

# Conscription

by Kevin Linch

Throughout European history monarchs, states, and governments have claimed the right to select men and force them to serve in the military. Modern conscription, whereby all the young men (and later sometimes also women) under the jurisdiction of a state were liable for military service and a selection of them was taken into the armed forces each year, emerged in France in 1798 with the "loi Jourdan" during the French Revolutionary Wars (1792–1801). This article explores the ideas about conscription, and their communication and introduction across Europe during and after the Napoleonic Wars (1803–1815), as well as discussing its history afterwards.

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## Antecedents to Conscription

Compulsory military service was not a new feature of political and social life in Europe before conscription was introduced during the French Revolutionary Wars (→ Media Link #ab). Across Europe there existed a variety of mechanisms by which some states could enforce service in the military. Many of these stemmed from requirements for communities or families to provide men to serve in a levy under local magnates.<sup>1</sup> During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries these obligations fell into disuse as military forces developed into a permanent establishment (often termed standing army) paid for and organised by the state. As such, a levy that could only be mobilised for a few months a year became outdated.<sup>2</sup>

▲ 1

In response to the burgeoning manpower demands of war during the late seventeenth and the eighteenth century, particularly the various wars of the 1670s and 1720s and the Seven Years' War, some states reformed systems of compulsory military service or introduced new means to supply or supplement their armies. For example, in France and England this took the form of a militia: an auxiliary, locally raised force that was only liable to serve permanently during wartime but undertook annual training in peacetime.

▲ 2

One of the more unusual of these developments was the Swedish *indelningsverket* (allotment system), which was reformed by Charles XI (1655–1697) (→ Media Link #ac) in 1682 (→ Media Link #ad). In this, communities were obliged to provide and, crucially, maintain men and horses for the army (coastal communities provided men for the navy), with units allotted to geographical areas. As such the system was territorial as it closely linked military organisations with particular places and social structures. Another later development that was viewed with interest across Europe, and was more widely adopted, was the Prussian *Kanton* system. Like the *indelningsverket*, this territorialised the Prussian army, assigning districts to particular military units, and it allowed for a large part of the army to be demobilised in peacetime.<sup>3</sup>

▲ 3

As ways of arming the populace, all the compulsory military systems in Europe had limitations. A similarity between these measures was their inconsistent application, as there were numerous exemptions from service, such as belonging to a certain social class or territory (for example, in the UK, Scotland and Ireland had no militia, and the Tyrol was not subject to the same military code as other parts of the Habsburg Empire). Moreover, many states were wary of mass arming. In the polyglot Russian and Habsburg empires, any kind of militia would have been difficult to enforce because they were patchwork states with multiple jurisdictions. Throughout Europe, military service was tied to monarchs and existing power structures.

▲4

After the Seven Years' War and the American War of Independence, military thinkers across Europe began to seek explanations for success and failure in these wars. As part of this "military enlightenment" writers discussed the military and particularly its relationship with society and culture. Perhaps the most famous of these was Jacques-Antoine-Hippolyte, Comte de Guibert's (1743–1790) (→ Media Link #ae) *Essai général de tactique* (→ Media Link #af) published in 1772. In this Guibert envisaged a new style of war that harnessed the military might of the people:

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Mais, supposons qu'il s'élevât en Europe un peuple vigoureux, de génie de moyens, & de gouvernement; un peuple qui joignît à des vertus austères, & à une milice nationale, un plan fixe d'aggrandissement, qui ne perdît pas de vue ce système, qui sachant faire la guerre à peu de frais, & subsister par ses victoires, ne fût pas réduit à poser les armes, par des calculs de finance. On verroit ce peuple subjuguier ses voisins, & renverser nos foibles constitutions, comme l'aquilon plie de frêles rofeaux. ... Entre ces peuples, dont la foiblesse éternise les querelles, il se peut cependant qu'un jour il y ait des guerres plus décisives, & qui ébranlent les Empires.<sup>4</sup>

Nor was this a purely abstract discussion, as the late eighteenth century witnessed several conflicts that aroused the interest of military minds and indicated a new relationship between society and war. There were several "national" wars of resistance, such as those of the American colonists, of the Corsicans, and of the Dutch in 1787–1788. Although scholarship has challenged the extent to which these were precursors to citizen armies, they were often interpreted as such by contemporaries.<sup>5</sup>

