Critical Military Studies

ISSN: 2333-7486 (Print) 2333-7494 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rcms20

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To cite this article: Luise Bendfeldt & Emily Clifford (22 Nov 2025): Eating ourselves safe: intersections of food, militarisms and national security in Sweden, Critical Military Studies, DOI: 10.1080/23337486.2025.2583757

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/23337486.2025.2583757

Published online: 22 Nov 2025.

CRITICAL MILITARY STUDIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/23337486.2025.2583757

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Eating ourselves safe: intersections of food, militarisms and national security in Sweden

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ABSTRACT

A recent advertising campaign launched by Lantbrukarnars Riksförbund, Sweden's agricultural association, compels shoppers to buy Swedish produce 'for Sweden' – declaring it Sweden's best/tastiest defence – thereby depicting Sweden's agricultural sector as the first line of defence in a larger quest for national security. Curious about the supermarket as a site of everyday militarism, we ask how increasing militarism might (re)configure Swedish society and who gets to be part of its protection. Drawing from an established tradition seeking knowledge of militarisms far from the battlefield, we use this campaign as a jumping off point to interrogate the ways in which militarism functions in Swedish society. In particular, we investigate the role gender, race and class in Sweden's everyday militarism through the example of the food shop and 'buying security'.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 24 January 2025
Accepted 29 October 2025

KEYWORDS
Everyday militarism; food; gender; race; Class

Introduction

In the summer of 2023, I, Luise Bendfeldt, went food shopping. Arriving in the parking lot of the local supermarket, I noticed a new advertisement campaign that had been put up in the usual spaces. What immediately caught my eye was the word *försvar* [Swedish for defence] in capital letters. The whole text, or at least, the big caption accessible to read from afar, read: *Jag ODLAR Sveriges godaste FÖRSVAR* [I am GROWING Sweden's best (tastiest) DEFENCE]. Next to it on the ad was a friendly looking woman holding many tomatoes in her arms, standing in what looked like a greenhouse. Looking across the parking lot, it was not just this woman but two other characters who were also part of the same campaign: a woman kneeling in amongst cattle, holding a calf, her text being: *Jag TAR HAND om Sveriges FÖRSVAR* [I TAKE CARE of Sweden's DEFENCE] and a man standing in a blooming field of rape seed, with text stating *Jag får Sveriges FÖRSVAR att VÄXA* [I get Sweden's DEFENCE to GROW]. With a background of thinking critically about the processes of militarism and embracing my feminist curiosity, I found myself immediately taking apart this advertising campaign, contemplating militarism in the everyday as they were doing my weekly food shop.

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This article has grown from a series of conversations following this initial moment of contemplation; together we sought to understand how Swedish everyday militarism manifests and how gender, race and class dynamics play a central role within these processes. The advertising campaign – launched by *Lantbrukarnars Riksförbund* (LRF), Sweden's agricultural association – compels shoppers to buy Swedish produce 'for Sweden', thereby depicting Swedish consumers as the first line of defence in a larger quest for national security. Some might say this is to be expected; the marketing of organic and locally grown produce has become a common sight in climate-conscious communities, indicating the increased salience of 'green consumption' (Parrett 2020). And yet, what interests us about this campaign is not what it tells us about Sweden's climate ambitions nor its agricultural policies *per se*. Rather, we aim to unpack how this consumer-facing messaging shapes and is shaped by gendered, raced and classed everyday militarism in Sweden and how this influences Swedish society.

Drawing from an established tradition in IR of seeking knowledge about militarism far from the battlefield (e.g. Dowler 2012; Enloe 2000; Tidy 2015) and the impact militarism has on societies (Basham, Belkin, and Gifkins 2015), we invite the reader to accompany us to the supermarket. Using the LRF campaign as an entry point, we ask: how is this push to 'buy security' reproducing and/or sustaining militarized gender, race and class relations in the Swedish context? In so doing, our article contributes to the literature on everyday militarism in Sweden (e.g. Ericson, Svenbro, and Wester 2023; Stern and Strand 2022, 2024) by highlighting the centrality of intersecting dynamics of gender, race and class. Such interrogations are particularly relevant in the context of increased global geopolitical instability, which for Sweden has led to the accession of NATO – signifying a departure from its long-held stance of neutrality (Åhäll 2024; Berg and Fredriksson 2024).

To begin, we use the literature on everyday militarism, including food work and shopping, their associated dynamics of gender, race and class in the politics of national security. We then outline the Swedish context, highlighting how shifts in Swedish militarism interact with evolutions in the welfare state. After a discussion of the methods, we present our analysis of the LRF campaign. We finish this analysis by discussing how everyday militarism furthered by the campaign (re)configures understandings of the Swedish nation and, in turn, supports increasingly militarized class and race relations at a national scale. With this, we highlight the importance of an intersectional approach to everyday militarism; without paying attention to the specific interaction of race, class and gender, we risk missing the key dynamics of power shaping how militarism is realized within Swedish society and beyond.

