The End of the *Wehrpflicht*: An Exploration of Germany’s Delayed Embrace of an All-Volunteer Force

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ABSTRACT

LAUREN TUCKER: The End of the Wehrpflicht: An Exploration of Germany’s Delayed Embrace of an All-Volunteer Force
(Under the direction of Liesbet Hooghe)

Conscription in Germany has shown an incredible resilience over the past two decades in the midst of a Europe-wide trend toward all-volunteer forces. The politics of base closures, military recruitment concerns, and the dependence of the social service sector on the labor of conscientious objectors blocked the Bundeswehr from undergoing comprehensive structural reform. In a recent development, Germany abandoned its Sonderweg in 2010 with very little debate, deciding to suspend conscription and transition to a professional force. The rapid success of the policy change is a consequence of three developing factors: a financial environment of extreme austerity, the growing inequity of the draft, and former Defense Minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg’s immense popularity.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and former Minister of Defense Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg announced in a joint press conference on November 22, 2010 that effective as of July 1, 2011, the government would suspend general conscription, known as the Wehrpflicht. The institution of conscription has been a part of Bundeswehr culture since 1956, necessitated by West Germany’s geopolitical position in the heart of the Cold War battlefield. As the frontier to non-communist Europe, West Germany served as NATO’s first line of defense against a Soviet invasion of the continent, requiring the state to develop the capacity to amass large troop volumes for territorial defense. Developments over the past two decades have created a starkly different international security environment, which increasingly calls the raison d'être of a large conscription army into question. The Iron Curtain has fallen, Germany is reunited and surrounded by NATO allies, European integration has broken down territorial borders, and Russia is seen as a potential strategic partner rather than an existential threat. Simultaneously new threats have emerged which are complex and transnational in nature and require the application of a more flexible and mobile force. Quality and interoperability have usurped quantity and territoriality as the guiding principles around which security strategies are built. In this external setting, Germany had until recent developments refused to abandon
conscription and remained one of only four NATO member states yet to adopt an all-volunteer, professional army.

The transformation of the Wehrpflicht in the political debate from an issue of national identity to an outdated policy that could no longer be reconciled with modern security needs has followed a rapid course over the past year. This thesis aims to provide a general understanding of the trajectory of conscription in Germany since 1990 by answering two questions. First, what were the primary factors behind the Wehrpflicht’s resilience over the past two decades, despite strong strategic pressures to reform and a general European trend toward all-volunteer forces? Second, how can the recently emerging political consensus around transformational reform and the suspension of conscription best be explained?

The explanation that follows is divided into four main chapters. Chapter 2 provides the background information to the story: a historical overview of the Wehrpflicht in Germany from its inception to its recent suspension and the European comparative context. Chapter 3 presents the key arguments on both sides of the Wehrpflicht debate as found in the existing literature. Chapter 4 identifies the three primary factors behind Germany’s reluctance to abandon conscription over the past two decades: the domestic politics of base closures, military recruitment concerns, and the dependence of the social service sector on the labor of conscientious objectors. Finally, Chapter 5 offers three interlocking explanations for the reform’s success: a financial environment of extreme austerity, the growing inequity of the draft, and zu Guttenberg’s immense popularity.
CHAPTER 2
BACKGROUND

As a starting point for understanding the difficult debate in Germany around the Wehrpflicht and the transformation of the Bundeswehr into an all-volunteer force, this chapter will provide a historical overview of conscription, from its inception to its recent suspension. It will also provide a European comparative context for the last two decades of reform.

Historical Overview of the Wehrpflicht

Christian-democratic politicians initially denounced zu Guttenberg’s plan to suspend conscription as an affront to the identity of their party, the armed forces, and German democracy (Demmer, Kullmann, Pfister, & Schwennieke, 2010; “Kritik auf breiter Front,” 2010). These emotional appeals implied that the Wehrpflicht was an immutable principle that should not be subjected to shifts in strategic calculus. However, a look at the historical development of conscription discredits this narrative. Since its inception, the Wehrpflicht had continually evolved to meet changing political and security imperatives (Grajetzki, 2010, p. 62; Longhurst, 2004, p. 120).

The conflation of the Wehrpflicht with the identity of the Bundeswehr does have a historical basis, as general conscription developed simultaneously with the reconstitution of the armed forces in the Federal Republic. However, conscription did not enjoy
political consensus at the time, nor has it achieved it since. With the advent of the
Korean War and growing fears of Soviet expansion, the Western Allies abandoned the
project of German demilitarization, allowing the Federal Republic to join NATO in 1955
and rebuild its armed forces to a strength of 500,000 (Buch, 2010a, p. 35). The Christian-
democratic government of Konrad Adenauer (CDU) insisted that reinstituting the
*Wehrpflicht* was the only viable means to fill the ranks, while the opposition Social
Democratic Party (SPD) argued that doing so would provoke a similar response in the
“Soviet occupation zone” and deepen the division of Germany. Following sixteen hours
of debate, the German parliament passed the *Wehrpflicht* law on July 7, 1956, which
obliged German men from the age of 18 to perform basic military service. Conscripts
began to serve for a period of 12 months in 1957 (Westdeutscher Rundfunk, 2006). As
predicted by the SPD, the German Democratic Republic responded by introducing a basic
military service of 18 months in 1962 (Bundeswehr, 2011).

