

JULY 2024



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Introduction

The Russo-Ukrainian War has heightened security concerns across Europe. In response, European countries are not only looking to enhance their capabilities to face modern types of warfare but also experiencing a resurgence of interest in traditional security measures such as military conscription (Silva, 2024). This shift is evident as nations reassess their defence capabilities, both within multinational alliances such as NATO and by bolstering their own national defence.

In response to these evolving security needs, the German government has turned its attention to the recently restored Scandinavian conscription systems as a role model to embark on the process of reintroducing conscription (Deutsche Welle, 2024a). The success of these Scandinavian systems, which makes them attractive to other European countries, lies in adapting to their changing societies by presenting innovative models of conscription (Jonsson *et al.*, 2024; Strand, 2021). Furthermore, this type of draft is based on choosing the best and most motivated people. The highly selective draft is helping these countries to move from military service as something men were forced to do to something now people select to do for their personal and professional growth (Braw, 2017).

Following the success factor of Scandinavian models in reflecting changing societies and making it attractive for professional growth, the reintroduction of conscription in Germany presents significant challenges, with wider social implications in terms of making the Bundeswehr an inclusive and attractive model for professional and personal growth for youth (Jonsson *et al.*; Jäckle, 2023). A reformed conscription system in Germany can be achieved by focusing not only on intermediate security needs but on how the military can provide opportunities for youth. Germany's government should consider including the essential elements that make Scandinavian models successful, such as being highly selective or competitive in the job market. Moreover, in Germany's particular case, an essential element to reflect its social reality is the inclusion of migrants or inhabitants with a "migrant background". This would help to foster greater social cohesion (Winnick, 2017) and counter recent events where nationalist sentiments have resurfaced. The latter is of paramount importance given Germany's historical context and the risk of the military's potentiality to fuel nationalist sentiments. The careful management of nationalist discourse within recruitment campaigns is essential.

The first section of this paper provides an overview of the Swedish and Norwegian conscription models highlighting the elements of success that are necessary to achieve a renovated conscription system in Germany. The second section briefly presents the context of conscription in Germany. Then the paper outlines a key consideration for restoring conscription in Germany when trying to reflect their current social reality.

Conscription Systems in Sweden and Norway

Germany's Minister of Defence, Boris Pistorius, has been considering the introduction of Swedish or Norwegian conscription models to counter the poor results of military service campaigns and to meet his objectives of overhauling Germany's armed forces (Haseldine, 2024). The Swedish model appears to be a potentially suitable solution. Pistorius acknowledged that past conscription methods were unfair and that the goal is not to create a mass army nor to promote forced labour (Deutsche Welle, 2024a).

Conscription was restored in Sweden in 2018 due to a shortage of soldiers, after being suspended in 2010. The Swedish system has major advantages over classical conscription models: it focuses on talent acquisition and expansion of reserves. Recruiters screen all young people and select the most promising for military service, including women as fully integrated members (Barndollar, 2024). The Swedish model also has been appraised for its selectiveness and its gender neutrality (Strand, 2021). The success of Sweden's model, which has seen recruitment quadruple in early 2024, serves as an aspirational model for other European countries as it has managed to make military service competitive and attractive to citizens by reinventing conscription instead of restoring a traditional system (Barndollar, 2024).

The Vice Admiral of the German Navy, Jan Christian Kaack, has proposed the Norwegian model (Oltermann, 2023). The Norwegian system, similar to the Swedish one, evaluates individuals' motivation, values and attitudes. The selection process starts with an online questionnaire where individuals provide self-reported information about their health, interest and motivation. Based on these responses, nearly 30% of applications are preselected for further physical and psychological evaluation, and approximately 30% of those preselected are called for basic training and conscription (Jonsson et al., 2024). This model stands out for conducting an initial process to move on to the next stages of recruitment, based on motivations and personal interest. The fact that the Norwegian model aligns with the current social reality of its country has also been a factor of success (Jonsson et al., 2024).

The Norwegian armed forces did not struggle with filling its annual conscript quota of 8,000 men. However, the military and the government decided to maximise the military's talent pool by including women. For that, the military launched a large information campaign directed at girls and their parents to explain what the armed forces do, the importance for having armed forces and what conscription means for girls. By doing this, Norway not only improved the quality of its military but offered a plus in young women and men CV's. A survey among Norway's conscripts in 2017 showed 90% of women and 83% of men were pleased with their experience (Braw, 2017).