Nourishing militarism: the food shop as the first line of defence

This article is concerned with the relationship between everyday consumption and national security in Sweden and the racialized and class-based militarisms to which it owes its strength. By this, we mean the relations of power sustaining and prioritizing militaristic ideals, beliefs and practices in society. Feminists have explored how these power relations materialize as security practices, ideology, gendered politics and even fashion choices (Enloe 1983, 1990, 2000, 2007, 2015; Shepherd 2018). This work traces how militarism infuses and shapes our everyday lives by way of our homes, our families and our consumption patterns. For example, Enloe (2000) famously used a Star Wars

themed tin of soup to illustrate the pervasive presence of militarism in our consumer-driven day-to-day. Dowler (2012, 492) considers how a military themed wedding cake gives social meaning to 'warrior masculinity' and allows it to become culturally hegemonic. Tidy (2015) examines how military charities use food brands as a form of nostalgic 'conscious capitalism' by which to rehabilitate the image of the British military in the minds of the general public. The historical relationship between food and militarism has further been explored with regard to gardening, including the case of victory gardens and women's role within state-encouraged war-time gardening initiatives (Ginn 2012; Gowdy-Wygant 2013; Hayden-Smith 2014; Palestrino 2025).

Everyday militarism, then, reflects how our intimate social worlds shape and are shaped by ongoing war-preparedness, reproducing the banal, mundane or seemingly apolitical valorization of military power (Dowler 2012; Enloe 2000; Tidy 2015). This is evident at the intersection of militarism and childhood (Beier and Tabak 2020), through which homemaking and food work are positioned as central to a safe society. For example, Geist Rutledge (2015) explores how the instigation of national school meals in the United Kingdom and the United States was a response to the collective worry about undernutrition and the fitness of prospective soldiers during the Boer War (UK) and the Second World War (UK and US). This framing – in which children embody 'the great second line of defense in future trouble' (2015, 198) – tied school lunch programmes to the security of both the nation *and* the nation's agricultural capabilities.[1] A similar argument was interrogated by Burridge and McSorley (2012), who investigated growing fears in the US that poor nutrition was making children 'Too Fat to Fight'. This encroachment of military ideals into the kitchen and the classroom implies that all people and all parts of society are included within the remit of national defence, whilst drawing specific boundaries around idealized soldiering bodies.

By imbuing civilian households with responsibility for rearing the future generation of soldiers, this narrative militarizes the intimate labour of homemaking, both expecting children to contribute to future war readiness and disciplining caregivers and guardians who 'fail' to enable such goals. This is an irrefutably gendered endeavour; the expectations that women produce, raise, feed and procreate with the nation's soldiers colours practices of nurturing, nourishment, consumption and marriage with a militaristic quality (Basham 2016; Basham and Catignani 2018). For example, Kelly Spring (2020) details how Second World War food rationing programmes reinforced traditional gender roles, women's domestic role as feeder of home and nation rendered a direct contribution to the war effort. Garvin (2022) explores how women negotiated practices of cooking and homemaking in Italy during the Fascist period, when food became a site through which to exert violent nationalism. Charon-Cardona and Markwick (2019) detail women's leading role in the Soviet wartime garden movement, in which personal and patriotic morale were conflated in defence of 'Mother Russia'. This 'home front' messaging instrumentalizes the image of the 'kitchen patriot' as a model of idealized womanhood – nurturing, devoted, self-sacrificing – through which military mobilization can be naturalized (Yang 2005).

And yet, the gender lens is insufficient on its own to tell the story of everyday militarism in Sweden. In fact, some query whether an over-focus on gender within militarism literature elides interrogation of how gender interacts with race and class to reproduce militarism in the everyday (Howell 2018; Zalewski 2017). In this vein,

a genuinely intersectional approach is necessary (Henry 2020). For example, we are interested in how assumptions about mothering practices, and particularly food work, are transposed by neoliberal logics onto a class-based cultural politics (Cairns, Johnston, and MacKendrick 2013). The individualizing rhetoric of the organic food movement ties children's nutritional futures to the strength of the national future, positioning mothers as 'individually responsible for producing a healthy child *and* a healthy planet' (2013, 98, emphasis in original). This is, importantly, both a gendered and a class-based cultural model; the social pressure to raise an 'organic child' enlists well-resourced mothers to protect the collective through their individual consumption practices. Relating this to familiar notions of mothers as caring and self-sacrificing increases their emotional salience.

As we will illustrate in the empirical portion of this article, these gendered and class-based consumption practices are central elements to understanding the story of the LRF posters and their role in Sweden's everyday militarism. Advertisers' appeals to gendered feelings of responsibility and individual obligation instrumentalize the food shopper into 'buying security'. These dynamics are also present in other examples of domestic consumption that reproduce everyday militarism. For example, bullet-proof school uniforms implicate the caring parent and their race and class privileges into wider militarism through the act of 'buying protection' for their child at school. Owing to steep prices, the 'security mom' with the ability to purchase such everyday security solutions is tacitly white and economically comfortable (Sutton 2023; see also Grewal 2012). This 'market militarism', as Leander (2024) terms it, uses commercial processes to inscribe militarism ever deeper into our everyday lives. She highlights how the mundanity of these processes demobilizes anti-militarist resistance and obscures militarism's gendered, racialized and class-based foundations. It also helps to further implicate all people, or rather certain people, in the security of the nation. In our case, then, it is thus fruitful to think of not only the products through which militaristic ideals are transmitted but how the activity of *buying* such products contributes to their valorization. How might calls to buy Swedish produce to defend the country shape militarized gender and class relations in Swedish society?

