

Paper to be presented at the Twelfth European Social Science History conference in Belfast, 4-7 April 2018 at Queen's University

On the Changing Perceptions of Women's Role in the Nation's Defence during the Age of Total War

The Introduction of Defence Service Training for Girls in Sweden during World War II

*Esbjörn Larsson, Associate Professor in History and Senior Lecturer in History of Education, Uppsala University
esbjorn.larsson@edu.uu.se*

Introduction

As previous studies of women during the Second World War have revealed, the war meant a distinct change in the female sphere of activities in Sweden, as elsewhere. This can partly be explained by the pressures exerted on even a non-combatant country like Sweden, since large parts of the male population were involved in military operations. In several areas, women then came to take over tasks previously performed by men.¹

Studies of women in the military have shown how the outbreak of war also brought a fairly abrupt change in how women were perceived as relating to military activity. In the Swedish Women's Voluntary Defence Service – the 'Lotta movement' [*Lottarörelsen*], founded in 1924 – the initial plan was for its activities to serve only to support the country's defence in peace-

¹ Regarding Sweden, see e.g. Johanna Overud (2005): *I beredskap med Fru Lojal: behovet av kvinnlig arbetskraft i Sverige under andra världskriget* [about the need for female labour in Sweden during the Second World War] (Stockholm: Stockholm University), pp. 223–225. For international research, see e.g. Lucy Noakes (2010): 'Women and World War II', in George Kassimeris & John Buckley (eds.), *Ashgate Research Companion to Modern Warfare* (Farnham: Ashgate Pub.), pp. 223–240, and Claudia Goldin & Claudia Olivetti (2013): 'Shocking Labor Supply: A Reassessment of the Role of World War II on Women's Labor Supply'. *The American Economic Review* 103 (3), pp. 257–262.

time. Not until 1935 were ideas formulated about the possible functions to be performed by the 'lottas' in the event of war. Of these functions, it emerged that there was a clear division between what were perceived as appropriate work for women (telephony, clerical work and provision of first aid), on the one hand, and more active participation in the country's defence on the other.

This view of the role of women in defending the nation, however, changed during the 'stand-by years'. By 1943, no fewer than 5,600 Swedish women were serving as air-raid wardens and being trained in shooting and handling weapons for self-protection. Interestingly, this displacement of women's sphere of activities was also followed by redefinition of the air defence warning service: the frequently monotonous task of looking out for hostile aircraft was presented as an activity for which women were particularly suited.²

Moreover, studies of the 'defence service training' [*värntjänstutbildning*] introduced at Swedish secondary and girls' schools during the Second World War have partly confirmed the picture of being an air-raid warden as a task that, during the stand-by years, came to be considered suitable for women as well. By the end of 1940, target reconnaissance, reporting and orderly duty were identified as elements in defence service training for girls, too, alongside more traditional female tasks such as healthcare and childcare. Nevertheless, a detailed analysis of the exercises in target reconnaissance, reporting and orderly duty has revealed a somewhat ambivalent attitude towards allowing girls to engage in these elements. Although most schools began arranging such exercises for their female pupils, there were also schools that did not; and the stakeholders consulted before the ordinance regulating defence service training was adopted included some who disapproved of these exercises being included in the girls' training. Furthermore, in the teachers' manuals issued by the Swedish National Agency for Training in 1942, a linguistic slippage is discernible: the girls' exercises were not as clearly linked to military practice as those of the boys. Nevertheless, a relatively high proportion – 9 per cent – of the country's schoolgirls and students aged 16 to 20 reported, in the 1941–42 academic year, that they had

² Fia Sundevall (2011): *Det sista manliga yrkesmonopolet: genus och militärt arbete i Sverige 1865–1989* [about gender and military work in Sweden] (Stockholm: Makadam), pp. 52–56 and 63–65.

served as air-raid wardens. This indicates that participation in the nation's defence became an accepted task for young women too during the stand-by years.³

