and ammunition. Janbaz writes of the "Talib's beautiful white, white turban/ That survived this attack... " (Janbaz 2012, 106) while Sadullah Sa'eed Zabuli in "A Time is coming" says: "A white caravan of turban-wearers is coming from all directions, They have the beautiful light of justice in their hands" (Zabuli 2012, 69).

In the more recent Afghan war, in one poem, a mujahed takes pride in emitting power through his general appearance:

> The reason we always fold our moustaches upwards
>
> Is because we break the necks of our enemies.
>
> We are all united. Out path and our movement is united.
>
> We fold our white turbans and black pahj on our heads.
>
> We are happy when we are martyred for our extreme zeal and honour;
>
> This is the reason we strap bombs around our waists....[156] [157](Anon 2012, 147).

Another source of pleasure is physical fitness and having an attractive body, with soldiers often sunbathing or working out during their downtime. For Danish soldiers, it is known as "buff time" (Pedersen 2017, 18). US soldiers coming in from Iraq, while resenting the constraints of the military system, "also loved the attention and power they got while in uniform; they loved their weapons,

---

[156] Anon, "The Message of a Devoted Mujahed," 147.
[157] "Some people fold their moustache hairs upwards to signify bravery as Genghis Khan was known to do" (Strick van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012, 238)

their camaraderie, and their robust bodies" (Crane-Seeber 2016,43). Hennessey and his colleagues often sunbake. In Iraq, they are "basking in boxers on improvised sun-loungers" (Hennessey 2009,5) and regularly go to the gym.

Conclusion

The pleasures that soldiers experience on and off the battlefield are expansive— from the camaraderie of collective joy to the thrill and awe of witnessing explosions, to finding a sense of meaning. While the material unquestionably chronicles horror, injustice, and terror, they also reveal how much pleasure is in war.

It is notable that these pleasures are evident in different wars over the past century and not just confined to a particular type of conflict. The memoirists and poets writing about World War I, World War II and the latest wars in Iraq and Afghanistan all document many pleasures, and many of them shared. As discussed in the methodology chapter, there are of course limitations to interpreting what such a diverse group of people say and write. But while memoirs can be critiqued in terms of their "truth-telling or representation of memory", similar critiques may be made of other data sources (Duncanson, Jenkins and Wooward 2017, 535).

But of course, the soldier's pleasures are more complicated in that it is in the context of their violent role. The paradox is evident as the material shows how alongside killing, soldiers also experience a strong sense of affection and purpose, and also have many interesting, strange and spiritual moments. When soldiers are deployed, there is an assumption that their "humanity is negated" (Maringira 2024, 82) but the reality is different because they are not "just instruments of killing" (Maringira 2023)—as the material presented in this chapter clearly shows. But the discomfort remains. In the next chapter I will explore this unease and how it underpins much of the scholarship on war and broader social discourse: we simply do not want to know about the pleasure that happens in it.

Chapter 7

Pleasure is reprehensible

War is ugly, horrible, evil, and it is reasonable for men to hate all that. But I believe that most men who have been to war would have to admit, if they are honest, that somewhere inside themselves they loved it too, loved it as much as anything that has happened to them before or since. And how do you explain that to your wife, your children, your parents, or your friends?

Former soldier William Broyles (Broyles 1984).

I think it's really interesting what you're doing. Really fascinating. I did think—should you be allowed to have that topic? It does make you question having fun in war zones and sites—should you be allowed to talk about that? That's why I think it's interesting, because within our context, within the people we know, you can discuss that. But outside I wonder what people think? [158]

Respondent 19, female Australian consultant consultant working for a U.S. contractor

One quote is from a former soldier who served in Vietnam war in the late 1960s. The other is from a respondent who shared with me her experiences of living in Afghanistan during the recent conflict. What is striking in the two accounts is a shared uneasy awareness that talking about pleasure in war is somehow wrong. Their concerns are not misplaced either—there are real cultural and political stakes in acknowledging such experiences. In 1999, the historian Joanna Bourke did an interview with *The Guardian* newspaper about *An Intimate History of Killing, Face to Face Killing in Twentieth Century Warfare,* her book which explores the history of killing in war, including its pleasures. The journalist posed the questions that if the thrill factor of war is so obvious, "...why hasn't it been publicised before, let alone been written about by academics?"

Bourke tells the reporter there are many reasons—it's a taboo, we don't want to encourage war, and it "puts a question mark over our motives for war and killing". The journalist next asks why would one

[158] Respondent interview on March 6, 2020.

stir up such “dark forces? What benefits can come from sending up flares to light up issues that people have instinctively avoided during peace time normality?” (Kingston 1999).

But this discomfort isn't just academic—it reflects a deep societal resistance to confronting pleasure in war. While Bourke is focusing on the “dark pleasures”, such as killing, the tensions also apply to the “good” or more benign pleasures explored in this thesis. Chapter three explored how structural issues in war studies – in particular a focus on fighting and injury had likely contributed to a particular conception of war, which focused on trauma and omitted other experiences. Chapter f looked at the broader tensions surrounding pleasure as a concept. This chapter examines the moral dilemmas, guilt, disbelief, and discomfort that the idea of pleasure in war provokes—both among those who experienced it and among the scholars and media who are prone to critiquing or dismissing it. I argue that this prevailing moralism has contributed to the neglect of pleasure in IR, limiting our cultural and political understanding of war. This chapter will trace how scholarship and public discourse resist and reject the notion of pleasure in war, thus obscuring the important insights into the lived experiences and emotional realities of conflict discussed in previous chapters.

When it comes to the study of fun in war, the concept has been neglected due to a prevailing “morality of war” that shapes and disciplines scholarly attitudes and analyses (De Lauri et al 2025,4). Pleasure in war is in the same boat. The moralistic framework matters for a few reasons. First, it pressures people who go to war to hide or feel guilty about their experiences. Given the widespread concern about the impact of war on individuals, war workers are placed in a difficult position—stigmatised either for being traumatised (if they are) or for having experienced pleasure (if they did). Second, the discomfort around discussing or examining pleasure means we are not getting an honest picture of war and all that happens there. Instead, we are left with a purified version—it is the war we want and fits with our expectations. Finally, based on my analysis, what is striking about these pleasures is how they are a normal part of war life and come in many forms. Placing these experiences in the same category may risk undermining the horror of killing, but it also shows how pleasure exists in war in many different forms.

I will explore the problem with pleasure in several steps. First, I examine suspicion surrounding the study of war within IR more broadly—a concern largely raised by feminists but also echoed in other fields. Basically, academics who study war and the military can be seen as pro-war or apologists,

particularly if they approach the topic outside of a trauma and suffering discourse. Second, I examine the taboo surrounding pleasure in war and how pleasures are ignored, critiqued and actively erased. Next, I show how war workers are aware of the taboo on pleasures in war, and have mixed responses, including guilt and defiance. I also discuss how war workers want to discuss their pleasurable experiences despite the taboo. Finally, I examine the many insights we gain by looking at pleasure, particularly about human nature, violence, as well as what it is like to live in war. The challenge in all of this is that every war has different sides—what one group finds acceptable or pleasurable, another may find deeply troubling.

Suspicions around war studies

Within IR, morality is often related to concepts like "just war" or the "responsibility to protect" doctrine, rather than in relation to the politics of what scholars should or should not study. But when it comes to studying war itself, there is always morality around it (Pili 2023). Feminist scholars, in particular, have interrogated what counts as appropriate knowledge when it comes to war. Some argue that topics such as "war and suffering, violence and rape" are often seen as the "correct materials" for feminist research (Penttinen 2013,3). At the same time, feminists grapple with studying certain topics and also question whose experiences of war should be prioritised or embraced (Sylvester 2013, 45). There is also "unease" around feminists who depart from the usual feminist arena of peace studies (Sylvester 2013,39).

In other fields, war is also problematic. The anthropologist Pedersen (2019) reflects on how military anthropologists are often stigmatised as "bad anthropologists" and the pressure from some quarters of the discipline to keep it a "demilitarised academic zone" (González et al cited in Pedersen 2019, 679). The issue came to life in the Human Terrain Project when anthropologists and other social scientists were embedded with the U.S. military in Iraq and Afghanistan to generate information for the military about the local population (Pedersen 2019,678). Pedersen also recounts suffering social censure from colleagues and students for studying the military and being introduced at a social gathering to a visiting scholar by his Professor as, "This is Thomas. He's a very unpopular guy. He studies Danish warriors, you see" (Pedersen 2019,679). Researching killing in war also appears to be fraught and "intensive analysis of the act of killing to be as much a taboo subject as the act itself"

(Tomforde 2025, 127). The lack of scholarship into what it is like to kill is, as Bar and Ben-Ari (2005, 134) note, “surprising”.

Pleasure in war as taboo

Pleasure in war is undoubtedly taboo, a fact reflected across the broader culture, academic scholarship and media portrayals. In this section, I examine how scholars, journalists, politicians and the wider public are wary of pleasure in war.

The concept of joy, for example, is a taboo because it goes against “official accounts that expect narratives of repentance and the search for forgiveness from the ex-combatants” (Nieto-Valdivieso 2017, 78). Fun for German soldiers is a problem because of strong prohibition against associating war with enjoyment, rooted in ant-military beliefs shaped by Germany’s past (Johais 2024). While there is evidence of female Finnish Lotta Svärd volunteers who worked for German officers stationed in Lapland during World War II feeling “adventure, excitement and attraction”, discussing friendliness during that period remains off-limits in Finnish public discourse (Penttinen 2013,88).

The taboo plays out in various ways. For example, in *The Guardian* interview, historian Bourke discusses how her work on the pleasure of killing in war was denounced by members of veterans’ associations, and after giving a talk at the Australian Defence Force Academy in Canberra, she received the clear message that her work was unwelcome. Reflecting on her research, Bourke says: "It is a taboo .... It's not pleasant to think about and it was surprising for me when I came across it” (Kingston 1999). She identifies several reasons for this silence—including the concern that open discussion might encourage war, the fact that it is “disturbing” to acknowledge, and that it risks discrediting combatants (Kingston 1999).

The feeling “good” pleasures are also problematic and make people feel uncomfortable. Eva Johais, for example, wrote to the German military asking for an official research permit to study the concept of fun in war but was rebuked by a bureaucrat in an official letter that “war is no fun” (Johais 2024,1). However, when she later interviews soldiers, they tell Johais they do have fun but are careful to not share stories outside of their peer group about what really happens on deployment or their military jokes.

Scholars are aware that tackling the taboo also causes discomfort. Welland, one of the few scholars who has explored pleasure in war by examining novels, carefully justifies her approach. She considers the "obvious tension" in connecting joy and pleasure with "something as violent and horrifying and destructive as war" and stresses she is a "spectator" to war and has never personally experienced it (Welland 2014, 440). As she explains, " ... it is not my intention to suggest that war is desirable or to fetishise it in anyway, or to occlude its very real violences and the sufferings it engenders" (Welland 2014, 440). But still, Welland recognises that linking pleasure with war "is likely to make many (as it makes me) uncomfortable" but believes it necessary in the study of war (Welland 2014, 454). Dyvik, in her study of military memoirs raises a similar point, arguing that IR need to not only take embodied experiences seriously but to be "open" to their "multiplicity", including those "that may be uncomfortable and difficult to hear"(Dyvik 2016, 135).

Disavowing pleasure in war work

The taboo around pleasure in war is so strong that even when respondents describe positive experiences, some studies overlook or dismiss them. For example, in Feinstein's 2006 study of war journalists, the dominant focus is on the psychological risks of war journalism. Some of his interview subjects push back at him, with the journalist Maggie O'Kane telling him bluntly: "I don't necessarily buy your theory that we are all traumatised". His response is telling:

> I assured her that was not my view. And indeed, the results of my studies proved us correct. After a decade or more of confronting extremely hazardous situations, some journalists do develop psychological problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder and depression. They are a minority, albeit a substantial one. This should not be surprising, given the nature of what front-line journalists do. *The more remarkable observation, perhaps, is that most emerge relatively unscathed* (Feinstein 2006, 182).

