Introduction

**LGBT Soldiers in Military History**

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Abstract

While lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people have always served in militaries, military organizations and leaders have managed the presence of sexual gender minorities in the ranks in complicated ways that were influenced by regulation, military culture, social and cultural norms, and perceptions of military effectiveness. The history of LGBT soldiers in modern western military history reveals important ways that various military organizations have addressed the question and challenges of open service by LGBT people. While many states have incorporated LGBT people into their organizations, it is not the case globally, and policies continue to change. The five essays in this collection explore various aspects of LGBT military history in West Germany, Australia, the Netherlands, the United States, and Israel and explore themes including the importance of comparative history; the differences between de jure and de facto integration; the effects of both regulation and culture on LGBTQ inclusion; and the experience of LGBT people in uniform.

Keywords


Soldiers (and sailors, and airmen, and marines) have sex. Soldiers are attracted, romantically and sexually, to other people. Soldiers fall in love and are in
relationships. Soldiers have ideas about masculinity and femininity. Soldiers sometimes conform and obey and sometimes rebel against rules and norms. Military organizations represent that forceful arm of the state and are intended to fight and win wars, so they operate under imperatives of effectiveness and readiness. But they are also social organizations, and they often reflect (and sometimes shape) the social and cultural landscape of the societies from which they are drawn. Law, policy, and regulation do not always match culture, implicit expectations, and social norms. Questions about how to manage sex and sexuality in a military force are not new.\(^1\) Militaries across time and space have confronted these challenges: how and to what extent should sexual, romantic, and platonic relationships between consenting adults within the force and between soldiers and civilians be managed? Does someone’s sexual behaviour, attraction, or identity affect their suitability to serve in uniform? Does it affect unit cohesion, morale, or discipline? What is the relationship between sex characteristics, gender, and military service?

But even defining the landscape is difficult – what histories count as LGBT or queer military history at all? The search for an umbrella term, to unite various minoritized and marginalized groups related to sex and gender under a single identifier, has been important, but fraught with questions of inclusion and exclusion.\(^2\) And in military contexts the distinction between LGB history and transgender or queer history remains important, as the treatment of sexuality and sexual orientation is often distinct from considerations related to gender identity and gender expression. Another initialism, sogie, or sometimes sogiesc, represents a different way to think about the topic of sex and sexuality, focusing on the categories of sexual orientation (so), gender identity and expression (gie), and sex characteristics (sc) as ideas that pertain to all people and which are experienced and expressed along spectra, are not fixed categories of identity, and are embedded in social, political, historical, and cultural contexts.

In the quest to define the field, historians of LGBT and queer history more broadly offer paths forward, including the call to ask critical ontological questions. Historian Michael Bronski writes, in the introduction to a A Queer History of the United States, that “All too often, most of us think in terms of simple dichotomies, including gay and straight”. Bronski contends that the task of even figuring out what “counts” as LGBT or queer history is anything but

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1 For a documentary anthology and analysis of LGBT people in military history, see R. R. Burg, Gay Warriors: A Documentary History from the Ancient World to the Present (New York, 2001).
straightforward. To illustrate his point, he asks readers to consider a letter from a nineteenth century male alumni of Dartmouth College to his friend: “I don’t see how I can live any longer without having a friend near me, I mean a male friend. Yes, James, I must come; we will yoke together again; your little bed is just wide enough”. Bronski interrogates: “Was [he] gay? Did he love James? Did they have a sexual relationship? If so, what did this mean for his two marriages later in life? Is this queer history?”

Military historians can, and should, apply similar interrogatories to many episodes in military history. Militaries have, historically, been predominantly male homosocial spaces and institutions, in which intimate social bonds between people of the same sex undergird power dynamics and social cohesion, so the construction of masculinity has been critical to their functioning as organizations. But militaries are also, often, homoerotic spaces, where same sex desire (especially between men) also shapes social relationships and power dynamics. And the line between the two can be thin, indeed, making constructions of masculinity and femininity even more critical to define “safe” interactions in such spaces. The inclusion (or exclusion) of women into militaries further complicates how we understand the history of sexual orientation and gender identity and expression in the military. Aaron Belkin’s work highlights the contradictions about manliness and masculinity inherent in military organizations, and in which both men and women are involved in upholding and challenging.

