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Military Organization: The Change
from Professional to Conscript Armies,
19th and Early 20th Centuries.

Military organization: the change from
professional to conscript armies, nine-
teenth and early twentieth centuries, by
Lt Col E. E. Wilhoyt, Jr. Command & Gen-
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31 May, 1949.

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BRIEF

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BRIEF

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SUBJECT: Military Organization: The Change from Professional to Conscript Armies, 19th and Early 20th Centuries.

1. PROBLEM.-- To consider the change from professional to conscript armies in the 19th and early 20th centuries, to determine the factors promoting such changes, and to determine the probable nature of conscription in future armies.

2. FACTS BEARING ON THE PROBLEM.--

a. Certain definitions are essential to a proper understanding of this subject. These are:

(1) A professional army is an army composed of personnel who voluntarily choose to follow the military profession for long terms of service.

(2) A conscript army is an army composed of personnel who are enrolled by compulsion. A true conscript army is based upon universal military service with exemptions only in the national interest. A modified conscript army is based upon a compulsory service policy which permits exemptions to privileged classes, the purchase of substitutes, and similar variations which give the army professional characteristics.

b. Although the scope of this subject limits consideration of conscription to the period subsequent to the year 1800, it must be recognized that the appearance of conscription on the military scene occurred even as early in history as during the days of the early Egyptians and also that conscription saw its first use in the modern sense in connection with a mass army under Napoleon at the close of the 18th century.

3. DISCUSSION.-- As the 18th century had been the greatest era of the purely professional armies, characterized by a high state of training and severe discipline; so the 19th century saw the development and perfection

of the conscript army, characterized by rapid training of great numbers of soldiers.

At the beginning of the 19th century, France possessed a conscript army which had been born in 1798 of the necessity of supporting Napoleon's campaigns. Although the formation of this army had been assisted initially by patriotic fervor, continued conscription to support the long campaigns became increasingly unpopular and resulted in many modifications to permit exemptions and purchase of substitutes. At this time Russia, alone of the other nations of the world, possessed a conscript army; and it was not a true conscript army.

Although several nations half-heartedly applied conscription at times during the early part of the 19th century, Prussia profited most by the examples of Napoleon's mass armies and set out to train her entire male population for war by use of a short three year term of service followed by a longer period of service in the reserves. Further reforms in 1860 produced the new Prussian conscript army which was based upon three principles: first, universal liability rigidly imposed so as not to permit modifications which inevitably resulted in an essentially professional army; second, short period of service in the regular army followed by a longer period of service in the reserves; and third, arrangements to permit rapid mobilization at the start of a war.

Retgression in the French army produced a strictly professional army of quality which in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871 was overwhelmed by the new Prussian army of quantity. The lessons of that war were apparent to the world, and army reforms were the

order of the day. In 1872 France undertook reforms to follow the Prussian pattern. Japan did likewise in 1873; Russia in 1874; and Italy in 1875. Austria-Hungary had already followed the pattern in 1868 after a defeat at the hands of Prussia in 1866 had taught her the necessary lessons.

England and the United States were the only nations of major importance to retain the long service professional army. Among the more important considerations which brought about this situation are:

a. The geographical locations of England and the United States are such that they have been secure in relying upon naval forces as their first line of defense. However, technological developments in warfare are steadily decreasing the importance of this consideration.

b. The people were temperamentally opposed to the principle of compulsory service and could not be convinced of its value except in time of national emergency.

c. The professional army was better suited for use in garrisoning military installations in overseas colonies.

For these reasons Great Britain and the United States have clung to the professional army in spite of its comparatively high cost and have resorted to conscription only when the magnitude of the manpower requirement in a war forced it upon them or as at present when volunteers are not adequate to furnish necessary manpower to the services within budget limitations.

Experience in both World Wars proved that a combination of the volunteer system and the conscript system of raising armies is not conducive to the production of a military-industrial balance.