Finally, these concerns are intimately related to the racial dimensions of everyday militarism and its materialization in Sweden. Debates within Critical Military Studies have highlighted how an over-emphasis on the gendered reproduction of militarism has led to an overlooking of the racial dimensions of this very military power and its effect on the liberal political order (Howell 2018; MacKenzie et al. 2019). To interrogate these dimensions, we must engage with intersectionality to not generate 'a *re-politicization* and *reinforcement* of racial, gender and class hierarchies' (Henry 2020, 107, emphasis in original). By investigating everyday militarism from within Sweden's supermarkets, we take these concerns firmly into account. In this paper, we thus explore the dynamics of gender, race *and* class in the construction of Swedish militarism at the level of the everyday. We take gender, race and class as intersectional hierarchies of power, that order (understandings of) political life and the space of action within it. In so doing, we recognize the ways in which notions of national defence and social responsibility are steeped in racial and class-based power differentials, and how these contribute to patterns and practices of militarized violence at all levels of analysis. Importantly, this does not mean purely introducing race and class-based elements to gender analysis. Rather, we are

interested in drawing out the interactions between gender, race and class that reproduce militarism in the everyday. Our article thus adds to feminist work on militarism by suggesting that the call to 'buy security' – illustrated by the LRF's campaign – is a productive lens through which to not only see the subtle mechanisms of Swedish militarism but also to highlight the need for attending to gender, race and class in any investigation of militarism and its processes. For greater context, the next section discusses the status of Swedish militarism and its gendered, racialized and class-based components.

The Swedish case and context

Sweden's relationship with war and militarism is complex and uncertain. Despite historically styling itself as a peace-loving, modern, progressive and non-aligned nation (Åhäll 2018; Andersson 2009; Jezierska and Towns 2018; Larsen 2021; Stern and Strand 2022, Åse and Wendt 2019; Towns 2002), there have been continued undertakings to (re) militarize (Ledberg, Ahlbäck Öberg, and Björnehed 2022). Sweden thus provides an interesting case to examine shifting attitudes towards the role of the military in society and its influence on the everyday lives of modern Swedes. This section offers an overview on the historical developments of/in Swedish militarism, considers the role of gender within these different moments and explores where discussions of race and class may be a necessary contribution.

After the Second World War, Sweden sought to capitalize on the notion of neutrality (Cronqvist 2012; Sandman 2019). As such, both Swedish security policy and Swedish national identity became imbued with 'rationality, peacefulness and modernity' (Cronqvist 2012, 198) always in contrast to the backwards, violent, traditional Other. Ultimately, this established Sweden as a 'small fortress, a peaceful neutral island, a realm of security' (199), self-proclaiming exceptionalism and moral superiority over other developed nations (Pratt 2007; Jansson 2018). However, with the developments of the Cold War, this 'realm of security' felt increasingly threatened – something that is reflected in a shift of military policy and doctrine. Throughout the Cold War, Sweden committed itself to a policy of 'total defence'. This implied 'all-encompassing military preparedness' (Åse and Wendt 2022, 226; see also Ericson, Svenbro, and Wester 2023) throughout all levels of society, it relied on a strong collaboration between the home, state institutions and the armed forces, with every Swedish citizen being both prepared and (thereby) contributing to the nation's preparedness. With the end of the Cold War began a period of gradual disarmament of Sweden's military (Stern and Strand 2022), alongside a shift in focus towards international missions (Holmberg 2015; Ericson, Svenbro, and Wester 2023). This also included the ending of conscription in 2010 (Persson and Sundevall 2019). Yet, since 2015 there has been a move to (re)militarize and re-introduce conscription in an effort to prepare Sweden, and its military, to meet the contemporary challenges and developments of global politics (Government of Sweden 2015; Strand and Kehl 2019). These efforts have most recently resulted in Sweden's accession to NATO (Thorhallsson and Stude Vidal 2024).

The different turns and developments overviewed above both relied on and enacted various gendered dynamics between the home and the nation, the protector and the protected and the citizen and the Other (Åse 2016; Enloe 2007; Kronsell and Svedberg

2001). These in turn have provided ample material to investigate the role of gender in Sweden's militarism. For example, Ericson, Svenbro and Wester have examined how the notion of 'total defence' acts as a happy object (Ahmed 2010) around which Swedish militarism is mobilized. They demonstrate that while the masculine protector received funding, in the form of the Swedish Armed Forces (SAF), the feminine civil society does not, despite high demands on the latter's contribution to preparedness (Ericson, Svenbro, and Wester 2023). Regarding the issue of conscription, Kronsell and Svedberg (2001) argue that the introduction of female soldiers may make visible particular relations between gender, citizenship and collective identity. Further, conscription has been interrogated in terms of how narrations of women, men and gender equality interact with narrations of military service in Sweden (Persson and Sundevall 2019), as well as how this very definition of a practice of militarism is made compatible with Sweden's image as a progressive, feminist state (Strand 2023). Similarly, Stern and Strand (2022) demonstrate how gender and sexuality are mobilized in SAF campaigns to not only strengthen Sweden's identity as gender-progressive but also facilitate the SAF's ongoing rearmament and reterritorialisation. The idea of achieving one's possibilities is also reflected in Stern and Strand's (2024) examination of military recruitment testimonials in Sweden and the US, in which both the aspiration and the possibility of transcending racialized, gendered and classed limits are instrumental in 'selling' military service. Another strand of research on Swedish militarism and gender is concerned with the practice of remembering military history and the militarism enacted through these practices. Åse and Wendt have explored the connections between gender, national security and memory/memorialization and how they interact with(in) Swedish militarism (Åse and Wendt 2021, 2022; Wendt 2023). Here, the function of the gendered logic of protection is particularly evident in how the protector protects the protected, i.e. women/families, who 'in turn, secure the biological and cultural reproduction of the nation/homeland' (Åse and Wendt 2022, 237). The notion of home(making) as constructing the nation is further explored by Cronqvist's (2012) assessment of Cold War preparedness campaigns, in which she exposes the role of the housewife in war preparedness, nurturing and protecting the home and by extension the 'larger collective home', i.e. the Swedish nation (2012, 202).