Thinking about and managing soldiers, sex, and sexuality may not be new, but the idea of “LGBT” soldiers constituting a particular demographic group that can be studied systematically, or the idea of “LGBT” or “queer” military history as a distinct subfield is thoroughly modern, and has developed alongside an increasingly sophisticated (and medicalized) lexicon and understanding of sex, gender, and sexuality. As Carol Cohn reminds us, the United States “never officially screened, excluded, or discharged homosexuals as a class of people until the mobilization for World War II”. The first military to allow LGB people

to serve openly was the Netherlands in 1974. And many militaries all over the world still have policies in place that limit the inclusion of sexual or gender minorities in uniform. The recency of this policy history and the shifting contemporary landscape for LGBT people in military forces worldwide, makes for an unevenly developed historiographical landscape.

To be sure, this contemporary orientation presents a problematic for historians, although it also presents opportunities far beyond the topics that have been written about in this special issue. How do historians understand the intersections of gender, sex, and sexuality before the development of our modern vernacular about sexuality, orientation, and identity? LGBT and queer military history cannot and should not begin in the twentieth century, although that is where the historiographical weight lies, as the documentary record reflects increased medical, psychological, political, and military concern with the question of same-sex sex and attraction.

**LGBT Military Service Today**

Globally, national militaries, alliances, and coalitions are still divided on the question of LGBT military service, and policies change over time. Generally, militaries in highly developed, western countries have been more accepting of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people serving in the military. Many (though certainly not all) states in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East still exclude LGBT people from military service or actively persecute them. Policy regarding LGBT service is ambiguous in many places as well. The Index is positively correlated with both human development and democracy indicators.

In 2014, the Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (HCSS) released its “LGBT Military Index” which ranked 103 countries on 19 policies that reveal five key principles or approaches for assessing a country’s integration of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people into the nation’s military forces: Inclusion, Admission, Tolerance, Exclusion, and Persecution. We can imagine these along a spectrum. The HCSS defines the guiding principles as follows:

“**Inclusion:** the military aims to maximize the benefits and minimize the risks associated with diversity among personnel. Inclusion means valuing and integrating each individual’s differences into the way an organization functions and makes decisions.

**Admission:** LGBT individuals are de jure allowed to serve, but their differences are not necessarily acknowledged, valued, or integrated into the way the organization functions.
Tolerance: LGBT individuals are not formally acknowledged, or may be required to conceal their identity. There may be laws against sexual activity between members of the same sex.

Exclusion: LGBT individuals are barred from serving.

Persecution: LGBT individuals are actively victimized. Policies aim to prevent them from developing a positive identity, or even expressly stigmatize them.\(^8\)

These categories, while largely based on an assessment of policies, also reveal much about how a country’s military integrates (or fails to integrate) LGBTQ people at a socio-cultural level as well. Still, the relationship between policy and culture, between formal and informal regulation, and between values espoused and values enacted is important.

Historically, policies surrounding LGBT military service have come in waves, which also often correspond to broader social and cultural movements. Policies were implemented or enforced or tightened as social, cultural, and moral panic about LGBT people entered public debate and blurred the line between public and private. Then, as gay rights movements and the social and cultural acceptance of LGBT people gained steam, policies were relaxed, went unenforced, or were repealed. But these shifts also corresponded to shifting military requirements, as societies assess needs for force size, readiness, and accession. Military commanders, physicians, psychiatrists, and others have always exercised discretion. As noted, the Netherlands led the world in allowing service by openly LGBT people in 1974. A major wave of countries, primarily in Europe, implemented laws or policies allowing for open service by (L)GB persons in the 1990s. Another wave followed in the 2010s.\(^9\)

While many activists have worked hard to include transgender people in the movement, within military organizations, there remains a distinction between the regulations and norms that regulate “LGB” and “T” service. The list of countries that allow service by transgender or intersex people to serve is significantly smaller than the list of countries that include open serve by LGB people. Militaries have, in many cases, separated the question of romantic and sexual desire, orientation, and consenting sexual behaviour (e.g., being lesbian, gay, bisexual) from questions of gender identity and expression (e.g., being nonbinary, transgender, genderqueer, gendernonconforming) and sex