I have added the italics to his quote as even though he finds it "remarkable" that war reporters are unscathed— that 70 percent of them *did not have* PTSD (Feinstein 2006, 39)—he chooses not to explore the implications of this. While he notes many things they enjoy about their work, he still centralises the negatives, such as PTSD, alcoholism, divorce and the dangers. Feinstein later criticises war journalists with PTSD that avoid treatment, which he ses as "neglect, approaching disdain" and "was part of a wider, macho culture of silence that historically enveloped the profession" in relation

to psychological issues (Feinstein 2006,182). He says he id “at pains throughout my studies to emphasise that my aim was not to pathologise a profession” (Feinstein 2006, 183). Yet, arguably, he does exactly this—his thinking that people must be traumatised by war shape both what he highlights and what he leaves unexplored.

This tendency to foreground harm while sidelining positive responses is not limited to studies of war journalists. It also appears in research into government personnel in war zones. In Hibberd and Greenberg’s 2011 study of British Foreign office staff, from the outset, the authors assume war zones are inherently traumatic, stating that as modern wars do not have a “frontline”, and with the rise of suicide bombers and improvised explosives:

> ... all personnel who work in conflict areas, including diplomatic staff, can be regarded as being “at risk” of exposure to intense psychological stress as a function of their work (Hibberd and Greenberg 2011, 353).

While the study aims to investigate mental health, there is a preliminary assumption that being in Iraq and Afghanistan compared to other countries is likely to lead to poorer mental health and adverse outcomes. Yet the data tells a more positive story. Personnel posted to Iraq and Afghanistan are much more motivated by “adventure” in comparison to the general overseas group—30.2 percent compared to 10.3 percent. They also report more professional and personal rewarding satisfaction levels. Tellingly, both groups have nearly the same number of people who have positive feelings about their posting—121 (overseas) and 120 Iraq and Afghanistan. Nonetheless, despite the evidence of meaningful, even satisfying, experiences among staff in conflict zones, the study foregrounds PTSD and other negative outcomes, leaving these positive accounts underexamined (Hibberd and Greedbery 2011.)

Focusing on the negative and ignoring the positive is also evident in some humanitarian scholarship. Roth’s study of 44 international aid workers asks a variety of questions about their backgrounds, including “what they found satisfying and frustrating about the job” (Roth 2011, 154). The paper, instead of looking at the satisfying parts, is largely concerned with risk and how the respondents downplay it. As Roth puts it:

> Danger rarely was a major theme in the interviews, even though some respondents mentioned acquaintances, co-workers, or friends who had been injured or killed in accidents or attacks ... If the respondents spoke about dangerous situations at all, they mentioned them casually rather than emotionally (Roth 2011, 155).

The only reference to a positive in war is when one respondent reports she found going to dangerous places "attractive" (Roth 2011, 159). Rather than taking on face value that the respondents do not feel their situation is dangerous, Roth interprets their narratives as being about assuming a position of "professionalisation" and continues to push a security narrative (Roth 2011, 151). The possibility that war work might be gratifying or fulfilling is not something to explore. Although it is important that scholars focus on the vulnerable in dangerous situations, and hold concerns for people in need, an effect seems to be the dismissal of positive experiences in war.

Some scholars are more open about the moral issues at play in studying the good in war. Morten Brænder (2020) says he is reluctant to explore the topic of excitement and how it motivates Danish troops. As he puts it: "I never really intended to study excitement" (Brænder 2020, 23) and says he did so after a military psychologist suggested it. But even more significant is his attitude when analysing the results. When looking into whether soldiers sought excitement in war to trangress social boundaries, he is "comforted" when it turned out they do not (Brænder 2020, 38). "They might be sensation seekers, but they are not in it for bloodlust. Instead, they emphasise the importance of playing by the rules" (Brænder 2020,38). His relief suggests a discomfort not just with transgression, but with the idea that war might be thrilling in ways that exceed acceptable moral frameworks. Brænder seems pleased that their desire for thrill and adventure, to trangress their own boundaries, "can only be fulfilled within a strictly rule-bound framework" (Brænder 2020,38). What if this isn't the case? From what Brænder is saying, he would be uncomfortable with what his respondents are telling him.

For some scholars, people who experience pleasure in war likely suffer from a distorted or manipulated emotional awareness. As mentioned, Sylvester's concept of "experience in war" is premised on a "politics of injury" (Sylvester 2013, 3) and she wonders about people who "express or reach toward enthusiasm or satisfaction in war?" (Sylvester 2013, 106). She asks if they are:

> … gripped by false consciousness, inauthentic emotions, sick affects? Are those such rare emotional experiences of war that they need not be discussed? .... What if one is quite willing to experience the chaotic thrill of the moment rather than the long-term calm of peace?" (Sylvester 2013, 160).

As mentioned earlier, she takes a somewhat critical and disapproving tone by highlighting that:

> "Some people embrace war, get addicted to it, celebrate it, and keep lining up for it by displaying horrendous weapons at arms fairs or by becoming iteratively mercenary. They might live comfortably in the Green Zone of Baghdad or feed off it, willingly or most likely not … (Sylvester 2011, 2).

Across these diverse studies, we see how the idea of pleasure in war not only sits uneasily within dominant scholarly frameworks—it is rendered problematic or even unspeakable. Whether through methodological omission, interpretive reframing, disbelief, judgement or moral discomfort, positive experiences in war are pushed to the margins.

Critical in the media

It is worth briefly noting that outside academia, the media can also respond disapprovingly to portrayals of war as pleasurable—especially when such depictions are not explicitly anti-war. This is exemplified in a withering *New Yorker* magazine commentary of Ernst Jünger's The *Storm of Steel,* which has long been a controversial war memoir. While Jünger was later associated with national conservatism and is a controversial figure (de Llis 2019), [159] I believe an element in the discomfort with the book lies in his depiction of war's pleasures. As shown in the previous chapter, many of the pleasures he documents—exhilaration in battle, spectacle, friendship, renown—are found in many other war memoirs over the past century, including the ones I am studying.

[159] James de Llis, host of the *Hermitix* podcast, discusses with historian and biographer Elliot Neaman the question of how closely Ernst Jünger aligned with Nazism. According to Neaman, Jünger went through many ideological phases in his life, including fascism, surrealism, leftism, anarchism, drug-inspired mysticism and others (de Llis 2019).

In a 2023 article in the *New Yorker*, journalist Alex Moses critiques the tone of the book, arguing that: "Senseless brutality was recast as a salutary hardening of the soul". When Jünger writes of the "the matter-of-fact joy in danger, the chivalrous urge to fight," Moses describes it as "dire blather". He later dismisses Jünger for being an "infuriatingly detached witness to the suffering of others" (Moses 2023). One moment that draws particular criticism is Jünger's account of watching an Allied air raid over German-occupied Paris in May 1944 while he drinks burgundy with strawberries. Jünger writes of the city, "with its red towers and domes, [it] was laid out in stupendous beauty, like a calyx overflown by deadly pollination". Moses finds such reflects troubling. Yet this type of aesthetisication—the arresting spectacle of war or the "eye fucking" (Broyles 1984) mentioned earlier—are staples in many war memoirs. But Moses clearly does not approve: "...despite his faintly nauseating aura, or perhaps because of it, Jünger is still finding readers" (Moses 2023).

Another example of the critique of pleasurable experiences of war comes from the Norwegian magazine *Alfa*. As mentioned previously, in 2010, it published a feature on the Telemark Battalion, a group of Norwegian soldiers who serve in Afghanistan. It includes striking quotes from servicemen, such as "war is better than sex" and "you don't sign up to go to Afghanistan to save the world, but to join a real war" (cited in Dyvik 2016, 138). A video clip also shows a military commander raising a cry to Valhalla—a place in Norse mythology where slain soldiers go after dying in battle—followed by soldiers chanting in reply. These displays of pleasure go on to prompt a strong public reaction. Norway's Minister of Defence, Grete Faremo, condemns the coverage, stating that the "expressions by soldiers in Afghanistan [are ones] that we cannot accept... [they] express attitudes that the armed forces cannot support" (cited in Dyvik 2016, 138). It is noteworthy that the article does not ask deeper questions about pleasure in war—it is simply written off as unacceptable. As Dyvik remarks, the case illustrates that there is "emotional disciplining" around war, with pleasure not deemed appropriate (Dyvik 2016, 134).

Not worth exploring?

Scholars naturally have their own research interests and it could be that pleasure in war is simply not interesting or worthy of attention. For Pentinnen, she sees that pleasurable experiences such as purpose and meaning are "somehow irrelevant or suspect" in IR relations (Penttinen 2013, 102). Bhungalia, in her study of humour and laughter in Palestine, says she has "comprehensively avoided"

writing about them, even though they are part of everyday routines and encounters (Bhungalia 2019, 389). She says she didn't ignore them because they were taboo but because she was focused on studying "war, violence, policing, aid"—objects that are relevant to funding bodies. She admits she finds humour and laughter as "a kind of *non*-object for analysis" (Bhungalia 2019, 401).

Pleasure is obviously not of interest to the BBC journalist Steven Sackur who interviews Dr David Nott on *Hard Talk* in 2016. At the very start of the conversation, Nott speaks of the "the joy" he felt upon returning to Aleppo in 2014 to reunite with the young men he has trained as surgeons:

> I wanted to help them. I wanted to just be with them and it was a real joy actually to go back ... and to spend six weeks with them. And I was absolutely delighted to see how they'd coped. They went from being a ragtag bag of amateurs really a year before that and not knowing how to stitch properly, not knowing how to make the right diagnoses, not knowing how to really operate. They turn themselves into a very first-class group of very good surgeons. I'm talking about surgeons, that were 28, 29 and 30 and they really were very good. And it was a joy, actually to see that the training that they'd had had actually really paid off and they enjoyed showing me how they could operate and it was really enjoyable.

Despite the positive note, Sackur quickly shifts the interview to trauma, suffering and loss: "Well, that's the positive. The negative is that you were there in the midst of a spate of barrel, bombs attacks on civilian areas in Rebel held parts of Aleppo..." The interview goes on to discuss Nott's PTSD (BBC HARDtalk 2016). Even when pleasure is present, it is very quickly passed over in favour of expected narratives of horror.

In some instances, however, scholars are critical of the omission of pleasure. In his review of war historian Margaret MacMillan's *War: How Conflict Shaped Us*, Edward N. Luttwak condemns her for leaving out the pleasures of war, describing it as a "fatal omission". For Luttwak, this is "crucial because war is inexplicable without it, though dominant memories of two world wars have concealed it" (Luttwak 2020). He discusses how world wars before 1914 and more recent ones have been fought by volunteers who hoped that "war would offer more pleasurable experiences than those of their daily lives". He remarks that "half the occupants of London pubs" had been to war and:

> I do not recall ever hearing anyone regretting his participation, not even the Lieutenant Colonel who left a leg on the El Alamein battlefield ... and I certainly do not regret my own sporadic combat encounters over the span of many years on two different continents (Luttwak 2020).

In his overview of her book, he critiques MacMillan, a “a non-practitioner" for describing war to readers who know nothing of war and who have “never even conversed with anyone who has experienced war”. For these readers the “cavalcade” is fine because war is so removed from their lives that it is an “abstract” concept anyway (Luttwak 2020). But Luttwak—himself a veteran of combat—opens up a key question explored in the next section: what happens when people with first-hand experience of war acknowledge its pleasures? They usually feel bad or do so reluctantly.

