

Review – Martialling Peace

Written by Vanessa Gauthier Vela

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Martialling Peace: How the Peacekeeper Myth Legitimises Warfare

By Nicole Wegner

Edinburgh University Press, 2023

When contemplating United Nations peacekeeping, the image that comes to mind is one of a morally *good* project draped in sky-blue hopes. Knowing peacekeeping is a militarized operation, where does this association come from? What does peace involve? What does it silence? In her book, Nicole Wegner presents, analyzes, and questions the production of the peace narrative involved in peacekeeping, as well as its ideological and political implications.

Using discourse analysis, Wegner unpacks how peacekeeping is mobilized rhetorically, using the peacekeeping myth as a central framework in order to shed light on how it legitimizes militarized violence. In doing so, she highlights the relationship between war and peace and gendered, racialized, colonialist, nationalist, and imperialist discourses. Focusing on the case of Canada and its particular entanglement of national and peacekeeping narratives, the author uses the concept of martial peace to analyze how the idea of peace and the physicality of violence can cohabitate.

The book contains five chapters, an introduction, and conclusion. In Chapter 1, Wegner presents the concept of martial peace, which she describes as the legitimization of military force within a particular type of peace. Peace is then an aspirational discourse that reproduces militarist ideology and practices, and this vision of peace justifies international and domestic peacekeeping and policing. In Chapter 2, she presents how peacekeeping is understood as different from other forms of militarized violence. Her analysis unpacks the UN peacekeeping trinity – impartiality/consent/use of force only for defense – and its connection to the idea of peacekeeping as a moral, “soft” way to use militarized means in global politics. This difference thereby legitimizes such military action. Wegner examines the Canadian version of the myth in Chapter 3, based on its representations in Canadian popular culture, memorial artifacts, and academic theorization. Canada’s global identity is reflected in UN peacekeeping as indicative of Canadian values, in discourses that intertwine UN peacekeeping principles (impartiality/consent/use of force only for defense) with values that Canadians are said to embody (paternal helpfulness and innocence/altruism/non-violence). The peacekeeping myth is kept alive by Canadians who are happy to believe that such values are somehow distinctly Canadian. In Chapter 4, the author discusses the period of the war in Afghanistan, where Canadian troops were deployed in the context of a counterinsurgency operation. Wegner demonstrates that the peacekeeping myth, rather than being disrupted by Canada’s involvement in counterinsurgency, instead made it possible to discursively shift the understanding of the war, making it appear as an exercise in humanitarianism. Chapter 5 turns to domestic Canadian policing discourses to highlight the relationship between “peace” – meaning order for the settler population – and violence against Indigenous resistance. In this narrative, the martial force of the state is positioned as legitimate and is used for peaceful purposes, while Indigenous resistance is presented as uncivilized and a threat to good order.

Martial Peace: Binding Militarism and Martial Politics

The concept of martial peace is the main contribution of Wegner’s book. It builds a bridge between Alison Howell’s concept of martial politics, which addresses the violence of liberal societies, and the concept of militarism, related to military action. In doing so, Wegner is intervening in contemporary scholarly debates on the use of critical conceptual

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tools to analyze subjects related to “war” and “peace” (Howell, 2018; MacKenzie et al., 2018). In a feminist manner, she invites us to question what seems like common sense, i.e., what we understand as “peace,” and shows how narrow definitions obscure colonial and imperial violence. Questioning the politics of peacekeeping, she problematizes how peace is envisioned in different discourses. Wegner bases her analysis on a conceptualization of militarism as an ideology that justifies and legitimizes military action through narratives that reproduce a discursive environment within which the criticism of military activities is taboo and the military is seen as “good.” Her concept connects militarism, peace, and liberal violence in an analytical back-and-forth between national and global politics and power structures. In doing so, she underscores a specific vision of peace – martial peace – that legitimizes militarized violence to achieve peace.