▲6

This military examination was quite open, and there was a general exchange of ideas through the communication channels of the enlightenment. Guibert, although French and a potential enemy, was on good terms with Frederick II of Prussia (1712–1786) (→ Media Link #ah) and discussed the Prussian military system with him. Additionally, alliances and personal ties also facilitated the exchange of ideas, such the visit of the British Prince Frederick Augustus, Duke of York and Albany (1763–1827) (→ Media Link #ai) to Prussia to watch military manoeuvres in the 1780s, and his eventual marriage (→ Media Link #aj) to Princess Frederica Charlotte of Prussia (1767–1820) (→ Media Link #ak).<sup>6</sup>

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## The Introduction of Conscription

The discussion of a new military culture during the 1770s and 1780s was given the opportunity to be put into practice during the French Revolution (→ Media Link #al). When war broke out in 1792, the tenor of French discourse about the war was different from previous conflicts. As the Revolution became threatened by the advancing Austrian and Prussian armies, and with discontent and rebellion across France, the Revolutionary government began mobilising France for war on a much larger scale than ever before. This resulted in the *levée en masse* (→ Media Link #am), which set the basic principle for conscription for the future: all the population of a polity was at the command of the state during wartime.<sup>7</sup>

▲8

However, it was some time until this mobilisation was transformed into a formal system of conscription. In part, this was due to the dissonance between the rhetoric of the revolutionary government and the reality of its application: the *levée en masse* expected everyone to be willing and enthusiastic about the war but in truth it took a good deal of coercion to get what was needed. This resulted in France amassing a huge army – some 750,000 men in 1794 – but it was a force

that had no means to maintain itself at that size.<sup>8</sup> It was not until the political situation in France became more settled under the Directory and with peace in continental Europe that a more permanent means to supply men for the army was discussed. The result was the 1798 *loi Jourdan* (Law of 19 Fructidor Year VI).

▲ 9

The *loi Jourdan* set the pattern for conscription in Europe over the next 100 years; each year young men (aged 20 to 25 in the case of the *loi Jourdan*) were put into groups, or classes as they were called, and a selection was made of those who were to serve in the army. During the ages set for conscription, every man would be liable for service each year. Service was for five years.<sup>9</sup> This means of supporting the army, and of the power of the state to decree how many men were to be raised for the military each year, underpinned the French Army for the next 17 years of war.<sup>10</sup>

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## The Transmission of Conscription Across Europe

Initially, not much notice was paid to France's latest military law. Most European experience of the new intensity of warfare came from the early Revolutionary period of 1793–1795. It was this period, and the *levée en masse*, that was analysed and discussed to try and understand France's military success. The significance of conscription and the overhaul of the machinery of government to military power were less appreciated, and were harder to identify within all the changes wrought by the revolutionary governments of 1793–1799. Moreover, the means for gathering information about the French military were much more restricted. The Revolution and subsequent war had disrupted trans-European communication. Information about France was often received second hand via propaganda that accompanied revolutionary armies or the rhetoric of the Revolutionary deputies, which reinforced the focus on mass, patriotic mobilisation. Alternatively, intelligence was gathered via observation from involvement in military campaigns, which necessarily did not focus on recruitment. An example of this discussion can be found in the volumes of the *Neues Militärisches Journal* (1797–1805) edited by Gerhard Johann David Waitz von Scharnhorst (1755–1813) (→ Media Link #an).<sup>11</sup>

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This meant that the discussion of conscription across Europe was uneven. The timing and form of the introduction of conscription was affected by the availability of information and its communication. As a result, conscription was transmitted to other places in Europe in four ways:

▲ 12

the imposition of French conscription in territories that were annexed to France;  
new states created by France as a result of conquests, in which conscription was introduced as part of the establishment of these states;  
existing states that became allies of France and which were required to furnish troops as part of their agreement, and so introduced conscription to meet their manpower quotas;  
and other powers in Europe that adopted conscription to match the scale and demands of warfare to fight against Franco-Allied armies.

In the first two cases, the introduction of conscription to the population of these areas was direct. Large parts of west and north-west Italy, some Swiss lands, the Rhineland, Holland, and the north German coasts all became part of the French Empire and so liable for conscription. In these territories (→ Media Link #ao), French bureaucratic structures and organisation (*départements*), and crucially administrators, were introduced to oversee conscription.<sup>12</sup>

▲ 13

As well as these annexed territories, Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821) (→ Media Link #ap) also created new states across Europe. In these French satellite kingdoms access to information about conscription and its introduction to new territories was often as direct as in the annexed territories. In the Kingdoms of Italy, Westphalia, the Grand Duchies of Berg and Poland conscription was established, usually as part of wider political and social reforms. In the case of Italy and Westphalia, Napoleon himself wrote the decrees on conscription. It was instituted in Italy in 1802 upon the formation of the Republic of Italy by Francesco Melzi d'Eril (1753–1816) (→ Media Link #aq), with Napoleon's approval,<sup>13</sup> and was enshrined in the constitution of Westphalia when the state was established in 1807.<sup>14</sup>