The purpose of this paper is to examine more closely this changed view of women's sphere of activities and, more specifically, perceptions of the relationship between women and military operations, in the context of the Second World War. As the studies of both the Swedish Women's Voluntary Defence Service and the schools' defence service training programmes have shown, the stand-by years brought a kind of re-evaluation of what were considered female tasks in the event of war. However, supported by the studies presented in this paper, my assertion is that the exercises in, for example, target reconnaissance, reporting and orderly duty for girls at secondary and single-sex schools should not be regarded as a completely new female activity. Instead, their background included school physical education (PE) and the Girl Scout⁴ movement's activities.⁵

Schools' physical education teaching

In the public inquiry preceding the introduction of defence service training, there was a distinct emphasis on close connection of the proposed training with the existing teaching of PE. This was described in the methodological instructions for public secondary schools issued in 1935, which also governed other, more senior forms of school, such as girls' and middle schools.⁶ Ac-

³ Esbjörn Larsson (2016): "Att fostras för landets försvar: värtjänstutbildning för pojkar och flickor under andra världskriget" [about defence service training for boys and girls during the Second World War], *Militärhistorisk tidskrift* 2015:1, pp. 89–134.

⁴ Unlike the scout movement in Britain, the term "Girl Guide" was not used in Sweden to describe girls who engaged in scouting. In Sweden, the term "Girl Scout" was used instead. See Bodil Formark (2010): *Den välsituerade flickan: om den svenska flickscoutrörelsens historia 1910–1940* [about the Swedish Girl Scout movement, 1910–1940] (Lund, Sekel Bokförlag), pp. 18, 75–81.

⁵ These are activities previously touched upon in e.g. Pia Lundquist Wanneberg (2004): *Kroppens medborgarfostran: kropp, klass och genus i skolans fysiska fostran 1919–1962* [about the body, class and gender in school physical education, 1919–1962] (Stockholm: Stockholm University) and Formark (2010).

⁶ *Metodiska anvisningar till undervisningsplanen för rikets allmänna läroverk* (1935) [Methodological instructions for the national curriculum for Sweden's public secondary schools] (Stockholm: Swedish National Agency for Education), p 3 and pp.

ording to the appointed specialists in defence service training, PE was an excellent preparation for the defence service training to which the children would be introduced on reaching a more mature age. Among the preparatory elements that could be brought in from the very start of schooling were a range of activities, including 'cross-country games' [*terränglekar*] and 'camp life' [*lägerliv*], cited as direct preparation for defence service training.⁷ Of these, the first-mentioned element is of particular interest here, since these games were seen as directly preparing children for their future training in target reconnaissance, reporting and orderly duty.⁸

A more detailed description of these cross-country games indicates that they may be divided into three categories: tag games; treasure or scavenger hunts and path-finding exercises; and ambush and reconnaissance ('recce') games. The category of 'tag games' [*tafattlekar*] included active contests aimed at catching opponents, such as 'Hide and Seek' [*Kurragömma*], 'Prisoner's Base' [*Rymmare och fasttagare*], 'Cowboys and Indians' [*Indianer och vita*], and 'Capture the Flag' [*Flaggleken*]. The treasure hunts as well as the path-finding and track-finding exercises were basically about teaching the children to read nature and be able to follow a path or instructions in a forest environment. This was something practised in, for example, Fox Hunt [*Jaga räven*], Cops and Robbers [*Fånga tjuven*] and following a cross-country trail or track. Finally, the ambush and recce games were about finding and identifying opponents in the terrain, and the games played were 'Excommunication' [*Påven bannlyser*], 'Stealth Chase' [*Smygjakten*], 'Bear Hunt' [*Björnjakten*] and the 'Boundary Game' [*Gränsleken*].⁹

These findings make it clear that exercises in moving around in the natural environment and making observations undetected by others were made part of schools' PE and open-air sports days, for girls as well as boys, as early as four years before the Second World War broke out. However, how far

195–200; Värntjänstutbildningssakkunniga (1940): *Betänkande och förslag angående värntjänstutbildning för skolungdom* [the Specialists' report and proposals on defence service training for schoolchildren] (Stockholm: Nord. bokh. i distr.), pp. 21–25.