During the course of the bipolar conflict, the Federal Republic’s conscription
policy did not remain static, but rather adapted to social, political, and security
developments (Longhurst, 2004, p. 120). In 1961, an alternative service or *Zivildienst*
was introduced for conscientious objectors (BMFSFJ, 2008). In 1968, the Basic Law was
amended to reflect the obligation to perform basic military or an alternative service (GG
§12a). However, the terms of this service remained at the discretion of politicians. As
Table 1 on the next page shows, the length of the *Wehrpflicht* fluctuated over time,
corresponding to shifts in political calculus.
Table 1
Timeline of length of basic military service in Germany

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Period</th>
<th>Length of Basic Service</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>April 1, 1957 – March 31, 1962</td>
<td>12 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 1, 1962 – June 30, 1962</td>
<td>15 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 1, 1962 – December 31, 1972</td>
<td>18 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 1, 1973 – September 30, 1990</td>
<td>15 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 1, 1990 – December 31, 1995</td>
<td>12 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 1, 1996 – December 31, 2001</td>
<td>10 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 1, 2002 – November 30, 2010</td>
<td>9 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 1, 2010 – June 30, 2011</td>
<td>6 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 1, 2011</td>
<td>suspended</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The initial service requirement of 12 months was increased to 18 months over the course of 1962 in response to President Kennedy’s demands for Bonn to increase its defense capabilities following the Berlin crisis (Kennedy, 1961; “Mobil-Machung,” 1961). A decade later, the signing of the Basic Treaty, in which the partitioned German states recognized one another for the first time, ushered in a period of Ostpolitik. The relaxed security environment, combined with political concerns over growing draft inequity as a consequence of the coming-of-age of the large “Baby Boomer” generation, led to a reduction in service time to 15 months (Grajetzki, 2010, p. 62; “Wir werden nie genug,” 1972). As the Bundeswehr’s recruitment pool began to run dry in the mid-1980s, a reflection of the demographic impact of the birth control pill, the government planned to reinstate the 18-month service term from the year 1989 (“Letztes Aufgebot,” 1984). However, the end of the Cold War precluded this policy change from taking effect (Longhurst, 2004, p. 120). Instead, the Wehrpflicht was further reduced to 12 months with reunification in 1990, and has since been progressively pared down as part of an extended transformation process with the aim of modernizing the armed forces to better
meet the demands of the post-Cold War era (Grajetzki, 2010, pp. 63-65). The policy debate unleashed by this transformation has centered around a growing tension between two previously harmonious principles of *Bundeswehr* identity: a severely limited use of force and multilateralism (Belkin, 2007; Malici, 2006; Mauß, 2000; Meiers, 2007). In many ways, conscription has become a symbol for this identity crisis, alternately seen as an obstacle to ‘normalization’ by its detractors or a safeguard against historical tendencies by its supporters (Longhurst, 2006).

Structured around the principle of territorial defense, the *Bundeswehr* exited the Cold War as a large and immobile force. In a sense, it was never meant to fight. The Allied policy of deterrence required warm bodies to line up along the Iron Curtain, not warriors. German society accepted remilitarization begrudgingly, and then only as a necessary means to maintain peace (Hoffmann & Longhurst, 1999, p. 148). NATO demands and the historically grounded aversion to force as a legitimate security tool were thus easily reconciled. However, the end of the bipolar freeze challenged the dual principles of military restraint and multilateralism. As new security threats emerged and conflicts erupted outside of Alliance borders, Allied partners increasingly questioned Germany’s historical pass from participating meaningfully in out-of-area missions (Hoffmann & Longhurst, 1999, p. 151). Reforms have aimed to transform the *Bundeswehr* into a mission-oriented force, resulting in an increasingly diminished role for conscripts.
Table 2
*Development of conscript ratio since 1991*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Active Forces</th>
<th>Conscripts</th>
<th>Percent Conscript</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Active Forces</th>
<th>Conscripts</th>
<th>Percent Conscript</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>476,300</td>
<td>203,000</td>
<td>42.6</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>308,400</td>
<td>118,400</td>
<td>38.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>447,000</td>
<td>201,700</td>
<td>45.1</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>296,000</td>
<td>107,000</td>
<td>36.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>408,200</td>
<td>176,300</td>
<td>43.2</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>284,500</td>
<td>94,500</td>
<td>33.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>367,300</td>
<td>154,100</td>
<td>42.0</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>284,500</td>
<td>94,500</td>
<td>33.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>339,900</td>
<td>137,300</td>
<td>40.4</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>284,500</td>
<td>94,500</td>
<td>33.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>358,400</td>
<td>164,550</td>
<td>45.9</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>284,500</td>
<td>94,500</td>
<td>33.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>347,100</td>
<td>152,560</td>
<td>44.0</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>245,702</td>
<td>56,624</td>
<td>23.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>333,500</td>
<td>137,500</td>
<td>41.2</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>245,702</td>
<td>56,624</td>
<td>23.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>332,800</td>
<td>142,000</td>
<td>42.7</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>244,324</td>
<td>56,624</td>
<td>23.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>321,000</td>
<td>128,400</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>250,613</td>
<td>63,155</td>
<td>25.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Data from IISS Military Balance, years 1991 – 2010*