First hand knowledge —and guilt

This section examines how soldiers, war journalists, and humanitarians report complicated, often contradictory feelings about the pleasures they experience in war. In each section, I will first look at what war workers say in the memoirs. The responses from the interviews will be batched together at the end of this section as they provide a range of insights that are particularly relevant to the Afghanistan situation.

Soldiers

As noted earlier, Sebastian Junger’s *War* explores the many ways that US soldiers find pleasure in the war in Afghanistan. It is notable, however, that this complex love of combat remains hidden, reluctantly acknowledged, or sidelined. While soldiers discuss the excitement of war with their chaplains, psychiatrists and maybe their partners, Junger observes:

> ...the public will never hear about it. It’s just not something that many people want acknowledged. War is supposed to feel bad because undeniably bad things happen in it...” (Junger 2010,214).

As mentioned earlier, one soldier reflects on not wanting to return to his old civilian life in the US, telling Junger that combat is an “adrenalin rush” and he is worried that if he can’t find that feeling back home, he would start drinking, “… because we miss the good stuff” (Junger 2010,232). Here,

Junger puts the spotlight on the counter-intuitive reality—soldiers yearn for combat life. Back at the U.S. base in Vicenza, Italy, Junger asks soldier Bobby Wilson if he misses the bunker. The soldier says he would "take a helicopter there tomorrow" and then, "leaning in, a little softer, 'Most of us would'" (Junger 2010, 215). The fact the soldier speaks in a softer manner to not be overheard suggests what he is saying is somehow wrong.

The hidden yearning and shame about wanting this feeling is also echoed in Broyles' 1984 *Esquire* essay, where he recounts visiting a former Vietnam veteran friend. His friend talks about how: "fun Vietnam was. I loved it. I loved it, and I can't tell anybody". Broyles shares this feeling with his friend. While reflecting that war is "ugly, horrible, evil", it is also something they both loved "as much as anything that has happened to them before or since". He asks: "... how do you explain that to your wife, your children, your parents, or your friends?" (Broyles 1984)

Broyles writes about Vietnam veterans returning from war and moping around:

> ... listless, not interested in anything or anyone. Something had gone out of our lives forever, and our behavior on returning was inexplicable except as the behavior of men who had lost a great perhaps the great-love of their lives, and had no way to tell anyone about it (Broyles 1994).

They are also "mute ... out of shame":

> Nothing in the way we are raised admits the possibility of loving war. It is at best a necessary evil, a patriotic duty to be discharged and then put behind us. To love war is to mock the very values we supposedly fight for. It is to be insensitive, reactionary, a brute (Broyles 1984).

While not explicitly calling them "pleasures in war", British soldier Hennessey often reflects on the tensions around enjoying oneself in war. During difficult phone calls home to his girlfriend on the satellite phone, he recognises that "deep down" he knows there is "something incredibly selfish in what we do, something self-indulgent" which makes it easier for those who have left (Hennessey 2009,266). He reflects that he feels scared by the question "how would you spend your last day?" asked on the hospital soap opera *Gray's Anatomy*, which the soldiers are addicted to watching:

> None of us out here could answer that question with the certainty I suspect those at home would want and expect. Maybe it's just not a question we want to ask ourselves while a possible answer remains 'scrapping with the boys in the Green Zone (Hennessey 2009,266).

After arriving at a British outpost in Sangin, in Helmand Province in the south towards the end of his duty, Hennessey feels guilty about feeling relieved that he is going to have another "scrap". He "partly crushed ... by the thought that I might have already done my last fighting" (Hennessey 2009,212). Hennessey is also frank about the need for validation and respect from peers and senior staff that they "weren't sick" people for enjoying war,

> …we wanted documents signed in black and white and glinting metal forged with our names to shout to the rafters that what we had done was not wrong, not bad, but glorious and heroic, and we weren't sick to feel that it had all been such fucking good fun (Hennessey 2009, 288).

Earlier in this chapter, I mentioned Johais' study of German soldiers, which found that the taboo around fun in the military meant soldiers are cautious not to "leak any signs of a humour culture that deviates from society's norms of appropriateness" (Johais 2024, 74). One soldier tells her it never occurs to him to share moments of fun from deployment because it is "absolutely inappropriate" (Johais 2024, 77).

A century earlier, Ernst Jünger is acutely aware of the judgement around pleasure in war. *The Storm of Steel* is filled with shared meals, games, wine, marvelling at explosions, surviving batttles and laughter. Anticipating criticism that they are getting drunk, he remarks: "Those who have never known the brief spells that separate one murderous battle from another may hold up their hands at us if they please" (Jünger 1996,112). He defends his drinking, saying it blots out the present and "only memory and hope were lit up". For Jünger, indulgence is a way to escape the devastation. For soldiers who survive, there are two types of memories – "the black and read thread". The black is the horrifying, traumatic moments and the red are the joyful drunken and joking moments with fellow soldiers, just as people do in peacetime. "It was only because these black and red threads were interlaced in fairly equal proportions that the experiences of the war were not intolerable" (1996,113). What Jünger is saying here is *don't judge us, this kept us sane*. He is also saying that war, in memory, is both pain and pleasure.

Journalists

In the interviews and memoir, war journalists are just as prone to expressing guilt and wariness about pleasures in war. The judgement they face—for even enjoying aspects of war—is perhaps best captured by magazine editor Bill Emford, who describes the profession as comprising "some of the sickest people you'll ever meet," dismissing their work as little more than "voyeuristic travel writing" (cited in Foerstel 2006: xiv)

War journalist Loyd is aware of the shame, particularly around enjoying covering the Balkan war. He describes it as "more than a little monstrous" that he can leave the luxuries of Priština each day to drive a few miles to encounter people "experiencing abject terror and hardship" and then return home to a warm room to write before "dining and drinking well, and ultimately falling asleep while musing on the job's pleasures" (Loyd 2007,53). Loyd is intermittently conflicted about the pull of war:

> War is like hard-drug abuse or a fickle lover, an apparently contradictory bolt of compulsion, agony and ecstasy that draws you back in the face of better judgement time and time again (Loyd 1999, 310).

The reporter Mike Nicholson is also drawn to war but feels "inhuman" for liking it:

> And you have to be honest... I did get quite a thrill from being under fire, being with soldiers, watching the fighting. It's a very exciting, exhilarating existence and I'd be dishonest if I didn't admit it (McLaughlin 2016,21).

Here the tension is explicit: feeling compelled to be "honest" yet frames his honesty as "admitting" to liking war, suggesting guilt or secrecy. Other journalists also raise being "honest" about their true motivations. Alex Thomson of Channel 4 News recalls foreign correspondents on TV as a child and thinking to himself it looked "fun":

> I mean really if I'm honest with you that is part of the motivation. I think that anyone who doesn't say that being a war correspondent is a glamorous way of making a living is bull-shitting you .... (McLaughlin 2016,2)

Another unnamed correspondent says that a lot of journalists are not being honest with themselves about why they do the job. He says people want to hear that war journalists do it for idealism and to save the world. But as he remarks: "I think it takes a rare degree of courage to say, 'Well, I actually love this'" (Feinstein 2006,65). Michael Herr in his Vietnam memoir mocks the various lofty reasons as to why journalists say they go to war. He is often asked why he is *really* there, and he says in truth, he is there to watch the killing (Herr 1997, 24). This common thread of denying the real reasons they go to war—for fun and pleasures—is likely connected to journalists being cognisant of the general taboos around it; it is not socially acceptable for them to say they enjoy war.

That said, Loyd is defiant about enjoying it. He recalls days spent on the front in Bihac towards the end of the war:

> I cannot apologise for enjoying it so. Sure, the face of war is a base one: suffering, destruction, brutality, and incalculable grief. There is enough misery waiting upon each of us without seeking it voluntarily. But I felt I had stood in line often enough—laden with dread as likely as not by every possible outcome—to justify revelling in the more fear-free periods when they occurred (Loyd 1999, 303).

The defensiveness is evident amongst other war reporters too. While they admit to a rush of excitement, they insist their motivation extended beyond it (Feinstein 2006, 47). Some also take exception to the way they are portrayed—not liking terms such as *sensation seekin*g or finding *adrenalin junkie* offensive (Feinstein 2006, 47).

Aid workers

Aid workers also report instances of feeling bad about feeling good in war. The war surgeon David Nott survives a serious attack in an ambulance in Sarajevo, in which a porter dies. After the initial shock, he is confronted with an "another emotion that was more surprising, even a little disturbing. I felt elated, exhilarated, euphoric" (Nott 2019, 82). Heidi Postlewait, contemplates having sex with a colleague on a base in Somalia, and feels "oddly ashamed" and blames the guilt on her friend Andrew:

> Everything with Andrew is work and saving lives and God forbid you should enjoy yourself while you're at it. I think I can make love with a few sexy young soldiers, and a Somali or two, and not forget that children can't go to school in this country. Does he think the Haitians or the Somalis aren't making love? (Postlewait, Cain and Thomson 2004, 114).

The Respondents

I place the respondents in a separate category because, while their discussion of the complexity of pleasure in war occurred in the same context—a "war" in Afghanistan—they were also open about the topic and expressed nuanced views. Many reflected on what it meant to experience pleasure amid violence, suffering, and poverty. Some felt guilt, others did not—but all had their own unique interpretations of feeling conflicted about pleasure in war.

Several respondents described moments when the comforts of expat life in Kabul clashed sharply with surrounding violence and poverty, evoking feelings of shame and guilt in response to their own privilege. Respondent 5, a female European journalist and film maker, didn't feel guilty, but rather a sense of "shame" around the disparity between expat privilege and Afghan hardship. She experienced this feeling when attending yoga classes or parties at bars and restaurants in Kabul. One French restaurant called L'Atmosphere had a swimming pool. "I mean, sunbathing by your pool while outside there were beggars in the streets and women in burqas—it was more a sense of shame," she said.[160] Another respondent, 14, a European woman consulting to NATO, told the story of having breakfast one morning when a large suicide bomb exploded outside the base in Kabul:

> It just felt so ridiculous that I was sitting there eating a warm cinnamon bun with glazing, knowing that people had just been massacred right outside. And there was absolutely nothing that I can do about it. And that ....yeah, it filled me with guilt. [161]

Some, like Respondent 15, a female European human rights worker, criticised those who glamourised war—foreign workers who posted photos with guns or exaggerated danger on their Facebook pages—calling this "playing at war" and deeply disconnected from Afghan realities.[162] Respondent 11,

[160] Respondent interview on February 21, 2020.
[161] Respondent interview on February 24, 2020.
[162] Respondent interview on February 21, 2020.

a male European NGO worker, said he never felt bad about having a good time or making money, because “I know that I've been there with the purpose of doing something good and I know I've worked my ass off”. [163]

For some of the respondents, as discussed earlier, pleasure in war was very normal. Respondent 32, a male European UN worker, initially resisted going to Afghanistan but a short visit revealed it was a place with the ordinary rhythms of life. He rejected the idea that experiencing pleasure in a warzone is inherently problematic, arguing that conflict zones contain multiple realities and that pleasure and suffering can coexist without cancelling each other out. “I don't consider myself to have had pleasure at the expense of those who suffered,” he said. “Is the implication that you're not allowed to have pleasure in this whole thing that is called war, because there are people in this whole thing that is called war who are suffering? It’s not a zero sum game.” [164] Respondent 18, a male North American USAID staff member, remarked if would be unusual if people weren’t finding pleasure in war. “You know, humans can find pleasure in almost any circumstance. So, I would find it peculiar if somebody suggested that you could not find pleasure in war,” he said. [165]

Several respondents reframed pleasure not as indulgence, but as resilience. Small moments—laughter with local colleagues, shared meals, romantic connections—were seen as expressions of life. Respondent 6, a female European NGO worker, recalled sharing a cup of tea with her guards and having a laugh: “It gives you hope— it means that you still have life even in a war zone”. [166]

Others said that one had to be there to understand the concept of pleasure. Respondent 19, a female Australian consultant working for a U.S. contractor, said it would feel weird explaining the concept to other people: “If they don’t understand war, they are not going to understand having a good time in it”. [167]

Finally, a few respondents also mentioned that they weren’t having pleasure because others were suffering. Respondent 11, a male European NGO worker said there was no harm, “in feeling pleasure

[163] Respondent interview on February 12, 2020.
[164] Respondent interview on July 1, 2020.
[165] Respondent interview on March 20, 2020.
[166] Respondent interview on March 20, 2020.
[167] Respondent interview on March 6, 2020.

from watching a good movie or cracking a joke with a colleague" but there was something wrong if the pleasure from other people's suffering. For example, if there was a joke about people's suffering in war, "then I wouldn't feel good about enjoying myself". [168]

In sum, while a few expressed no guilt at all, most navigated a morally complex emotional terrain. The concept of pleasure was varied: necessary, sometimes suspect, confusing and a fact of life.