Factors promoting the change from the professional to the conscript army were economic and administrative, technological, and idealogical.

Among the economic and administrative factors were:

a. Armies of a size suitable to participate in conflicts between nations could no longer be raised by the volunteer method which is prerequisite to the professional army. Although pay in armies was not sufficient to entice volunteers, nations could not afford to increase the pay in armies of the size required.

b. The development of national economies became increasingly more complex with the result that wars more and more tended to become global in nature.

c. Steadily increasing costs of the weapons of war and higher standards of living made it increasingly more difficult for a nation's economy to support a professional army of adequate size to wage wars.

Among the technological factors were:

a. The industrial revolution greatly increased a nation's capacity for production of the weapons of war and made possible the equipping of mass conscript armies.

b. The industrial revolution brought with it a higher level of education among the common people who had been the greatest source of volunteers in the professional army.

c. Improved methods of transportation and communications brought the nations of the world closer together and increased the tendency for local quarrels to expand into conflicts between groups of nations with emphasis on the race to produce the largest armies.

Among the ideological factors was the rise of the principle of "equality," one of the cornerstones of the French Revolution. This led to the theory of universal liability to serve one's country.

4. CONCLUSIONS.-- The conclusions arrived at are:

a. That the economic, technological, and ideological development of the nations of the world advanced during the 19th and early 20th centuries and produced conditions which require use of conscription in armies involved in modern wars.

b. That the future use of conscription will not be directed only toward production of mass armies but will be characterized by careful application of selection in order to produce a military-industrial balance and insure maximum utilization of technology.

c. That conscript armies deteriorate into armies professional in nature when exemptions are permitted for reasons other than those required to produce a military-industrial balance in a nation, and that such modified conscript armies are not usually successful against the true conscript army.

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2. FACTS BEARING ON THE PROBLEM.--

a. Although the scope of this subject limits consideration of conscription to the period subsequent to the year 1800, it must be recognized that the appearance of conscription on the military scene occurred even as early in history as during the days of the early Egyptians and also that conscription saw its first use in the modern sense in connection with a mass army under Napoleon at the close of the 18th century.

3. DISCUSSION.-- As the 18th century had been the greatest era of the purely professional armies, characterized by a high state of training and severe discipline, so the 19th century saw the development and perfection of the conscript army.

a. Organization of armies at the beginning of the 19th century.--

(1) France entered the 19th century with a conscript army which had been born in 1798 of the necessity of supporting Napoleon's campaigns. The initial patriotic volunteer army, imbued with the fiery propaganda of the rights of man, had proved inadequate to cope with the First Coalition, which threatened the new republic in 1793. The Committee of Public Safety had met this emergency by the earliest of draft laws

which read as follows: "The young men shall go to fight: married men shall forge weapons and transport supplies; the women shall make tents and uniforms or serve in the hospitals; the children shall make lint; the old men shall be carried to the public squares to excite the courage of soldiers, hatred of kings, and enthusiasm for the unity of the republic."

The initial successes were due to great numbers and fanatic enthusiasm. Carnot added organization and discipline to the army when then enjoyed many successful campaigns. In 1798, however, the exhaustion of many years of continuous warfare resulted in great shortages of replacements for the army. Conscription was adopted in order to place the entire male population of France at the disposal of Napoleon.

By 1800 this compulsory conscription remained although it was moderated by permitting the payment of substitutions and by authorizing exemptions.

(2) By 1800 England had developed a policy of fighting her wars overseas either to settle colonial disputes or to preserve the balance of power in Europe. The basis of British army organization then has since become the traditional one of maintaining a substantial and yet comparatively small standing army and relying upon volunteers to provide replacements. Toward the end of the 18th century heavy bounties were used to encourage voluntary enlistment. When that failed, pressgangs and even prisons were used to provide recruits.

(3) Prussia entered the 19th century with an army which had grown into a highly professional and rigidly disciplined organization under Frederick the Great. Nations over the world had admired this army

and had patterned their own after it during the 18th century.