The Peacekeeping Myth: Legitimizing Violence in the Name of Peace

Basing her analysis on the concept of martial peace, Wegner demonstrates how the peacekeeping myth legitimizes militarized violence. She shows how peacekeeping became mythologized and how the myth is used in global politics to package the “common sense” that makes peacekeeping *desirable* and understood as a *good thing*. Wegner underlines the importance of the scale of the use of force, “*rather than the absence of it*” (p.34), in the myth. Her analysis is relevant to ongoing debates on peacekeeping and the use of force. Indeed, since the decision of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to involve peacekeeping missions in contexts where peacekeepers are exposed to hostile actors and the dos Santos Cruz Report (2017) recommending a more robust posture to reduce the number of peacekeeper casualties, the discussion on the use of military means has been partially depoliticized. This depoliticization reduces the space to question why peacekeepers are in danger (which would highlight a political aspect of the context) and which peacekeepers are in danger (which would highlight inequalities between Global South and North Troop Contributing Countries; Cold-Ravnkilde, Albrecht, and Haugegaard, 2017). Moreover, it masks the fact that peacekeepers are also harmful to the host population (Razack, 2004; Whitworth, 2004; Higate and Henry, 2014; Jennings, 2017; United Nations, 2023). Wegner’s contribution in examining the peacekeeping myth is to provide a useful framework to understand the debate on the use of force in peace missions and how the idea of “making peace” complements a militarized mindset in an environment where military violence is understood as useful.

The Canadian Peacekeeping Myth

Wegner, herself Canadian, focuses on the Canadian peacekeeping myth and how it is connected to the appeal of peacekeeping and to the idea of Canadian military activity as innocent and helpful. The myth contains attractive, flattering ideas about Canadian national identity and presumed Canadian values. At the same time, it obscures the violence of the Canadian state in domestic policing and international military operations, as well as its responsibility and that of its citizens in the colonial and imperial order and white supremacy. In Wegner’s analysis of the discourses around martial activities where the Canadian state benefited from the peacekeeping myth, she shows how they directly obfuscated the state’s violence. In the context of the Canadian Armed Forces’ counterinsurgency operation in Afghanistan, the myth contributed to idealizing the “civilized” heroes who were defending the world against “bad” brown men, as illustrated by the government’s rhetoric concerning the “saving of Afghan women.” In the case of violence against the resistance of Indigenous communities by Canada’s military and police forces, some of which have also participated in UN peacekeeping, the myth benefits violent colonial institutions by representing Indigenous protest as a threat to order and the Canadian state as the benevolent guardian of said order. The martial politics involved in domestic policing – where violence against Indigenous communities is hidden behind peace and order for the settlers – and national militarism are thus linked. Similar links can also be made concerning research examining other countries involved in peacekeeping; for instance, in the analysis of how Brazilian peacekeepers deployed in Haiti euphemized the violence of their tasks to fit the narrative of a humanitarian vision of peacekeeping (Xavier do Monte, 2023) and how this increased use of force in the context of stabilization is related to processes of domestic militarization in Brazil (Kenkel, 2021).

Wegner convincingly develops her analysis of the Canadian peacekeeping myth, but this focus also leaves some questions open. The creation of the Canadian myth is presented as something that occurred in the past and is now stabilized. It would have been interesting for Wegner to explore how Canadian orientations and UN peacekeeping

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activities have interacted with the Canadian peacekeeping myth since the 2000s. In the same way, the unique historical entanglement connecting Canada and UN peacekeeping at multiple levels raises questions as to the transferability of this framework to other countries. For example, how can we use the frame of the peacekeeping myth in countries where peacekeeping has increased in importance since the end of the Cold War but where their participation has not resulted in UN recognition (Krishnasamy, 2007) and international legitimacy?

Overall, Wegner offers a strong demonstration of how international and domestic politics are bound together. Her book will be useful to the study of peace, militarism, UN peacekeeping, feminist and critical approaches more broadly, discourse analysis, and Canadian politics. The concept of martial peace contributes significantly to the study of global politics in relation to domestic dynamics, and its flexibility will be helpful in future research to make visible discursive processes of legitimizing state violence that involve both military and liberal civilian spheres.

About the author:

Vanessa Gauthier Vela, PhD, is an affiliated researcher at the Gender Centre of the Geneva Graduate Institute and a visiting lecturer at the Vienna School of International Studies. Her research interests include feminist theory, security, peacekeeping, and militarization.