Let's talk about it

Some soldiers want to talk about their pleasures. A German soldier expresses gratitude to Johais, saying it is the first time he has been able to speak about humour in war—a topic usually considered off-limits (Johais 2024, 76). Norwegian soldiers welcome the opportunity to discuss fun with Mogstad it as it means exploring "their full experience" of war (Mogstad 2024,10). They are willing to speak to the researcher as they "appreciated" the positive focus as local media stories focus on the struggles and trauma, and contribute to "negative stereotypes" and "stigmas" (Mogstad 2024, 55). As war journalist Lindsey Hilsum tells McLaughlin:

> We're all supposed to be in danger all the time and we're all supposed to be traumatised and in need of psychotherapy because of all the dangerous things that we do. I mean, it's bollocks! We choose to do this and it is sometimes dangerous but so are lots of other jobs. Nobody forces me to do this (McLaughlin 2016, 18).

In relation to the video and *Alfa* magazine scandal that "exposed" a particular type of warrior culture among Norwegian troops—"war is better than sex," etc—Major Wenneberg acknowledges that while the scandal is troubling, it also "taught people about what happens in war allowing the public to learn about 'the everyday life of soldiers'" (cited in Dyvik 2016, 139).

Opening up space to discuss pleasure in war also creates new pathways for scholarship. Parashar argues that Penttinen's approach to examining joy in war raises important questions about the boundaries of one's scholarship, as well as why women's violence, for example, remains a taboo topic in IR. She finds Penttinen's arguments "exhilarating" as they "consider possibilities of discussing the

[168] Respondent interview on February 12, 2020.

multiplicity of experiences of women who participate in wars and militant projects" (Parashar 2014, 197).

For the few scholars who write directly about pleasure in war, it is typically seen as a way to better understand war itself. As mentioned earlier, Welland recognises the "tensions" involved in studying joy and pleasure in war. After explicitly justifying her position, she argues that these emotions are important to examine because they are part of the puzzle of war. Not only is it "legitimate methodologically, but it would be a serious omission to leave out" (Welland 2014, 440).

What are we missing?

By not exploring it, we are undoubtedly missing the full story of war. For noncombatants, we can move beyond the portrayal of war workers as stressed, traumatised or selfless heroes and see a far richer and less "heroic" experience in which people find enormous personal benefits. Many noncombatants find deep personal meaning in their wartime roles, whether through a sense of purpose, belonging, professional advancement, and intense connection with other people. They are also not passive figures on the sidelines, but active participants in the war-ish landscape. The pleasures they experience may not be rooted in destruction, but they are still shaped by war. Recognising these dynamics allows for a more honest and nuanced understanding of how war can make people feel so alive.

For combatants, the insights are far more complicated, for their role in war is to kill — and the pleasures are laden with even more contradiction and moral uneasiness. For beneath the discipline and duty, there are many ordinary pleasures in the heightened experience of war: there is the sense of purpose, the spectacle, the play and the deep bonds that have been explored in previous chapters. The pleasures can be very physical and collective (Dyvik 2016). They can be born from soldiers recreating a "home" front where they engage with and build relationships with ordinary civilians (Maringira 2024). However, in relation to killing, as hard as it may seem to understand, soldiers can feel "indifference or sometimes enjoyment" when doing it. It is not always "pathological or traumatic," but is instead "woven into the very fabric of normal everyday life" (Bar and Ben-Ari 2005, 151).

Pleasure in war makes us confront difficult truths about humans and violence. By going to the heart of war and examining what people find joy in, might the pleasures of war offer insight into what humans across racial, cultural, and national lines truly long for? If so, these desires might not be so foreign or extreme: having a job that feels meaningful, learning new things, being part of a collective purpose, forming intense friendships, and earning a decent wage. War, for all its horror, can offer these in concentrated form. Or perhaps it's the proximity to violence, the brush with death, that intensifies sensation and sharpens our sense of what it means to be alive. War doesn't just expose the extremes of human behavior; it also reveals truths about what we value and what we crave. It also shows us how normal or mundane war can be.

Conclusion

This thesis argues that ignoring pleasure in war—however difficult, problematic, or inappropriate it may seem—contributes to a whitewashing of war itself. When pleasure is excluded, we are left with a cleaner, more idealised narrative. It not only makes war less messy and politically troubling but ultimately *less human.* It also shields us from confronting the fact that war can be not only destructive but also fulfilling, and that those having such experiences are not necessarily "evil". By omitting pleasure, a particular interpretive framework is reinforced—one that maintains war as wholly despairing and brutal, and one that resists the full story. Trauma makes war legible; pleasure makes it illegible.

This chapter concludes the study by summarising the key research findings and showing how I answered my original research aims and questions. Next, it acknowledges the limitations of the research design and offers areas for future inquiry. Finally, it outlines this thesis's contributions to broader discussions within war studies, including the ontology of war and how people experience it.

Research Questions and Aims

The central question of this project was: "What are the pleasures in war, and what do they tell us about war?" Several subsidiary questions followed:

- Is the concept of pleasure treated as important in the IR literature about war?
- Why not?
- Where can it be found instead?
- Why does its absence from IR matter?

My research found that soldiers, journalists, humanitarians, and other war workers experience a wide range of pleasures, both personal and professional. These include a sense of purpose and meaning, achieving goals, becoming a better person, and forming deep relationships forged in intense conditions. Pleasure was also found in play and fun—drinking, talking, listening to music, sharing meals—as well as in spectacle and novelty: watching explosions, traveling, meeting new people, and

encountering strange and challenging environments. What was compelling was just how rich the landscape of pleasure was and its nuances.

Despite this, the experience of pleasure is not taken seriously in IR and is largely absent from the literature. I demonstrated this by analysing top-ranked IR journals over the past 25 years, where only two mentions of pleasure in relation to war appeared.

Why we don't know about pleasure in war is related to a few key reasons. First, there is a need to broaden the ontology of war. Second, there a despairing and moralistic approach to the study of war. Third, pleasure itself is a contested and political experience. Fourth, as pleasure in war is a taboo, people don’t want to explore or discuss it. I will now go into these themes in more detail.

To begin with, when explored war itself as an object of study, it is framed in numerous ways and frequently treated as mysterious or unknowable. Yet despite this fluidity, dominant narratives prevail. While war is generally discussed in relation to the state, feminist and critical IR approach it through experience, embodiment, phenomenology, and the everyday. They also engage with war in terms of fighting and the discourses that shape it. While some recognition exists that war is a landscape of diverse experiences, pleasure remains marginal.

Still, trauma and violence focused research into experience, the everyday, and phenomenological approaches has been valuable. For example, the everyday lens helps account for how life goes on in war and the lived nature of it (Parashar 2013, Nordstrom 1997). The different ways that violence is experienced and how people react, resist and build new lives has also been important in thinking about pleasure (Moghnieh 2017, Nordstrom 1997). Moghnieh’s portrait of “living-in violence” in Lebanon, for example, shows how life goes on and amidst the violence, there is pleasure—she swims, has drinks and has party plans. If we take a similar approach to pleasure and begin to examine it—we gain a better understanding of what it means to “feel good,” and how and why it happens. Is pleasure in war normal? Is it exceptional? What are its politics? Does it fuel war?

The work of Gilks (2025) is especially compelling. He argues that we must stop thinking of war as a "tragic fate" and instead recognise it as something shamefully humans do—something for which we are accountable: "...war is because we embody it" (Gilks 2025, 1). This challenges the belief that war is

an exogenous force or act of divine will (Gilks 2025, 1) and places human agency at the centre of it (Gilks 2025, 8).

He, alongside Penttinen (2015) and de Lauri et al (2025), also mention the norms and moralities we have in thinking about war. While the moralism around war is understandable, it is so dominant that anyone who feels or studies something other than horror becomes suspect or is seen as complicit. In the hierarchy of what is appropriate to study, pain is on top. But as de Lauri et al have found in studying fun, it is "trivial if not morally inappropriate and provocative" (De Lauri 2025, 4).

I also explored the challenges of pleasure as a concept—its definition, politics, and ethics— and see that this is another reason why pleasure in war is ignored. The literature on pleasure tells us that it is political in many ways—from political parties appealing to be people's pleasures to get elected to political movements disciplining what people are allowed to enjoy. Pleasure literature also raises questions about agency and structure, and asks if we just simply feel pleasure or it is something that society shapes on our behalf. How this translates to war is significant yet challenging to pin down. Pleasure is something we can't help but feel but in the context of war, it can also fuel people's dreams, their plans, their relationships and their daily hopes.

The taboos around pleasure in war are striking and problematic. I believe it is an ethical issue not looking at pleasure. Excluding it reinforces a belief that war is only harmful, which distorts and stigmatises the experiences of war workers who find meaning in it, or build deep friendships, for example. *There must be something wrong with them.* Are the American soldiers who liberated Europe in World War II from the Germans and the Japanese suspect? Or is it only some soldiers and war workers whose pleasures are problematic? Even within the pleasures there are taboos— how much sex people had or money people earned are rarely explored or discussed.

Thus, the absence of pleasure matters and by studying it, we build a bigger framework and explore more deeply why some people go to war, what it offers them and why it can be so memorable.

Limitations

As outlined in the methodology chapter, this research had several limitations. The first one was the difficulty of defining war and providing context to the pleasures that people were experiencing. While the memoirs provided context and the subjects clearly experienced pleasure on and off the battlefield, and in violent contexts which could be described as “war”, the respondents in the interviews had mixed feelings. As discussed, there was disagreement amongst participants about whether they were "in" a war in Afghanistan, and they also had varying definitions of what war itself was. In scholarship, it was also often hard to determine what kind of conflict or situation the subjects of a study were in.

This confusion reinforces the idea that war remains underdeveloped as an object of inquiry (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, Bousquet et al. 2020) but also the notion that no two wars are the same. Furthermore, with the rise of drones and more powerful remote weaponry, and militaries reluctant to send their troops into conventional battle, the pleasures may shift. Or maybe not. From the memoirs, particularly for soldiers, it was notable how similar—in some ways— Ernst Jünger’s WWI pleasures were compared to those of British soldier Hennessey.

Another limitation was the inherent challenge of studying an emotion or experience like pleasure: how to define it, how to measure it, and how to ensure participants and readers understood what it meant. While I used Aaron Smuts' "feels good" definition (2011) and Leonard D. Katz's notion of pleasure as "feeling good or happy" (2016), other theoretical approaches could frame it differently. Furthermore, some of the respondents were also wary of using the word pleasure when discussing their experiences. I believe this underscores one of the many challenges of the concept of “pleasure”—it is a laden term.

Third, studying positivity in the grim context of war raised ethical challenges. IR and the social sciences typically treat war as a site of trauma, and exploring pleasure was often seen as inappropriate. The ethics submission process reinforced this bias, assuming war-related research must deal with trauma and distress. Participants had to be told upfront that the research focused on pleasure, and were given advance questions. This likely influenced who chose to participate and skewed the sample toward those who already identified with the theme.

