Mobilizing military labor in the age of total war

Ottoman conscription before and during the Great War

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As warfare became more industrialized and total from the mid-nineteenth century onward, conscript labor became increasingly necessary to meet the manpower needs of modern mass armies. As a multifront and prolonged war of attrition, the Great War represents the apogee of this process. Military employment in the form of obligatory service, required of every male citizen as a patriotic duty, also defined a new interaction (both inclusive and exclusive) between the state and society, providing the centralizing state with a new mechanism of control at the local level. As a result, conscription was on the agenda not only of nation-states, but also of multiethnic empires, including the Ottoman Empire. This chapter deals with the Ottoman experience of conscription. After discussing Ottoman conscription from its beginnings in the nineteenth century, it focuses on its application during the Great War. Rather than presenting a thorough description of Ottoman conscription, the chapter explores its major characteristics and peculiarities. While basic categories of military labor were similar, the practice unfolded in different ways in different settings. Therefore, emphasizing “the Ottoman difference” is as important as underlining the similarities with other cases. Besides providing a critical analysis of Ottoman conscription, this chapter also aims to shed light on the Ottoman experience in order to bring it into a comparative perspective within the global history of military recruitment.

The evolution of Ottoman conscription

The French Revolution’s levée en masse was enacted in 1793 to confront the threat of a multifront war with foreign powers and of rebellions at home by summoning all able-bodied men to defend the “nation”. The levy was regarded as an action that would put into practice Rousseau’s prescription in the social contract that “every citizen should be a soldier by duty, not
by trade”.1 Whereas the French revolutionary mass levy was an *ad hoc* measure, conscription acquired a systematic form in the age of Napoleon.2 But it was the mid-nineteenth-century Prussian model that gave the system a more established obligatory character and formed a military structure drafting large numbers of men in an efficient way.3 Conscription not only increased the efficiency of armies in the age of industrialized warfare, but also, and perhaps more importantly, formed new relations between state and society. It signalled an intrusion of the state into people’s lives and created an area of contention between the state and society. Conscription can also be depicted as a battleground between “individual and local communities on the one hand and a distant impersonal state on the other”.4 Compulsory military service in nineteenth-century Europe was envisioned as a way of creating a new form of loyalty to the state, as a form of nationalist socialization, and as a new system of drill and training to ensure military efficiency.5

European models, the Prussian one in particular, inspired and influenced the Ottoman conscription system, but a more direct “role model” in this respect was Mehmed Ali Pasha’s (r. 1805-1848) modernized Egyptian army.6 His well-trained army of conscripted Egyptian peasants prevailed over Mahmud II’s (r. 1808-1839) Ottoman army in Syria in 1831-1833, when Mehmed Ali was still nominally an Ottoman governor and Egypt a province of the Ottoman Empire. However, while the European influence was significant, the evolution of Ottoman conscription was determined to a considerable extent by its own internal dynamics, culture, politics, and challenges.

When the Ottoman state embarked upon a process of military reform in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to establish a centralized modern army integrated with the population, it increasingly became aware of the potential of obligatory military service as the main recruitment mechanism to realize its goals.7 Conscription would not only serve as an efficient way of meeting manpower needs of the newly formed standing

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2 Woloch, “Napoleonic Conscription”.
3 On the reorganization of the conscription system in Prussia especially after the defeat of the Prussian army at Jena in 1806, see Hippler, *Citizens, Soldiers and National Armies*, pp. 163-189.
5 Mjøset and Van Holde, “Killing for the State, Dying for the Nation”, pp. 9, 51.
6 Zürcher, “The Ottoman Conscription System in Theory and Practice”, p. 81. On the Egyptian conscription system during the time of Mehmed Ali Pasha, see Fahmy, *All the Pasha’s Men*.
7 On the background and beginning of this reform process, see Aksan, *Ottoman Wars, 1700-1870*. See also Erdem, “Recruitment for the ‘Victorious Soldiers of Muhammad’ in the Arab Provinces”; Çadirca, *Tanzimat Sürecinde Türkiye*.
army, but it would also contribute to a more general reform attempt of the Ottoman state, which involved a move toward centralization and better permeation of state power into provinces and local populations. In this sense, the willingness on the part of the Ottoman state to introduce conscription not only stemmed from the necessities of the changing nature of warfare, which compulsory military service served better than previous forms of recruitment, but it was also closely related to the state’s changing political-ideological preferences. Conscription was attractive because a well-established conscription mechanism would give the political center more control at the local level and it would provide more effective power over local magnates who had accumulated considerable autonomy in the eighteenth century. Therefore, it is not surprising that one of the earlier steps taken towards creating a modern centralized conscript army in the Ottoman Empire was the formation of the reserve corps (redif) in 1834 as a permanent armed force stationed in the provinces. In establishing this, Mahmud II acted with a dual objective. This would not only be a reserve force for the army to be activated for external uses during wartime, but it would also contribute to the imposition of central authority over Anatolia, particularly over the rebellious tribes and nomadic groups.

Conscription was also one of the main agendas of the Tanzimat (Reorganization) edict of 1839, which ushered in major administrative reforms

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8. This change occurred both in the sense of “hardware” (weapon technology, infrastructure, etc.) and in that of “software” (military drill, tactics, strategies, etc.).

9. For a concise analysis of this process, see Khoury, “The Ottoman Centre versus Provincial Power-Holders”.

10. The redif units initially recruited men from local populations on a voluntary basis, and then, after 1844, by the drawing of lots. The redif soldiers can be seen as “part-time soldiers”. They were required to gather for training twice a year, and they were called up during wartime. At other times, they continued their civilian lives. The main reason for this method was the scarcity of labor force in agriculture. Compared to conscription, the redif system allowed, during peacetime, the manpower that was employed in agriculture to be left in place. On the redif system, see Çadırcı, Tanzimat Sürecinde Türkiye, pp. 27-63. The Ottoman reserve corps system became dysfunctional over time and was abolished in 1913; the corps were replaced by regular army units.

11. Aksan, “Ottoman Recruitment in the Late Eighteenth Century”, p. 33. In fact, at a more general level, the main motive for the entire process of Ottoman military reform was to control endemic violence both internal and external. Similar to Charles Tilly’s view, Aksan has linked militarization and the articulation of the modern state: “control of internal violence and defence of shrinking borders drove mobilization and military fiscalism in the late eighteenth century, and propelled the emergence of Ottoman mid-nineteenth-century absolutism” (ibid., 22). See also Tilly, Coercion, Capital and European States. For a similar discussion of the abolition of the janissaries and the coming of a modern standing army based on conscription in the era of Mahmud II, see Yıldız, Neferin Adı Yok.
aimed at creating a centralized modern bureaucracy, an efficient modern fiscal system, and a modern powerful army. As of this date, conscription was always referred to in the official discourse not only as one of the major foundation blocks of the military reform, but also as a new tool that would be useful in creating an “Ottoman citizenry” out of a multireligious and multiethnic imperial population in the age of nationalism.12

However, the implementation of conscription in the Ottoman Empire was not a smooth process. Although a commitment to conscription emerged in the early 1830s, Mahmud II's modern standing army continued to be a professional army for a while; it recruited men as “volunteers” to be employed as paid soldiers. The first comprehensive legislation concerning conscription was issued only in 1846.13 What pushed Ottoman conscription to be a more established and standardized system were the large-scale modern wars in the second half of the nineteenth century, such as the Crimean War (1853-1856) and the Russo-Ottoman War (1877-1878). These multifront and industrialized wars demanded much larger mass armies. The coming of the age of “total war” with the Balkan Wars (1912-1913) and the Great War required a more efficient system of conscription, which could provide a large-scale and permanent mobilization.14 However, Ottoman conscription, while becoming more established, continued to be incomplete as well as discriminatory to a considerable extent.

The incompleteness had mostly to do with infrastructural problems. The level of the Ottoman state’s “infrastructural development” was far from being satisfactory in the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries.15 For example, the system of universal conscription required a reliable census to determine where the potential manpower could be found. Such a demographic mechanism then necessitated a sizeable growth in the state bureaucracy, which would include an efficient recruitment organization, economic power to supply provisions to conscripts, and security

12 On the changing nature of the Ottoman recruitment system in the Tanzimat period, see Heinzelmann, Cihaddan Vatan Savunmasına; Şimşek, “Ottoman Military Recruitment and the Recruit”.
13 Various major legal revisions were made in 1869, 1886, 1909, and 1914. On the documentation of the Ottoman laws concerning conscription, see Ayın, Osmanlı Devleti’nde Tanzimat’tan Sonra Askere Alma Kanunları.
14 For a concise account of these wars, see Uyar and Erickson, A Military History of the Ottomans.
15 I am using “infrastructural development” in the sense Michael Mann has used it. See Mann, The Sources of Social Power, II, The Rise of Classes and Nation-States. See also Weiss, “Infrastructural Power, Economic Transformation, and Globalization”.

forces and efficient sanctions to combat draft-evading and desertion. Nineteenth-century Ottoman modernization achieved a certain amount of progress in these respects, but never to the extent that would bring about remarkable success. There were severe geographical differences. The system almost never worked in the economically underdeveloped regions where the infrastructural power of the state was quite weak, such as the tribal Kurdish-populated parts of southeastern Anatolia and certain regions of the Ottoman Middle East, where a nomadic lifestyle was still dominant.