As Table 2 shows, the number of conscripts serving in the *Bundeswehr* and the conscript ratio has decreased significantly since 1991, the result of a series of reforms. The Two-Plus-Four Treaty of 1990, which defined the conditions for a reunified Germany, set a cap on force strength at 370,000. The *Bundeswehr* thus faced the dual task of integrating East German soldiers and reducing a combined force size of 620,000 (Grajetzki, 2010, p. 63). The conscript ratio did not diminish during this transition, remaining between 40 and 45 percent, but fewer conscripts were needed to maintain this ratio. The *Defense Policy Guidelines* of 1992 further confirmed the centrality of conscription to force structure. Though recognizing the changing role of the armed forces in the “post-confrontational era” (paragraph 37) and developing the *Bundeswehr*’s ability to participate in UN missions by creating crisis response forces, the *Guidelines* reiterated the primary objective of the *Bundeswehr* as territorial defense. Defense of the homeland was defined as the responsibility of every citizen, with the *Wehrpflicht* serving as the glue between the armed forces and society (paragraph 38).
The next reform took effect in 1996 and further reduced troop strength to 340,000, with a basic military service requirement of 10 months. Economic rather than strategic motives fueled this reform, which worked toward cutting the size and budget of the Bundeswehr as a means to cash in on the peace dividend. Defense Minister Volker Rühe (CDU) pledged to save 2.1 billion DM per year while keeping the conscript ratio at the status quo (Dyson, 2007, p. 63). However, increasing participation in out-of-area missions, specifically the experience in Kosovo, raised concerns that Germany’s armed forces were structurally anachronistic and inept (Huber & Schmidt, 2004, p. 351). In response, Rühe’s successor Rudolf Scharping (SPD) authorized a commission under the leadership of former German President Richard von Weizsäcker to make proposals for fundamentally transforming the Bundeswehr into a modern force (Dyson, 2007, p. 90).

The Weizsäcker Commission report (2000) presented a new strategic vision for the Bundeswehr, suggesting drastic cuts in troop strength and the conscript ratio with the aim of restructuring the armed forces toward the primary objective of participating in out-of-area crisis missions. Scharping’s eventual 2003 reform moderated the vision, reducing troop strength to 282,000 with 80,000 conscripts serving nine months. The Commission’s rejection of the primacy of territorial defense was further reinforced in the Defense Policy Guidelines of 2003, which redefined the Bundeswehr’s role as crisis management and highlighted the threat of terrorism (Dyson, 2007, pp. 122-123). Scharping’s successor Peter Struck passed a reform to further reduce the number of soldiers to 252,000 with around 50,000 conscripts (Klein, 2009, pp. 179-180).

As the Bundeswehr became smaller and more mobile, fewer and fewer conscripts could be structurally tolerated. The result has been a progressive reduction of basic
service time in an attempt to push more conscripts through the system. The latest reduction from nine to six months, the result of a compromise between the Christian-democratic and Liberal government coalition of Chancellor Merkel, had been in effect less than 2 months when Defense Minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg announced his plans to suspend conscription indefinitely in August 2010 (“Guttenberg will,” 2010; “Schwarz-Gelb,” 2010). The Wehrpflicht, along with the alternative service of Zivildienst, will be suspended as of July 1, 2011. Germany’s last round of conscripts reported for duty on January 3 (Repinski, 2011). Their departure will mark the beginning of a new era as the Bundeswehr becomes an all-volunteer force.

Conscription in the European Neighborhood

The Federal Republic’s remilitarization after the Second World War was conceptualized and legitimated through its membership in NATO. As a consequence, the Bundeswehr is deeply embedded within the Alliance structure and European security norms. A full picture of the transformation of the Bundeswehr from a conscript to an all-volunteer force requires a look at this regional context. A quick survey of the European neighborhood reveals a striking trend toward the development of professional armed forces since the end of the Cold War. Tables 3 and 4 on the following pages provide an overview of the force structure, defense expenditures, and force strength for NATO and non-NATO European states.
Table 3
NATO member states’ armed forces

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Structure</th>
<th>Reform Date</th>
<th>Service Term</th>
<th>Defense % GDP</th>
<th>Active-Duty Forces</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albania</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium**</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgaria**</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Croatia</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czech Rep.**</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark**</td>
<td>Conscript*</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4-12 mo.</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonia**</td>
<td>Conscript</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8-11 mo.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France**</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany**</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece**</td>
<td>Conscript</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>12 mo.</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary**</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iceland</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy**</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvia**</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithuania**</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luxembourg**</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands**</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>Conscript</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>12 mo.</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland**</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal**</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania**</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovakia**</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovenia**</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain**</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>Conscript</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>6-15 mo.</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK**</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>1963</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>1973</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. **EU member state
Note. Denmark only utilizes conscription when the number of volunteers is insufficient. Conscription in Germany will be suspended July 1, 2011, with a planned force reduction to 185,000.
Table 4

*Non-NATO European states’ armed forces*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Structure</th>
<th>Reform Date</th>
<th>Service Term</th>
<th>Defense % GDP</th>
<th>Active-Duty Forces</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armenia</td>
<td>Conscript</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>24 mo.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria**</td>
<td>Conscript</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>6 mo.</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Azerbaijan</td>
<td>Conscript</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>12-18 mo.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belarus</td>
<td>Conscript</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>12-18 mo.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bosnia-Herzegovina</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyprus**</td>
<td>Conscript</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>25 mo.</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland**</td>
<td>Conscript</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>6-12 mo.</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>Conscript</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>18 mo.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland**</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macedonia</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>9 mo.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malta**</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moldova</td>
<td>Conscript</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>12 mo.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montenegro</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>Conscript</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>12 mo.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serbia</td>
<td>Conscript*</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>6 mo.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden**</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>Conscript</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>260 days</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukraine</td>
<td>Conscript</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>12-18 mo.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* **EU member state

*Note.* Serbia plans to end conscription in 2011.