In Norway and Sweden, people have been drawn to the new conscription model because it offers an opportunity for professional growth in terms of skill development and sense of responsibility. In Norway for example, the government has been able to portray the armed forces as a prestigious institution, ergo paving the way for reputable career paths (Braw, 2017). Conscripts can participate in worthwhile activities, which helps them acquire important skills, such as leadership, discipline, communication, sense of duty (Braw, 2017; RUSI, 2013) —as well as other competencies that are prized in today's job market— which also contributes to their satisfaction rates (Stachowitsch & Strand, 2024). Likewise, conscription in Sweden focuses on promoting civic duty while providing opportunities for the development or refinement of skills that will be useful for their personal and professional career development, military or non-military (Braw, 2017; Stachowitsch & Strand, 2024). Furthermore, these new models attract young people as they represent an occasion to learn with advanced equipment and technology, providing technical knowledge useful in many civilian careers (Braw, 2017). Restoring conscription using either of these models could serve as a starting point to reshape the conscription model in Germany. Swedish and Norwegian models stand out mainly due to the opportunity they represent for personal growth, for being inclusive with women and considering personal motivations. Conscription then, must be competitive to attract promising individuals to enlist in the Bundeswehr, regardless of whether they are women or men. This type of draft would require skilled young men and women who can be trusted with expensive technological equipment and with positions of responsibility that a 19-year-old could hardly experience in civilian life (Braw, 2017). Therefore, this would help improve the quality of the armed forces while achieving the government's objectives of overhauling Germany's armed forces (Haseldine, 2024).

Between Past Fears and Current Defence Necessities

Born in 19th Century in the context of the French Revolution (1792-1801), the concept of *levée en masse* established the guiding principles of conscription that influenced military recruitment for the next century (Linch, 2012). During the period of the two world wars, especially World War II, Germany experienced a radical version of conscription. The Third Reich translated conscription into forced labour to compose an army of up to 20,7000,000 soldiers and officers (Haskew, 2014). Serving the regime became the law and *raison d'être* of the state (Bacolod and Koenigsmark, 2017). The historical impact this event had on Germany's history has been transformative, shaping perceptions of conscription and influencing societal priorities. For this reason, considering historical aspects is essential for the success of the new conscription model in Germany.

The aftermath of World War resulted in Germany's division into two states and a strong rejection of militarism and extreme nationalism. The focus shifted to denazification and the promotion of a political culture of peace and democracy (Gardner, 2012). The reunification in 1990 consolidated Germany as a European power whose commitment to peace and cooperation legacy influences its national and foreign politics until today (Judt, 2005). Post-cold war, the 1990s and early 2000s saw significant changes in conscription practices. By the mid-2010s, fewer than 40% of European countries had some form of conscription (The Economist, 2024). As Jäckle (2023) describes opposition to conscription grew in the early 2000s, driven by the belief that Germany would not likely engage in military conflicts. This led to the suspension of conscription in 2011, reflecting broader changes in Germany's defence strategy and international commitments.

However, the conflict in Ukraine has prompted a renewed interest in conscription among European countries (Rongé & Abrate, 2019). In Germany, before becoming Chancellor, Olaf Scholz pledged to increase the number of troops (Brady, 2024). Likewise, Pistorius, spoke about restoring conscription as part of a larger plan to overhaul Germany's armed forces, stating in 2024 that "We are defending our country and our allies... no one should even entertain the idea of attacking us" (Haseldine, 2024). The current administration aims to raise its troops from 182,000 to 203,000 by 2030 (The Economist, 2024). In the face of a wave of reinstatement of conscription in Europe, the question is how Germany can adopt a model that is both attractive and in line with its social reality.

Key social consideration for designing a new conscription model in Germany

Plans to restore conscription in Germany have awakened fears rooted in the country's unique history. Many young people fear the idea of being forced to serve, which is in line with the way contemporary German society values individual freedoms, conflicting with the imposition of conscription (Jäckle, 2023). Therefore, the new conscription system must prioritise personal motivations, interests and individual skills. Additionally, legal concerns have been raised, as conscription could contradict Article 12 (2) of the Basic Law and Article 4 (2) of the European Convention on Human Rights, both of which prohibit forced labour (Jäckle, 2023.). Any attempt to reintroduce conscription would need to navigate these legal frameworks to ensure compliance with human rights standards.

The decision to reintroduce conscription has sparked debates on security, national identity and international obligations. According to Jäckle (2023), an online survey conducted by Politikpanel Deutschland from June 30 to July 17, 2022, revealed that out of 8,598 participants, 37.9% tended to vote in favour of conscription, with 25.4% strongly in favour, 12% strongly opposed and 15.3% somewhat opposed, while only 9.5% were completely neutral. Also, participants who consider themselves as politically right-wing, nationalist and traditionalist showed greater inclination towards conscription (Jäckle, 2023).

Supporters of major political parties, particularly CDU/CSU and AfD, were more likely to support conscription, whereas supporters of other parties were less favourable. Interestingly, people who completed military service held a positive attitude towards conscription, viewing their experience as meaningful and valuable (Jäckle, 2023).