⁷ Värntjänstutbildningssakkunniga (1940) ['Specialists in defence service training'], p. 21 and pp. 48–49.

⁸ Värntjänstutbildningssakkunniga (1940) ['Specialists in defence service training'], p. 28.

⁹ *Metodiska anvisningar ...* (1935) ['Methodological instructions...'], pp. 199–200; Värntjänstutbildningssakkunniga (1940) ['Specialists in defence service training'], p. 28.

these games were also initially linked to their possible application in military operations remains to be investigated.

Girl Scouts' exercises

Alongside the link between physical education (PE) and the defence service training introduced in Swedish schools during the Second World War, there are also major similarities between this training and the Swedish Girl Scout movement. It is evident from the work material left behind by the experts in defence service training that the similarities were manifest at the time, and even created problems.

At the specialists' meeting of 4 July 1940, PE Director Elin Lindelöf participated for the first time, as a co-opted expert on the training of female pupils. The minutes of this meeting record Lindelöf as asserting that, except for weapon practice, all the proposed defence service exercises should be included in the girls' exercises as well.¹⁰ It thus seems clear that, at this time, the defence service training specialists would already be suggesting that, for example, target reconnaissance, reporting and orderly duty should be included in the girls' exercises.

At this meeting, moreover, the girls' exercises in relation to the activities of 'lottas' and Girl Scouts were discussed. In this context, Lindelöf emphasised that the girls should not be trained as 'lottas' for the purpose of preparing them for field duty. Furthermore, PE Director Marit Hallström, the only permanent female specialist in the committee, said that she had been telephoned by the Swedish Girl Scout leader.¹¹ Judging from this comment, the latter does not seem to have been keen on the idea that Girl Scout activities should be associated with the defence service training that the specialists had been appointed to investigate. The discussion at their meeting culminated in the decision that neither of the terms 'Girl Scout' or 'lotta activity' were to be used to describe the girls' exercises. Nevertheless, both these activities were clearly seen as important sources of inspiration. As one of the

¹⁰ Minutes of the specialists' meeting on 4 July 1940, Värntjänstutbildningssakkunnigas arkiv ('Archive of the specialists in defence service training'), Vol. 1, Swedish National Archives (Riksarkivet, Ra).

¹¹ Probably the Swedish Girl Scout Association's Scout Manager Gerda Bäckström.

two male civilian members, Benkt Söderborg, Headmaster of Norra Real, emphasised: 'We can adopt the thing, but not the name.'¹²

Both the connection with the Girl Scouts' exercises and the Scout Movement's ambivalent attitude towards defence service training are also noted in the Swedish Girl Scouts' Association's consultation response to the defence service training specialists' report. On the one hand, appreciation was expressed that so many of the exercises used by the Association recurred in the specialists' proposals. On the other, the Association particularly emphasised that it completely distanced itself from the idea of 'training and bringing up children and adolescents for war'.¹³ However, exactly what similarities existed between the Swedish Girl Scout exercises and those proposed by the defence service training specialists is not evident. The 'look-after-yourself tasks' [*Red-dig-själv-arbeten*] were the only example cited.¹⁴

In this case, the reply from the Swedish Scout Council, which united various Boy Scout organisations, was more detailed. It emphasised, for example, that the Boy Scout movement used a number of different exercises that were also proposed for inclusion in the defence service training. Particularly relevant to this study is the fact that, for example, target reconnaissance, reporting and orderly duty were also emphasised as included in the scouts' exercises, albeit with different names.¹⁵

That similar exercises were also conducted in the Girl Scout movement emerges from the Swedish Girl Scout Association's *Handbok för flickscouter* [Handbook for Girl Scouts] from 1930.¹⁶ A detailed review of the tests conducted by the Swedish Girl Scout Association admittedly reveals that the

¹² [Original quotation: "Vi får ta saken men ej namnet"] Minutes of the specialists' meeting on 4 July 1940 (op. cit.).