Conscription served as a pillar of European security strategy during the Cold War, being nearly universally practiced across the divided continent. Exceptions to this rule were the UK, which abolished conscription in 1963, Luxembourg, and the neutral states of Ireland and Malta. Legitimated by the policy of deterrence, conscription existed as the most efficient method to recruit the large numbers of troops necessary to guard against a possible territorial attack. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, the logic of maintaining large standing armies for the purpose of territorial defense fell apart.
As shown in Table 3, NATO member states reacted to the disappearance of any direct threat on the borders of Europe by cashing in on the peace dividend. Defense budgets were slashed and have remained at depressed levels, most notably in Western Europe, where only France, Great Britain, and Greece meet or exceed NATO’s two percent defense-spending goal (Germany spent 1.4 percent of GDP on defense in 2009). Cuts in spending were accompanied by cuts in force strength, another trend demonstrated in Table 3. These considerations of cost savings fueled what Haltiner and Tresch (2008) have defined as the ‘Downsizing’ European military reform wave, which spanned the first half of the 1990s (p. 173). Lacking any clear strategic vision for reform, shrinking military budgets created shrinking armies that no longer required the mass mobilization of the male population to fill their ranks. Belgium became the first Allied state to respond to these developments by abandoning conscription, transitioning to an all-volunteer force in 1994.

An overabundance of supply was not the only problem that conscription presented to European militaries in the new security context – equally important was a shortage of skill. As the Gulf War demonstrated in 1990, conscript armies were not up to the task of responding to new security threats. Whereas Britain’s all-volunteer force deployed 30,000 soldiers to the Saudi Arabian theater, France could only manage to send 13,000, despite having a military nearly double the size of the British (Boène, 2003, p. 114). Where conscripts are not prohibited by law from participating in foreign deployments, they are precluded by inadequate training that renders them incompetent to fulfill the highly specialized tasks of out-of-area missions. As Haltiner and Tresch (2008) have argued, the increase in out-of-area, multinational missions since 1990 has served as a
catalyst for the phasing-out of conscription across the continent. In a study of 27 European countries, the authors found a significant negative correlation between conscript ratio and participation in out-of-area missions (p. 178). A new strategic vision for European security based on the principles of peacekeeping and crisis management provided the impetus for the ‘Professionalization’ reform wave spanning from 1995 to 2001 (p. 174), during which both the Netherlands and France abandoned the policy of conscription.

The trend toward smaller, specialized, all-volunteer forces continued during the first decade of the twenty-first century, with only the European Allied states of Estonia, Greece, Norway, and Turkey holding on to conscription. If the picture is expanded to look at the larger European neighborhood (Table 4), of non-NATO members of the European Union, only Austria, Cyprus, and Finland maintain conscription. In summation: 24 of 28 Allied states and 22 of 27 EU states entrust their security to all-volunteer rather than conscript forces. A final look at the states resisting this trend reveals a consistent narrative and provides an explanation for why conscription has not been phased out completely across Europe.

First, the imperative of territorial defense is not anachronistic in those states who have persistent territorial disputes with their neighbors, such as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Cyprus, Georgia, Greece, Moldavia, Russia, Turkey, and the Ukraine. This also applies to a lesser extent to Estonia, who is still wary of neighboring Russia but may choose to follow the lead of its Baltic neighbors Latvia and Lithuania, who transitioned to all-volunteer forces in 2007 and 2009 respectively (Haltiner & Tresch, 2008, p. 171).

1 Denmark officially has conscription, but it is utilized only when volunteers are insufficient to meet force strength requirements. Information can be found at the Danish Defence website: http://forsvaret.dk.
Second, states who remained outside of the Cold War alliance system built their militaries to deter threats without the assistance of a collective security guarantee. They generally maintain a militia system based on large ratios of reserves and have not faced political pressure to end conscription (Jehn & Selden, 2002, p. 96). This applies to Austria, Finland, and Switzerland, though Sweden faced similar conditions and adopted an all-volunteer force in 2010. Lastly, Norway is a unique case. It is an Alliance member, but its force structure resembles the non-aligned states, with an active to reserve ratio of 1:8 (Jehn & Selden, 2002, p. 97). Though these states have chosen to retain conscription, they have reduced the share of conscripts serving. Haltiner and Tresch (2008) have calculated that the average proportion of conscripts has dropped from 60 percent during the Cold War to 26 percent in 2006 (p. 172). As European militaries modernize to adapt to the increasingly complex threat scenarios in the international security environment, conscripts are at best degenerating into a second-rate pool of reserves, and at worst losing their function altogether (Haltiner & Tresch, 2008, p. 175).
CHAPTER 3
THE WEHRPF LICHT DEBATE

The arguments around the issue of conscription in Germany are well established in the literature. Gareis (2010) has described the debate as one between rivaling traditionalist and liberal-progressive camps, both firmly entrenched in their positions and selectively citing political, social, and institutional reasons to support their views (p. 27). This chapter will provide an overview of the main arguments favored by conscription’s supporters and detractors.