\(^9\) (L) is included in parentheses, as some militaries did not allow women to serve, so the question of lesbian service was moot until military positions were open to women.
characteristics (e.g., being intersex). Even the most LGBTQ+ inclusive military organizations are still largely organized along gendered lines when it comes to uniforms, physical fitness standards, training, housing, and job assignments, although there is some movement toward gender blind or gender-neutral policies (although the gender-blindness or gender-neutrality of these is up for some debate).

The five essays here confront various historical aspects of LGBTQ integration into the militaries of West Germany, the United States, Israel, the Netherlands, and Australia, which in 2014 ranked 12th (Germany), 40th, 9th, 2nd, and 5th in the Index respectively. Thus, four of the five countries analysed in this special issue, by contemporary standards, are beacons for inclusive practices, and one (the United States) is squarely in the middle of global trends. The essays presented here help to both contextualize and complicate the historical processes and narratives that have resulted in these rankings. As the essays demonstrate, the full integration of LGBTQ people into militaries has rarely been simple or linear, and a deep understanding of culture and lived experience can complicate our understanding of even “progressive” and inclusive policies.

**Key Themes in the Special Issue**

This special issue brings together five essays that offer a variety of methodological approaches to the study of LGBT military history; still, important themes emerge and reveal some of the important conversations in the field today. These ideas include the significance of international and comparative history to policymaking and historical analysis; the difference between de jure and de facto integration and between law, policy, and regulation and organizational culture when it comes to the integration of LGBT service members; and the importance of lived experience of LGBT people to the historical narrative of LGBT military history.

First, because militaries are usually analysed as national institutions, LGBT military history often follows national contours as well, focusing on the experiences of LGBT people and the regulations that allowed or circumscribed their service. But this national orientation runs the risk of missing broader trends of continuity and change within militaries that share organizational structures, values, and assumptions. Furthermore, militaries around the world are aware of what others are doing, especially when it comes to their partners and allies –

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thus comparative approaches might also tell us about the movement of ideas in and between military organizations. Technology and tactics are not the only things that transfer from one military organization to another.

Klaus Storkmann's essay merges the national and intellectual history of West Germany's policy regarding LGBT soldiers and makes explicit the significance of international comparison to policymakers. West Germany imagined itself (by the 1980s) "the most liberal in the whole of NATO", but Storkmann concludes that this identity belongs to the Dutch, whose liberalism toward homosexuality long predated the Bundeswehr's. Storkmann argues that West Germany actively looked to the experiences of other militaries when considering its own regulations regarding homosexuality and that these comparisons influenced how the Federal Republic of Germany implemented its own policies. Thus, Storkmann's essay is an important contribution to the internationalization of LGBTQ military history. Storkmann relies on (West) German Federal Ministry of Defence (FMoD) records to present an intellectual and cultural history of West German ideas and policymaking in this area. Storkmann's historical approach is a welcome addition to the host of case studies and reports that use a comparative approach to encourage policymakers to make a change.11

The essay provides evidence of policymakers explicitly relying on these comparisons to make and act on policy, an approach that may also illuminate the policy process in other countries as well.12

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11 Making comparisons to other military organizations that had successfully integrated LGBT service members was a key approach for activists in the United States, where the policy changes lagged those of other Western militaries by well over a decade. RAND published studies (at the request of the Secretary of Defense, in each case) in 1993 and an update in 2010 that included comparisons with foreign militaries. See Bernard D. Rostker, et al., Sexual Orientation and U.S. Military Personnel Policy: Options and Assessment (Santa Monica, CA, 1993), 65–104; and National Defense Research Institute, Sexual Orientation and U.S. Military Personnel Policy: An Update of RAND's 1993 Study, (Santa Monica, CA, 2010), 275–316. Other organizations lobbying for legal changes in the United States also made these comparisons. See, for example, numerous publications by the Palm Center, which analyse the integration of LGBT people into the militaries of Israel, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia, https://www.palmcenter.org/topics/foreign-militaries/. See also Nathaniel Frank, et al., “Gays in Foreign Militaries in 2010: A Global Primer” (Santa Barbara, CA, 2010); “Report of the Comprehensive Review of the Issues Associated with a Repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell” (Washington, DC, 2010), 89–92.