(4) At the start of the 19th century Russia was forced to resort to conscription. This was necessary in order to conduct her wars with France and to conduct her campaigns for territorial expansion. These campaigns were accomplished with astounding success by Alexander I in the fifteen year period ending in 1815. The period of military service in some instances lasted for 25 years under deplorable conditions.

(5) Austria-Hungary's strictly professional army had not been adequate to suppress the rising revolutionaries of France. Although its experiences in conflict against the Turks and Frederick the Great had made the Austria-Hungarian army the most serious opponent of Napoleon, the repeated victories of Napoleon gave rise to reforms intended to pattern the Austria-Hungarian army after the French model. At the beginning of the 19th century this army was in the midst of that reorganization.

(6) The United States entered the 19th century with a very small professional volunteer standing army. Her policy then, as for most subsequent emergencies, was to provide the forces required by calling for additional volunteers.

(7) Italy, with her many separate states and their separate armies, and Japan, with her feudal system, had no national army in 1800 and cannot be considered in the same breath with the real military powers of the world at that time.

b. Subsequent reorganization of armies.--

(1) Prior to 1870.--

(a) By 1804 the payment of substitutions

had reached such widespread usage in France that one out of ten conscripts bought substitutions to avoid service in the army.

Whereas the first armies of the republic had been true French armies, the armies of Napoleon extended the conscription to include the sons of conquered peoples. This practice reached such proportions that the army with which Napoleon invaded Russia was only one-third French. The rest were Germans, Italians, Poles, and other subjects of the empire. This was not the national conscription as discussed throughout this paper. It was simply the exploitation of conquered people and one of the many factors which contributed to Napoleon's downfall.

France, under the restored Bourbons, at first renounced conscription, but three years later she reinstated conscription to some degree because of the small numbers of volunteers. Only a fraction of the yearly quota was called up, and draftees were permitted to purchase substitutes. France required a long term of service, had many reenlistments, and lacked trained reserves. What resulted was in actuality a professional army.

There was little to disturb the peace of Europe from 1815 to 1848. At that later date insurrections in France soon were followed by the era of Napoleon III and an aggressive foreign policy. However, the French army still remained essentially professional, due mainly to the opposition to universal service by the influential middle class.

On the eve of the Franco-Prussian War, the French army had suffered years of retrogression. This was due to the long period of peace during which officer

promotions were slow, the officer corps grew stagnant, and there was a general failure to take advantage of possible improvements. Napoleon III had seen the need to strengthen the French army; but, confronted with popular opposition, was successful only in effecting the adoption of certain armament improvements.

The French army remained professional and was based on long term service as an assurance of superior quality. The French had failed to learn the lessons provided prior to 1870 by the Prussians or by the American Civil War, -- lessons on the value of superior numbers.

(b) During the early 19th century the most significant development among the armies of the world was the rise of the new Prussian army. After the Prussian defeat at Jena in 1806, Napoleon had limited the size of the Prussian army. Based on this limitation, Prussia, in 1808, secretly adopted conscription although this was not generally known until the War of Liberation in 1813. Prussia also decided to train her entire male population for war by use of a short three year term of service in the active army after which the soldier became a member of the "Landwehr" or reserve.

Hence, it is seen that the mass army which rose with the French Revolution was now used most ably by one of the least democratic countries in Europe. It was then that Prussia evolved the basis for her future power which so guided the history of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

However, rioting throughout Europe in 1848 and a later surrender to Austria without fighting in a quarrel over the leadership of the Germanic Confederation indicated a further need for army reforms.

In 1860 Prussia adopted reforms which were based upon necessary revision of the existing dual system of a small regular army backed up by a large "Landwehr" or militia. These reforms involved a discontinuation of the "Landwehr", and training the entire annual quota of conscripts in the regular army while retaining the five preceding classes in the regular army reserve. All of this was coupled with rearmament. It presented an expensive program made possible over popular objection only because of increased national population and consequent increased national wealth which was subjected to increased taxation.