Arguments in Favor of Conscription

Traditionalists start from the position that security is of primary importance when weighing the legitimacy of conscription in a democratic state. Though the Wehrpflicht offers other benefits in a democracy, such an intrusion into the individual lives of citizens can only be justified when national security is at stake (Kirsch, 2010, p. 199). They dispute the assertion that the transformed security environment has freed Germany from the responsibility of maintaining a robust capacity for territorial defense. Though a territorial attack seems unlikely, a threat could develop over the medium to long-term, and the Bundeswehr must be prepared to double the size of its force if required. Conscription gives the armed forces the flexibility to respond to unexpected threats through increased mobilization (Klein, 2009, pp. 180-181). Suspending conscription
would erase this option, as it could not be reinstated in times of crisis without further escalating the conflict (Kirsch, 2010, p. 202). Furthermore, Germany has a special responsibility to provide for peace and security on the European continent, given its central geographical location and political weight. New threats also have a territorial dimension that requires the development of contingency plans with “area-covering” military measures. For example, a terrorist attack could threaten infrastructure networks across the country or continent. Conscription provides a ready pool of first-responders (Unterseher, 2003, p. 69). Additionally, conscripts continue to serve a valuable function in a modern Bundeswehr that has shifted its focus to out-of-area missions. Though they cannot be deployed abroad, they fill a supportive role at home, taking care of domestic duties so that professional soldiers can develop the specialized skills necessary for international crisis management (Schmidt, 2010, p. 153). These territorially bound soldiers also play an important role in natural catastrophe response efforts (Kirsch, 2010, p. 201). In short, the end of the Cold War did not spell the end of history. Security risks both old and new threaten all citizens, and conscription remains a legitimate means to organize collective defense.

Recruitment concerns represent a second traditionalist argument. Conscription provides the armed forces with an essential recruitment pool, without which the Bundeswehr would be unable to attract qualified and intelligent career soldiers (Hoffman & Longhurst, 1999, p. 160). Given Germany’s demographic aging, employers face a highly competitive labor market where young talent is in high demand and short supply. The Bundeswehr’s limited budget places it at a disadvantage, as it must compete with private firms who can offer superior monetary incentives and fringe benefits.
Additionally, the *Bundeswehr* must confront a shift in social values, whereby interest in serving in the armed forces has declined, especially among the young and educated (Tresch, 2008, p. 77). Under the system of conscription, between 40 and 50 percent of career soldiers are recruited during their obligatory military service (Unterseher, 2003, p. 71; Klein, 2009, p. 182). A conscript army is the smarter, more modern army. The *Wehrpflicht* “is the best way to attract the sort of recruits the armed forces are looking for: not born warriors drawn to violence but thoughtful folk with varied talents who can win over local populations even as they hunt terrorists” (“At ease,” 2010).

Traditionalists contend that an all-volunteer *Bundeswehr* would not suffer alone in its recruitment woes – the social service sector would also be robbed of *Zivildienst*, which provides 90,000 young men each year for social work in hospitals, homes for the disabled and elderly, and kindergartens (Dyson, 2007, p. 22). Without the pool of affordable labor provided by those conscientious objectors who choose to perform social rather than military service, the sector would require a significant injection of government spending in order to hire professional replacements at higher wages. The environment of fiscal austerity would most likely limit such a social spending plan, leaving the sector financially crippled and unable to provide essential services. Beyond the budgetary benefits of *Zivildienst*, young men acquire a sense of social responsibility during their service year and act as positive role models in a field that is traditionally dominated by women. *Zivildienst* also serves as a bridge in the context of demographic change, promoting intergenerational solidarity and understanding (Schroeder, 2010, p. 151).

Traditionalists also claim that conscription strengthens the democratic character of the German Armed Forces, keeping it rooted within civil society and preventing the
development of a state-within-a-state (Dyson, 2007, p.34). The fear of an isolated military has its historical roots in the Weimar Republic, where the Reichswehr rose up in defiance against a democracy it despised (Klein, 2009, pp. 186-187). The Wehrpflicht reinforces the principle of Citizens in Uniform, whereby soldiers represent a diverse spectrum of social backgrounds and political leanings, bring civility to the military barracks, and encourage their families back home to take an interest in military affairs (Hoffman & Longhurst, 1999, pp. 147-148). An all-volunteer force oriented toward the labor market would result in a decline of social representation, with deprived social categories and those with right-wing ideologies being overrepresented. The result is a poor man’s army, alienated from the greater society (Van Doorn, 1975, p. 153).