And yet, the security of 'The People's Home' – or *folkhemmet*, the Swedish welfare state – has at its heart an essential paradox: it is both universal and exclusionary (Barker 2013). As Barker (2013) explains, the composition of 'the people' to be defended retains an ethno-cultural character, with those falling on the outside subject to marginalization and even criminalization. This has intersected with the neoliberalisation of Swedish welfare, which has eroded perceptions of citizenship and led to growing class divides (Schierup and Ålund 2011). As such, practices of racialized 'subordinated inclusion' in the Swedish welfare community have morphed into a dynamic of 'subordinated exclusion', whereby migrants and others racialized as non-Swedes have lost access to welfare and labour support. This has configured a racialized working class largely stripped of social protections (Mulinari and Anders 2022). These communities are simultaneously over-policed (Öström et al. 2023) and under-protected (Schclarek Mulinari 2022), leading scholars to argue that a military-style occupation of Swedish racialized working-class neighbourhoods is underway (Thapar-Björkert, Molina, and Raña Villacura 2019; Nafstad 2023). Examining a speech given by Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson,

Leonardo Schclarek Mulinari (2024) explores the idea that Sweden is cultivating a racialized security state, moving along a militarized continuum through the repressive targeting of racialized populations. The discourse of *folkhemmet* is thus marred by tensions between Swedish exceptionalism – with associated values of tolerance and egalitarianism – and a racialized, neoliberal security logic.

An intersectional view of Swedish (everyday) militarism therefore reveals discord in its imagery of war preparedness; race and class are not so much transcended by the gendered packaging of military ideals, but rather work in concert with gender to shape and advance these. This dynamic is subject to relatively infrequent discussion within critical military study circles, which tend to concentrate on the relationship between gender and national identity, as discussed above. In our article, we take an intersectional approach, examining the ways in which gender, race and class interact to reproduce distinct processes of militarism in the Swedish everyday. In particular, we argue that gender is insufficient on its own to explain these processes; Swedish militarism is made intelligible through the interplay between these forces. The supermarket is a particularly fruitful space within which to witness this; contemporary Swedish militarism capitalizes on the everyday to both reinscribe and conceal gendered, racialized and class-based imaginations of the nation and national defence. Before we get into our analysis, a word on methods is needed.

Methods and material

As noted above, the contribution of this article uses discourse analysis to examine the 'From Sweden, For Sweden' advertising campaign run by *Lantbrukarnas Riksförbund* (LRF), Sweden's agricultural association, a 'non-partisan interest and business organisation for farmers and foresters' (Lantbrukarnas Riksförbund 2024). As such, this is an interest group by and for farmers that seeks to sell Swedish produce to Swedish consumers. While we are unable to comment on the intent of this campaign (Shepherd 2015) and the co-option of militarism for profit-making, we take the campaign and its posters as an opportunity to investigate the pervasiveness of everyday militarism in Sweden.

The material consists of seven[2] photo-posters positioned outside the supermarket and accompanying text found on the campaign's official website. The posters each depict a farmer posing with what they produce – vegetables, grain or animals – and a slogan referring to how they contribute to defence. The people depicted in the posters are actual farmers, some of which have since featured in other social media clips talking about their farming practices.

We take these photo-posters as starting points to think about how the weekly shop is implicated in processes of everyday militarism through the idea of shopping as the first line of defence. As such, these posters sparked a number of questions: Who is (not) depicted in these posters? Who is thus (not) considered part of Swedish defence efforts? What do these inclusions and exclusions reveal about who and what constitutes both 'Sweden' and 'defence'? What role does food play in militarism and reterritorialization efforts? And ultimately, how do these understandings rely on and reiterate gendered, raced and classed tensions?

These questions then guided our analysis of both the posters and the accompanying text. Here, we were broadly inspired by Parry's (2011) 'visual framing analysis'. As such,

we paid attention to the composition of each poster itself (its colours; the placement of parts of the image; the type of text and its relationship to the image; the content and individual parts of the image). Followed by reading the posters in concert with the broader campaign materials (what is (not) being afforded space; what imagery or narratives are repeated across different materials; how the messaging is directed to the audience through different emphasis); and finally, examining the material in the context of Swedish politics (particularly vis-à-vis everyday national defence and security policies). The choice to combine the LRF campaign's visual and discursive elements was influenced by growing academic interest in the communicative potential of images in studies of war and security (e.g. Bleiker 2018; Campbell 2003; Williams 2003; Lisle 2011; Weber 2008). Mackie (2012) argues that applying discourse analysis to both language and visual texts is vital for appreciating the unequal social production of knowledge. Hansen (2015) sees images as supporting discursive agents to give meaning to particular foreign policy decisions, and in Richards's (2023) analysis of media representations of veteran activists, visuals complement discursive framings to promote British militarism. The interaction between images and text in digital 'regime[s] of representation' thus help interpretive scholars to comprehend the discursive field of militarism in an internet age (Mackie 2012, 116).