This unpopular new army was given its first test in 1864 against little Denmark when it proved its merit but won no new popularity. Two years later, in 1866, in the Seven Weeks War with Austria for the domination of the German states, the new army again proved itself and at the same time won great popularity with the German people.

So impressive was the performance of the Prussian mass army against Austria that most of the rest of the world except England and the United States took steps to follow the example.

(c) In England during that portion of the 19th century prior to 1870 there were some parliamentary differences of opinion as regards the size of the army. The Liberals claimed that English liberties always flourished best with the smallest standing army. The Tories, on the other hand, replied that the army protected rather than threatened individual liberties. The outcome presented little or no change as the army in general remained small with forts and arsenals receiving attention in the small war scares of the period.

An exception to Britain's policy of relying on a volunteer professional army occurred in 1802 when she resorted to levies on the parishes to provide the manpower necessary to participate in the continental struggle.

(d) In 1854 the Russian army underwent certain reforms such as a slight reduction in the years of service and the abolishment of corporal punishments as a form of military discipline.

(e) Austria-Hungary continued her army reorganization after the French model until the War of Liberation in which she fielded a well trained and disciplined mass army which had a decisive influence in the final conflicts.

After the final defeat of Napoleon a modified conscription was retained much as had been done in France and with the comparable result that the Austria-Hungarian army became increasingly professional in nature.

Although the Austria-Hungarian army was generally recognized as the best in Europe during the first half of the 19th century, the professional spirit had so gripped the army by 1866 that the result of war during that year with Prussia was a disastrous defeat.

As a result of that war, Austria-Hungary adopted army reforms along the Prussian pattern in 1868.

(f) The United States called up additional volunteers to expand her army for the War of 1812 and for the Mexican War.

In the Civil War of 1861-1865 mass armies were employed in the United States. At first both sides attempted to maintain their armies by volunteers, but both were forced to resort to conscription. In the North the requirements of the Union army were met by

a use of a combination of volunteers and selective service which held all between the ages of 18 and 45 liable to service but actually drew only from the age group between 20 and 35 as those outside this bracket were not forced to serve. Drafted men were also permitted to purchase substitutes.

In the South conscription was also used and was much more severe. Ultimately, all white men between the ages of 17 and 50 were subject to the draft even though volunteers of all ages were available in large numbers.

(g) Prior to 1870 Italy went through many struggles for independence and unification. The first problem was one of combining the many small armies of the formerly independent states into one organization. Organized initially along the lines of the French army after Napoleon's conquest, it was based upon modified conscription.

(h) The restoration of Imperial power in Japan in 1868 all but did away with the old feudal system under which each clan maintained its own troops.

(2) 1870 to World War I.--

In the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871 the new Prussian mass army of quantity overwhelmed the French professional army of quality; and, in so doing, dissolved the hopes of many old military men who had believed in the old professional army. This new Prussian army was based on three principles: first, universal liability rigidly imposed so as not to permit relaxations by modifications which inevitably resulted in an essentially professional army; second, short period of service in the regular army followed by a longer period of service in the reserves; and third, arrangements to permit

rapid mobilization at the start of a war.

Those who had ignored the lessons of the Prussian victory over Austria in 1866 and of the American Civil War were now convinced of the virtues of the new mass army.

In 1872, France, who had received the last costly lesson, followed the pattern. Russia did likewise in 1874 by making all classes susceptible to military service. At the same time, the period of service was reduced from 25 to 16 years with exemptions permitted for reasons of education only.

Great Britain was also led to certain changes. She retained the standing army of volunteers but placed greater emphasis on educational qualifications and stopped the practice of selling officers' commissions. In order to increase the effective strength of the army, a shorter term of service of 12 years was instituted.