Finally, the Wehrpflicht has for many traditionalists become a symbol of Germany’s strategic culture. The concept of strategic culture challenges the assumption that all states act in a uniform, rational manner independent of their specific historical or cultural contexts. Rather, a state approaches security through a historical lens. As Hoffman and Longhurst (1999) have argued, the Wehrpflicht is an integral component of a new identity forged after the Second World War, in which the Bundeswehr was to be a service for peace and war was rejected as a legitimate tool of foreign policy (pp. 146-148). According to former Defense Minister Volker Rühe (CDU), abolishing conscription is akin to sanctioning the creation of an intervention army with global power projection, a distinct departure from Germany’s strategic culture (as cited in Hoffman & Longhurst, 1999, p. 158).
Arguments Against Conscription

Supporters of an all-volunteer Bundeswehr argue that the end of the Cold War transformed the international security environment. European mass armies and military strategies oriented toward territorial defense became anachronistic with the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and removal of any direct territorial threat. New security threats, technological advances in weaponry and equipment, and increasing out-of-area missions require less manpower and more brainpower, necessitating a specialization of the armed forces and rendering conscripts, with their limited training and skills, ineffective (Van Doorn, 1975, p. 150). Conscripts cannot be deployed abroad, a significant limitation in an era where crisis response and conflict management define the Bundeswehr’s main tasks. An outdated force structure has weakened the Bundeswehr’s crisis reaction capability and mission performance. Of a force strength of 250,000, only 6,700 troops can be deployed on international missions (“At ease,” 2010). Additionally, officers must be allocated from the intervention and stabilization forces in order to meet the training and education demands required by the Wehrpflicht (Klein, 2009, p. 183). With the unfortunate reality that many conscripts will apply this training toward such menial tasks as cleaning weaponry and chauffeuring officers, this drain on vital resources cannot be strategically justified. The growing number of European states who have chosen to transition to all-volunteer forces demonstrates the growing consensus that the conscription model has passed its expiration date.

Another critical concern voiced by opponents of the Wehrpflicht is the decline in Wehrgerechtigkeit – or the equity of the conscription process. With the reduction in the size of active-duty forces over the past two decades, the Bundeswehr has required less
and less conscripts to fill its ranks. This has changed conscription from a universal to a selective system, rendering it unconstitutional (Jehn & Selden, 2002, p. 95). The Ministry of Defense has responded with measures to hide these disturbing statistics, such as raising the bar for eligibility. In 2000, the Bundeswehr declared 10 percent of potential conscripts unfit to serve, freeing them from all service obligations. As reported by Der Spiegel (“The army doesn’t want you,” 2011), this number climbed to 42.7 percent in 2009. Out of 417,300 young men examined by the Bundeswehr in 2009, 96,185 remained eligible for military service after subtracting those unfit to serve and those who chose to perform an alternative service. Of this number, 63,413 young men were actually required to serve (Froehlingsdorf, Roebel, & Scheuermann, 2010). A conscription system which results in only 15 percent of each age cohort rendering military service is not justifiable.

Opponents of conscription also claim that an all-volunteer force is the more rational economic model. As Pfaffenzeller (2010) has shown, countries with an all-volunteer force have on average lower budgetary defense costs as a percentage of GDP than countries utilizing conscript systems (p. 490). The argument that professional soldiers cost more and therefore will necessarily drive up personnel costs is based on the faulty assumption that a transition to a volunteer-based system would require the same personnel strength. In reality, a professional soldier replaces more than one conscript, in terms of training, experience, skills and motivation (Klein, 2009, p. 185). Furthermore, focusing solely on budgetary personnel costs ignores the hidden costs of the conscript system. The cheap manpower provided by the Wehrpflicht promotes an artificially labor-intensive production process, resulting in an inefficient labor-to-capital ratio.
(Pfaffenzeller, 2010, p. 484; Poutvaara & Wagener, 2007, p. 7). Additionally, the total cost to society of a draftee is not limited to what the government chooses to pay him, but rather includes the value of his lost production elsewhere. These opportunity costs are substantial as conscription ignores the principle of comparative advantage. In non-economic terms, not everyone is equally good at being a soldier, and society suffers when citizens are forced into this role (Poutvaara & Wagener, 2007, p. 7). On the individual level, draftees are burdened with a sustained break from their own economic development, forced to work in the military or social sector instead of investing in their human capital through education or work experience. This results in a lower lifetime wage profile for those who must serve (p. 9). Considering the whole spectrum of costs associated with the Wehrpflicht, it proves to be an expensive alternative to the all-volunteer model.

Finally, supporters of transformation consider the link between democracy and the Wehrpflicht to be highly dubious. As Pfaffenzeller (2010) has shown, countries with conscription appear on average less democratic than countries with all-volunteer forces, based on a comparison using the Freedom House Political Rights index for 2006 (p. 487). There is no evidence for a positive mutually conditional relationship between democracy and conscription. Democratic states such as the U.S. and the U.K. have traditionally maintained all-volunteer forces, while dictators such as Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini started wars with conscription (Klein, 2009, p. 186). Historically speaking, democracy and conscription did not develop simultaneously in Germany, but rather first came together after the Second World War (Pfaffenzeller, 2010, p. 488). Further, the growing selectivity of the Wehrpflicht has discredited the claim that a conscript army ensures the
equal representation of all social strata in the ranks of the Bundeswehr, strengthening its democratic character. More than half of secondary school graduates reject military service and opt for the alternative civilian service (Klein, 2009, p. 181). The fears of a state-within-a-state developing in the absence of the Wehrpflicht are unrealistic. In contrast to the military leadership of the Weimar era, Bundeswehr officers have been educated in the democratic state and are loyal to it. Germany’s unique system of parliamentary control over the armed forces acts as an additional safeguard against non-democratic developments (pp. 186-187). Reformers reject what they see as boilerplate conservative arguments for the Wehrpflicht based on an identity myth born during the heights of the Cold War, a myth which should not prevent the Bundeswehr from transforming into a modern force.
CHAPTER 4
EXPLAINING RESISTANCE TO REFORM