Marketing is a key site at which to see this in action. Long central to the creation and diffusion of social norms, behaviours and values (Zwick and Cayla 2011), marketing is particularly adept at combining diverse representational practices. As a 'hybrid communicative process', advertising uses visual and linguistic discourse to construct persuasive marketing messages (Al-Subhi 2022, 38; Bulmer and Buchanan-Oliver 2006). What's more, 'marketing thinking' firmly positions consumption as a dominant social force, commodifying and privatizing great swathes of our social and political life (Moufahim et al. 2007, 538). By investigating examples of visual marketing in the (re)production of everyday militarism, we uncover and critically analyse the discursive commercialization of military ideals. The analysis that follows considers how the visual and linguistic texts of the LRF's campaign together reproduce gendered, racialized and class-based discourses in the service of Swedish everyday militarism.

Caring for the nation

There are a number of gendered tensions present in both the posters and the accompanying text, which in turn successfully draw national defence logics into intimacies of the everyday. Most strikingly, there is an explicitly gendered tension as to how the farmers are depicted. The men are stood upright, in fields or next to potatoes, evoking a sense of strength and protection. Some, like the one holding rye above his head, mirror historical war campaign posters in their poses and compositions. As such, these posters may be read in the long and broad history of military propaganda. However, while historical iterations of such posters often encouraged the *growing* of food, thus contributing to the self-sufficiency of the state, here, it is the *buying* of produce that is encouraged. Meanwhile, the women farmers are depicted in ways that draw out a more feminized, softer, caring side. They are depicted with animals, cradling tomatoes or crouching close to the ground. This is also reflected in their associated slogans 'I take

care of Sweden's defence' and 'our softest cavalry'. Further, compositionally, all women farmers are placed in the background, behind their calf, goats, tomatoes or beets. As such, although they are presented as an integral part of Sweden's defence, how they are placed within their posters suggests a more supportive role within this. As such, there are two key gendered tensions: the difference in depiction between the male and female farmers and the one between defence and caring.

The latter is also demonstrated by the campaign's emphasis on nourishing the 'national family'. By repeatedly using the pronouns 'you' and 'we', the LRF invites the consumer into a homogenized collective of citizens cultivating Sweden's defence; 'In order for our Swedish agriculture to continue to develop, you, we, and many more must buy the goods'. In so doing, the campaign explicitly infuses the intimate space of the family with discourses of national defence, equating familial and national security by promising to 'ensure that both you and the rest of Sweden have food on the table in an uncertain world situation'. The significance of this security dining table is twofold. First, the metaphor explicitly, and problematically, connects practices of defence and care. Second, drawing national security into the domestic sphere has a depoliticizing effect, reproducing the simplistic promise of self-sufficiency as security. Yet, this self-sufficiency is to be bought and not produced, grown and nurtured by people themselves. Nonetheless, ultimately, these interweaving discourses naturalize militarism by reinforcing a gendered impression of social responsibility.

Swedish food is a vessel for taking care of Swedish land and its ostensibly Swedish inhabitants. Substituting more traditional militaristic imagery with caring language softens the LRF's defence-related discourse. Consequently, the masculine logic of national defence is transposed through the everyday form into something feminized, domestic and ultimately benign. The campaign's audience is evidently the conscientious caregiver, who feels responsibility for both the family and the wider environment:

> For the extra kroner, you benefit a farm that cultivates with responsibility for the climate and the environment, creates lots of jobs, protects good animal care and uses less antibiotics in animal breeding.

This text is combined with imagery of open fields and baby animals. This infers traditional gendered obligations towards the nation-state: 'men's responsibility to use violence to protect the nation and its citizens and women's home-front duty to produce and care for the nation's future citizens' (Åse and Wendt 2021, 293). By using the natural environment as a proxy for national protection, violence is entirely removed from this conceptualization of defence. In its place, peaceful, private cultivation practices are prioritized. This generates a seemingly naturalized defence logic, in which individuals have both the responsibility and the power to act on behalf of the country. Defence then is no longer a question of international politics, but rather an intimate and everyday part of a citizen's social life.

From this logic, homemaking becomes central to how Swedes see their social responsibility and their individualized relationship to the state. Each is an equal member of the national family. This reinforces ideas of gendered responsibility for everyday war preparedness, as seen in the literature introduced above (e.g. Basham and Catignani 2018; Hedström 2022; Cairns, Johnston, and MacKendrick 2013). These discourses have added gravity when read in the context of Sweden's current

security situation. Carl-Oscar Bohlin, Sweden's Minister for Civil Defence and Micael Bydén, Sweden's Commander-in-Chief, have each made headlines in January 2024 for suggesting that 'war could come to Sweden', urging the Swedish public to prepare: 'everyone, individually, needs to prepare themselves' (Bydén 2024). These comments prompted a 3,500% increase in visits to the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency's online map of bomb shelters and a 900% increase in downloads of its information booklet 'If crisis or war comes' (Nordstrom 2024). First issued during World War II and distributed to all Swedish households during the Cold War, the booklet was revised and re-issued in 2018, following Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea. After Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the booklet was re-distributed, providing advice for managing a wide range of crisis situations, from forest fires and powercuts, to cyberattacks and all-out war. In late 2024, it was updated once again, now nearly three times the size of its previous version (Jones 2024). In addition, the agency has advised Swedes to prepare 'crisis kits' for their households, containing necessities like a radio, food, water, a sleeping bag and a camping stove. This has triggered a crisis kit market, in which private companies profit from ready-made food kits that profess to have a 25-year shelf life (Nordstrom 2024).