¹³ [Original quotation: "att barn och ungdom utbildas och uppfostras för krig"] Swedish Girl Scout Association, 24 January 1941, no. 68, Ecklesiastikdepartementets konseljhandlingar [The Ecclesiastical Department's cabinet documents] (Eck-dep.) 21 March 1941, Ra.

¹⁴ Swedish Girl Scout Association, 24 January 1941, no. 68, Eck-dep. 21 March 1941, Ra. The 'look-after-yourself tasks' were a matter of learning to prepare, manage and mend personal equipment (from clothing to bicycles and tools) and learn how to make use of edible plants. Värntjänstutbildningssakkunniga (1940) ['Specialists in defence service training'], pp. 37–38.

¹⁵ Swedish Scout Council, 25 January 1941, no. 68, Eck-dep. 21 March 1941, Ra.

¹⁶ *Handbok för flickscouter* (1930) [Handbook for Girl Scouts] (Stockholm: Swedish Girl Scout Association).

activities concerned seem, to some extent, to have been preparation for a fairly traditional women's role.¹⁷ For example, in the test for becoming a Third Class Girl Scout, the girl was required to be able to mend socks, while a Second Class Girl Scout had to be able, first, 'to cook oatmeal porridge, gruel, eggs, potatoes, fruit soup and cocoa, as well as to fry sausages' and, second, 'to sew on buttons and sew buttonholes as well as to mend small holes in clothing.'¹⁸

A First Class Girl Scout was also required to 'have sewn a Girl Scout blouse, Girl Scout dress or Girl Scout outer garment', and 'be able to bake bread; prepare fish, meatballs, pea soup, brown beans, root-vegetable mash, a stew, apple rice, pancakes and French toast; and arrange the canteen in a practical, agreeable manner'.¹⁹ For a girl who aspired to be a First Class Scout but, for physical reasons, was unable to engage in strenuous exercises, a replacement test was proposed: that she should carry out thorough cleaning of a room and also demonstrate knowledge of both poisonous and edible fungi and their subsequent preparation and storage.²⁰

Besides these domestic skills, however, requirements also included knowledge of such activities as orienteering, tying knots of all kind, care of accident victims, swimming, camping, rowing, cycling, skiing and skating.²¹ In addition, a few exercises were also included that, in this context, are of particular interest since they resemble exercises in target reconnaissance, reporting and orderly duty. Above all, these consisted of exercises to practise observation and distance estimation.

The Third Class observation test comprised a 300-metre walk, to be completed in no more than 10 minutes. During this test, the Girl Scout was to try to memorise what she observed. Everything, from weather conditions and geographical phenomena to people and animals she encountered, had

¹⁷ Op. cit. pp. 44–46, 175, 185–186.

¹⁸ [Original quotations on p. 45: "[k]unna koka havregrynsgröt, välling, ägg, potatis, fruktsoppa och choklad samt steka korv" and "[k]unna sy i knappar och sy knapphål samt laga mindre hål på kläder"]Op. cit. pp. 44–45.

¹⁹ [Original quotations: "[h]ava sytt scoutblus, scoutklänning eller scouttytterplagg" and "[k]unna baka bröd, anrätta fisk, köttbullar, ärtsoppa, bruna bönor, rotmos, en stuvning, äppelris, pannkaka, fattiga riddare och kunna ordna matserveringen praktiskt och trevligt"]Op. cit. p. 46.

²⁰ Op. cit. pp. 175, 185–186.