The defensive posture of the traditionalist camp succeeded in keeping conscription in Germany for the past two decades, long after most other European states had undertaken the transformation to an all-volunteer force. What makes Germany a unique case? What were the primary factors behind the resilience of the *Wehrpflicht* since 1990? The public debate in support of conscription has been dominated by the normative arguments. Conscription keeps the armed forces democratic and rooted in civil society, fulfils Alliance responsibilities, maintains a strategic culture where soft power dominates, and serves as a cornerstone of Germany’s post-war identity. However, the primary factors behind the *Wehrpflicht*’s staying power are not actually value-based. The domestic politics of base closures, military recruitment concerns, and the dependence of the social service sector on conscientious objectors served as the main roadblocks to a comprehensive reform of the Bundeswehr’s force structure prior to 2010.

*Domestic Politics of Base Closures*

In a 2001 interview with *Der Spiegel*, Richard von Weizsäcker, the chairman of the special commission tasked with providing a roadmap for the transformation of the Bundeswehr, identified the key obstacle to reform: “Every member of parliament knows that no single chapter of reform will attract the attention of his colleagues more than the
question of military bases” (Schult, 2001b). Generally speaking, *Bundeswehr* reform has little pull on the imagination of the German electorate. According to an October 2006 poll, only 10 percent of the population shows an active interest in defense matters. A majority of those polled claimed to have little or no interest at all (Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach, 2010, p. 325). However, military bases provide a clear exception to this rule. While seemingly an abstract exercise of military efficiency on paper, local populations associate base closures with lost jobs and economic decline (Weiland, 2004). As the most visible and least popular consequence of the structural transformation of the *Bundeswehr*, base closures have embedded the reform process in the arena of electoral politics, mobilizing stiff opposition from federal, regional, and local politicians. Conscription has been tightly bound with the domestic politics of base closures, as politicians recognize that a professional army would be smaller and demand fewer military bases. Electoral strategy has served as a key factor behind the *Wehrpflicht*’s resilience in the face of military-strategic pressures that favor an all-volunteer force (Dyson, 2007).

Since 1990, the two mass political parties have had little to gain and much to lose from addressing the issue of conscription. In constituencies housing military bases, any talk of reforming the *Bundeswehr* into an all-volunteer force could be spun by the opposition into a threat to the local economy and used as electoral ammunition. SPD and Union candidates directly compete for these seats and have been averse to politicizing the conscription issue. The smaller parties, such as the Greens and the Liberals, have been less constrained in their opposition to conscription, as their candidates are elected from state lists and do not have to directly defend a constituency (Dyson, 2007, p. 78). In
contrast to the clear electoral costs of opposing conscription, political gains are diffuse. Championing the modernization of the *Bundeswehr* is unlikely to stir the excitement of the base. In an October 2009 poll conducted by the *Bundeswehr Social Science Institute*, most respondents had little knowledge of current *Bundeswehr* missions abroad, or had in fact never even heard of them (p. 34).

The politics of base closures has worked as a brake on *Bundeswehr* reform over the past two decades (Dyson, 2007). In 1995, Defense Minister Volker Rühe’s (CDU) plan to close bases and redirect DM 1.5 billion toward investment met with stiff opposition from local politicians and unions. In response, Rühe modified his ambitions and reduced the number of base closures (p. 65). Similarly, Defense Minister Rudolf Scharping’s (SPD) 2001 reform moderated the Weizsäcker Commission’s recommended troop reduction in order to keep more bases open (Dyson, 2007, p. 110). The Chairman of the Federal Armed Forces Association commended Scharping for his balanced approach (Schult, 2001a). Still, the political outcry came from every corner. Paul Breuer, Defense Speaker of the Union’s parliamentary group, accused Scharping of making indiscriminate cuts in a haphazard fashion. The Liberal Parliamentary Secretary Joerg van Essen criticized the Defense Minister’s arrogant and cold approach (“Scharping will,” 2001). The Director of the Bavarian State Chancellery claimed that his state was being used by the SPD as a political punching bag (Schult, 2001a). 7,000 protestors took to the streets in the state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, forming a human chain in front of a base marked for elimination. The social-democratic governor publicly broke solidarity with his Defense Minister and pledged to keep fighting for the base (“10,000 machten,” 2001). In his own defense, Scharping claimed that from a purely
military calculation, 100 additional bases should have been closed (“Scharping will,” 2001).