In the United States, although conscription was not considered essential, its subsequent use was provided for in an act of 1903 which provided means for repelling invasion, suppressing rebellion, and actually waging war.

In Italy, the war of 1870 also showed the need for reorganization; and, in 1875, the army was remodelled after the Prussian system. Service was compulsory between the ages of 21 and 55. The recruit usually served 18 months in the active army and was then transferred to the reserve in which he served until the age of 55.

In 1871 a law was passed in Japan which abolished the clan and created an absolute need for some military system to provide for military preparedness.

As in other fields, an effort was made to follow the European example. Although there was a great

opposition by the military class to any proposal to use the common man in the conscript army, the conscription law of 1873 made service a national duty required of all male subjects from 17 to 40 years of age.

There were variations in the method of application of the principles of the mass conscript army. Some countries such as Spain and Belgium continued to permit the purchasing of substitutes. Others, such as some of the South American countries, actually called up only a small fraction of the annual class either because of limited military requirements or limited national resources. France came the closest to perfect practice in at one time calling up over four-fifths of an annual class.

For social reasons Germany called up mainly peasants and middle class recruits. This was due to class hatred caused by the socialist-communist doctrine which was gaining support among the industrial laborers.

England and the United States alone of the great powers remained outside the realm of conscription. One was protected by a strong navy; the other by wide oceans.

Conscription in the nations of the world suffered only minor variations in the period that remained before World War I. Living conditions in most armies did not influence a better-than-average man to consider re-enlistment, for he could envisage a more profitable future in the industrial world. Increased population made it impossible to induct all men of military age into peacetime armies. Wealth and position in life made it possible for certain men of military age either to avoid induction or to arrange for special considerations.

However, in spite of the slump in the popularity of conscription, at the start of World War I all nations of importance except Great Britain and the United States based their military policy upon the use of conscription.

(3) World War I to World War II.

World War I was a struggle of mass armies. It was the culmination of a long contest between European nations for a superiority of numbers.

England attempted at first to provide her manpower requirements through application of the volunteer doctrine. It was a hopeless failure, not only because the resulting total was short of the requirement, but also because the volunteers included many of the key personnel of British industry.

Finally, in August of 1917, the British adopted a selective form of conscription designed to maintain a military-industrial balance.

Profiting by the experiences of the British, the United States passed the Selective Service Act in 1917. The full benefits of a selective service system were compromised, however, by the concurrent use of a volunteer system.

Elsewhere conscription was utilized to the utmost with undeserved emphasis on effort to place more and more men in the field with the mass armies and consequent unbalanced use of the nations resources which include both men and materials.

The peace treaty of Versailles included the abolishment of the German mass army. The size of her army was limited to 100,000 men, and compulsory universal military training was forbidden.

England and the United States quickly reverted to small volunteer regular armies, and only three great

powers retained the mass army system. These were France, Italy, and Japan; and, of these, France reduced the term of service to one year and permitted exemptions which contributed to the causes of failure against the German army in 1940.

The post-World War I period quickly merged into the pre-World War II period in which all of the important nations of Europe except Great Britain used conscription as a means of preparedness but gave more weight in its application to considerations of technology to emphasize the importance of weapons, and to considerations of selection in order to maintain the nation's economic structure.

In 1940 the United States and Great Britain were again last to join the conscription parade.

World War II required the utilization of a nation's entire war potential. In the United States, as in most of the other nations in the war, manpower was allocated so as to profit most from technology. The emphasis was no longer on the mass army.

c. Survival of the long service professional army.

As has been apparent in the foregoing account of the evolution of conscription in one period of history, England and the United States were the only nations of major importance to retain the long service professional army after Prussia had demonstrated the effectiveness of the short term German conscript army.

Among the more important considerations which brought about this situation are:

(1) The geographical locations of England and the United States are such that they have been secure in relying upon naval forces as their first line of defense. However, technological developments

in warfare are steadily decreasing the importance of this consideration.