By presenting a well-informed and well-prepared population as the key to any successful 'total defence' system (Cronqvist 2012; Ericson, Svenbro, and Wester 2023) and by promoting a vision of emergency preparedness that enlists households and the private sector, the Swedish administration places clear national responsibility onto the family unit. The domestic space becomes an intimate venue for militarism, as practices of homemaking – be they identifying bomb shelters or curating homemade crisis kits – substitute care for security, nurture for defence. This is heightened by the ongoing global food crisis – inextricably linked to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Abay et al. 2022) – which has increased levels of child poverty and hunger in the former 'poster child' nation (Wigen 2022; Christophers 2023). The LRF campaign thus speaks to a population both primed to (privately) act and impelled to spend for their security. By positioning the homemaker as a key national security player, this narrative successfully depoliticizes security concerns and shifts attention away from the state.

And yet, this gendered story does not necessarily reflect the full picture. As we discussed above, the dynamics of Swedish everyday militarism are at once gendered and explicitly entrenched in racialized and classed-based power relations. The increasingly exclusionary nature of the 'people's home' and its associated welfare state restructuring have accelerated racialized divisions in Swedish public life (Mulinari and Anders 2022). As such, the transposition of war-preparedness from the state to the home unit cannot be analysed purely as an example of gender politics. Rather, as the following two sections will attest, by using the food shop as a vehicle for militarism, the LRF campaign both reproduces and conceals a racialized and class-based re-territorialization of Swedish society. By viewing these analyses as intersecting rather than competing with gender, we can see how the depoliticization of national defence discussed above creates the conditions upon which further power inequalities flourish.

Eating and being truly Swedish will 'cost a little more'

In addition to the gendered dimension of the LRF campaign, then, the dimension of class is evident throughout and reiterated by the campaign. While the campaign espouses the need to buy Swedish produce, it also recognizes that it

> costs a little more to choose a Swedish cucumber over a Spanish, Dutch or German one. But for that extra money, you are supporting a farm that grows responsibly for the climate and the environment, creates lots of jobs, ensures good animal welfare and uses fewer antibiotics in animal husbandry.

However, while the extra cost is acknowledged, it is superseded by an essential need to pay this charge. The admission of the more expensive Swedish price is immediately followed by, and rebutted through, the fact that this is the 'cost' of security. The campaign constructs the sense that if the 'little extra cost' is not paid, the only alternative is a loss of security and even a potential loss of life. As such, the campaign leaves little room for the realities of food shortages, the rising cost of living or discussions around who is able to afford locally grown food. A lack of the latter is particularly apparent later in the text of the LRF website, which states that 'if you consider the efforts in production, it becomes easier to understand these food costs' (2023). While that statement might be true, it nonetheless closes down any conversation around food poverty and class. In the meantime, high inflation has caused Sweden's food prices to soar, food banks to proliferate and families to struggle to make ends meet (Henley 2022). Almost one in eight low-income, single-parent households find it hard to feed their children (2023). Sweden's prized welfare state has been steadily cut back and, as such, the wealth gap has widened: Statistics Sweden (2024) has reported that almost 15% of Swedes are at risk of poverty. Whilst the campaign urges Swedes to 'pay a little more' for patriotic unity, the impact of this security premium is felt differently across the country.

This then influences the type of consumer who can claim to 'protect' Sweden. Or rather, who is given a role and responsibility in the defence of the nation? Is it only those that can afford more expensive food, i.e. the financially well-situated people, who have a part to play in the defence of the nation? And, in turn, who are those who are given a place in the very nation that is being defended? The responsible homemaker appears in public discourse as both gendered and unmistakably classed; those citizens able to defend – and represent – Sweden are identified among the narrow pool of the family-oriented and financially privileged. This further contributes to the previously discussed tension between re-territorialization efforts and the universal yet exclusive notion of *folkhemmet*. Where once the 'People's Home' of the welfare state was lauded as a source and leveller of national social security, Swedes are now being asked to stake their claim to security through their ability to function responsibly outside of this home. Moreso, the process of re-territorialization, delineating both the territory and the people that are to be part of the Swedish nation, is evident in the clear delineation between Sweden and elsewhere – Spain, the Netherlands, Germany. Here, elsewhere it is characterized as without clear, or rather lesser, standards of farming, in turn constructing Swedish farming, and by extension the Swedish nation, as a space of elite-level enterprise.

The connection between food, spending and the Swedish nation becomes particularly evident through the slogan 'Swedish food is more than just food'. Here, it is implied that

the shopper does not just go into the supermarket to procure some groceries to cook dinner with, but rather through this act, the individual shopper contributes to and is part of something bigger, something beyond 'putting food on the table'. The money spent on food is also spent in pursuit of something else – national security. This security is constructed as the outcome of a specific type of capitalist action: buying Swedish products. However, this choice is not presented as purely economic, it is also portrayed as both an emotional and a moral choice. This is communicated through long passages about the role and contribution of Swedish food to Swedish infrastructure and social life – Swedish food helps to create jobs, contributes to tax revenue, is linked to schools and shops in small towns. This then both illustrates and naturalizes the wider agricultural-defence complex, using patriotic sentiment to depoliticize the country's plans for civil defence. The accompanying text to the campaign clearly states that

> without its own food production, Sweden becomes very vulnerable. The more Swedish food you buy, the stronger Sweden's ability to provide for itself, the more secure we all become.