My positionality also shaped the research. As someone who worked for the UN in Afghanistan, my perspective was inevitably informed by personal experience. I was aware of the criticisms of Western intervention and reflected on whether my framing was defensive or complicit. Did I avoid labelling respondents as imperialists to avoid implicating myself? Furthermore, writing this thesis during ongoing global conflicts where the daily violence was blasted onto my social media feed impacted this thesis. Soldiers laughing or articulating enjoying violence were not abstract; they were very real. It was thus complicated holding that reality in the same frame as the other pleasures—laughter, camaraderie, a sense of purpose—the soldiers discussed in their memoirs. I saw so many harrowing images of dead and traumatised people that my research into pleasure felt inappropriate. It also seemed incorrect: how is it that anybody could be enjoying it? I would catch glimpses of pleasure on my social media feeds but really? I could see so clearly how morality played a role in war research, particularly as I at times wondered if this research would be used to justify people finding jobs in war. *Look! You will probably enjoy war!* In these moments of doubt, however, I would return again and again to the memoirs, poetry and interview transcripts, and I could not ignore the recurring presence of pleasure.

Contribution and Significance

This thesis is, to my knowledge, is the first IR study to centralise the experience of pleasure in war among war workers. More broadly, no other work has specifically focused on pleasure in relation to journalists and humanitarians. While some literature exists on motivations, this research fills a significant gap. The thesis contributes in several other areas.

First, it contributes to IR's experience literature, in particular feminist and critical IR scholarship. Scholars such as Enloe, Sylvester, and Parashar have argued for attending to the everyday, embodied, and lived experiences of war. Sylvester (2012, 2013) critiques IR's abstract focus on states and systems, arguing that understanding people's experiences is essential. Parashar (2013) notes that for those who live in war, it becomes a daily performance. Narozhna (2022) adds that IR must go further in recognising how violence affects bodies in mundane, everyday ways. While much of this scholarship focuses on trauma, this thesis aligns more with Dyvik (2016) and Penttinen (2013) in exploring how war can be something other than suffering but also Gilks (2025) phenomenological approach which centres the human in war, and moves beyond the tragic fate narrative.

It also contributes to critical war studies by exploring war beyond fighting. While it diverges from some discourse-based approaches, it supports calls for a multiple ontological framework. Many scholars already recognise that war is more than fighting, and this research builds on that insight by focusing on the expansive ecosystem of war workers and the positive experiences they can have in war.

This thesis contributes to research on journalists, aid workers and other war workers whose stories are not at all included in IR's study of war. It does this by centralising what is positive about their experience instead of examining the psychological and geopolitical pitfalls and problems of their jobs.

I believe this thesis also contributes to the "anything goes" methodological approach in IR, which is echoed in the work of Sylvester and Penttinen. It analyses memoirs, poetry, scholarship, and interviews, drawing from diverse epistemic communities to explore pleasure. As discussed, while there are limitations to this approach, it was a necessary.

Finally, unexpectedly, by exploring pleasure in war, I came to wonder about what makes some people happy and feel alive. The first thing we learn is that there is pleasure in connection, friendship, learning and working collectively in intense situations. Across time and space, the "frontline" emerges as an exciting and deeply existential place. A striking feature of this experience is the exhilaration born from being part of a group, shedding the ego and having a shared sense of purpose. Away from the frontline, being close to people, talking, sharing meals and engaging in work that has purpose and provides the opportunity to learn appears to bring people great joy. Being recognised is also important, as is engaging with other cultures and landscapes.

Final comment

War zones buzz with death and life. Amidst this, pleasure is normal and appears in many forms—from the lightness of a shared joke to the sense of purpose found in daily routines. It is also part of the spectrum of experience when soldiers kill. Pleasure pervades the everyday experiences of those who live and work within it, but it can also entice them to war in the first place. While citizens may look on, and think, *I wouldn't be like that*, I believe this is not the case. And this, I think, is part of what makes pleasure in war so disquieting.

I am absolutely anti-war. And yet, as I wrote this thesis, a strange song kept returning to me: the theme from the movie *Ghostbusters,* with its line, "Who you gonna call? Ghostbusters!" When a nation is invaded or violence erupts, who do you call? As distasteful as it is, we call for soldiers, warriors, and guerrilla fighters. We want journalists, humanitarians, and surgeons there too—to assist in any way possible. But once they go, we expect them to behave and live through war in a way that is legible to us: one that is terrible and traumatic. But this just isn't always the case. In parts, they are enjoying it.

I wonder if people are being lured back to war because it's a space that makes them feel alive. If this is the case, what would happen if all the war workers simply stopped going? If society knew about the pleasures, would we better armed when condemning war? These questions trouble me. On one hand, war depends on participation: without soldiers, logisticians, cooks, analysts, fighters, surgeons or bureaucrats, it would grind to a halt. On the other hand, war seems to have a momentum of its own—rooted in states, ideologies and technologies that far exceed any one person's refusal. Still, the question lingers: by continuing to work in war and enjoying it, do people help sustain it? Did I help sustain it?

The fact is pleasure confronts a contradiction at the heart of war: that pleasure, camaraderie, and purpose flourish alongside acts of brutality. This coexistence is neither a justification nor a denial of suffering, but a recognition of war's emotional complexity. There are many types of pleasures in war and they are not all the same but essentially, they are rooted in connection, meaning and the spectacular. To ignore pleasure in all its forms would be to ignore what the unknown French woman resistance fighter from World War II was telling us all those years ago — that war made her feel alive.

This thesis does not justify war, nor excuse its violence. Rather, it examines how different kinds of pleasure—all very human—are everywhere in war zones. And please, by me telling you this, don't shoot the messenger.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Achilli, Luigi. 2024. “Boko Haram’s ‘Playground’: Exploring the Role of Fun among Children Associated with Armed Groups in Nigeria.” *War & Society* 44 (1): 95–112.

Addario, Lynsey. 2015. *It's what I Do: A Photographer's Life of Love and War*. Penguin.

Åhäll, Linda and Thomas Gregory. 2015. Introduction to *Emotions, Politics and War.* Routledge

Alexander, Jessica. 2013. *Chasing chaos: My decade in and out of humanitarian aid*. Crown.

Ali, Nosheen. 2010. “Books vs Bombs? Humanitarian development and the narrative of terror in Northern Pakistan.” *Third World Quarterly*, *31*(4), 541–559.

Amoureux, Jack.L and Brent J. Steele. 2015. *Reflexivity and International Relations: Positionality, Critique, and Practice*. Routledge.

Anon. 2012. “The message of a devoted mujahed”. In *The Poetry of the Taliban*, edited by Alex van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn eds. 2012. Hachette UK.

Aradau, Claudia and Jef Huysmans. 2014. Critical Methods in International Relations: The Politics of Techniques, Devices and Acts. *European Journal of International Relations* 20 (3): 596–619.

Armani, Mohammad Wali. 2012. “Afghanistan”. In *The Poetry of the Taliban*, edited by Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn.Hachette UK.

Armoudian, Maria. 2016. *Reporting from the danger zone: Frontline journalists, their jobs, and an increasingly perilous future*. Routledge.

Australian Defence Force. n.d. “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder”. Australian Defence Force. Accessed August 28, 2025. https://www.defence.gov.au/adf-members-families/wellbeing/mental-health-online/post-traumatic-stress-disorder

Baaz, Maria Eriksson, and Maria Stern. 2009. “Why Do Soldiers Rape? Gender, Violence and Sexuality in the DRC Armed Forces.” *Peace and Conflict* 1(2): 495-518.

Bar, Neta and Eyal Ben-Ari. 2005. “Israeli Snipers in the Al-Aqsa Intifada: Killing, Humanity and Lived Experience.” *Third World Quarterly* 26 (1): 133–52.

Barkawi, Tarak, and Shane Brighton. 2011. “Powers of War: Fighting, Knowledge, and Critique.” *International Political Sociology* 5(2): 126–143.

Bauman, Emily. 2019. "The naive republic of aid: Grassroots exceptionalism in humanitarian memoir." In *Global humanitarianism and media culture,* edited by Michael Lawrence and Rachel Tavernor*.* Manchester University Press.

Bazan, Ariane and Sandrine Detandt. 2013. “On the physiology of jouissance: interpreting the mesolimbic dopaminergic reward functions from a psychoanalytic perspective.” *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 6 (7):709.

Bennett, Dashiell, “The Life of a War Correspondent Is Even Worse Than You Think”, July 10, 2013. https://www.theatlantic.com/international/2013/07/life-war-correspondent/313463/

Bentham, Jeremy. *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation,* 1789. https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/bentham1780.pdf.

Bhungalia, Lisa. 2019. "Laughing at power: Humor, transgression, and the politics of refusal in Palestine." *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space* 38 (3): 387-404.

Borri, Francesca. 2013. “Woman’s work”. *Colombia Journalism Review*, July 1, 2021. https://www.cjr.org/feature/womans_work.php

Bourke, Joanna. 2000. *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in Twentieth-Century Warfare.* London: Granta Books.

Bousquet, Antoine, Jairus Grove and Nisha Shah. 2020. “Becoming war: Towards a martial empiricism.” *Security Dialogue* 51 (2-3): 99-118.

Brinkmann, Svend. 2022. *Qualitative Interviewing: Conversational Knowledge Through Research Interviews*, online edn, Oxford Academic.

Brock, Rita Nakashima and Gabriella Lettini. 2012. *Soul repair: Recovering from moral injury after war*. Beacon Press.

Bulmer, Sarah and David Jackson. 2015. "'You Do Not Live in My Skin': Embodiment, Voice, and the Veteran." *Critical Military Studies* 2 (1–2): 25–40.

Brænder, M. 2016. "Adrenalin Junkies: Why Soldiers Return from War Wanting More." *Armed Forces & Society* 42(1): 3-25.

Brænder, Martin 2020. "Transgression within Boundaries: A Qualitative Study of Excitement Motivation Among Combat Troops." *Qualitative Psychology* 7(1): 23–42.

Brighton, Shane. 2011. "Three Propositions on the Phenomenology of War." *International Political Sociology* 5(1): 101–105.

Broache, Michael. 2022. "Planning, conducting, and analyzing interviews." In *Handbook of Research Methods in International Relations*, edited by Joseph R. Huddleston, Thomas Jamieson, and Patrick James. Edward Elgar Publishing.

Brown, Katherine and Elina Penttinen. 2013. "A 'sucking chest wound'is nature's way of telling you to slow down….': humour and laughter in war time." *Critical Studies on Security* 1(1): 124-126.

Broyles, William, Jr. 2021. "Why Men Love War." *Esquire*, November 11, 2021. https://www.esquire.com/news-politics/news/a28718/why-men-love-war/

Caesar, Ed. 2014. "Shooting the Messengers." GQ, 22 August, 2014. https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/article/war-reporting

Cain, Kenneth, Heidi Postlewait and Andrew Thomson. 2004. *Emergency sex (and other desperate measures): true stories from a war zone*. Random House.

Cameron, Lily, Mary McCauley, Nynke van den Broek and Hannah McCauley. 2024. "The occurrence of and factors associated with mental ill-health amongst humanitarian aid workers: A systematic review and meta-analysis". *PLoS one* 19(5): p.e0292107.

Chouliaraki, Lilie. 2014. “From War Memoirs to Milblogs: Language Change in the Witnessing of War, 1914–2014.” *Discourse & Society* 25(5): 600–618.

Clausewitz, Carl von. 1984. *On War*. Translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Cohen-Hanegbi, Naama, and Piroska Nagy. 2018. *Pleasure in the Middle Ages*. Brepols Publishers.