A second theme that emerges is the distinction between de jure and de facto integration of LBGT soldiers. There are laws, policies, and regulations that govern the management of SOGIE within militaries, but there are also norms, implicit expectations, and culture at play. If Storkmann's essay assesses the Bundeswehr as less liberal than its Dutch counterpart, then Jaus Muller's essay, “How a ‘Hunt for Homosexuals’ in 1987 Ultimately Contributed to a Real Change in Emancipation for Gay Men Serving in the Armed Forces of the Netherlands” complicates the narrative of Dutch liberalism toward homosexuality. Muller's essay brings to the forefront the distinction between legal and regulatory integration and inclusion and cultural and social integration and inclusion in military contexts. Muller argues that the real emancipation for gay men in the Dutch military came only in the late 1980s – while still long before many other Western militaries, far after the important 1974 marker for “open” service by homosexuals. Muller argues that legal changes are insufficient to measure the level of inclusion experienced in a military organization; not until gay men felt safe coming out in the military did they do so.

Muller argues that gay men and lesbian women were subject to harassment and discrimination, which contradicted the Netherlands’ progressive image on gay rights. Muller concludes that the contradiction stemmed, in part, from the way the law was changed in 1974. While the decision fit the broader trend toward decriminalizing consensual sexual behaviour between adults, some of the language in the Ministry of Defence directive allowed for interpretation about “personality” and “fit” to factor into personnel decisions and muddied the waters on whether homosexuals were mentally sound or mentally unfit. These equivocations enabled an environment in which harassment and abuse of LBGT soldiers could continue, contrary to official mandate.

A different variation on this theme is evident in Noah Riseman’s essay, “The Royal Australian Navy and Courts Martial for Homosexuality”, which examines how official policies regarding same-sex sex were policed and punished in the Royal Australian Navy between 1912–1970. Riseman examines the small number of cases regarding homosexuality in the Australian military that went to a court martial, instead of being dealt with administratively. Riseman argues that courts martial records reveal how the Australian military conceptualized and policed homosexuality within the ranks. Riseman argues that courts martial policed perceived failures of judgment and discretion (e.g., unwanted sexual advances, and bad conduct) more than consensual homosexual relationships. Riseman’s article highlights the importance of discretion and judgment in the handling of cases involving same-sex sex, desire, and behaviour.

Even when apparently strict bans and limitations were in place, military leaders and personnel navigated regulations and policies to effect different
outcomes. When military organizations valued or required an individual’s service, decisions could be made to look the other way or to carve out exceptions to established procedures. When militaries needed fewer bodies in uniform, discharges for homosexuality or different classifications for conscripts served to winnow the pool. The variations on discipline, retention, and treatments, subject to a commander’s discretion or the impersonal grind of a bureaucratic system, often undoubtedly left LGBT soldiers in vulnerable and precarious positions.

The tension between formal and informal inclusion was often compounded by legal or regulatory ambiguity – such as that seen in West Germany throughout the 1970s, in the United States in the era before the Second World War and again under “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”, and in Israel between 1948–1983. But even when there was no legal or regulatory ambiguity, LGBT people have felt simultaneous attraction and repulsion by military organizations. Jacqueline Whitt’s historiographical essay, “Queering American Military History” examines how this tension has been experienced in the United States military and written about in US military historiography. For example, for decades the United States military offered lesbians an alternative to marriage and traditional gender roles in civilian society, even though the military also pursued the discharge of lesbians and the regulation of women’s sexuality quite seriously for much of that same period.

Whitt presents a state of the field essay about LGBTQ military history in the United States. Whitt traces the origins of the field to women’s history and gender history and explores three threads in the contemporary literature: the relationship between sexuality and gender in the military; the relationship between sexuality, state control and citizenship; and sexuality and lived experience in the military. Whitt argues that historians must uncover, centre, and mainstream LGBTQ history as central, rather than peripheral, to the study of military history. Whitt refers primarily to secondary, published sources in this essay, which traces the intellectual history of the field while also covering the history of major changes in how the US military dealt with questions of LGBTQ sexuality and gender identity.