Here, we see the caregiver reappears as a central character in Sweden's security story. The appeal to support the vulnerable through personal consumer choices situates national defence once again within the private and naturalized space of the home. This enables consumer-based security solutions to be positioned as morally rather than politically charged.

As such, the individual consumer assumes personal responsibility for the nation's insecurity if their shopping choices are not Swedish, or rather in support of Swedish agriculture and by extension Swedish defence. This is particularly interesting within the context of the campaign. In the summer of 2023, Swedish public debate was dominated by Sweden's quest to join NATO – famously an alliance relying on cooperation and where members relieve some of their self-sufficiency. Additionally, it is important to note that the posters analysed in this article were encountered in an urban setting, which might reflect a rural/urban divide as to who is considered to be the target audience for this marketing campaign: ecologically mindful yet wealthy urbanites who can afford to buy more expensive produce? Even in a less exaggerated version, not everyone has the means to always make a choice as to what they spend money on. Even more so, the (inadvertent) support of Sweden's defence through buying Swedish produce, even if it costs a little more, automatically makes the shopper complicit in militarism through Swedish agriculture. Ultimately, the emphasis on being able to support Swedish defence through just spending a little extra money not only individualizes responsibility onto the single shopper, but it also constructs capitalism as the solution to insecurity. By suggesting that global uncertainty and crisis can be prevented and solved through spending, the campaign not only buys into but reproduces the capitalist system, including its inherent injustices and violences.

With the above, we have seen how the individualization and privatization of national defence through homemaking redefines 'true' 'responsible' Swedes as financially privileged and willing to part with their money for the good of the nation. Couching this in ideas about caring further removes this narrative from Swedish politics, instead reproducing an abstracted vision of Swedish society that can seemingly withstand its internal contradictions. As the following section will argue, this vision is reinforced by the image of the national body as tacitly white.

Defining the super Swede

In addition to analysing expectations around gender and class about who shops in the defence of the Swedish homeland, this article is also concerned with the racialized dimensions in the campaign itself and within increased militarism and re-territorialization of Sweden. As demonstrated earlier, the move to re-territorialize Sweden relies on and exacerbates processes of inclusion and exclusion. In particular, the 'subordinated exclusion' (Mulinari and Anders 2022) of those who are not included in the ethno-cultural composition of 'the people' (Barker 2013).

These moves to re-territorialize, and attended exclusions, are particularly evident in the following passage of the accompanying text to the campaign, in which both the scale and variety within the Swedish nation are expressed:

> So more people need to understand that their choices make a difference. From Kiruna to Ystad - in supermarkets, farm shops and meat counters - more people must put Swedish products in their baskets. More Pitepalt must be made from Norrbotten pork and baba ganoush from Skåne eggplant. We need to eat more honey from Halland and heat houses with bioenergy from Småland's forests. And sure, a sun-ripened Spanish beefsteak tomato might sneak in from time to time. But every time you choose Swedish food, you are strengthening a farming system that benefits both you and the whole of Sweden.

The Sweden that is constructed here reaches from the very North (Kiruna) to the South of the country (Ystad), from a county on the Western coast (Halland) to one on the Baltic Sea (Småland) – marking the territorial boundaries very clearly. Meanwhile, the choice of food that is to be made with Swedish produce is inclusive and multicultural: baba ghanoush, an eggplant dish made around the Mediterranean, and Pitepalt, a classic Swedish potato-based dumpling filled with meat. These examples of the types of food that can be made with Swedish produce hint at inclusiveness and multiculturalism – espousing that Sweden is made up of and includes a variety of people, cultures, foods. And yet, the re-territorialization moves construct one united, though complex, Sweden that needs and deserves protection.

As discussed previously, the emphasis on 'us' and 'you' not only helps to delineate who is included but also constructs 'you' as an integral part of Sweden and its defence: 'But every time you choose Swedish food, you are strengthening a farming system that benefits both you and the whole of Sweden'. Here, the 'you' that the campaign is directed at is constructed as a part of this effort to buy Swedish produce, support Swedish agriculture's self-sufficiency and ultimately defend the Swedish nation. However, while the accompanying text presents a Sweden that is united yet complex, with clear territorial boundaries and a variety of culinary choices, the campaign posters themselves do not offer such diversity.

The people depicted in the campaign posters are four women and three men, all of whom appear to be white Swedish. Within these posters, there is some variety in terms of 'alternativeness', i.e. a deviation from the social norm. For example, the younger woman, kneeling amongst calves, has green hair. Furthermore, all people depicted read as white Swedish, which narrows the conditions of possibility for eating and looking like a Swede. This narrowing is a two-fold erasure. On one hand, it obscures the diversity among Sweden's farming community: representing the class of landowners while erasing farm labourers. The latter also includes the continued injustices faced by the indigenous Sámi

population of Sweden (Bergmann 2024; Lantto 2014). This then reproduces both race and class hierarchies within Sweden and is proscriptive Sweden('s defence). This in turn raises many questions as to the racialization of the people's home (*folkhemmet)* and the status and belonging of all those that live and labour in Sweden. At the same time, this representation also obscures Sweden's reliance on foreign seasonal workers and its position and role within the global food production market. For example, Swedish farming relies on foreign seasonal workers, such as workers from Thailand being flown in to pick berries (Hedberg 2021). By not including these individuals within the imagery of the campaign, the LRF conceals Sweden's complicity in exploitative labour markets and hides that Sweden's defence might not be as home-grown as it promises. In reality, the profits from such produce are garnered through the exploitation of classed and racialized labour. Alongside the hollowness of these narratives, the non-representativeness of the campaign makes a statement about who can be a part of Swedish society, and therefore who is allowed to do the protecting. The absence of racialized bodies combined with a clear emphasis on white farmers suggests a homogenous (white and financially secure) view of the Swedish nation.