Connorton, Elizabeth, Michael J. Perry, David Hemenway, and Matthew Miller. 2012. “Humanitarian Relief Workers and Trauma-Related Mental Illness.” *Epidemiologic Reviews* 34: 145–155.

Cottee, Simon. 2011. “Fear, Boredom, and Joy: Sebastian Junger’s Piercing Phenomenology of War.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 34 (5): 439–59.

Cottee, Simon and Keith Hayward. 2011. “Terrorist (E)motives: The Existential Attractions of Terrorism.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 34(12), 963–986.

Crane-Seeber, Jesse. 2016. “Sexy warriors: The politics and pleasures of submission to the state.” *Critical Military Studies*. 2(1-2):41–55.

Critcher, Chas. 2011. “Double Measures: The Moral Regulation of Alcohol Consumption, Past and Present”. In *The New Politics of Leisure and Pleasure*, edited by Peter Bramham and Stephen Wagg. Palgrave Macmillan.

Curtis, Devon E. A., Florence Ebila, and María Martín de Almagro. 2022. “Memoirs of Women-in-Conflict: Ugandan Ex-Combatants and the Production of Knowledge on Security and Peacebuilding.” *Security Dialogue* 53(5): 402-419.

De Born, Bertran. 1978. cited in Barbara Tuchman. *A distant mirror.* Ballantine books.

de Jong, Sara. 2011. “False binaries: Altruism and selfishness in Ngo work”. In *Inside the everyday life of development workers: The challenges and futures of Aidland,* edited by Fanne-Meike Fechter and Heather Hindman. Kumarian Press.

De Lauri, Antonio. 2025. “Coda: the experience of war beyond exceptionalism.” *War & Society* 44(1): 172–177.

De Lauri, Antonio, Luigi Achilli, Iva Jelušić, Eva Johais, and Heidi Mogstad. 2025. “Introduction to the Special Issue: War and Fun: Exploring the Plurality of Experiences and Emotional Articulations of Warfare and Soldiering.” *War & Society* 44(1): 1–13.

De Llis, James, host. 2019. *Hermitix*. “The Life of Ernst Jünger with Elliot Neaman”. November 30. Podcast 45 min., 2 sec. https://creators.spotify.com/pod/profile/hermitix/episodes/The-Life-of-Ernst-Jnger-with-Elliot-Neaman-e14qhn9

di Giovanni, Janine. 2012. *What I Saw in the War*. TEDxWomen. Accessed August 29, 2025. https://www.ted.com/talks/janine_di_giovanni_what_i_saw_in_the_war

Delori, Mathias. 2018. “A Plea for a Discursive Approach to Emotions: The Example of the French Airmen’s Relation to Violence.” In *Researching Emotions in International Relations*, edited by Maéva Clément and Eric Sangar. Palgrave Macmillan.

Department of Veterans' Affairs. 2025. Rest and recreation in Sydney during Vietnam War. DVA Anzac Portal. Available at: https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/wars-and-missions/vietnam-war-1962-1975/all-way-lbj/rest-and-recreation-sydney-r-and-r

Dolan, Chris, Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern. 2020. “What is sexual about conflict-related sexual violence? Stories from men and women survivors”. *International Affairs* 96 (5): 1151–1168.

Duffield, Mark, Joanna Macrae and Devon Curtis. 2001. “Politics and humanitarian aid.” *Disasters* 25(4):269-74

Duncanson, Claire, Niki Jenkins, and Rachel Woodward. 2017. “Military Memoirs.” In *Palgrave International Handbook of Gender and the Military*, edited by Rachel Woodward and Claire Duncanson. Palgrave Macmillan.

Dyvik, Synne L. 2016. “Valhalla Rising’: Gender, Embodiment and Experience in Military Memoirs.” *Security Dialogue* 47(2): 133–150.

Elsworthy, Helen**.** 2014. “Hunter Hero: Lyn Thorpe, Humanitarian Aid Worker.” *Newcastle Herald*, August 25, 2014. https://www.newcastleherald.com.au/story/2477198/hunter-hero-lyn-thorpe-humanitarian-aid-worker/

Enloe, Cynthia. 2014. *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*.. University of California Press.

Evans, Joel and Anil Mathur. 2018. “The Value of Online Surveys: A Look Back and a Look Ahead.” *Internet Research*. 28.

Ewans, Martin. 2005. *Conflict in Afghanistan: Studies in Asymmetric Warfare.* Routledge.

Faizani. 2012. “Pamir”. In *The Poetry of the Taliban*, edited by Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn.Hachette UK.

Fan, Weimao and Zheng Yan. 2010. “Factors affecting response rates of the web survey: A systematic review.” *Computers in human behavior* 26(2): 132-139.

Fast, Larissa. 2014. *Aid in Danger: The Perils and Promise of Humanitarianism*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

Faulkner, Sandra L. 2019. *Poetic Inquiry: Craft, Method and Practice*. Routledge.

Fazl, Abu. 2012. “A Mujahed’s Wish From His Mother”. In *The Poetry of the Taliban*, edited by Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn. Hachette UK.

Feda, Maiwand. 2012. “Poem” In *The Poetry of the Taliban*, edited by Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn. Hachette UK.

Feinstein, Anthony. 2006. *Journalists Under Fire: The Psychological Hazards of Covering War.* Johns Hopkins University Press.

Foerstel, Herbert. 2006. *Killing the messenger: Journalists at risk in modern warfare*. Praeger.

Foucault, Michel. 1984. *The Foucault Reader*. Edited by Paul Rabinow. Pantheon Books

Freud, Sigmund. 1933. “Why War?” Letter to Albert Einstein. https://courier.unesco.org/en/articles/why-war-letter-freud-einstein

Gellhorn, Martha. 1998. *The Face of War.* Granta Books.

Gifford, Robert K. 2006. “Psychological Aspects of Combat.” In *Military Life: The Psychology of Serving in Peace and Combat*, edited by Amy B.Adler, Carl Andrew Castro and Thomas W. Britt. Volume 2: 123–145.

Gilks, Mark. 2025. Towards a phenomenological ontology of war. *Review of International Studies* 51(4): 707–725

Gilligan, Ian. 2024. Clothing, Sublimation, and the Enjoyment of War. *Human Arenas*, pp.1-22.

Ginsberg, Benjamin. 2014. *The Worth of War*. Prometheus Books.

Goldkuhl, Göran. 2012. “Pragmatism *vs* interpretivism in qualitative information systems research.” *European Journal of Information Systems* 21(2): 135–146.

Gray, J. Glenn. 1970. *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle.* Bison Books.

Greig, Matilda. 2018. “War for Sale: Peninsular War Veterans' Memoirs in the Long Nineteenth Century (1808–1914).” Doctoral dissertation, European University Institute. https://hdl.handle.net/1814/60534.

Grieger, Thomas A., Stephen J. Cozza, Robert J. Ursano, Charles Hoge, Patricia E. Martinez, Charles C. Engel, and Harold J. Wain. 2006. “Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Depression in Battle-Injured Soldiers.” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 163(10): 1777–1783.

Grossman, Dave and Loren W. Christensen. 2008. *On combat: The psychology and physiology of deadly conflict in war and peace*. Open Road Media.

Guisolan, Stéphanie Cécilia, Mariacristina Ambrogi, A. Meeussen, Fabrice Althaus and Gilles Eperon. 2022. “Health and security risks of humanitarian aid workers during field missions: Experience of the International Red Cross.” *Travel Medicine and Infectious Disease* 46, 102275.

Gusterson, Hugh. 2008. “Ethnographic research.” In *Qualitative Methods in International Relations: A Pluralist Guide*, edited by Audie Klotz and Deepa Prakash. Palgrave Macmillan.

Hamwey, Megan, Karlen S Bader-Larsen, Danette F Cruthird and Lara Varpio. 2021. “The ties that bind: camaraderie in military interprofessional healthcare teams.” *Military Medicine* 186 (Supplement_3): 42-47.

Harari, Yuval Noah. 2008. *The ultimate experience. Battlefield Revelations and the Making of Modern War Culture 1450-2000.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Harrison, Elizabeth. 2013. “Beyond the looking glass? ‘Aidland’ reconsidered.” *Critique of Anthropology* 33(3): 263-279.

Hartley III, Dean S. 2021. *An Ontology of Modern Conflict.* Springer International Publishing.

Heath-Kelly, Charlotte. 2013. *Politics of Violence: Militancy, International Politics, Killing in the name.* Routledge.

Hedges, Chris. 2003. *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*. PublicAffairs

Hegghammer, Thomas. 2010. “The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad.” *International Security* 35(3): 53–94.

Hennessey, Patrick. 2009. *The Junior Officers' Reading Club: Killing Time and Fighting Wars.* Penguin Books.

Henriksen, Rune. 2007. “Warriors in Combat – What Makes People Actively Fight in Combat?” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 30 (2): 187–223.

Hermez, Sami. 2017. *War Is Coming: Between Past and Future Violence in Lebanon*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

Herr, Michael. 1997. *Dispatches*. Random House

Hesiod. Homeric Hymns, Epic Cycle, Homerica. Translated by Evelyn-White, H G. Loeb Classical Library Volume 57. London: William Heinemann. 1914. Accessed at https://www.theoi.com/Text/HesiodWorksDays.html.

Higate, Paul. 2012. "'Cowboys and Professionals':The Politics of Identity Work in the Private and Military Security Company." *Millennium Journal of International Studies* 40 (2): 321-341.

Hibberd Jessamy M and Neil Greenberg. 2011. "Coping with the impact of working in a conflict zone: A comparative study of diplomatic staff." *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine* 53(4): 352–357.

Hillman, James. 2004. *A Terrible Love of War.* Penguin Books.

Hoffman, Frank G. 2007. *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars*. Potomac Institute for Policy Studies.

Holmes, Andrew. 2020. "Researcher Positionality--A Consideration of Its Influence and Place in Qualitative Research--A New Researcher Guide". *Shanlax International Journal of Education*, 8(4): 1-10.

Holmqvist, Caroline. 2012. "War/Space: Shifting Spatialities and the Absence of Politics in Contemporary Accounts of War." *Global Crime* 13(4): 219–234.

Holmqvist, Caroline. 2013. "Undoing War: War Ontologies and the Materiality of Drone Warfare". *Millennium* 41(3): 535-552.

Hurka, Thomas. 2009. "Thomas Hurka on Pleasure," April 2009, in *Philosophy Bites,* produced by David Edmonds and Nigel Warburton, podcast, 17:13, https://philosophybites.com/podcast/thomas-hurka-on-pleasure/

Mike Danforth and Ian Chillag, "F-Bombs, Chicken, and Exclamation Points," April 21, 2015, in *How to Do Everything*, produced by Gillian Donovan, podcast, MP3 audio, 18:46, http://www.npr.org/podcasts/510303/how-to-do-everything.

Hynes, Samuel. 1998. *The soldier's tale: Bearing witness to a modern war*. Penguin Books.

Ibrahimkhil, Abdul Matin. 2012. “Blood debt”. In *The Poetry of the Taliban*, edited by Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn.Hachette UK.

Ikramuddin, Hafiz. 2012. “Kabul is set on fire”. In *The Poetry of the Taliban*, edited by Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn.Hachette UK.

Jachens, Liza, Jonathan Houdmont and Roslyn Thomas. 2016. “Effort–reward imbalance and heavy alcohol consumption among humanitarian aid workers.” *Journal of studies on alcohol and drugs 77* (6): 904-913.

Jackson, Patrick Thaddeus. 2008. “Foregrounding ontology: dualism, monism, and IR theory.” *Review of International Studies* 34 (1): 129-153.

Jacobson, Nora, Rebecca Gewurtz, and Emma Haydon. 2007. “Ethical review of interpretive research: Problems and solutions.” *IRB: Ethics & Human Research* 29(5): 1-8.