The allied states that adopted conscription were prompted by French military demands and usually followed the French model. In south-west Germany (Bavaria, Württemberg and Baden) conscription was also part of wider social and political reforms overseen by their own administration. Often, these were implemented by ministers working in a tradition of enlightened absolutism, such as Maximilian Josef Garnerin, Count of Montgelas (1759–1838) (→ Media Link #ar) in Bavaria.<sup>15</sup> Further impetus for change came with the welding of German states into the new Confederation of the Rhine in 1806,<sup>16</sup> which required 63,000 men from the Confederation and set military contingents for each state. This forced the states of the Confederation to examine, and in many cases establish, French conscription to meet their treaty obligations.

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For the other larger powers in Europe – Spain, Britain, Austria, Prussia, and Russia – the process of examining and changing recruitment into the army was more complicated. In the case of Austria, and Russia, they largely continued as they had done and did not drastically alter recruitment into the regular army, although they expanded military participation by establishing and enlarging militias.<sup>17</sup> Britain, although relatively safe from invasion due to the power of the Royal Navy, introduced varying levels of compulsion for part-time auxiliary forces to be called out if an invasion occurred, culminating in the Local Militia Act (1808), which balloted men for service.<sup>18</sup> In those states that were much more directly threatened by the French there was more pressure to reform, yet this often had to be carried out under difficult circumstances such as physical occupation by Franco-Allied armies or treaty restrictions. As such, the development of reception and discussion of ideas about conscription were profoundly shaped by local political culture and events. In Spain, the introduction of universal military service was codified in 1810 but the administration of the state had already collapsed as a result of French occupation, and so implementation of the ordinance of 1810 was uneven.<sup>19</sup> Prussia's army was restricted by treaty, which forced the army to adopt methods to train men and then hold them in reserve, thus building up the potential size of the army. At the same time, internal debates within the army and government focused on the balance between arming the population and developing a professional army for any future war. The full introduction of conscription had to wait until 1813 and the declaration of war against France, and this was undertaken in a very short timescale that precluded a full resolution of the issue as the need to mobilise men into the armed forces was the paramount concern.<sup>20</sup>

▲ 16

## Conscription After the Napoleonic Wars

The Napoleonic Wars introduced conscription across most of Europe in one form or another. The Treaty of Paris in 1815 returned peace to Europe and instigated the Concert of Europe, and meant that states that had introduced conscription now had to decide if they should continue using it. Mostly these were internal debates, which echoed national political issues, such as France's abolition of conscription as part of the restoration of the Bourbons, or military concerns such as the loyalty of conscription-based armies when called upon to suppress rebellions.<sup>21</sup> This was particularly the case in the first half of the nineteenth century when most of the military activity in Europe centred on armies intervening to restore order in both social and political events.<sup>22</sup>

▲ 17

Peace brought about a new and contentious aspect for discussion: the mathematics and logistics of mobilisation. In this European debate, states first began deciding on the number of men to be conscripted each year (if indeed they used conscription), their length of service, and then what to do with them after they had completed their time in the army. Comparisons were then made between states, and this dialogue was stimulated even further by the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871, when a longer serving army (the French) met a shorter-serving but larger army (the Prussians). Reflections on this war emphasized the need to calculate the size of armed forces available in a crisis, the number of men who could be called up, and the time it took to do this. In the years preceding the First World War this became the major pre-occupation, if not obsession, of general staffs across Europe.<sup>23</sup>

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The realities of total war between 1914 and 1918 caused governments to recognise that in a war of this kind there was more to mobilisation than simply the number of men in uniform. Governments needed to balance the number of men un-

der arms with the ability to feed and cloth them and supply them with weapons and ammunition. Consequently, states began transforming conscription into national service, whereby states took unprecedented command of the population they governed, a process exemplified by Soviet Russia and Great Britain during the Second World War. Like the initial establishment of conscription across European states, this was often an internal process prompted by military necessities.

