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Being Recalled Years Later: An Observation on Military Dreams

Yıllar Sonra Geri Çağrılmak: Askerlik Rüyaları Üzerine Bir Gözlem

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To the Editor,

Many individuals in Türkiye who completed their compulsory military service years ago report experiencing intense, vivid, and anxiety-provoking dreams in which they are suddenly summoned back to the military. From a cultural perspective, this phenomenon does not appear unique to Türkiye. Similar narratives of such dreams are frequently encountered in various English-speaking online forums (Reddit 2025).

Comments I have quoted from a Turkish forum (Ekşi Sözlük 2025) illustrate how these dreams tend to recur and how they share remarkably common thematic elements. Users describe feelings of grievance and confusion in their dreams, as they find themselves called back into service due to reasons such as missing documents or incomplete days of service.

> *"I've completed my military service. Why am I here again?"*
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> *"It's been years since I finished my service, yet I keep having this dream."*
>
> *"The story changes, but the theme remains the same."*
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> *"No one understands or believes that I have completed my military service. "*
>
> *"They're recalling me again because of a missing document."*
>
> *"I've done my service, but apparently I still have some missing days left."*
>
> *"Even the commander knows I'm right but can't do anything."*
>
> *"I feel immense relief upon waking up."*

Such dreams carry thought-provoking psycho-social implications. At first glance, they suggest that the traces left by compulsory military service persist over time, and that these dreams may symbolize various anxieties related to authority or issues of personal freedom. Interestingly, these dreams are not exclusive to those who served long terms; individuals who completed short-term, paid military service, and who report having had smooth military experiences, also report such dreams (Ekşi Sözlük 2025). This observation suggests that the underlying meanings of these dreams cannot be explained solely by traumatic experiences during military service. Freud's concept of "typical dreams" may help illuminate the structural commonalities found in these dreams (Freud 1900).

Freud (1900) asserted that while each individual may imbue their dream world with personal, unique characteristics that render it incomprehensible to others, certain dreams, which he termed "typical dreams," carry interpretations that remain consistent across individuals. According to Freud, in such dreams, either the dreamer lacks the associations that would make the dream intelligible, or these associations are so obscure and insufficient that interpretation becomes impossible. Freud listed dreams of the death of loved ones, dreams of flying, and dreams of nakedness, alongside examination dreams, as examples of typical dreams (Freud 1900).

In examination dreams, the dreamer finds themselves having to retake an exam they had previously passed successfully, but experiences various obstacles that prevent successful completion, such as difficulty arriving on time, pens that won't write, erasers that fail to erase, or the inability to read or understand the exam questions (Draaisma 2015, Schredl 2017). It is quite remarkable how similar these types of dreams are to examination

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dreams, in which the dreamers see themselves being recalled to military service for various reasons (such as missing documents or incomplete service days) despite having completed their military duty (I have previously published a study examining how Type B dreams associated with substance use display structural similarities with examination dreams; however, I am omitting those discussions here to maintain focus.)

Freud's initial interpretation of examination dreams posited that they are not difficult to decipher and that they arise from unresolved memories of punishments suffered due to past misconduct (Freud 1900). Although our school years are long behind us, and our parents can no longer punish us, whenever we commit a misdeed or begin to feel the burden of a responsibility, our dreams emerge to punish us (Freud 1900).

In 1909, Freud revisited his view of these dreams during a scientific discussion with his colleague Wilhelm Stekel (Freud 1901, Draaisma 2015). Stekel observed that such dreams often involve exams successfully passed in the past. He proposed that these dreams emerge whenever people face impending tests or evaluations, hence the label "examination dreams" (Draaisma 2015). Following his discussion with Stekel, Freud noted that these dreams offer a kind of consolation during stressful times: "Do not fear what is coming tomorrow; remember how frightened you were before your school-leaving exam. Nothing happened, and look, today you are a doctor." He added that the dreamer's protest within the dream—"but I have already passed this exam"—actually conceals the dream's consoling message (Freud 1901).

Freud further revised his interpretation in the 1914 edition of The Interpretation of Dreams, suggesting that examination dreams do not merely offer consolation but also convey self-criticism: "Is there really only consolation in examination dreams? Is there not also some self-reproach, some sense of shame? It seems these dreams say: You are quite old now, you have advanced far in life, but you are still making such foolish, childish mistakes" (Freud 1914).

According to Freud, emotions and thoughts that would provoke anxiety in conscious awareness do not simply vanish but can surface in dreams or slips of the tongue (Freud 1901). In this context, military dreams may serve as symbolic expressions of anxieties surrounding potentially distressing situations. Beyond this, such dreams might help reduce anxiety by staging potentially threatening scenarios in the dreamer's mind.

Criticism directed at an individual in an area where they have extensive prior success and confidence typically does not induce anxiety (Vaillant 1992). However, precisely for this reason, such situations provide fertile ground for the dream censorship mechanism. For instance, just as someone who has driven for years may still dream of losing control of a vehicle (Schredl 2020), the recurring theme of being recalled to military service despite having successfully completed it may represent the censored component of military dreams. Thus, unless interpreted, the individual remains puzzled about why they are being sent back to fulfill a duty they have already completed, unaware that the dream may be satisfying repressed desires causing anxiety.

The striking paradox in examination and military dreams (being recalled to service) reflects the success of the dream-work in reducing the individual's anxiety without their awareness by substituting one anxiety-provoking situation with another (being called back to service for various reasons).At this point, these dreams can be likened to what Kohut described as "self-state dreams." According to Kohut, such dreams arise in response to distressing situations such as a decrease in self-esteem or threats of self-fragmentation; the individual responds to these threats with anxiety and attempts to restore an integrated sense of self (Kohut 1977). In military dreams, anxiety related to a potential decrease in self-esteem may be censored and alleviated through the scenario of a military service that the individual has previously completed successfully. In this context, these dreams might simultaneously embody both the censorship and wish-fulfillment aspects of Freud's dream theory and the characteristics of Kohut's self-state dreams, which respond to threats of self-dissolution with anxiety. In a way, these dreams seem to advise us to look for anxiety wherever desire is present.

Although there is extensive literature on dreams related to traumatic military experiences in the context of post-traumatic stress disorder, there appears to be no systematic academic study focusing specifically on dreams involving the theme of being recalled to military service. Investigating the frequency, thematic structures, emotional content, and temporal relationships of such dreams with individuals' psychosocial histories would be scientifically worthwhile.

Dreams involving the theme of being recalled to military service, despite having completed that duty, share structural similarities with typical examination dreams and constitute phenomena worthy of in-depth exploration from both psychoanalytic and self-psychology perspectives. Freud's dream theory and Kohut's conceptualization of self-state dreams provide a valuable theoretical framework for interpreting this dream type. Future qualitative and quantitative research examining the frequency, narrative structures, accompanying

emotions during dreaming and upon awakening, and connections with individuals' psychosocial histories could greatly enhance our understanding of the psychological origins of these dreams. This observation has been reflected to the editor and readers, in the hope that it may serve as a starting point for future research in this field.

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