Jacoby, Tami. 2006. “From the trenches: dilemmas of feminist IR fieldwork”. In *Feminist Methodologies for International Relations*, edited by Ackerly, Brooke A., Maria Stern, and Jacqui True. Cambridge University Press.

Jameson, Frederic. 1983. “Pleasure: a Political Issue”. *Formations of Pleasure* 1: 1–14.

Jamieson, Nikki, Kim Usher, Dorothy Ratnarajah and Myfanwy Maple. 2021. “Walking forwards with moral injury: Narratives from ex-serving Australian defence force members.” *Journal of Veterans Studies* 7(1):174–185.

Janbaz. 2012. “Turban”. In *The Poetry of the Taliban*, edited by Alex van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn. Hachette UK.

Jawad. 2012. “Trenches”. In *The Poetry of the Taliban*, edited by Alex van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn. Hachette UK.

Jefferson, Thomas. (1776, July 4). Declaration of Independence: A transcription. National Archives, Washington, D.C. Available at: https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript (Accessed 29 August 2025)

Johais, Eva. 2024. “The WARFUN Taboo.” *War & Society* 44 (1): 66–81

Johnson, John. 2001. “In-depth interviewing.” In *Handbook of Interview Research*, edited by Gubrium, Jaber F., and James A. Holstein. SAGE.

Johnson, R. & Onwuegbuzie, Anthony & Turner, Lisa. 2007. “Toward a Definition of Mixed Methods Research.” *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* 1: 112-133.

Jünger, Ernst. 1996. *The Storm of Steel.* Penguin Classics.

Junger, Sebastian. 2010. *War.* New York: Twelve.

Katz, Leonard D. 2016. “Pleasure", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), Accessed August 25, 2025. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/pleasure/

Khaksar, Hayatullah. 2012. “Afghans bring me to tears”. In *The Poetry of the Taliban*, edited by Alex van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn. Hachette UK.

Khalili, Laleh. 2016. “The Politics of Pleasure: Promenading on the Corniche and Beachgoing.” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 34(4): 583–600.

Kingston, Peter. 1999. "How Many Did You Enjoy Killing in the War, Grandad?" *The Guardian*, May 26, 1999. https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/1999/may/26/features11.g23.

Korte, Barbara. 2009. *Represented Reporters: Images of War Correspondents in Memoirs and Fiction*. transcript Verlag

Koschut, Simon. 2022. "Emotions and International Relations." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*.

Krystalli, Roxanne. 2019. “Narrating violence: Feminist dilemmas and approaches”. In *Handbook on gender and violence*, edited by Laura J.Shepherd. Edward Elgar Publishing.

Krystalli, Roxani and Philipp Schulz. 2022. “Taking love and care seriously: An emergent research agenda for remaking worlds in the wake of violence.” *International Studies Review* 24(1):viac003.

Kuehnel, Josefine and Nina Wilén. 2018. “Rwanda’s Military as a People’s Army: Heroes at Home and Abroad.” *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 12(1): 154–171.

Kühne, Thomas. 2011. “The Pleasure of Terror: Belonging through Genocide.” In *Pleasure and Power in Nazi Germany*, edited by Pamela E. Swett, Corey Ross, and Fabrice d’Almeida. Palgrave Macmillan.

Jonsson, Oscar. 2019. *The Russian Understanding of War Blurring the Lines between War and Peace*. Georgetown University Press.

Lang, Johannes. 2022. “A new psychology of war: The science of resilience and the militarization of positive psychology.” In *Resilience: Militaries and Militarization,* edited by Joanna Bourke and Robin May. Springer International Publishing.

Lar Paw, Naw, Kyaw Min Htike, Rajitra Nawawonganun and Roshan Kumar Mahato. 2025. “Exploring the association of depression and post traumatic stress disorder among humanitarian aid workers along the Thai-Myanmar border.” *Mental Health & Prevention* 37: 200409.

Law, John. 2004. *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research*. Routledge.

Lawlor, Leonard and John Nale. 2014. *The Cambridge Foucault Lexicon*. Cambridge University Press.

LeardMann, Cynthia A. and Teresa M. Powell, Tyler C. Smith, Michael R. Bell, Besa Smith, Edward J. Boyko, Tomoko I. Hooper, Gary D. Gackstetter, Mark Ghamsary, and Charles W. Hoge. 2013. “Risk factors associated with suicide in current and former US military personnel.” *Jama* 310 (5):496-506.

Levy, Yagil. 2007. “Soldiers as Laborers: A Theoretical Model.” *Theory and Society* 36(2): 187–208.

Levy, Jack and William R.Thompson. 2010. *Causes of war*. Wiley-Blackwell.

Liang, Qiao and Wang Xiangsui. 1999. *Unrestricted Warfare*. (PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House), https://www.c4i.org/unrestricted.pdf

Lisle, Debbie. 2016. *Holidays in the Danger Zone: Entanglements of War and Tourism*. University of Minnesota Press.

Lomsky-Feder, Edna. 2004. “Life Stories, War, and Veterans: On the Social Distribution of Memories.” *Ethos* 32(1): 82–109.

Lopes Cardozo, Barbara, Carol Gotway Crawford, Cynthia Eriksson, Julia Zhu, Miriam Sabin, Alastair Ager, David Foy, Leslie Snider, Willem Scholte, Reinhard Kaiser, Miranda Olff, Bas Rijnen and Winnifred Simon. 2012. “Psychological distress, depression, anxiety, and burnout among international humanitarian aid workers: a longitudinal study.” *PLoS One*, 7(9):e44948.

Loyd, Anthony. 1999. *My War Gone By, I Miss it So*. Doubleday.

Luttwak, Edward. 2020. “Gory or Glorious— the pains and pleasure of war”. *Times Literary Supplement*, 13 November 2020, https://www.the-tls.co.uk/history/war-margaret-macmillan-review-edward-n-luttwak

Mæland, Bard and Paul Brunstad. 2009. *Enduring military boredom: From 1750 to the present*. Springer.

MacKenzie, Megan H. 2012. *Female Soldiers in Sierra Leone: Sex, Security, and Post-Conflict Development*. New York University Press.

MacLeish, Kenneth. 2013. "Making war at Fort Hood: Life and uncertainty in a military community." Princeton University Press.

MacLeish, Kenneth. 2019. "How to feel about war: On soldier psyches, military biopolitics, and American empire." *BioSocieties* 14 (2): 274-299.

MacMillan, Margaret. 2020. *War:How Conflict Shaped Us.* Profile Books.

Mansfield, Nick. 2008. *Theorizing War: From Hobbes to Badiou.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Markiewicz, Tadek. 2024. “Talking to the State: Interviewing the Elites about What’s Not to Be Said”, *International Studies Perspectives* 25 (2): 265–284.

Matyusha, Pavlo. 2022. “Is There Happiness in War? Where?”, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, August 21, 2022. https://lareviewofbooks.org/short-takes/is-there-happiness-in-war-where/.

Mearsheimer, John J. 2014. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. W.W. Norton.

McGowan, Todd. 2022. *Enjoyment Left and Right*. Sublation Press.

McGrath, John. J. 2007. *The Other End of the Spear: The Tooth-to-Tail Ratio (T3R) in Modern Military Operations.* Combat Studies Institute Press Publications.

McLaughlin, Greg. 2016. *The War Correspondent.* Pluto Press.

Mercer, Colin. 1983."A poverty of desire: pleasure and popular politics." *Formations of pleasure* 1: 101-23.

Malkasian, Carter. 2013. *War comes to Garmser : thirty years of conflict on the Afghan frontier*. Oxford University Press.

Maringira, Godfrey. 2024. "Wartime soldiers, civilian relations: Zimbabwean soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo war 1998–2002." *War & Society* 44 (1): 82–94.

Maringira, Godfrey. 2023. "Combat Sex: Pleasure of War in Africa." *Public Anthropologist*, February 8, 2023. https://publicanthropologist.cmi.no/2023/02/08/combat-sex-pleasure-of-war-in-africa/.

McSorley, Kevin. 2013. *War and the Body*. Routledge.

McSorley, Kevin. 2014. "Towards an Embodied Sociology of War." *The Sociological Review* 62 (2_suppl): 107–128.

Miller, Kenneth.E. and Andrew Rasmussen. 2010. "War exposure, daily stressors, and mental health in conflict and post-conflict settings: Bridging the divide between trauma-focused and psychosocial frameworks". *Social science & medicine* 70(1): 7-16.

Mitchell, David. 2017. "NGO presence and activity in Afghanistan, 2000–2014: a provincial-level dataset." *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 6(1): 1-18.

Moghnieh, Lamia. 2017. "'The violence we live in': reading and experiencing violence in the field." *Contemporary Levant* 2(1): 24–36.

Mogstad, Heidi. 2024. "'Playing War': Norwegian Soldiers' Experiences of Fun and Responsibility in Afghanistan." *War & Society* 44 (1): 46–65.

Mooney, Bel**.** "Brave British Nurse Who Fights Ebola Is a Selfless Hero to Lift Our Hearts." *Daily Mail*, August 23, 2014. https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2735215/BEL-MOONEY-Brave-British-nurse-fights-Ebola-selfless-hero-lift-hearts.html.

Moradi, Yousef, Behnaz Dowran, and Mojtaba Sepandi. 2021. "The Global Prevalence of Depression, Suicide Ideation, and Attempts in the Military Forces: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Cross Sectional Studies." *BMC Psychiatry* 21 (1): 510

Mujahid, Gulrukhsar. 2016. "Questioning the Counter-insurgency Doctrine in Afghanistan." *Strategic Studies* 36(1): 46–58.

Musa, Saif Ali and Abdalla A.R.M. Hamid. 2008. "Psychological Problems Among Aid Workers Operating in Darfur." *Social Behaviour and Personality: an international journal* 36 (3): 407 – 416.

Nadelson, Theodore. 2005. *Trained to kill: Soldiers at war*. JHU Press.

Narozhna, Tanya. 2022. "The Lived Body, Everyday and Generative Powers of War: Toward an Embodied Ontology of War as Experience." *International Theory* 14 (2): 210–232.

Nachtwey, James. 2007. *My Wish: Let My Photographs Bear Witness*. TED Talk, filmed March 2007. Accessed August 29, 2025. https://www.ted.com/talks/james_nachtwey_my_wish_let_my_photographs_bear_witness

Nevarez, Michael D., Harlan M. Yee, and Robert J. Waldinger. 2017. "Friendship in War: Camaraderie and Prevention of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder." *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 30 (5): 512–20.

Nieto-Valdivieso, Yoana Fernanda. 2017. "The Joy of the Militancy: Happiness and the Pursuit of Revolutionary Struggle." *Journal of Gender Studies* 26 (1): 78–90.

Nordin, Astrid H. M., and Dan Öberg. 2015. "Targeting the Ontology of War: From Clausewitz to Baudrillard." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 43 (2): 392–410.

Nordstrom, Carolyn. 1997. *A different kind of war story*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

Nordstrom, Carolyn. 1999. “Visible Wars & Invisible Girls, Shadow Industries, and the Politics of Not-Knowing.” *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture & Social Justice* 1 (1): 71–84.

Nott, David. 2019. *War doctor: Surgery on the Front Line.* Picador.

Nussbaum, Martha. 2012. “Who is the happy warrior? Philosophy, happiness research, and public policy.” *International Review of Economics* 59: 335–361.

O’Malley, Pat and Mariana Valverde. 2004. “Pleasure, Freedom and Drugs: The Uses of‘Pleasure’ in Liberal Governance of Drug and Alcohol Consumption”. *Sociology* 38(1): 25-42.

Ortner, Sherry B. 2016. "Dark anthropology and its others: Theory since the eighties." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 6 (1): 47-73.

Osborne Alison K, Gemma Wilson-Menzfeld, Gill McGill and Matthew D Kiernan. 2022. “Military service and alcohol use: a systematic narrative review.” *Occupational Medicine* 72 (5): 313–323.