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## The Conscription Debate

Within all the discussions about conscription across Europe, there have been several tensions that have stimulated debate. Firstly, there has been the paradox of wanting to arm and mobilise the population as an expression of patriotic virtue – a people's war – and the state imposing obligations on its subjects for military service to its own ends.<sup>24</sup> Secondly, conscription has occupied a central debate in the military's role in society, and society's role in the military, which ranges from a focus on a highly trained and long-serving professional army separated from society (to the point of rejecting conscription) to the army serving as a "school of the nation" where relatively short service in the armed forces served as a means of inculcating citizenship. The latter case explains the endurance of conscription during the Cold War and even into the early years of the 21st century (→ Media Link #as). Thirdly, as technological and economic mobilisation became significant factors in military success, compulsory military service had to be balanced against the economic impact of removing a proportion of the male population. As such, conscription has been as much a political, social, economic and ideological debate as it has been a military one.

▲ 20

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## Appendix

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Nicholson, *Medieval Warfare* 2004, pp. 40–44.
- <sup>2</sup> Anderson, *War* 1998, pp. 21–24; Tallett, *European Warfare* 2010.
- <sup>3</sup> Anderson, *War* 1998, pp. 91–92, 113–114, and 120; Wilson, *Social Militarisation* 2000.
- <sup>4</sup> Guibert, *Essai général* 1772, vol. 1, pp. 17–18, 22. "But imagine that a vigorous people will arise in Europe that combines the virtues of austerity and a national militia with a fixed plan for expansion, that it does not lose sight of this system, that, knowing how to make war at little expense and to live off its victories, it would not be forced to put down arms for reasons of economy. One would see that people subjugate its neighbours, and overthrow our weak constitutions, just as the fierce north wind bends the slender reeds. ... Between these peoples, whose quarrels are perpetuated by their weakness, one day there might still be more decisive wars, which will shake up empires.", transl. by K.L.
- <sup>5</sup> Starkey, *War* 2003.
- <sup>6</sup> Stephens / Kiste, Art. "Duke of York" 2004.
- <sup>7</sup> Bell, *Total War* 2007; Forrest, *Conscripts and Deserters* 1989.
- <sup>8</sup> Griffith, *Art of War* 1998, pp. 80–82.
- <sup>9</sup> See [http://gallica.bnf.fr/Search?ArianeWireIndex=index&q=loi+jourdan&lang=EN&f\\_century=18&p=1&f\\_creator=Jourdan%2C+Jean+Baptiste+%281762-1833%29](http://gallica.bnf.fr/Search?ArianeWireIndex=index&q=loi+jourdan&lang=EN&f_century=18&p=1&f_creator=Jourdan%2C+Jean+Baptiste+%281762-1833%29) for the reports that led to the law, and [http://www.napoleon.org/fr/salle\\_lecture/articles/files/conscription\\_le\\_Premier\\_Empire1.asp](http://www.napoleon.org/fr/salle_lecture/articles/files/conscription_le_Premier_Empire1.asp) [07/06/2011].
- <sup>10</sup> Woloch, *Conscription* 1986.
- <sup>11</sup> See <http://www.ub.uni-bielefeld.de/diglib/aufkl/neumiljour/neumiljour.htm> [12/01/2012] for articles; White, *Enlightened Soldier* 1989.
- <sup>12</sup> Broers, *Europe* 1996.
- <sup>13</sup> Grab, *Conscription* 2009.
- <sup>14</sup> Pavković, *Recruitment* 2009.
- <sup>15</sup> Blackburn, *Germany* 2003, pp. 58–59.
- <sup>16</sup> The French text of the treaty is available on [http://www.napoleon.org/fr/salle\\_lecture/articles/files/traite\\_confederationrhin\\_12juillet1806.asp](http://www.napoleon.org/fr/salle_lecture/articles/files/traite_confederationrhin_12juillet1806.asp) [07/06/2011].

17. ^ Rothenberg, Great Adversary 2007; Mikaberidze, Conscription 2009.
18. ^ Cookson, British Armed Nation 1997.
19. ^ Esdaile, Conscription 2009.
20. ^ Walter, Conscription 2009.
21. ^ Hippler, Conscription 2006.
22. ^ Showalter, Europe's Way 2002.
23. ^ Bond, War 1983.
24. ^ Broers, "Total War" 2008.