Where and when unable to implement conscription on the individual basis, the Ottoman state resorted to earlier practices in such regions, such as getting into contact with communal or tribal leaders and encouraging them to join the Ottoman armed forces by forming “volunteer” units from their local populations under their own leadership in return for certain political and material gains from the state. One of the best examples of this practice was the Hamidiye Cavalry Regiments, which were established by Abdülhamid II (r. 1876-1909), but also continued in different forms through the Great War. This was an irregular militia composed of select Kurdish tribes. The basis of joining this militia was, at least in principle, voluntary. Besides its intended function as being an auxiliary force in the region acting on behalf of the Ottoman state, the Hamidiye was also a part of a larger sociopolitical project aimed at creating a special bond of unity between the center and the Kurds. It was meant to “tie the empire more firmly to its Muslim roots and provide a defense against Russia and the Armenians, both increasingly aggressive after 1878, and the Kurds could be used as a balance against the urban notables and the provincial governments”. On the other hand, some regions where the state not only lacked the capacity to control but also did not have “reliable” connections with local leaders, such as Yemen, were completely left out of the Ottoman system both formally and informally.

The Ottoman conscription system was discriminatory. The system had a marked religious character and always remained predominantly Muslim in practice. While the universality of conscription was accepted in principle, in practice the focus of the system was on the Muslim Ottomans. In fact, the Ottoman military reform can be described as “the re-construction of a Muslim army”. In this sense, Ottoman conscription served the re-

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17 Olson, The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism and the Sheikh Said Rebellion, p. 8. See also Van Bruinessen, Agha, Shaikh and State; Klein, “Power in the Periphery”.
Islamization of Ottoman identity rather than creating a secular Ottoman citizenry. This does not mean that there were no non-Muslim soldiers in the Ottoman armed forces. In certain specific positions in which there were not enough Muslims, such as medical officers, the Ottoman Armenians, Greeks, and Jews were welcome in the army, and held the ranks of lieutenant and captain. As for enlisted men too, in some cases, such as the navy, non-Muslims were enlisted in the Ottoman armed forces as early as the 1830s. But such examples were usually related to the specific needs of the Ottoman military at certain times, and they never constituted a standardized common practice integrated into the system. However, non-Muslims were not totally excluded; on the contrary, they were always kept within the system, but in a discriminatory way. The Reform Decree (İslahat Fermanı) of 1856 extended the obligation of military service to non-Muslims but allowed for exemption upon payment of a fee. Buying exemptions in this way almost became the norm for non-Muslims, and the exemption fee in practice replaced the cizye, the tax that Islamic law required of non-Muslims. The extent of the exemption fee was restricted in the legislations of 1909 and 1914, but it never disappeared entirely.

While the application of the exemption fee was more standardized for non-Muslims, the method of buying exemption was not closed to Muslims, either. But it was not just that this option offered to Muslims was often revised with new regulations; in addition, the payment that they had to make was much higher (it was 50 gold liras after 1870), and only quite rich Muslims could afford it. So, conscription was unequal in economic terms, too. The burden of actually serving in the army almost always fell on the poor in general and peasants in particular.

On the other hand, the universality of military service did not mean that all able-bodied Muslim males of military age would be obliged to serve in the military, either. For various pragmatic reasons, there was an extensive system of exemptions for Muslim Ottomans as well. Until more restrictive regulations were put into effect in 1909 and 1914 as well as during the Great War, many categories of Muslims in the empire had the right to be exempt

20 Heinzelmann, Cihaddan Vatan Savunmasına, p. 206.
21 On the history of the conscription of Ottoman non-Muslims, see Gülsoy, Osmanlı Gayrimüslimlerinin Askerlik Serüveni.
22 Heinzelmann, Cihaddan Vatan Savunmasına, p. 250.
23 Zürcher, “The Ottoman Conscription System in Theory and Practice”, p. 87. There was also the option of personal replacement to avoid service, but this method disappeared relatively early.
from military service. These included religious functionaries, medrese students, Muslim residents of Istanbul and the Hijaz province (the holy cities of Mecca and Medina), high- and even middle-ranking bureaucrats, much needed skilled laborers, and males who were the only breadwinners of their families.

Was there an ethnic dimension in Ottoman conscription in the sense of being based on a certain ethnicity and excluding others? There were certain “ethnic” preferences, but it is hard to say that the Ottoman conscription system had a clear ethnic dimension from the beginning. Discrimination was based on religion rather than ethnicity. But it should be noted that there was an ethnic hierarchy in Ottoman conscription. The Anatolian Muslim population (Turks, Kurds, Circassians, and Laz) in general and the Turkish element in particular constituted the backbone of the Ottoman military. The “dominance” of the Turkish element was evident as early as during the military reforms Mahmud II. This element was preferred as the most trusted group in attempts to make the state more centralized and to subject, for example, “peripheral” Arab provinces to the centralization process. The ethnic core of the new Ottoman army established by Mahmud II was “made up of ‘Turks’, the Türk uşağı (‘Turkish lads’) which Ottoman commanders increasingly saw as the most reliable, most malleable cannon fodder”. The Ottoman state always tried to integrate its Arab population into its military, but a certain amount of ambivalence towards and distrust of the Arabs also always existed, reaching unprecedented levels during the Great War.

Was the Ottoman conscription system popular? It is evident that the system had to cope with occasional major resistance coming from various segments of society. First of all, it should be noted that, while the system was discriminatory against non-Muslims, there was no particular enthusiasm on the part of the latter about serving in the Ottoman armed forces, either. It is true that since inclusion into obligatory military service would provide certain political gains and an increase in status, leading to full citizenship, various political or religious representatives of the Ottoman Greeks, Armenians, and Jews often expressed official approval of the extension of obligatory military service to their communities. For example, an influen-

24 The Turkish element here refers to a sociological category, rather than an ethnic one. This category had certain common characteristics, the most determining of which were being Muslim (mostly Sunni Muslim), speaking Turkish, and preferably being settled (not being nomadic).
26 On the relations between the Young Turk regime and the Arabs, see Kayalı, Arabs and Young Turks.
tial Armenian political figure, Krikor Zohrab, a deputy from Istanbul in the Ottoman parliament after 1908, considered the equal military service obligation as an important step towards the creation of a solid Ottoman citizenship and described it as “a matter of brotherhood”.

Similarly, the Grand Rabbi of the Jewish community, Haim Nahum Efendi, who had had political ties with the Young Turks since the preparation for the 1908 Revolution, openly supported the idea of obligatory military service for Ottoman Jews and worked to convince his congregation in this respect. But this remained merely official rhetoric to a great extent. Ordinary members and potential draftees of these communities usually showed reluctance about conscription. Draft-evasion and desertion of Ottoman non-Muslims were common problems.

Nor was resistance to conscription a problem unique to the non-Muslim Ottomans. Similar forms of resistance also occasionally appeared on the part of the Muslim Ottomans. Draft-evasion and desertion by Muslims increased especially after the 1909 regulations which restricted the exemption status of many Muslim groups. For example, the decision to draft those medrese students who failed to pass their exams in time made many people, not just the medrese students, quite unhappy, because there had been many fake medrese students (among them even illiterate peasants), who had abused this method of avoiding military service. Moreover, the move to draft men from the regions which had previously remained outside the recruitment system also caused the emergence of acts of resistance in those regions. For example, after the 1909 regulations, the Ottoman state had to deal with occasional rebellions against the draft, which came from various sections of the Laz and the Kurds in Anatolia, and the Arabs in Arab provinces.

Similar acts of resistance, mostly in the forms of draft-evasion and desertion, sometimes also appeared on the part of the Anatolian Muslim-Turkish population, the backbone of the Ottoman army. As I will show, such forms of resistance constituted a serious problem during the Great War.

28 Shaw, The Ottoman Empire in World War I, I, Prelude to War, pp. 153-154.
29 Gülsoy, Osmanlı Gayrimüslimlerinin Askerlik Serüveni, pp. 145-146.
30 On the issue of conscripting Ottoman medrese students, see Bein, “Politics, Military Conscription, and Religious Education in the Late Ottoman Empire”.
31 Shaw, Ottoman Empire in World War I, I, pp. 166-170.
Reforms after the Balkan defeat

The humiliating defeat of the Ottoman army in the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913 led the Ottoman authorities to conclude that it was urgently necessary to bring in “a new spirit and enthusiasm” to the army, for which an overall reform and reorganization in the army was needed. This situation was very much similar to the discussions for a major overhaul in the in Russian military after the defeat in the Russo-Japanese War of 1905. Reforming the army was a primary agenda of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) government which had established single-party rule in 1913. After less than a month, the Regulation for the General Organization of the Military was issued on 14 February 1913 to execute organizational reforms concerning the army. But a major overhaul began to take place when Enver Pasha, the leading CUP leader in military affairs, became the minister of war on 3 January 1914. This process also included a foreign contribution. After the Ottoman state signed an agreement with the German military on 14 December 1913, the German Military Mission, under the leadership of Otto Liman von Sanders, came to the Ottoman Empire to help reform the armed forces. The German Military Mission provided help with the reorganization of the army, and also offered useful advice to revise the conscription system and the mobilization plans in line with the Prussian-German experience. The German contribution to Ottoman mobilization continued after the secret treaty of alliance signed on 2 August 1914, and also after the Ottoman entry into the war on the German side on 2 November 1914.