Another survey pursued by the opinion research institute Forsa (2024) found that 52% of the participants favoured restoring conscription, compared to 44% who opposed it. Additionally, 54% of the participants believed Russia would attack NATO members if the invasion of Ukraine succeeded, compared to 39% who deemed such an attack impossible (Deutsche Welle, 2024a).

In view of that a significant percentage of people who consider themselves right-wing and traditionalists are more inclined to support conscription (Jäckle, 2023), the German government will have to conduct a careful management of negative nationalist discourses, from the initial process of officialising the initiative to the recruitment process. Recent events exhibited a slight resurgence of extreme nationalist sentiments, which had to be considered to avoid misrepresentations, within conscription, of Germany's current social configuration. Last May, the owners of a bar on a German island filed a criminal complaint after guests filmed themselves singing "foreigners out" and "Germany for the Germans" (Deutsche Welle, 2024b). What has also been alarming is that these videos were recorded by young social media influencers. Similarly, police in Bavaria are investigating two men who reportedly sang "foreigners out" during the 2024 *Bergkirchweih* beer festival. The men were 21 and 26 years old, respectively (Deutsche Welle, 2024b). These events in the context of conscription, are relevant as xenophobic or extreme nationalist sentiments within the military can be amplified due to socio-political tendencies. The rise of extreme right-wing movements in Europe has sometimes been supported within military ranks due to societal fears about cultural diffusion (Davis *et al.*, 1993). This is because the traditional military's approach has inadvertently been to conceive the enemy as the "Other" (Macedo & Gounari, 2006), i.e., different cultures, ethnicities, or people with different religious backgrounds can be seen as undermining national unity and identity -often perceived as homogenous- promoting xenophobic sentiments.

The incidents above reflect growing xenophobic sentiments among young people revealing a lack of social cohesion. Amidst the outbreak of xenophobic sentiments, this could potentially convert the military into a breeding ground for nationalist sentiments. A poor management of conscription can exacerbate these types of nationalistic and xenophobic attitudes. Therefore, it is essential to promote the *Bundeswehr* as an inclusive institution that represents the diversity of the German society.

To rethink conscription in an inclusive way, it might be, for example, necessary to discuss the possibility of non-citizens joining the Bundeswehr. According to Winnick (2017), over one in five Germans have a “migration background”, i.e., one or both of their parents were not born in Germany. Nowadays, in schools, one in three children have parents who are immigrants. People with migration backgrounds are now full members of German society and play a role in the new national identity. Patriotism becomes a symbolic element that must be balanced against its negative associations with the country’s legacy of ethnic and racial-based nationalism, especially in a context where the (false) idea of a homogenous nation is increasingly unrealistic.

Allowing non-citizens to join the Bundeswehr could be a significant step forward to inclusiveness. While Germany has traditionally required citizenship for military service, some countries have allowed non-citizens to serve in their military forces. For instance, in 2008, the US military piloted a new recruitment programme allowing immigrants without permanent residency to enlist in the Army. The “Military Accessions Vital to National Interest” (MAVNI) recruited more than 10,400 soldiers between 2008 and 2016. Germany has a shortage of expertise, in language and cultural skills that are necessary for overseas deployments, just like the US when this initiative was introduced (Winnick, 2017). Recruiting non-citizens might be a feasible option to fill these needs. Moreover, a reform of this magnitude would represent more than an inclusive and diverse conscription system, would pave the way also for a broader migration policy.

Conclusion

Germany is trying to actualise to geopolitical changes in Europe through reforms to its security policies to address their military needs and strengthen their national security, such as the reintroduction of conscription that had been suspended since 2011. German government officials have looked to two Scandinavian models, the Norwegian and Swedish, as useful role models to reform conscription (Deutsche Welle, 2024a). These models stand out primarily for being competitive, based on the personal interest and motivation of applicants, and for providing opportunities for both men and women to grow professionally (Jonsson *et al.*, 2024). Nowadays in these Scandinavian countries, men are not generally forced against their will to do military service, but the best women and men are selected to do it (Braw, 2017). In addition, the models have been successful in adapting to the changing society of their countries respectively (Jonsson *et al.*, 2024). The German government can benefit from considering the main elements of such conscription models, in terms of being competitive and selective. Additionally, in line with the argument, that the success of these models is to be adaptive to their social realities, Germany would have to consider their social trends that are relevant to the reintroduction of conscription, such as the matter of migrants for the role they play in society and the current German identity (Winnick, 2017). Moreover, establishing the military as inclusive for non-citizens will promote a broader social integration (Winnick, 2017) countering recent events that revealed a resurgence of extreme nationalist sentiments. By including the key elements of the Scandinavian models and considering their own societal reality, the German government can create a strategy for restoring conscription that reconciles the collective memory of the past, nationalism and social integration with the new military needs, promoting the Bundeswehr as an inclusive and forward-thinking institution.

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