(2) The people were temperamentally opposed to the principle of compulsory service and could not be convinced of its value except in time of national emergency.

(3) The professional army was better suited for use in garrisoning military installations in overseas colonies.

For these reasons Great Britain and the United States have clung to the professional army in spite of its comparatively high cost and have resorted to conscription only when the magnitude of the manpower requirement in a war forced it upon them or as at present when volunteers are not adequate to furnish necessary manpower to the services within budget limitations.

d. Factors promoting the change.

(1) Economic and administrative.

(a) Armies of a size suitable to participate in conflicts between nations could no longer be raised by the volunteer method which is prerequisite to the professional army. Although pay in armies was not sufficient to entice volunteers, nations could not afford to increase the pay in armies of the size required.

(b) The development of national economies became increasingly more complex with the result that wars more and more tended to become global in nature.

(c) Steadily increasing costs of the weapons of war and higher standards of living made it increasingly difficult for a nation's economy to

support a professional army of adequate size to wage wars.

(2) Technological.

(a) The industrial revolution greatly increased a nation's capacity for production of the weapons of war and made possible the equipping of mass conscript armies.

(b) The industrial revolution brought with it a higher level of education among the common people who had been the greatest source of volunteers in the professional army.

(c) Improved methods of transportation and communications brought the nations of the world closer together and increased the tendency for local quarrels to expand into conflicts between groups of nations where emphasis was on the race to produce the largest armies.

(3) Ideological.

(a) The principle of "equality," one of the cornerstones of the French Revolution, led to the theory of universal liability to serve one's country.

4. CONCLUSIONS.

a. That the economic, technological, and ideological development of the nations of the world advanced during the 19th and early 20th centuries and produced conditions which require the use of conscription in armies involved in modern wars.

b. That the future use of conscription will not be directed only toward production of mass armies but will be characterized by careful application of selection in order to produce a military-industrial balance and insure maximum utilization of technology.

c. That conscript armies deteriorate into armies professional in nature when exemptions are permitted for reasons other than those required to produce a military-industrial balance in a nation, and that such modified conscript armies are not usually successful against the true conscript army.

ANNEX A

COMMAND AND GENERAL STAFF COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF OPERATIONS AND TRAINING

Fort Leavenworth, Kansas

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SUBJECT: Military Organization: The Change from Professional to Conscript Armies, 19th and early 20th Centuries.

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NOTE TO STUDENTS:

1. The references above are furnished to give the student enough material with which to begin his research. It is anticipated that the student will make use of all other available sources in order to give adequate scope to his subject and, when appropriate, to complete development of the subject to date.

2. The scope suggested below is intended as a guide only, and is not to be construed as a limitation on the student's perusal of the subject.

SCOPE:

1. Survival of long-service professional armies in the nineteenth century.
2. Factors promoting the change: economic and administrative, technological, ideological.
3. Army reorganization in Austria-Hungary (1868), France (1872), Japan (1873), Russia (1874),

Italy (1875).

4. English retention of long-service professional army; reorganization of home defense (Territorial) force; use of conscription in World War.

ANNEX B

DEFINITIONS

1. "Conscription" is defined in Webster's Dictionary as "the act of enrolling by compulsion for military or naval service.

Col. Maude, an English soldier, defined "conscription" as "the selection by lot or otherwise of a proportion of the men of military age for compulsory service in the naval and military forces of their country." This definition may be expanded to fit the requirements of total war by applying in selective form to both male and female citizens for use in military services or industry as required.

2. A conscript army is an army composed of personnel who are enrolled by compulsion. A true conscript army is based upon universal military service with exemptions only in the national interest. A modified conscript army is based upon a compulsory service policy which permits exemptions to privileged classes, the purchase of substitutes, and similar variations which give the army professional characteristics.

3. A professional army is an army composed of personnel who voluntarily choose to follow the military profession for long terms of service.

ANNEX C

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