The main aim of the process was to create a highly efficient army structure, which could easily and rapidly be utilized in a wartime situation when needed. The new structuring of the army closely and significantly

33 Sanborn, Drafting the Russian Nation, pp. 25-29.
34 For the complete text of the regulation, see Osmanlı Ordu Teşkilati, pp. 147-161.
35 Enver remained at this post through the end of the war, until 14 October 1918. In this capacity during this period he also served as the acting commanding general of the Ottoman army (the titular commander-in-chief was the sultan) and as the chief of the General Staff.
36 Similar agreements were also made with other European countries in the same period. The Ottomans invited a British mission to help reform the navy and a French mission to improve the gendarmerie. But the British and French missions left the country when the Great War began. See Birinci Dünya Harbinde Türk Harbi, I, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu’nun Siyasi ve Askeri Hazırlıkları ve Harbe Girişi, pp. 179-180.
37 For a postwar account of the German Military Mission by a German officer-historian who also served in the mission, see Mühlman, İmparatorluğu’nun Sonu, 1914, pp. 13-55.
38 Strachan, The First World War, p. 104.
depended on the recruitment system for its vitality, and required a large number of additional troops within a short period of time. In other words, in order for the new army structure to be efficient, there needed to be an efficient conscription system.

The new structure required about 500,000 troops in total, while the number of the available troops in the army dropped as low as around 200,000 in 1913 due to discharges after the Balkan Wars. According to calculations made in summer 1914, a total of 477,868 drafted men and 12,469 officers were needed to bring the army to full wartime capacity. To cope with the demands of this sudden increase, the existing conscription system, which had been characterized by many setbacks from the beginning and functioned unsatisfactorily during the Balkan Wars, needed to be revised and reformed. Moreover, a revision in the conscription system was needed also because the manpower pool of the empire was considerably reshaped after the Balkan Wars. In addition to about 340,000 casualties and subsequent loss of territories in the Balkans, the immigration of around 400,000 Muslim refugees from the lost territories into the empire also changed the demographic composition from which the military was to be drawn.

Under these circumstances, a new law for military service was issued on 12 May 1914. The main concern of Ottoman authorities was to have an efficient recruitment mechanism which would improve the conditions for an eventual mobilization. The new law aimed to tackle the problem of exemptions. The 1909 regulations had tried to make revisions in this respect, but they were not very successful in practice. The new law of 1914 aimed to minimize exemptions, allowing only for really necessary ones. The law also aimed to make the military service obligation more extensive in drafting more segments of society for active service, including the non-Muslim Ottomans. While a discourse of Ottoman equality accompanied this objective, the real aim was more pragmatic: acquiring the maximum number of draftees. In accordance with the aim of extending the obligation, there was also the intention to abolish, or at least restrict, the exemption fee.

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40 Erickson, *Ordered to Die*, p. 7.
41 Erickson estimates that the number of total Ottoman casualties during the Balkan Wars was about 340,000, of which 50,000 were killed in action, 75,000 died of disease, 100,000 were wounded, and 115,000 were prisoners of war. See Erickson, *Defeat in Detail*, p. 329.
43 For the text of the law, see *Düstür*, series II, vol. 6, pp. 662-704.
Mobilization for the Great War

The possibility of a general mobilization became reality only about three months after the announcement of the law, and it was at that point that the actual process of testing began for the above-mentioned objectives. The general mobilization was declared on 2 August 1914. The response to the call to arms was much better than it had been during the Balkan Wars. But it was not consistent geographically. It was better in western and central Anatolia, but not as good in eastern Anatolia and the Arab provinces. The units in Yemen and Hijaz (almost the entire Arabian peninsula) were never mobilized, and the XI, XII, and XIII Corps, which were stationed in eastern Anatolia, Mosul, and Baghdad respectively, never reach their intended effective strength due to the high amount of draft-evasion and desertion.  

After the declaration of mobilization, the eligible men aged from twenty to forty-five were called up for service. But these initial age requirements became insufficient to fill in the gaps in manpower in the armed forces as the war continued, and new arrangements were made in the following years. For example, the minimum age for the draft dropped to as low as eighteen on 29 April 1915. Then the maximum age for recruitment was increased to a high of fifty on 20 March 1916. Moreover, the duration of military service, which was two years in peacetime, was also extended in wartime until a special order was issued to determine when it would end. In practice this meant that enlisted men would have to serve until the end of the war.  

According to estimates from the Ottoman War Ministry and the General Staff at the beginning of the mobilization, the empire had the potential to mobilize about 2 million men for service within a single year. This was about 10 per cent of its general population, which was close to 23 million on the eve of the war. However, although the initial level of the Ottoman state's recruitment performance could be considered adequate, this estimate remained a distant possibility throughout the war. The number of troops

44 Birinci Dünya Harbi’nde Türk Harbi, I, p. 182.
48 The Ottoman Archives, Istanbul [henceforth, BOA], MV., 196/116, 24 February 1915.
49 BOA, DH.MB.HPS.M., 15/24, 8 July 1914.
50 Of these 23 million, around 17 million lived within the borders of present-day Turkey, more than 3 million in Syria and Palestine including Lebanon and Jordan, and about 2.5 million in present-day Iraq. Additionally, about 5.5 million lived in Yemen and Hijaz under Ottoman rule. See Pamuk, “The Ottoman Economy in World War I”, 112. On the Ottoman population in 1914, see also Karpat, Ottoman Population, 1830–1914, pp. 170-190.
in the Ottoman army was 726,692 around the time when mobilization was declared (it was around 295,000 in 1913), and it reached as many as 780,282 men by 25 September 1914.\footnote{Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri, III, part 6, p. 290; Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri Tarihi, X, Osmanlı Devri, Birinci Dünya Harbi, İdari Faaliyetler ve Lojistik, p. 102; Shaw, The Ottoman Empire in World War I, I, p. 148.} According to the official statistics, the total number of drafted men cumulatively increased to 1,478,176 by March 1915, and reached 1,943,720 by 14 July 1915. By March 1916 it increased to 2,493,000 and by March 1917 to 2,855,000.\footnote{Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri, X, pp. 164-165; Shaw, The Ottoman Empire in World War I, I, p. 148. See also the Turkish Military Archives, Ankara [henceforth, ATASE], BDH, Folder 62/File 309A/ Index 005.} If we add up the “volunteers” including the Kurdish and Bedouin cavalry volunteer units, the number of which is estimated to be around 80,000-100,000, the cumulative total number of men mobilized during the four years of the war would be around 3,000,000.\footnote{The estimates of the total number of recruited men in the Ottoman armed forces during the Great War vary in secondary sources. For example, Ahmed Emin Yalman claimed that 2,998,321 men were enrolled in the army during the four years of war. See Yalman, Turkey in the World War, p. 252. M. Larcher, who claims that he based his research on the official Ottoman data, gives a figure of 2,850,000 men mobilized during the war. See Larcher, La guerre turque dans la guerre mondiale, p. 602. The most recent estimated total number is given by Edward Erickson as 2,873,000, which he has reached by cross-checking the existing statistical data published in the secondary literature. Erickson also breaks up the total figure into armed service classes: 2,608,000 in the army, 250,000 in the gendarmerie, and 15,000 in the navy. See Erickson, Ordered to Die, p. 243.}

The Ottoman effort to mobilize men for war declined steadily as the war prolonged, and it suffered some serious internal problems and insufficiencies. First of all, there was the problem of lack of standardization among regions regarding recruitment. In practice, the conscription system did not work in the Ottoman Middle East. While it remained predominantly an Anatolian institution, it was not standard in Anatolia, either. Secondly, although at the beginning a short war was generally expected, the Ottoman state began to have difficulty in sustaining a large-scale and permanent mobilization as the war continued. And, thirdly, resistance to conscription in the forms of draft-evasion and desertion became a major problem especially in the second half of the war. As the war necessitated more and more military labor, the actual war conditions recurrently required changes in the conscription system. Where the formal conscription system did not function sufficiently, the state still tried to acquire necessary manpower by amalgamating old methods of recruitment with modern conscription methods and creating alternative recruitment categories. Volunteers constituted such an alternative category, which not only helped the state mobilize
those segments of its population that could not be conscripted formally due to infrastructural problems, but also provided the armed forces with additional manpower that could be used in “special” military missions.54

Volunteers in the Ottoman army: irregular conscripts or hired labor?

The use of volunteers in the Ottoman armed forces, a practice that had already been applied in the previous wars, became more systematic during the Great War, with new legal and practical regulations. There were various categories of volunteers, each of which was supposed to serve a distinct purpose. One of the major categories was tribal volunteers. Where the formal conscription system did not work, the state tried to apply the method of recruiting people as “volunteers”. This practice mainly targeted the Kurdish tribal population in Anatolia. Kurdish tribal volunteers were usually employed as separate cavalry forces in the Great War, which served as auxiliary units on the fronts that were near their native regions, such as in the Caucasus and Mesopotamia. Volunteerism in this case was not individual-based: the state entered into dialogue with tribal or community leaders, such as local chieftains, sheikhs, or aghas. The latter decided on behalf of their communities. This decision was itself not entirely voluntary either, because it had to be made under political pressure from the central state, though it promised political and material gains in return. Obeying the state’s call for volunteers politically meant that a particular tribal community expressed compromise with the central authority. In return for this obedience, the central authority recognized that tribe as a peripheral power-holder and allowed it a certain amount of autonomy through which that tribe could regenerate its power in its local setting. On the other hand, the volunteers who were recruited this way did not actually act according to their own will, although they were called “volunteers”.