The timing of this campaign is of particular note. As discussed above, Sweden's relationship to the racialized minorities living within its borders has developed into what some have termed a military-style occupation (Nafstad 2023; Thapar-Björkert, Molina, and Raña Villacura 2019). Growing racial divides are intensified by overzealous policing and the racialization of poverty, with many working-class neighbourhoods profoundly excluded from the narrative of Swedish nationalism (Mulinari and Anders 2022; Öström et al. 2023; Schclarek Mulinari 2022). In this context, the LRF campaign presents seemingly apolitical messaging of unity. And yet, by using gendered imagery of food and homemaking to determine both Swedish security and Swedish belonging, the LRF constructs and naturalizes a militarized 'super Swede' who is both self-responsible and tacitly white. This construction is not a one-time occurrence but is reiterated and naturalized through the second round of posters, launched in the summer of 2024, that reiterates this 'super Swede'. While the 2023 posters all centred 'försvar', i.e. defence, the 2024 iterations do not. Instead, they use more explicitly militaristic slogans. These are 'our softest cavalry', 'our defence has a strong backbone' and 'this is where Sweden's resilience grows'. This may be a reflection of the wider re-territorialization and increased militarism that progressed between 2023 and 2024 – where now more militarized narratives have become more commonplace and accepted. In fact, the threat, although not explicitly named, has become implicitly known and pervasive. The super Swede is constructed in direct relation to the ever-increasing instability of Sweden's immediate geopolitical context and wider global politics. This in turn is even further exacerbated by Sweden's accession to NATO and the associated expectation of projecting military power and the moral obligations of defending liberal values.

Altogether, the LRF's campaign showcases the growing divisions in Swedish society, in which the ideal family is both racially and financially privileged. This is reinforced by messaging which capitalizes on feelings of insecurity and the glorification of national defensive capabilities. Ideas about everyday caring become the channel through which this boundary drawing finds salience and is normalized. As such, it is the interplay between gendered, racialized and class-based power dynamics driving Swedish militarism and contributing towards the narrow redrawing of imagined Swedish society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article proposes that greater attention must be paid to the intersection between gender, race *and* class to provide substantive insights into processes of everyday militarism. By analysing a campaign entitled 'eating ourselves safe', we argue that everyday militarism reproduces exclusionary hierarchies in Swedish nationhood and national security approach. In the case of the campaign in question, the individual shopper becomes a key actor in Sweden's defence strategy – ultimately 'buying security'. This in turn taps into established care considerations, where the feminized homemaker nurtures and cares for her family, thereby providing stability. However, this time, the family is replaced by the nation and rather than nurture, it is a larger defence effort that is fed by this care. While these relationships are inherently gendered, they are ultimately class-based too, as they prioritize the self-sufficient and financially privileged consumers. What type of consumer can protect Sweden? The campaign suggests that national security and defence trump financial considerations, as Sweden's defence should be prioritized during the weekly shop 'even if it costs a little more'. We thus see clear links between gender and class that need to be explored when thinking about everyday militarism.

Similarly, Swedish farmers are constructed as the first line of defence, and their agricultural efforts are reshaped as defence efforts. The campaign draws a clear line between feeding the nation and defending the nation, further reflected in the 'eating ourselves safe' title. Yet, these moves also obscure not only certain realities of Swedish agricultural practices but once more pose the question of who can protect Sweden? As such, we need to consider race. The consumer targeted and valorized by this campaign are both multicultural and tacitly white. Likewise, the campaign represents only certain dimensions of the realities of farming in and for Sweden; obscuring Sweden's position within racialized and classed global labour markets. This rhetoric works to re-territorialize the Swedish nation by forcing homogeneity whilst simultaneously glossing over the violences suffered by racialized working class people. This is ultimately essential to Swedish militarism because it presents a land to fight for and normalizes the dispossession of racialized others. The simultaneous gendering and individualization of militarized homemaking conceals this dynamic. In turn, such a representation supports a narrow imaginary of the people's home in which the white and financially privileged are the only ones able to claim protection and be part of defence efforts, on Swedish soil. If we are to consider everyday militarism, it is essential to see both these intersecting dynamics of gender, race and class and the processes by which they are normalized.

Notes

1. Likewise, the physical education offered in schools is historically intertwined with militarism (Hargreaves 1987; Kelly 2016).
2. The introduction of this article describes three posters – the initial ones encountered in the supermarket parking lot in the summer of 2023. The same year, another poster was encountered on Instagram. And, a year later, in the summer of 2024, three new posters appeared outside the same parking lot.

Acknowledgments

We are very grateful for the numerous comments and enthusiastic input we received while writing this article. Particular thanks must go to the Gender, Peace and Security seminar at the Swedish Defence University, the panel on Everyday Militarism at BISA 2024 and Julia Welland, as well as attendees of the workshop on innocuous spaces in Bern 2024. Thanks too to Louise Ridden, Hannah Richards and Margot Tudor.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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