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## Indices

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- Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (<http://www.ieg-ego.eu/en/threads/alliances-and-wars/war-as-an-agent-of-transfer/frederick-c-schneid-the-french-revolutionary-and-napoleonic-wars>)

### Link #ac

- Charles XI of Sweden (1655–1697) VIAF [ⓧ](http://viaf.org/viaf/2617864) [ⓧ](http://viaf.org/viaf/2617864) (<http://viaf.org/viaf/2617864>) DNB [ⓧ](http://d-nb.info/gnd/119160978) (<http://d-nb.info/gnd/119160978>) ADB/NDB [ⓧ](http://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd119160978.html) (<http://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd119160978.html>)

### Link #ad

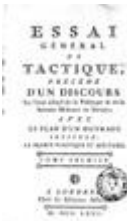


- <http://www.ieg-ego.eu/de/mediainfo/soldiers-of-the-royal-swedish-artillery?mediainfo=1&amp;width=900&amp;height=500>  
Soldiers of the Royal Swedish Artillery

### Link #ae

- Jacques-Antoine-Hippolyte, Comte de Guibert (1743–1790) VIAF [ⓧ](http://viaf.org/viaf/73854370) [ⓧ](http://viaf.org/viaf/73854370) (<http://viaf.org/viaf/73854370>) DNB [ⓧ](http://d-nb.info/gnd/118958887) (<http://d-nb.info/gnd/118958887>)

### Link #af



- <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5408326q/f6>  
Essai générale de tactique, 1772, BnF Gallica [ⓧ](http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5408326q/f6)

### Link #ah

- Frederick II of Prussia (1712–1786) VIAF [ⓧ](http://viaf.org/viaf/12303200) [ⓧ](http://viaf.org/viaf/12303200) (<http://viaf.org/viaf/12303200>) DNB [ⓧ](http://d-nb.info/gnd/118535749) (<http://d-nb.info/gnd/118535749>) ADB/NDB [ⓧ](http://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd118535749.html) (<http://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd118535749.html>)

### Link #ai

- Frederick Augustus, Duke of York and Albany (1763–1827) VIAF [ⓧ](http://viaf.org/viaf/56599724) [ⓧ](http://viaf.org/viaf/56599724) (<http://viaf.org/viaf/56599724>) DNB [ⓧ](http://d-nb.info/gnd/101490119) (<http://d-nb.info/gnd/101490119>) ADB/NDB [ⓧ](http://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd101490119.html) (<http://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd101490119.html>)

### Link #aj



- Dynastic Marriage (<http://www.ieg-ego.eu/en/threads/european-networks/dynastic-networks/heinz-duchhardt-the-dynastic-marriage>)

#### Link #ak

- Frederica Charlotte of Prussia (1767–1820) VIAF   (<http://viaf.org/viaf/42271821>) DNB  (<http://d-nb.info/gnd/104193433>)





#### Link #al

- Französische Revolution als Medienereignis (<http://www.ieg-ego.eu/de/threads/europaeische-medien/europaeische-medienereignisse/rolf-reichardt-die-franzoesische-revolution-als-europaeisches-medienereignis-1789-1799>)

#### Link #am

- Levée en Masse (<http://www.ieg-ego.eu/en/threads/alliances-and-wars/war-as-an-agent-of-transfer/conscription/ambrogio-a-caiani-levee-en-masse>)

#### Link #an

- Gerhard Johann David Waitz von Scharnhorst (1755–1813) VIAF   (<http://viaf.org/viaf/59077626>) DNB  (<http://d-nb.info/gnd/118606557>) ADB/NDB  (<http://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd118606557.html>)






- ([http://www.ieg-ego.eu/en/mediainfo/copy\\_of\\_gerhard-johann-david-von-scharnhorst-175520131813?mediainfo=1&width=900&height=500](http://www.ieg-ego.eu/en/mediainfo/copy_of_gerhard-johann-david-von-scharnhorst-175520131813?mediainfo=1&width=900&height=500))  
Gerhard Johann David von Scharnhorst (1755–1813)

#### Link #ao



- (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Dep-fr.svg>)  
Administrative Divisions of the First French Empire, 1812, Wikimedia Commons 

#### Link #ap

- Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821) VIAF   (<http://viaf.org/viaf/106964661>) DNB  (<http://d-nb.info/gnd/118586408>) ADB/NDB  (<http://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd118586408.html>)



- (<http://www.ieg-ego.eu/en/mediainfo/test-napoleon?mediainfo=1&width=900&height=500>)  
Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821)

#### Link #aq

- Francesco Melzi d'Eril (1753–1816) VIAF   (<http://viaf.org/viaf/37132984>) DNB  (<http://d-nb.info/gnd/123159253>)

#### Link #ar

- Maximilian Josef Garnerin, Count of Montgelas (1759–1838) VIAF   (<http://viaf.org/viaf/74650358>) DNB  (<http://d-nb.info/gnd/118838113>) ADB/NDB  (<http://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd118838113.html>)

#### Link #as



- (<http://www.ieg-ego.eu/en/mediainfo/conscription-map-of-the-world-2009?mediainfo=1&width=900&height=500>)  
Conscription map of the world 2011



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