Muslim immigrants and refugees (muhacirs) constituted another major category of volunteers, who were employed both for guerrilla operations and in the regular units. The Muslims who were forced to emigrate because of invasion or political oppression in various territories of Russia and the Balkans had reshaped the demographic composition of the Ottoman Empire since the late nineteenth century. Their numbers particularly increased

54 For a detailed social history of the Ottoman mobilization during the Great War, see Beşikçi, Between Voluntarism and Resistance.
with the influx of hundreds of thousands of Muslims from the former Ottoman territories in the Balkans into Anatolia after the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913. As far as the obligation for military service was concerned, the *muhacirs* in the Ottoman lands had to fulfill the requirements of the Ottoman conscription system to acquire full Ottoman citizenship status. However, the Ottoman state tended to provide a degree of flexibility to these newcomers in order to make their process of settlement and adaptation easier. This flexibility also covered those *muhacirs* who had previously been the subjects of the Ottoman state, who immigrated into Anatolia from the ex-Ottoman territories in the Balkans. Article 135 of the Law for Military Service of 1914 determined that all past and future *muhacirs* would be subject to the military service procedure six years from the date they arrived in the empire. Consequently, during the Great War when almost all able-bodied males of the empire were already conscripted in the military, the male population of such *muhacirs* provided an attractive source of energetic volunteer fighters for the Ottoman armed forces. When the Ottoman state expected them to volunteer, they also tended to respond to this call positively for various reasons. Volunteering for the armed forces would confirm their rights to be granted land and status in the Ottoman territory and expedite their integration into Ottoman society. Volunteering would open up new channels for *muhacirs* to engage in dialogue with the Ottoman state, a dialogue which would further establish their legitimate existence in the Ottoman Empire and increase their status.

The Ottoman state's appeal to *muhacir* populations to mobilize volunteers was shaped by the specific conditions and objectives of military campaigns on a particular front. As far as the Caucasus front was concerned, for example, former Muslim residents of the Caucasus and the Laz people of the eastern Black Sea region were most preferred. Thus, the Ottomans tried to mobilize Circassian *muhacirs* who had settled in Anatolian provinces and in Syria during the previous decades. These *muhacirs* would be useful in two ways: first, they were familiar with the mountainous geographical conditions of the region and, secondly, “they had come into the empire because they been driven out of their homes by the Russians, so they were particularly interested in joining the Ottoman forces that were attempting to regain control of the lands that they had been forced to leave”. The sentiment of revenge was a major motivating factor in their mobilization.

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55 BOA, DH.EUM.EMN., 89/14, 29 July 1914.
The third major category of volunteers included individually recruited volunteers, who would be used in “irregular” warfare, such as in the armed bands of the Special Organization (Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa), a secret paramilitary intelligence organization founded by Enver Pasha soon before the war on the model of Balkan paramilitary groups (especially the Bulgarian IMRO). The Special Organization not only undertook a major role in carrying out propaganda activities to attain support from Muslim populations in India, Russia, Iran, and Egypt for the Ottoman holy war (cihad), but also engaged in guerrilla warfare on major fronts throughout the war. The Special Organization also carried out operations to intimidate the local non-Muslim Ottoman population in Anatolia, particularly the Armenians, on the pretext that the organization acted as a counterinsurgency force against disloyal elements of the Armenian population, some of whom, after evading the draft or deserting the army, formed their own armed bands and voluntarily joined the Russian army. But this mission of the Special Organization took the form of direct abuses of, attacks on, and massacres of civilian Armenians during their forced migration in 1915. Though no precise statistical data are available, the Special Organization is said to have raised as many as 30,000 fighters at its height, most of whom consisted of prisoner-volunteers. Convicted prisoners, who were ready to be used in any form of violent operation in return for their release and also certain material gain, constituted one of the main sources of such volunteers. Many prisoners from various jails across Anatolia applied to become volunteers to

57 Stoddard, “The Ottoman Government and the Arabs”. For more on the Special Organization, see also Cemil, Birinci Dünya Savaşında Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa; Sencer, Turkish Battle at Khaybar; Shaw, The Ottoman Empire in World War I, I, pp. 353-456.

58 Shaw, The Ottoman Empire in World War I, I, p. 354. On the Armenian volunteers in the Russian army, see Gorganian, “Armenian Participation in World War I on the Caucasian Front”. There are also examples showing that some Ottoman Jews and Greeks voluntarily joined the Entente powers. For an example of the case of Ottoman Jews volunteering for the French army, see BOA, HR.SYS., 2403/7, 20 September 1914. For two examples of Ottoman Greeks volunteering for the British and Greek armies, see BOA, DH.EUM.3.Şb., 5/19, 29 April 1915 and BOA, DH.EUM.3.Şb., 8/61, 13 September 1915.

59 Yalman, Turkey in the World War, p. 220; Akçam, “Ermeni Meselesi Hallolunmuştur”, 168-180. In contrast, Guenter Lewy has argued that the incomplete character of the available documents does not allow us to attribute all of the abuses against the Armenians to the Special Organization – although he has not denied the existence of convicted criminals in the armed bands and has confirmed the attacks of “irregulars” or “volunteers” against the Armenian deportees. Lewy has also written that Kurdish irregular and volunteer forces, as well as Circassian volunteers, played a considerable role in the massacres of the Armenian deportees. See Lewy, The Armenian Massacres in Ottoman Turkey, pp. 82-89, 221-228.

60 Shaw, The Ottoman Empire in World War I, I, 373; BOA, DH.ŞFR., 46/134, 1 November 1914.
fight in the armed bands (çetes) of the Special Organization when official announcements were made that prisoner-volunteers would be accepted for guerrilla fighting. These armed bands, which can also be regarded as militia units, were loosely connected to the Ottoman military’s chain of command (the commanders of some were provided by the army), and they acted autonomously in practice.

It can be argued that, when the demand for military labor was so high, authorities could consider it quite legitimate to acquire the locked-in manpower that could potentially contribute to the war effort. Theoretically, like other enlisted men, the volunteers were required to comply with the existing conscription regulations from the moment they joined the armed forces. This included their duration of service. No volunteers were supposed to leave service during the war unless there was a demobilization order, which in practice meant they had to serve until the end of the war. However, the available evidence implies that maintaining discipline among the volunteers, especially the tribal volunteer units which were usually used as separate units, sometimes became a serious problem. Desertions were particularly widespread among them, especially among the tribal volunteers on the Caucasus front.

On the other hand, while the law obliged them to act like conscripts in theory, there was also an aspect of commodification involved in this process. Many volunteers actually served as paid soldiers, because they received payment from the state in either an explicit or an implicit way. The volunteers who were employed in the Special Organization’s missions either received regular money payments from the discretionary fund of the Ottoman military budget or were promised material benefits in return for their service, which was indeed a motivation for many people (especially for prisoners) to become willing to join the Special Organization’s armed bands as voluntary fighters. At the very least, being a volunteer in such an armed band could secure a free subsistence throughout the war years, since the provisions of such armed bands (at least those on the Caucasus front) were legally decided to be provided by the local population in the form of a “donation” (iane). This situation gave the members of armed

61 BOA, DH.ŞFR., 46/134, 1 November 1914.
62 For example, it was reported that, after the battle of Köprüköy in November 1914, the number of Kurdish tribal volunteers in the Third Army, which was around 20,000 at the beginning, dramatically dwindled to around 3,000 because of desertions. See Aytar, Hamidiye Alaylarından Köy Koruculuğuna, pp. 140-141.
63 Cemil, Birinci Dünya Savaşı’nda Teşkilât-ı Mahsus, p. 118.
64 Ibid., pp. 85-86; BOA, DH.ŞFR., 61/88, 23 February 1916.
bands the *de facto* right to act as if they were war-tax collectors and put pressure on civilians for this purpose. They were also effectively entitled to seize “booty” during their raids in enemy territory, mostly in the form of livestock.\footnote{Cemil, *Birinci Dünya Savaşı’nda Teşkilât-ı Mahsusa*, pp. 48, 59.} Money payments and material rewards were also involved in the Ottoman state’s relationship with the tribal volunteer groups as a means of encouraging such groups to volunteer and of maintaining their loyalty to the state.\footnote{Askeri Tarih Belgeleri Dergisi, no. 117 (January 2004), Document no. 43, p. 124.}

Can the volunteers who were paid or received material benefits be regarded as a kind of professional soldier and be placed in the category of free labor? It is hard to say that they fit neatly into this category, because there was no contract between them and the military authorities. Moreover, payments were usually made on an *ad hoc* basis, on the initiative of army commanders or militia leaders, and one can hardly speak of a standard procedure in this respect. The situation was more complex in the case of tribal volunteers, since it was the tribal leader who conducted the negotiation with and personally received the payment from military authorities; ordinary members of tribal volunteer units had no say in this process and, although they might receive a share of their leaders’ payment, their case still remained close to the category of “unfree labor”. And, as mentioned above, the law wanted to oblige them to comply with the conscription regulations. But it is obvious that this compliance clause did not make them conscripts *per se*, and it is equally hard to fit them in the conscript labor category. Instead it was an amalgamation of both forms, which resulted in a pragmatic form that included aspects of both categories.