The third theme follows from the second and focuses on uncovering and telling the lived experience of LGBT people in uniform as a critical part of the historical narrative. LGBTQ military history is not one that can be told only in terms of changing law, policy, and regulation. As the essays’ authors note, people whom we now understand to be gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender have always served in military organizations. The centrality of lived experience emerges most strongly in Yoav Zaritsky and Yuval Peretz Yonay’s essay, “Love, Sex, and Masculinity among Male Israeli Soldiers, 1948–1970”, which is based
on interviews with 32 gay men who served in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in the first decades of its existence, a period that largely precedes what the authors call the “politicization of sexual orientation in Israel”. Zaritsky and Yonay note the centrality of the IDF and military service to Israeli identity and the official ambiguity of the IDF toward homosexuality or bisexuality between 1948–1983.

Whitt’s essay also highlights the importance of community for LGBT people in uniform. For some, military barracks, training, and conditions prompted a sexual awakening or space in which to explore their sexuality when they found others who were “like” them. Military culture could, and often did, expand and stretch boundaries around sexuality, gender, and identity as easily as it circumscribed them. Muller’s essay likewise opens with the centrality of the lived experience of LGB soldiers to interrogate the effects of formal policy on military institutions, and Riseman’s essay also places individuals and their experiences at the centre of a bureaucratic and institutional narrative. Taken together, these essays remind us that LGBT or queer military history must centre people, even amidst examinations of structures, social change, legal manoeuvring, and activism. On matters of gender, sexuality, and identity within the military, it is clear that the personal was – and is – political.

Future Possibilities

There is no shortage of work to be done in the subfield of LGBT military history. The five essays here suggest different approaches, methods, sources, and questions for historians who wish to consider the intersection of LGBT history and military history. In addition to the vast documentary archives that modern militaries maintain, the subfield invites approaches and methods borrowed from oral history, social history, cultural history, legal history, medical history, and political history, as well as interdisciplinary work from sociology, anthropology and ethnography, political science international relations, and psychology, among others.

In nearly every country in the world, there is a potentially robust research agenda to uncover and analyse institutional culture; law, regulation, and enforcement; the lived experience of LGBT people; and the relationship between broad socio-cultural trends and LGBT inclusion in the military. Both military historians and LGBTQ historians have work to do in mainstreaming the other into the canon and narrative of their subfields. Military historians should consider how the categories of sex, gender, and sexuality affect their topics of inquiry, and LGBT and queer historians should investigate how military norms,
culture, language, and experience have shaped the experiences of LGBTQ people and beyond explicit explorations of military law, policy, and regulation related to SOGIE.

But much of the work to be done is in the expansion of boundaries – geographically, temporally, and thematically regarding whose stories and experiences are subject to the historian’s study. Broadly, LGBT military history must be more attentive to the experience of lesbians and bisexual men and women. Gay men dominate current historiographical trends, especially outside of the United States; this focus, of course, reflects the gender balance within many armed forces, but it also exposes an important gap in existing literature. Broadening the mandate of LGBTQ history beyond looking at the experiences of those who specifically identify as gay allows historians to uncover and explain the multitude of ways that norms, culture, and policy about sex, gender, and sexuality intersect in the military organizations. This call also introduces opportunities for more intersectional work, especially around issues of race and ethnicity, categories which also shape and are shaped by military service.

LGBT military history can also expand geographically and temporally, to the history of gender and sexuality in the military before the late twentieth century and in the non-western world. With the possible exception of Ancient Greece and the Sacred Band of Thebes, the relationship between sexuality and military service is understudied. If we understand sex, gender, and sexuality to be central to understanding military experiences and organizations, then this research agenda should expand in time to cover pre-twentieth century regulations, norms, and practices and expand in space to cover the non-western world, where LGBT service is still proscribed or dismissed as irrelevant (when the claim is that there are no LGBT people).

**Bibliography**


