



Österreichisches Institut für Internationale Politik
Austrian Institute for International Affairs

Trends in International Politics 2023

Military recruitment and conscription in the 21st century

Trend Report 3 / January 2023

Sanna Strand

Sanna Strand is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the oiip. She is also a postdoctoral researcher and teaching fellow at the Department of Economic History and International Relations, Stockholm University. She defended her thesis in Peace and Development Research at University of Gothenburg in 2019. Sanna's research focuses broadly on how young people are recruited to military service as well as how military service, missions and mandates are and has been legitimated to European publics. Her current research project is funded by the Swedish Research Council and explores the role and status of military conscription in contemporary Europe.

Impressum:

Österreichisches Institut für Internationale Politik – oiip,
Austrian Institute for International Affairs
A-1090 Vienna, Währinger Straße 3/12, www.oiip.ac.at, info@oiip.ac.at

Copyright © 2023

Military and security scholars have long argued for a trend in military recruitment policy and practice away from conscripted forces based on compulsory service towards professional forces based on voluntary service. Against the backdrop of dramatic societal changes and a new geopolitical order emerging after the end of the Cold War, the republican tradition of forcing young men to serve the nation in arms in exchange for citizenship not only seemed “out of date” (Haltiner 1998); mass armies composed of conscripted soldiers appeared increasingly redundant. Yet, in recent years, several countries in Eastern Europe and the Baltic Sea region have reintroduced compulsory national service systems as a response to Russian military aggressions. We have also seen an upswing in presumably out-dated republican ideals; with France reintroducing a limited service scheme to improve national integration and cohesion (Gheciu 2020) and Qatar, Kuwait & the UAE all announcing male conscription as a means to foster a collective of productive and patriotic citizens (Barany 2018). These recent developments have led prominent voices to declare a “return” (Braw 2017) or “comeback” (*The Economist* 2021) of conscription.

In light of this seeming trend towards mandatory service, it is important for military researchers and analysts to remember that the following: First, conscription did never disappear in many parts of the world, and assuming that it did reproduces a Eurocentric worldview by universalising a predominantly

“Western” experience. Second, the distinction between freedom and force – consent and compulsion – is unstable in *all* military recruitment practices, independent of system or policy. Recent scholarship have, for instance, demonstrated how social hierarchies based on race, class and citizenship effectively render the recruitment of “voluntary” soldiers a coercive and exploitative practice in many parts of the world (e.g. Ware 2012, Chisholm 2014, Eichler 2014) – but also how contemporary forms of conscription rely heavily on market techniques associated with the all-volunteer force (e.g. Levy 2010; Choi and Kim 2017; Strand 2022).

In times of geopolitical turmoil, when soldiers are mobilized in training and warfare in large numbers, we need in-depth research of military recruitment and conscription policy and practice that continues to problematize oft-taken-for-granted shifts and distinctions between free and forced enlistment/recruitment. We need explorations of private and public – state and non-state – forces that lay bare how young people’s experience of compulsory *as well as* consensual service often is dependent on social circumstances, inequalities and hierarchies. To offer a few illustrative examples: While Russia’s partial mobilization of conscripts into its war on Ukraine have forced ethnic minorities and marginalized young men into battle and death, the same conscription laws may be experienced as practically voluntary and escapable for Russian men from privileged socio-economic

backgrounds. Moreover, appeals to inmates of the Russian much-feared prison system to “volunteer” with a private military company in imperial warfare clearly also symbolizes a form of coercion. Finally, for many Ukrainian men exposed to strict conscription laws, not leaving the country when it suffers under external aggressions might be mandated by law, but at the same time experienced as an autonomous decision emanating from within. Research that highlights these complexities is crucial if we are to understand how young people are recruited, conscripted and mobilized in 21st century warfare.

Unfortunately, scholarship on the complex sociology of military recruitment and conscription is not easily translatable to “best practice” and policy recommendations. It offers few concrete advice on how to

recruit the best soldiers in the most efficient and just way. Indeed, it tends to highlight the violence and exploitation inevitably involved in *all* appeals to sacrifice the self while serving the nation in arms. Yet, there are clearly also, however subjective, different degrees of violence and exploitation involved in military recruitment and mobilization. In-depth case study research on *who* is targeted by military recruiters and draft boards, with what *promises* and under what *conditions*, is therefore a prerequisite for an informed public debate concerning if, and if so *how*, democratic states are to recruit soldiers in more efficient and just ways – in a 21st century characterised by geopolitical tensions and violent imperialism.

References

- Barany, Z. (2018). Soldiers of Arabia: Explaining Compulsory Military Service in the Gulf. *Journal of Arabian Studies*, 8 (1), 118-140.
- Braw, E. (2017). *The Return of the Military Draft*. Atlantic Council. Washington DC.
- Chisholm, A. (2014). The Silenced and Indispensable, Gurkhas in private military security companies. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 16 (1), 26–47.
- Choi, H, J, & Kim, N, H-J. (2017). Of Soldiers and Citizens: Shallow Marketisation, Military Service and Citizenship in Neo-Liberal South Korea. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 47 (4), 515–34.
- Eichler, M. (2014). Citizenship and the contracting out of military work: from national conscription to globalized recruitment, *Citizenship Studies*, 18 (6-7), 600-614.
- Gheciu, A. (2020). Remembering France's Glory, Securing Europe in the Age of Trump. *European Journal of International Security*, 5, 25-44.
- Haltiner, K, W. (1998). The definite end of the mass army in Western Europe? *Armed Forces and Society*, 25 (1), 7–36
- Levy, Y. (2010). The Essence of the 'Market Army.' *Public Administration Review*. May/June.
- Strand, S. (2022). The birth of the enterprising soldier: governing military recruitment and retention in post-Cold War Sweden, *Scandinavian Journal of History*. 47 (2), 225-247.
- The Economist (2021). "Call on Me: The Militart Draft Is Making a Comback." 2 March.
- Ware, V. (2012). *Military Migrants: Fighting for YOUR Country*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.