Here it is also interesting to note that, although their numbers were few (statistically negligible), the Ottoman army also employed professional foreign soldiers who served for money during the Great War. A well-known example is the Venezuelan officer Rafael de Nogales (1879-1936). After his attempts to join various European armies (French, Belgian) failed, he applied in 1915 to serve in the Ottoman army as an officer. He served on the Caucasus and Mesopotamia fronts, first as a captain and then major.\footnote{He published his memoirs in 1926, in which he gave significant details about daily life in the Ottoman army and presented his observations about social life in the localities where he served. See de Nogales, *Four Years beneath the Crescent*.}
Unskilled vs. skilled labor? The problem of exemptions

 Whereas the Ottoman conscription system had been characterized by a long list of exemptions, Ottoman authorities were determined in 1914 to restrict every “unnecessary” exemption. However, while this resolution was never abandoned during the war, it needed to be reshaped and revised under the actual conditions of mobilization and due to political preferences, financial necessities, and the need for technical-skilled labor in the economic and bureaucratic sectors. Therefore, as some exemptions were abolished, others remained in operation and sometimes new exemptions were introduced. The Ottoman Great War experience shows that, although military service was legally declared universal, there was still a general division of labor regulating who would be employed in a military and who in a nonmilitary function, even when meeting the need of military labor was the utmost priority. Those whose civilian skills were considered more useful and important than the service they would provide on the battlefield were granted exemptions and allowed to remain in their post during the war. Generally speaking, the obligation of military service actually fell on the shoulders of those who were providers of unskilled manual labor. A similar division also existed between the rich and the poor, as those whose financial contribution was regarded as more significant than their physical contribution could also be offered an alternative.

 While some forms of military labor (especially in the case of professional armies) are based on making a payment to the military laborer, the system of conscription may sometimes require the opposite: the potential military laborer himself is needed to make a payment to the state to avoid service. The issue of the exemption fee, which stood at the junction of the state’s political preferences and financial needs, constituted a major portion of the exemptions in the Ottoman conscription system. But the exemption fee always remained in effect in practice, and the state in actuality did not want to press too hard to abolish it. The Ottoman state never dared to risk this extra source of financial revenue, which served to alleviate its financial burdens. Moreover, its continuation was not regarded as so disturbing by those who paid it, namely the middle and upper strata of Ottoman non-Muslims, who did not have a long history of military service in the Ottoman Empire and were never particularly enthusiastic about revisions after 1909 aiming to include them into the active service obligation.68

68 On this reluctance of Ottoman non-Muslims after the 1909 Regulations, see Gülsoy, Osmanlı Gayrimüslimlerinin Askerlik Serüveni, pp. 141-148. On the reluctance of Ottoman non-Muslim
This general approach of the Ottoman state to the exemption fee can be said to have continued during the Great War, while some significant modifications were made. Parallel to the official discourse from 1909, it was announced in 1914 that the abolition of the exemption fee was among the main targets of the new legal and organizational reforms regarding the conscription system. But the points which this discourse needed to emphasize to justify itself acquired different dimensions after the declaration of mobilization. While the language of Ottomanism which stressed the abolition of the exemption fee as a way of equating Muslim and non-Muslim Ottomans through including them into the same military service obligation continued to some extent, the discourse now also needed to address certain sources of discontent in the public sphere concerning the unequal treatment of different economic classes in society. The “National Economy” policies of the CUP government offered many economic opportunities and privileges to the Muslim-Turkish elements of the empire and, apparently, a considerable number of well-off Muslims began to use the exemption fee option by the late 1914. This seems to have led to rumors that the conscription system favored the rich and that the burden of defending the fatherland was imposed on the shoulders of the poor. Therefore, in propagating their intention to abolish the exemption fee, Ottoman authorities needed to emphasize that the rich were obligated to serve in the armed forces as much as the poor: “Now the most genteel and the richest would defend their motherland in the same way as the poor peasant little Mehmeds [...] What an honor!”

But neither the new law on military service nor the mobilization regulations could abolish the exemption fee entirely. And the class dimension of the conscription system, namely the inequality in military service caused by economic inequality, continued. But certain restrictions applied. First of all, from now on, paying an exemption fee instead of actively serving in the armed forces did not mean that the payer would be exempted forever. Article 121 of the new law required that, even if a person paid an exemption fee, he was required to get basic military training for six months in the nearest infantry division. The law also stipulated that, while the exemption

recruits during the Balkan War of 1912-1913, see Adanır, “Non-Muslims in the Ottoman Army and the Ottoman Defeat in the Balkan War of 1912-1913”.
69 Behic, Mükellefiyet-i Askeriye Kanun-ı Muvakkatin İzahı, p. 7.
70 On the “National Economy” policies in this period, see Toprak, Türkiye’de Milli İktisat, 1908-1918.
72 Ibid., p. 14.
fee remained in effect, it would be available only in peacetime and nobody would be given this option in wartime.73

But not only did the exemption fee continue after the mobilization was declared and during the war, various of its restrictions were also loosened. Initial statements that condemned the practice would have to compromise with actual war conditions and be modified time and time again. For example, the new law on the exemption fee, which was enacted on 6 March 1915, confirmed that the practice would continue in war conditions.74 The practice did not disappear during the war and was legally renewed with some modifications.75

While the mobilization during the Great War made military labor top priority, the need for skilled labor in various departments of the state bureaucracy and economy was no less pressing. To keep its large bureaucratic machine running during the war, the Ottoman state also needed to exempt its bureaucrats and officials at key posts from conscription. For this reason, according to Article 90 of the law on military service, even if they were at the age of military service, state employees such as ministers, top officials, ambassadors, governors, judges, and muftis were not obliged to serve in the armed forces. But, more importantly, the state also needed its middle- and lower-ranking civil servants and technical personnel to continue their work in wartime, as their job description now also included supervising the mobilization process in their localities, as well as fulfilling their routine work. People such as post office clerks and telegram technicians, bank clerks, railway technicians and clerks, accountants, policemen, and so forth were equally indispensable during the war. Article 91 of the same law included a long and detailed list of middle- and low-ranking civil servants from many departments.

However, though their function was significant, civil servants increasingly came under the control of military authorities during the war. The martial law situation, which continued throughout the war, gave not only in practice but also officially the ultimate authority to military commanders in local administration. Although the mobilization decree gave the Interior Ministry the power to declare martial law, it was the War Ministry that actually ran all things military.76 This created a process in which state employees in the provinces, including the top local administrators, were

73 Ibid., p. 149.
75 Ibid., series II, vol. 8, pp. 380-381.
76 Shaw, The Ottoman Empire in World War I, I, p. 175.
required to obey the authority of military commanders. The War Ministry occasionally stressed this requirement in its correspondence to the Interior Ministry, whereupon the latter needed to warn its local officials that they should have considered and carried out the measures and proposals coming the commanders.77 Recruitment became a top priority in which civilian officials were expected to be particularly careful during the war. Civilian officials of the provinces were repeatedly warned by the center about their crucial function in ensuring that the draft procedure was carried out efficiently in their localities.78

The law on military service also provided exemptions for religious functionaries of every religion. According to Article 91, not only high- and middle-ranking religious representatives of all religious communities in the empire, but also low-ranking ones, were exempted, including priests, monks, and deacons (who had a certificate) for the Christians, and rabbis and deputy rabbis for the Jews. For the Muslim low-ranking religious functionaries, the exemption list was more detailed. It was stipulated that for each mosque, one imam, one Quran reciter (hafız), one call-to-prayer reciter (müezzin), and one caretaker (kayyum) would be released from the military service obligation.

Apparently, the Ottoman state was relatively flexible in the case of religious functionaries and provided them with an exemption status, especially where Muslim religious functionaries were concerned. Of course, there were reasons for this. Obviously, this flexibility did not stem only from the concern for providing uninterrupted religious service for believers in wartime. Low-ranking religious functionaries, particularly the village imam, also played a crucial role in mobilizing men for the war. Through his sermons, and as a respected personage among the local community, the imam was the key figure in justifying the military service as a sacred duty. He was the one whom local people took most seriously about the exaltation of martyrdom in war. The imam was also influential in convincing draft-evaders and deserters to rejoin the armed forces. Therefore, since the imam was regarded as one of the main propagators and motivators of the Ottoman mobilization at the grass-roots level, their exemption status ensured that enough of them were available in every locality.

77 BOA, DH.ŞFR., 55/157, 22 August 1915.
78 BOA, DH.ŞFR., 42/155, 30 June 1914.
Forced labor through conscription? The labor battalions

Whereas the efforts that were made in 1914 to minimize exemptions and to extend the military service obligation to all elements of Ottoman society were interpreted by some observers as a step towards the principle of Ottoman citizenship based on equality (as decreed in the Ottoman Constitution of 1876), such a perspective of equality was still lacking not only in the legislation, but also in the practice of mobilization. The Ottoman perspective regarding the inclusion and treatment of different religious and ethnic elements of the empire into the conscription system during the Great War was based on an understanding of Ottoman unity which was built upon a nationalist pragmatism. The Ottoman mobilization effort that was run by the nationalist CUP government of course wished to include and make use of the entire population of the empire. But this wish also tended to thwart as much as possible any political expectations and demands of dialogue with the state, which would emerge on the part of the same elements in return for their participation in the mobilization effort. Service of even the most distrusted elements could be accepted by the CUP government as long as that service was used in the way defined by the government itself and as long as that service did not produce any political expectations on the part of the providers.