²¹ Op. cit., pp. 44–46.

to be recorded. In addition, it was specifically emphasised that the observations had to be detailed. Remembering that she had met a person was not enough; she also had to record what kind of person it was and what (s)he was doing. The same applied to other phenomena as well. If she passed a field, the Girl Scout had to memorise what was growing there. After the walk, the girl reported what she had observed to the supervisor, either in writing or verbally.²²

For Second Class, there was a type of practical test of powers of observation called the 'Path Test' [*Spårprovet*]. Those who took this test had to follow a cross-country path for about one kilometre. Small markers of various kinds, made of twigs or stones, were placed in unnatural ways in the terrain. It was then up to the girl taking the test to find these markers and, according to a predetermined code system, interpret their meaning.²³

For the First Class Girl Scout tests, the observation requirements had been raised further. The Girl Scout was now to cover five kilometres on foot or skis in a maximum of two and a half hours. Equipped with only a compass, a watch and a tabular for measuring distance based on step length, the Girl Scout would get a grasp of the terrain that she would then, from memory, convey in a report written immediately after the excursion. Although this report was to also contain details of what the Girl Scout had encountered, the focus seems to have been on the nature of the landscape and, in particular, the distances between various reference points in the terrain.²⁴

Furthermore, distance estimation was something touched upon in the tests concerning both powers of observation and orienteering to become a Girl Scout of the Third and Second Class respectively. However, in the test for promotion to First Class, distance estimation also constituted a separate element. There, the requirement was a margin of error not exceeding 25 per cent in estimating either distance or height differences. In this area of accomplishment, the handbook for Girl Scouts also contained numerous examples of various techniques and calculation models that could be used to

²² Op. cit., pp. 44–46.

²³ Op. cit., pp. 118–199.

²⁴ Op. cit., pp. 151–152.

accurately estimate distances,²⁵ which indicates the importance attached to this element.

Successive broadening of women's sphere of activities?

As the guidelines show – both those for the schools' physical training and open-air days and those for the Swedish Girls Scout Association's activities – these activities included exercises to practise skills that may be associated with target reconnaissance, reporting and orderly duty. This study provides no detailed information on how far the activities of schools and the Girl Scout movement contributed to a change in perceptions of women's sphere of activities. For this purpose, in-depth studies regarding both the air defence warning service and the work of the defence service training specialists are required. However, it is worth noting that several of the skills that can be linked to serving as an air-raid warden, performing target reconnaissance, reporting and engaging in orderly duty were of the kind that girls had been trained in for several years before the outbreak of war. If nothing else, this is likely to have facilitated the expansion of women's sphere of activities during the Second World War.

In-depth studies of girls' defence service training may, it is hoped, contribute to further knowledge of how women's sphere of activities changed during the Second World War. One interesting aspect in this context is, for example, how resistance to target reconnaissance for girls was formulated and how far this resistance was based on what were considered suitable tasks for women.²⁶

Another interesting topic to pursue is the roots of defence service training in the Scout Movement. As has emerged here, both the Girl Scout and the Boy Scout Movements had, to say the least, an ambivalent attitude towards defence service training. On the one hand, there was sympathy with much of its content, given the major similarities between the Scout exercises

²⁵ *Op. cit.*, pp. 160–164.

²⁶ Here, however, other source material is required than e.g. the consultation responses sent in regarding the report of the defence service training inquiry. Although there are consultation responses that address the issue of the appropriateness of arranging exercises in target reconnaissance, reporting and orderly duty for girls, they contain no detailed reasoning regarding this issue. See Larsson (2016), pp. 110–111.

and those of defence service training; on the other, there was direct opposition to the military features. The fact that the Girl Scouts too engaged in exercises associated with military skills, such as target reconnaissance, is highly interesting in this context. However, the question for further research in this subject area is where these exercises originated and how far they were derived from, for example, those of the Boy Scouts.²⁷

²⁷ Until Bodil Formark's dissertation *Den välsituerade flickan* (op. cit.), the Swedish Girl Scout Movement was an almost unresearched phenomenon. Regarding exercises in distance estimation and observation, Formark shows that in 1924, these exercises were already included in the tests for Girl Scouts. However, Formark carries out no comparison with the Swedish Boy Scouts' exercises. Instead, she juxtaposes the girls' exercises with Robert Baden-Powell's formulations in *Scouting for Boys* from 1908. See e.g. Formark (2010), pp. 156–164.