Oxford English Dictionary. 2025. “Fun.” Accessed March 10, 2025. https://www.oed.com/dictionary/fun_n?tl=true

Parashar, Swati. 2014. *Women and Militant Wars: The politics of injury*. Routledge.

Parashar, Swati. 2013. “What wars and ‘war bodies’ know about international relations.” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 26 (4): 615-630.

Parashar, Swati. 2015. “Anger, war and feminist storytelling.” In *Emotions, Politics and War,* edited by Linda Åhäll, and Thomas Gregory. Routledge.

Paré, Ambroise**.** 1910. *Journeys in Diverse Places*. Collier. In *Harvard Classics*, vol. 38. https://archive.org/details/journeysindivers01pare.

Pedelty, Mark. 1995. *War stories : the culture of foreign correspondents*, Routledge.

Pedersen, Thomas Randrup. 2017. “Get Real: Chasing Danish Warrior Dreams in the Afghan ‘Sandbox’.” *Critical Military Studies* 3 (1): 7–26.

Pedersen, Thomas Randrup. 2019. “Breaking Bad? Down and Dirty with Military Anthropology.” *Ethnos* 86 (4): 676–93.

Peltier, Heidi. 2020. “The growth of the “camo economy” and the commercialization of the post-9/11 wars.” Watson Institute, Brown University. https://open.bu.edu/handle/2144/42016

Penttinen, Elina. 2013. *Joy and International Relations: A New Methodology*. Routledge.

Pfeifer Cruz, Claudia , & Jaïr van der Lijn 2021. *Multilateral peace operations in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021.* Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

Polman, Linda. 2010. *The crisis caravan: what's wrong with humanitarian aid?*. Metropolitan Books.

Putra, Bama Andika. 2023. “Complexities of the Ethical Dilemmas in Qualitative International Relations Research: Research Subjects, Ethical Codes, and Constructing Qualitative Rigor.” *Social Sciences* 12(3): 157.

Phillips, Sarah G. and Daniel J. Tower. 2025 “Knowing What Not to Know About Islamic State: Terrorism Studies and Public Secrecy.” *International Security* 50 (1): 9–45.

Pili, Giangiuseppe. 2020. “The Wild Bunch Is Enrolled to the Army: Sorites Paradox and the Problems for the Ontology of War.” *Areté: International Journal of Philosophy, Human & Social Sciences* 5: 231–49.

Pili, Giangiuseppe. 2023. “War Is Not Our Profession: Paradoxes for a Moralization and Morality of War.” *Moral Philosophy* 135–47.

Powell, Laura. 2014. “Glorification of the Military in Popular Culture and the Media.” In *Good Intentions: Norms and Practices of Imperial Humanitarianism*, edited by Maximilian Forte. Alert Press.

Qatin. 2012. “‘I Am an Afghan Mujahed.’” In: Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, eds. *The Poetry of the Taliban*. 2012. Hachette UK.

Quilty, Andrew. 2022. *The Return of the Taliban, Through the Eyes of a Photojournalist*. TEDxSydney. Accessed August 29, 2025.

https://www.ted.com/talks/andrew_quilty_the_return_of_the_taliban_through_the_eyes_of_a_photojournalist

Ramani. 2012. “We Are the Soldiers of Islam.” In *The Poetry of the Taliban*, edited by Alex van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn. Hachette UK.

Rapoport, Anatol. 1968. Introduction. In: Clausewitz, Carl von. *On War.* Penguin books.

Rapport, Nigel. 2003. *I am dynamite: an alternative anthropology of power*. Psychology Press.

Ravecca, Paulo, and Elizabeth Dauphinee. 2022. "What is left for critique? On the perils of innocence in neoliberal times." *Las Torres de Lucca: revista internacional de filosofía política* 11 (1): 37-49.

Read, Róisín. 2025. “Between Civilian and Military Masculinities and Exceptionalism in Humanitarian Memoir.” In *Routledge Handbook of Masculinities, Conflict, and Peacebuilding,* edited by Henri Myrttinen, Chloé Lewis, Heleen Touquet, Philipp Schulz, Farooq Yousaf , Elizabeth Laruni. Routledge.

Ribeiro S. C. Thomaz, Julia. 2018. "‘Knowing You Will Understand’: The Usage of Poetry as a Historical Source about the Experience of the First World War.” *Alicante Journal of English Studies / Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses* 31 (December): 109–24.

Rosamond, Annika and Annica Kronsell. 2018. “Cosmopolitan Militaries and Dialogic Peacekeeping: Danish and Swedish Women Soldiers in Afghanistan.” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 20, (2): 172–187.

Ross, Alex. 2023. *“*Ernst Jünger’s narratives of complicity*.” New Yorker*, July 3, 2023 https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/07/03.

Roth, Silke. 2015. *The Paradoxes of Aid Work: Passionate professionals*. Routledge.

Roth, Silke. 2014. “Aid work as edgework – voluntary risk-taking and security in humanitarian assistance, development and human rights work.” *Journal of Risk Research*, 18(2): 139–155.

Roth, Silke. 2011. “Dealing with danger – risk and security in the everyday lives of aid workers.” In *Inside the Everyday Lives of Development Workers: the Challenges and Futures of Aidland,* edited by Anne-Meike Fechter and Heather Hindman. Kumarian Press.

Rowe, Wendy. 2014. "Positionality." In *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Action Research*, edited by Coghlan, David, and Mary Brydon-Miller. SAGE Publications.

Sahar. 2012. “Pamir”. In *The Poetry of the Taliban*, edited by Alex van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn. Hachette UK.

Salt, Alexander. 2018. “Transformation and the War in Afghanistan.” *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 12(1): 98–126.

Sarantakos, Sotirios. 2013. *Social research*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Savin-Baden, Maggi and Claire Howell Major. 2013. *Qualitative Research: The Essential Guide to Theory and Practice*. Routledge.

Scarry, Elaine. 1985. *The body in pain: the making and unmaking of the world*. Oxford University Press.

Seacole, Mary. 1857. *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands*. London: James Blackwood.Project Gutenberg. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/23031.

Smirl, Lisa. 2012, “The State We Are(n’t) In: Liminal Subjectivity in Aid Worker Auto-biographies.” In *Statebuilding and State-Formation: The Political Sociology of Intervention,* edited by Berit Bliesemann de Guevara. Routledge.

Smuts, Aaron. 2011. “The Feels Good Theory of Pleasure.” *Philosophical Studies* 155: 241–265.

Solnit, Rebecca. 2021. *Orwell's Roses*. Viking.

Strohmeier, Hannah, Willem Scholte and Alastair Ager. 2018. “Factors associated with common mental health problems of humanitarian workers in South Sudan.” *PLOS ONE*, 13 (10): e0205333

Sue, Valerie M and Lois A. Ritter. 2007. *Conducting online surveys*. SAGE Publications.

Swett, Pamela.E, Corey Ross and Fabrice d’Almeida. 2011. “Pleasure and Power in Nazi Germany: An Introduction”. In *Pleasure and Power in Nazi Germany*, edited by Pamela E. Swett, Corey Ross and Fabrice d’Almeida. Palgrave Macmillan.

Sylvester, Christine. 2015. *Masquerades of War*. Routledge.

Sylvester, Christine. 2013. *War as Experience: Contributions from International Relations and Feminist Analysis*. Routledge.

Sylvester, Christine. 2012. “War Experiences/War Practices/War Theory”. *Millennium* 40(3), 483-503.

Sylvester, Christine. (Ed) 2011. *Experiencing war*. Routledge.

Teeters, Jennifer B., Caitlin L. Lancaster, Daniel G. Brown, and Sudie E. Back. 2017. “Substance Use Disorders in Military Veterans: Prevalence and Treatment Challenges.” *Substance Abuse and Rehabilitation* 8: 69–77.

Theis Bollmann, Anders and Søren Sjøgren. 2023. “Rethinking Clausewitz’s Chameleon: Is It Time for Western Militaries to Abandon the Idea of War’s Immutable Nature?". In *Military Politics: New Perspectives*, edited by Thomas Crosbie. Berghahn Books.

Tomforde, Maron. 2024. “Processing violence: the continuum between fear, doubt, and joy among German soldiers in Afghanistan.” *War & Society* 44(1): 113–130.

Thorpe, Holly. 2020. "‘Sometimes Fear Gets in All Your Bones’: Towards Understanding the Complexities of Risk in Development Work.” *Third World Quarterly* 41 (6): 939–957.

Tilly, Charles. 1990. *Coercion, capital, and European states, AD 990-1990.* Basil Blackwell

Travers, Max. 2001. *Qualitative research through case studies*. SAGE Publications.

Tripodi, Christian. 2023. “Hidden hands: The failure of population-centric counterinsurgency in Afghanistan 2008-11.” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 47(4): 545–573.

Trew, Bel. 2024. *War Journalism Should Be Rooted in Empathy — Not Violence*. TEDxBerlin. Accessed August 29, 2025. https://www.ted.com/talks/bel_trew_war_journalism_should_be_rooted_in_empathy_not_violence

Tuchman, Barbara W. 1978. *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century*. Alfred A. Knopf.

U.S. Congress. House. Committee on Foreign Affairs. Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia. 2007. *Working in a War Zone: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Civilians Returning from Iraq: Hearing before the Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, One Hundred Tenth Congress, First Session, June 19, 2007.* https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-110hhrg36206/pdf/CHRG-110hhrg36206.pdf

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. "How common is PTSD in veterans?", Accessed Jan 22, 2025. https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/common/common_veterans.asp

van Creveld, Martin. 2008. *Culture of War*. Spellmount.

van der Hoeven, Regina and Bernadette Kester. 2022. "Demythologizing war journalism: Motivation and role perception of Dutch war journalists." *Media, war & conflict* 15(3): 263-279.

van der Dennen, Johan. 2005. "Combat Motivation." *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice* 17: 81-89

van Linschoten, Alex Strick and Felix Kuehn (eds). 2012. *The Poetry of the Taliban*. Hachette UK.

Väyrynen, Tarja and Eeva Puumala. 2015. "Bodies of War, the Past Continuous, and (Ar)rhythmic Experiences." *Alternatives* 40(3-4), 237-250.

Vasterling, Jennifer J., Susan P. Proctor, Matthew J. Friedman, Charles W. Hoge, Timothy Heeren, Lynda A. King, and Daniel W. King. 2010. "PTSD Symptom Increases in Iraq-Deployed Soldiers: Comparison with Nondeployed Soldiers and Associations with Baseline Symptoms, Deployment Experiences, and Postdeployment Stress." *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 23 (1): 41–51.

Wood, Elisabeth Jean. 2003. *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador*. Cambridge University Press.

Smith, David Woodruff. 2018. "Phenomenology", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/phenomenology.

Welland, Julia. 2018. "Joy and War: Reading Pleasure in Wartime Experience." *Review of International Studies* 44 (3): 438–455.

Wright, Quincy. 1942. *A Study of War. Vol. 1*. University of Chicago Press.

Xenophon. 1923. *Memorabilia*. Edited by C. Marchant. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. Perseus Digital Library. Accessed May 27, 2024. https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0208%3Abook%3D2%3Achapter%3D1%3Asection%3D28

Yanow, Dvora and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea. 2006. *Interpretation and method: Empirical research methods and the interpretive turn*. M.E. Sharpe.

Zaeef, Abdul Salam. 2010. *My Life with the Taliban*. Columbia University Press.

Zarkov, Dubravka. 2007. *The Body of War: Media, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Break-Up of Yugoslavia*. Duke University Press.

Zabuli, Sadullah Sa'eed. 2012. "A Time is Coming". In *The Poetry of the Taliban*, edited by Alex van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn. Hachette UK.

Zahid. 2012. "Love of God". In *The Poetry of the Taliban*, edited by Alex van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn. Hachette UK.