The Law on Military Service of 1914 included certain ambiguities that could in practice easily be interpreted in a discriminatory way. Article 34 of the law divided active military service into two categories, “armed” and “unarmed service”. In other words, while some drafted men would be regarded as “normal” soldiers who were able to bear arms, others would be denied arms and instead employed in units that would mostly fulfill manual work behind the front lines. However, while this division might seem to be a standard procedure that any army might have, the Ottoman conscription law left two points ambiguous: first, it did not specify exactly who would be registered in the armed and who in the unarmed category. No clear criteria were stated in this regard. The law was much more specific on the procedures concerning medically unfit men who had physical problems or illnesses that could prevent them from carrying out active service (articles 34, 48). But no such clear procedures were defined for the unarmed service category. There are some implications in explanatory texts about the law

79 For example, see Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri, III, part 6, p. 232. For a discussion of the Ottoman conscription practice with respect to its relationship with the principle of Ottomanism, see Hacısalihoğlu, “Inclusion and Exclusion”.
that the division might have essentially been based on physical condition of a drafted man, such as having a minor bodily problem which would prevent him from fulfilling active military service on the battlefield but did not hinder him doing manual jobs. There are also some implications that the assignment to unarmed service could be done according to the profession and artisanal skills of enlisted men: medical personnel, for example, could be assigned to medical corps, and the literate could be assigned to posts as scribes in military units. Secondly, the law did not specify precisely what unarmed service would involve. In practice, it became synonymous with hard labor and, more specifically, with the labor battalions.

Forming labor-based military units was not an entirely new phenomenon in the Ottoman army. There were similar battalions called the “Service Battalions” which had been formed during the Balkan Wars. Nor was it unique to the Ottoman army. Since the work of war required vast amounts of labor, all combatant nations in the Great War constituted labor units to support their war effort. And in many cases, such labor units included recruits who were deemed to be “noncombatants”, a category which was defined by political authorities in a discriminatory way based on race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or age. Forms of recruitment and treatment of these laborers not only varied according to labor demands, but also were shaped by political circumstances. To give but a few examples, a large number of recruits from India were assigned to the labor and porter corps used in Iraq by the British Army in its invasion of the region in the Great War. These labor units, which were pejoratively called “coolie” corps, also included prisoners. Similar labor units were formed in Russia for non-Russian draftees such as the Kirgiz.

Originally, labor units in the Ottoman army were manned mainly by men too old or too young to serve in the army, by wounded or injured soldiers who had become unfit for combatant posts on the battlefield, and by older drafted men who were assigned to active reserve or territorial reserve units. But during the Great War the labor battalions were manned overwhelmingly by the non-Muslim Ottoman enlisted men, who were regarded as “untrustworthy” to bear arms, regardless of their age or

80 Behic, Mükellefiyet-i Askeriye Kanun-i Muvakkatinin İzahı, pp. 52, 188.
81 Özdemir, “I. Dünya Savaşı’nda Amele Taburları”, p. 32.
82 For a comparative account of labor battalions in the Great War, see Proctor, Civilians in a World at War, 1914-1918, pp. 40-75.
83 See Singha, “Finding Labor from India for the War in Iraq”.
84 Sanborn, Drafting the Russian Nation, p. 79.
85 Shaw, The Ottoman Empire in World War I, I, p. 341.
physical condition. By a deliberate decision of Ottoman military authorities, non-Muslim drafted men were mostly assigned to the “unarmed service” category, even if they were physically fit for the armed service category. In an order of the War Ministry issued on 3 August 1914, it was explicitly stated that “the labor battalions were to consist as much as possible of non-Muslims”. Those who were registered in the unarmed category were almost entirely employed in the labor battalions.

In this sense, the labor battalions not only carried out useful manual work, but they also acted as a means of controlling “suspect” conscripts in the army. These suspect elements included almost all non-Muslim subjects during the Great War, who were seen as undependable by the CUP-dominated state authority, which believed that if control over them was loosened even a little, they could easily turn into a subversive group supporting the enemy. For example, after the defeat in Sarıkamış on the Caucasus front, where desertions of Armenian soldiers to the Russian side caused anger among Ottoman authorities who then also claimed that that the local Armenians were in collaboration with the Russians, the acting commander-in-chief Enver Pasha issued an order to all military units on 25 February 1915, instructing that “Armenians shall strictly not be employed in mobile armies, in mobile and stationary gendarmeries, or in any armed service.”

However, it should also be noted that, as in the case of many orders given by Ottoman authorities during the war, the application of this order was not always so strict and standardized. Not only after this order, but also after the Armenian population was deported from Anatolia and exposed to ethnic cleansing, there were still some Armenian soldiers serving under arms in various places. For example, there were Armenian soldiers in the Ottoman army fighting with arms on the Sinai-Palestine front as late as spring 1916. In fact, it can be argued that, whereas the existence of such men implies the limits of the Ottoman power in executing its decisions, such exceptions might actually also be desired by the same power since it was congruent with Ottoman pragmatism during the war. If some elements of an ethnic-religious group could provide useful labor for the Ottoman mobilization effort in the way defined by the Ottoman state, Ottoman authorities did not hesitate to utilize it even when they expressed open aggression toward that group in general. For example, since the Ottoman

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army suffered from insufficient medical personnel, non-Muslim military doctors were not assigned to the labor battalions; they were always kept in regular combat units.\textsuperscript{89} While their personnel were overwhelmingly non-Muslim, many labor battalions themselves did not have military doctors.\textsuperscript{90}

In the case of non-Muslims, control by conscription or, more specifically, control by employment in unarmed labor was a premeditated practice in the Ottoman system, as shown by the official correspondence between Ottoman authorities. More direct references to this method can be found in the later phases of the war, and especially during the early phase of the Turkish National Struggle (1919-1922). For instance, this was adopted in order to neutralize the Greek population in the central and eastern Black Sea region, who were regarded as a potential fifth column. By conscripting the most physically able elements of their male population, Turkish authorities also aimed to eradicate any potential resistance to the occasional deportation of Greek villagers.\textsuperscript{91}

While the majority of the enlisted men in the labor battalions consisted of Ottoman Greeks and Armenians, there were also non-Muslims from smaller communities, such as the Assyrians (Süryanî). Nor did the labor battalions include only non-Muslims: Muslim conscripts were also employed in them. But these Muslim enlisted men were usually the ones who were too old or regarded as not entirely fit physically or useful for armed service. The labor battalions also included Muslims released from prisons to contribute to the mobilization effort.\textsuperscript{92} Sometimes labor units were manned by convicts as a form of alternative punishment, in which way their labor would be more useful than locking them away. For example, in the Third Army zone of the Caucasus Front in 1915, about 3,000 captured draft-evaders and deserters were ordered by the army command to be sent to the provinces of Diyarbekir and Mamuretülaziz to work in agriculture and transportation.\textsuperscript{93}

Another common way of compensating for the depletion of the agricultural workforce by using “outcasts” during the war was to assign captured prisoners-of-war to large farms urgently in need of manpower, a method that was used especially in the major provinces of Istanbul, Hûdavendigâr/Bursa, and Edirne, and in the districts surrounding these urban centers,

\textsuperscript{89} Mutlu, Birinci Dünya Savaşı’nda Amele Taburları, p. 159.
\textsuperscript{90} Özdemir, “I. Dünya Savaşı’nda Amele Taburları”, pp. 120-121, 132, 135.
\textsuperscript{91} Balçoğlu, Belgelerle Milli Mücadele Srasında Anadolu’da Ayaklanmalar ve Merkez Ordusu, pp. 79, 83, 87, 190.
\textsuperscript{92} Shaw, The Ottoman Empire in World War I, I, p. 341.
\textsuperscript{93} Öğün, Kafkas Cephesi’nin I. Dünya Savaşı’ndaki Lojistik Desteği, p. 89.
such as İzmit and Çatalca.\textsuperscript{94} It is understood from documents that many Russian prisoners-of-war were mostly employed in agricultural work this way.\textsuperscript{95} Upon the request of landowners, various numbers of POWs were assigned to the farms on condition that the landowner would house, feed, and guard them. Landowners were also required to report every week to their local administration and the military supply station inspectorate \textit{(menzil müfettişliği)} about the situation of the POWs assigned to them. In the case of desertions, urgent reporting was required together with physical descriptions of the POWs.\textsuperscript{96}

Terms of service in the labor battalions were not limited during the war, but drafted men were generally kept in the labor battalions for a minimum of three years.\textsuperscript{97} The main tasks fulfilled by the labor battalions during the war consisted of working in the construction and maintenance of roads and railroads, in the construction of fortified posts, helping transport men and materiel to the fronts, and helping in agriculture.\textsuperscript{98} Separate labor battalions were organized in each army district of the empire. But they were not static units and they could be transferred to any region of the empire whenever they were needed.\textsuperscript{99} There were ninety labor battalions at the time of mobilization was declared and each battalion was planned to include around 1,200 men. In total, there were approximately 100,000 men employed in them in 1914.\textsuperscript{100} There are no precise data available about the total number of men employed in the labor battalions during the four years of the war, but it can be estimated that the total number exceeded 100,000, taking into account the fact that the War Ministry decided to form fifty more labor battalions in 1915.\textsuperscript{101}

\textsuperscript{94} BOA, DH.EUM.5.ŞB., 34/25, 12 March 1917; Toprak, \textit{İttihad – Terakki ve Cihan Harbi}, 227 n. 14.
\textsuperscript{95} BOA, DH.EUM.5.ŞB., 37/21, 17 May 1917. Another interesting application in this respect was that Muslim prisoners of war in the hands of the Germans were transferred to the Ottoman Empire to be employed in agriculture and factories, where a labor force was needed. See ATASE, BDH, 1835/30/1-37.
\textsuperscript{96} BOA, DH.EUM.5.ŞB., 31/36, 12 June 1917. It is also important here to note that regular Ottoman troops could also be employed in agricultural work in times of urgent need, if there was no combat on the battlefield. For example, an order issued from the War Ministry in November 1916 required that, where and when possible, regular troops should perform agricultural work in their zones. See Öğün, \textit{Katıks Cephesinin I. Dünya Savaşı’ndaki Lojistik Desteği}, p. 93. For a similar practice, also see BOA, DH.ŞFR., 76/134, 16 May 1917.
\textsuperscript{97} Shaw, \textit{The Ottoman Empire in World War I}, I, p. 342.
\textsuperscript{98} Özdemir, “I. Dünya Savaşı’nda Amele Taburları”, p. 32.
\textsuperscript{100} Özdemir, “I. Dünya Savaşı’nda Amele Taburları”, pp. 21-22, 33.
\textsuperscript{101} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 63.
The labor battalions in the Ottoman army were characterized by notoriously poor living and working conditions. Some of the major problems which the labor battalions suffered from throughout the war were poor accommodation and lack of supplies and equipment. Eyewitness accounts confirm that many soldiers in the labor battalions were underfed and suffered from disease. Moreover, the treatment of soldier-laborers in the labor battalions was generally bad. Conditions in the labor battalions became particularly atrocious for the Armenian enlisted men especially after the deportation of the civilian Armenian population began in 1915. Such notorious aspects of the labor battalions, which became known from the experiences of early draftees and were spread among communities verbally from person to person, intimidated potential draftees and created an extra motive among reluctant non-Muslims to evade military service. Because of such problems, desertions from the labor battalions were frequent and, although non-Muslims constituted the majority, Turkish soldiers-laborers also deserted.

### Resistance to conscription: the problem of desertion

Ottoman conscription was unpopular among the masses it targeted, and occasional resistance to getting conscripted, in the form of draft-evasion and desertion, had accompanied the system in times of both peace and war. However, in terms of its considerable extent and intensity, resistance in the form of desertion (firari, the Ottoman-Turkish term for deserter, actually covers both deserters and draft-evaders) during the Great War

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102 For example, Rafael de Nogales states in his memoirs that, while he was in Adana in 1915, he observed that some Armenian and Greek soldiers in four labor battalions in the region, working in road construction, suffered severely from and died of famine: de Nogales, *Four Years beneath the Crescent*, pp. 176-177.

103 After this date, the number of armed guards in the battalions was increased and control over the Armenian soldiers became stricter. For an example on such measures, see *Askeri Tarih Belgeleri Dergisi*, 81 (December 1982), document no. 1837, p. 181. Eyewitness accounts also recorded direct assaults on the Armenians in the labor battalions in eastern Anatolia, and some have claimed these even included massacres. See, for example, Künzler, *In the Land of Blood and Tears*, pp. 16-20.

104 Sotiriou, *Farewell to Anatolia*, pp. 70-71.

105 For example, this point is wittily explained in the memoirs of an Ottoman Greek. See Spatari, “Biz İstanbullular Böylediriz”: *Fener'den Anlar*, p. 147.

106 BOA, DH.EUM.6.ŞB., 44/32, 20 June 1915; BOA, DH.EUM.KLU., 6/39, 10 January 1915.

presents a unique case. The problem of desertion was a major factor that eroded Ottoman war performance. The total numbers in the official Ottoman casualty statistics do not provide a separate figure for desertions, but include it under the more general heading of “deserters, POWs, sick, missing”, which reached the total of 1,565,000.108 According to the accounts of various high-ranking military authorities who served during the Great War, the proportion of desertion in this figure was estimated to be as high as 500,000.109 Various secondary sources also confirm this estimate.110 This represents nearly 17 per cent of all the men mobilized (3,000,000) during the war. The same percentage was about 1 per cent in Germany111 and slightly higher than 1 per cent in the British armed forces.112

Nearly every ethnic or religious group in the empire is represented in this picture. As mentioned earlier, desertions of Armenian soldiers were not infrequent and such desertions in the early phase of the war113 led Ottoman authorities to employ them in the labor battalions. Ottoman Greeks even coined a specific term for their deserters, “the attic battalions”, to describe those who hid in the attics of their buildings to avoid Ottoman recruitment authorities.114 Ottoman Jews were not particularly enthusiastic about military service, either. Among various methods to avoid service, obtaining a false medical report declaring an individual unfit for military service was apparently quite popular among this group.115 Similarly, desertions of Arab soldiers were also frequent, especially in the second half of the war.116 However, most desertions were attempted by Anatolian Muslims (namely, Turks as majority, Kurds, and to a lesser extent Circassian and Laz elements).

108 ATASE, BDH, 62/309A/005; Larcher, La guerre turque dans la guerre mondiale, p. 602.
109 See, for example, Liman von Sanders, Five Years in Turkey, p. 190; İnönü, Hâsrâlar, I., 2nd edn, pp. 126-127.
110 See, for example, Yalman, Turkey in the World War, pp. 261-262; Erickson, Ordered to Die, p. 243.
111 Zürcher, “Between Death and Desertion”, p. 257. It has to be mentioned here that desertion in the German army proportionally increased in the last year of the war, and it was remarkably high in certain units on certain fronts. For example, the spring offensive of 1918 brought the German soldier to the limits of his endurance: “Up to 10 per cent of men deserted in the preparatory stages en route from the eastern front.” See Englebard, “Mutinies and Military Morale”, p. 198.
112 Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire during the Great War, p. 741.
113 Shaw, The Ottoman Empire in World War I, I, pp. 93-105.
115 Aaronsohn, Türk Orduusyyla Filistin’de, 45. Feigning illness and malingering were also common among Muslim enlisted men. See, for example, Bir Doktorun Harp ve Memleket, pp. 72-73.
116 See, for example, BOA, DH.EUM.KLH., 5/56, 22 December 1915. The issue of frequent Arab desertions is also commonly mentioned in the memoirs of German officers who served in the Ottoman Empire. See, for example, Guhr, Anadolu’dan Filistin’e Türklerle Omuz Omuzu, pp. 144, 211.
who constituted not only the majority of the Ottoman population, but also the bulk of the enlisted men in the Ottoman army.\textsuperscript{117}

Neither the presumed strong Ottoman-Turkish military culture condemning desertion nor severe penal laws or references to the Islamic injunctions against avoiding military service could prevent desertion from becoming a major problem. The reasons for desertion varied. The most common, mentioned in the interrogation reports of deserters captured by Ottoman authorities, as well as of those captured by the British in Iraq and Palestine, include physical and mental exhaustion stemming from dire conditions at the front, despair and frustration resulting from the prolongation of the war, abuse at the hands of officers, the impossibility of obtaining home leaves, and reactions to the almost unlimited extension of term of service.\textsuperscript{118} Although almost all captured deserters express regret about their actions, they also implicitly or explicitly explain that they left as a last resort, when the conditions became unbearable and intolerable. This suggests that, although conscription was an obligatory form of military service, the enlisted men could still see a “tacit” contractual aspect in it. Although an individual potential draftee was legally obliged to enlist, this obligation was accepted as long as certain of the draftee’s basic expectations (provision of basic daily needs, fair treatment, reasonable term of service, continuation of one’s belief in the legitimacy of the service, providing for his family while he is away, etc.) were met by the authorities.

There were of course thousands of deserters who could not be caught immediately. Many of them turned into brigands to survive, forming armed bands, the size of which ranged from about a dozen to a few hundred people. Such armed bands, which were usually formed on the basis of common ethnic and religious ties, presented a major security threat across Anatolia. The trouble they caused reached an intolerable level in the later phase of the war. A telegram sent by the Interior Minister Talat Pasha to all local administrative units on 1 June 1918 complained that murders committed by bands of deserter-brigands were occurring in almost every corner of the

\textsuperscript{117} For instance, according to a report on deserters in the province of Aydın, covering the period from the beginning of mobilization (2 August 1914) to June 1916, shows that Muslims constituted the majority of deserters (28,950 out of a total of 49,228): BOA, DH.EUM.6.ŞB., 9/8, 6 September 1916. The province of Aydın included at this time the subprovinces of İzmir (the centre of the province), Aydın, Denizli, and Saruhan (Manisa).

\textsuperscript{118} For various examples of such reports, see ATASE, BDH, 2322/71/1-1; ATASE, BDH, 2322/71/1-7. For some examples from British intelligence, see the National Archives of the UK, Kew [henceforth, TNA]:PRO WO 157/703, March-April 1916; TNA:PRO WO 157/800, June 1917; TNA:PRO WO 157-727, May 1918.
Next to murder, the more routine crimes included the pillaging and robbing of villagers and townsmen. This turned desertion into a much larger issue of public security, which required the state to reorganize its gendarmerie to cope with the problem. On the other hand, there are examples showing that roaming deserters in the Ottoman countryside were not treated as complete outcasts by local populations; on the contrary, quite a few of them could easily hide in the vicinity of their own villages and were provided with shelter and food. Ottoman military authorities often note the support of the local populations and also lament the fact that this encouraged further desertions.

In fact, it is even difficult to argue that deserters were treated as complete outcasts by the state, either. When the need for military labor was so pressing and the number of deserters was so high, Ottoman authorities were always looking for a way to restore deserters into service during the Great War. Although military law required the death penalty for deserters, authorities typically reserved it for repeat offenders and those who committed serious crimes during their absence. Milder forms of punishment such as beating or imprisonment were usually applied to those who were caught during or after their first attempt. More importantly, three general amnesties were issued for all deserters on behalf of the sultan. The first one of these came as early as the declaration of mobilization (6 August 1914), the second appeared on 28 June 1915, and the third was announced in the last year of the war (15 July 1918). These promised pardons for deserters who surrendered to the authorities within a specified time period. The objective of all three amnesties was basically to bring the deserted military labor back in service, which would also help decrease the security problem in the countryside. There were other measures designed to recover the deserted labor, which were implemented in the absence of an amnesty. For example, the Interior Ministry circulated an announcement to all local administrative units on
21 September 1918, stating that deserters surrendering of their own free will could be enlisted as gendarmes if they met the necessary criteria for eligibility.\textsuperscript{125} Such surrendered deserters were usually employed in pursuit squads formed by the Ottoman gendarmerie to capture deserters and fight armed bands in the Anatolian provinces.

Such measures were not entirely ineffective, but Ottoman authorities continued to struggle with the problem of desertion until the end of the war. It remained a major factor eroding Ottoman performance on the battlefield and challenged state authority on the home front. According to the official Ottoman statistics, the number of enlisted men under arms was 560,000 when the Armistice of Mudros was signed on 30 October 1918.\textsuperscript{126} As mentioned above, the total number of desertions had reached almost the same level by that time.

**Conclusions for a comparative analysis**

Obligatory military service became increasingly more compelling as a method of securing military labor in the age of modern warfare, from the late eighteenth century onwards, and the Ottoman case is no exception. As a total war that demanded a permanent and large-scale mobilization of manpower, the Great War was the apogee of this process and made obligatory military service a necessity for all the belligerents. Conscription, however, was never purely a military matter, but was also significantly related to political concerns and internal security. Since its first phase of application in the era of Mahmud II, the system of conscription was in congruence with the state’s centralizing policies. Conscription with a working infrastructure would give the central state an increased ability to control the men at the local level and would help it counteract the power of local notables in the provinces. In this sense, from the state’s perspective the coming of conscription was important also in terms of internal security. The evolution of the system was far from smooth, mainly due to the infrastructural weakness of the state, but the political logic behind conscription remained relevant throughout the Great War.

The ideological preferences of the Ottoman state also played a determining role in shaping the nature of conscription. The religious and ethnic hierarchy of the Ottoman polity was reflected in it. Not only in its human

\textsuperscript{125} BOA, DH.UMVM., 124/182, 21 September 1918.
\textsuperscript{126} ATASE, BDH, 62/309A/005.
composition, but also in its symbolism and ideological justification, the system was predominantly a Muslim institution. Conscription was hardly universal in the Ottoman context. But this did not mean a complete exclusion of Ottoman non-Muslims. Instead, their situation was characterized by a discriminatory inclusion within a pragmatic outlook. For a long time, non-Muslims were loosely included in the system: they were denied active service, but were obliged to pay an exemption fee instead. The new regulations after 1909 and then in 1914 made Ottoman conscription more comprehensive, but still in a pragmatic fashion. When the demand for military labor was very high during the Great War, more and more non-Muslims were enlisted into the armed forces. But the overwhelming majority of the enlisted non-Muslims were employed in the unarmed labor battalions. Employing them in this way not only supplied useful labor for manual work, but also provided a means of control which would keep physically able non-Muslim male populations submissive, at a time when the nationalist CUP government increasingly considered them as a potential fifth column. In this respect, conscription as a “nation-building” project failed in the Ottoman case. One may even speculate that it accelerated the dissolution of the imperial demographic composition. On the other hand, it can be argued that Ottoman conscription served as a precursor for, a sort of catalyst of, the Turkish-Muslim identity that became the main basis of Turkish nationalism.

Ottoman conscription was a form of tributary and noncommodified labor, in which eligible males had to serve from legal obligation. There would be no payment in return for this service, the duration of which was supposed to be limited by law. However, wartime conditions could alter this limit. While the duration of active military service was declared to be two years for the army in May 1914,127 it was continuously extended as the war prolonged. Consequently, enlisted men had to serve until the end of the war. It can be said that this extension pushed conscript labor toward the unfree end on the axis of free/unfree labor.

127 According to the Law on Military Service of 1914, the total duration of service had three parts: beginning with the date of enlistment, the first two years were for active army service (nizam); then sixteen years for active reserve service (ihtiyat); and, finally, seven more years in the territorial reserve service (müstahfiz). The total period of service was twenty-five years. However, the two years of active service was actually only for the infantry; it varied for the gendarmerie and the navy: it was three years for the former and five for the latter. On the other hand, according to the Article 6 of the law, active army service in all military classes could be extended in wartime, which did actually happen during the Great War. See “Mükellefiyet-i Askeriye Kanun-ı Muvakkatı”, 29 Nisan 1330/12 May 1914, Düstür, series II, vol. 6, pp. 662-704.
As had been the case in European conscription systems after the French Revolution, obligatory military service was presented to the public as a form of taxation incumbent upon all citizens as a requirement for citizenship. In the Ottoman case religious justification played an important role as well. The discourse of obligatory military service as a patriotic duty was amalgamated with a religious discourse referring to the Islamic legal concept of Holy War.\textsuperscript{128} This religious discourse culminated in a “binding” document for Muslims when the Ottoman state officially proclaimed Holy War (cihad). A religious decree, issued through the office of the Sheikh al-Islam on 11 November 1914, invited all Ottoman Muslims to fight as a religious duty, as well as demanding support from Muslims all over the world. The emphasis on masculinity, which equated military service to a “rite of passage” into manhood, was another mechanism for justifying conscription, with deep roots in Ottoman-Turkish popular culture.\textsuperscript{129}

Ottoman conscription practice also shows that, even when conscription is the most dominant form of military labor, existing social-economic-political conditions and the multiple necessities of warfare require the simultaneous existence of different forms of recruitment. In the Ottoman case, conscription was never total, because of the infrastructural weaknesses of the Ottoman state, and the extent of manpower needs for specific purposes. The pragmatic needs of the state and the specific requirements of war simultaneously produced hybrid forms of recruitment (old and new). As discussed above, besides conscript labor, the Ottoman army developed and utilized various hybrid forms under the general heading of “volunteers”. Different from conscript labor, volunteers represented a certain degree of commodification, as many of them received payment or obtained material benefits in return for their service. However, they were still subject to the conscription regulations and had to serve until the end of the war once they joined the colors. Even mainstream Ottoman conscription included a different level of commodification, as it allowed (and sometimes in practice obliged, as in the case of non-Muslims) the avoidance of service through the payment of an exemption fee. The labor battalions can also be mentioned in this respect. These constituted a separate subcategory within conscription, through which conscript labor was used in manual works primarily related

\textsuperscript{128} Heinzelmann, Cihaddan Vatan Savunmasına, p. 264.
\textsuperscript{129} This emphasis on manhood was frequently used in the Ottoman propaganda literature during the war. In such literature, usually in the form of short and simple stories, the mothers and other female loved ones of potential draftees were always depicted as encouraging their boys to join the war to protect their virtue (namus) against the infidel enemy. For an example, see Seyfi, “Oğlumu Hududa Gönderdikten Sonra”, pp. 103-104.
to military need, but also in other economic sectors such as agriculture. It can be said that enlisted men in the labor battalions were employed “forced war workers” within a military framework.

The coexistence of different types of military labor was certainly not unique to the Ottoman case. In his seminal article on the evolution of recruitment types in the modern west, John Lynn has already pointed to the continuity of “old” forms and the possibility of coexistence of different types.130

In this sense, the Ottoman practice of conscription confirms that types of military labor were rarely entirely exclusive. Various factors such as the pragmatic needs of warfare, infrastructural problems, and political preferences mitigated exclusive categories and required a more hybrid system. Rather than following a teleological line of transition, it is more reasonable to argue that a particular type became dominant at a specific time and place, still allowing room for other types, as in the case of the Ottoman Great War experience.

Finally, the problem of desertion, which reached its peak during the Great War, demonstrates that resistance to compulsory military service was an integral part of the history of Ottoman conscription. The recruitment of military labor in a tributary form did not guarantee absolute control over it. Despite the existence of legal obligation, the threat of severe punishment, peer pressure, and religious-nationalist-cultural discourses that praised military service, the Ottoman case reveals that there was always a limit to obedience to conscription. The Great War was a time for the Ottoman state to use its actual and discursive power to mobilize the maximum amount of manpower but, ironically, it was also a period in which the evasion of military service reached very high levels. The extent of the problem allows us to argue that enlisted men were not entirely passive; they had an agency through which they could react to that obligation – at least when basic expectations, which had been implicitly or explicitly promised by the conscription law at the beginning, were not met by the state. This reaction, which forced the state to take measures both within the military and on the home front, was a major variable that played an important role in reshaping the way conscription was executed.

130 Lynn, “The Evolution of Army Style in Modern West”. 