Scharping’s successor to the Defense Ministry Peter Struck (SPD) further reduced the size of the Bundeswehr with his 2003 reform and set forth a plan to close 105 bases by 2010 (Dyson, 2007, p. 141). The Federal Armed Forces Association again supported the necessity of the base closures, but this did not temper the political firestorm. Parliamentary member Veronika Bellman (CDU) likened the economic threat to her region of Saxony to a nuclear catastrophe (“Große Unruhe,” 2004). Governors, including social democrats, criticized the closures for ignoring regional economic impacts and demanded federal aid for the transition (“Verständnis,” 2004). Struck rejected these appeals and vowed to push through the reform despite political resistance. He defended his decision to preserve the Wehrpflicht, arguing that its abolition would require the closure of an additional 60 bases (“Struck kontert,” 2004).

As the above survey of political rhetoric surrounding base closures reveals, the growing strategic irrelevance of conscripts did not stop politicians from fighting for the preservation of the Wehrpflicht. Conscription has been a stopgap on force downsizing, preventing base closures that could hurt politicians representing the targeted regions at the ballot box. However, as a recent study by Paloyo, Vance, and Vorell (2010) has shown, the assumption that communities facing base closures will suffer economic decline is not supported by the data. The authors found no significant impact of base closures on key socioeconomic indicators such as unemployment, household income, regional output, or tax revenue (p. 6). Bundeswehr bases are less integrated into the local economy than realized: they are small, self-sufficient, and autonomously administered.
The majority of provisions are not procured locally, but from a central location in Oldenburg, Niedersachsen. Most soldiers commute rather than settling their families in the area. The study suggested that base closures may in fact have a positive impact on the local economy, offering prime real estate for civilian development projects (pp. 12-13). However, election cycles are short, and politicians who promise growth at some unknown point in the future following a painful adjustment process are unlikely to emerge victorious. Abstract future gains do not trump tangible and immediate losses in the political game. In a strategic effort to save local jobs, and their jobs, politicians fought to keep their bases manned and open, a primary factor behind the political non-debate over conscription.

Recruitment

While politicians feared the electoral consequences of transitioning to an all-volunteer force, leading voices within the Ministry of Defense and military leadership argued that abandoning the Wehrpflicht would be a “fatal” mistake, cutting off the recruitment leg of the Bundeswehr (Hengst & Meiritz, 2009). General Harald Kujat, Bundeswehr Chief of Staff between 2000 and 2002, claimed that eliminating the pool of conscripts would render the armed forces incapable of fulfilling their international responsibilities (“Bundeswehr nur beschränkt,” 2001). As previously mentioned, nearly half of professional soldiers begin as conscripts (Unterseher, 2003, p. 71; Klein, 2009, p. 182).

The Defense Ministry looked to European states who had made the transition to an all-volunteer force and was not comforted by the results. After France ended
conscription in 2001, it saw a rise in personnel costs from 30 to 37 percent of the defense budget, despite starkly reducing the total force strength. Likewise, Belgium saw personnel costs rise from 50 to 58 percent after the 1994 transition. Spain saw an increase from 41 to 50 percent (Buch, 2010b, p. 10). Rising personnel costs prevented these armed forces from realizing a major aim of the modernizing reforms, namely to increase investment. In fact, France, Belgium, and Spain all saw decreases in the investment share of their defense budgets (Buch, 2010b, p. 11). According to a 2005 internal study conducted by the Ministry of Defense, professionalizing the Bundeswehr without a force reduction would potentially raise personnel costs by €7.2 billion per year. Though the study admitted that accurately predicting the costs of an all-volunteer force was a challenge, it stressed the fact that all of Germany’s neighbors who had transitioned away from conscription had underestimated the resulting rise in personnel costs (Ilse, 2005).

In addition to the suspension of the Wehrpflicht resulting in a potential rise in personnel costs, defense experts also feared a downward spiral in terms of recruit quality (Ilse, 2005). In this respect, Spain serves as a valuable example. Attracting voluntary recruits has proven to be a real problem, with the result that standards have had to be downgraded. The recruitment age was raised, physical fitness requirements lowered, and a satisfactory intelligence test score reduced to below the population average. Seven percent of the Spanish Armed Forces must be pulled from the immigrant population. Despite these measures, Spain has not been able to achieve force strength targets (Buch, 2010b, pp. 11-12).
A professional *Bundeswehr* would likely also suffer from a dearth of qualified volunteers, and supporters of the *Wehrpflicht* have argued that its suspension would result in the development of a “redneck army” (U. Winkelmann, personal communication, January 28, 2011). According to General Hartmut Bagger, *Bundeswehr* Chief of Staff between 1996 and 1999, conscription raises the level of professionalism in the armed forces. In a 1996 editorial written for *FOCUS Magazin*, Bagger argued that Germany should not follow the trend of its European neighbors and adopt a “professional” army, as the *Wehrpflicht* provided the *Bundeswehr* with clear advantages over an all-volunteer force. Conscription makes available the full potential of the next generation for military service, resulting in a more intelligent and balanced army. A conscript force is younger and has more vitality: the average age of a German soldier is 26 years – 12 years younger than the average found in all-volunteer forces. In contrast, professional armies are relegated to recruiting from the economically and socially disadvantaged segments of society, which has a negative impact on the quality and culture of the armed forces (Bagger, 1996).

According to Kirsch (as cited in Birnbaum, 2010), the *Bundeswehr* faced little chance of competing with private firms for the “brightest minds and most skilled hands” in the absence of the *Wehrpflicht*. Large companies such as BMW and BASF, as well as competitive small and medium-sized firms, offered a flexibility that the large apparatus of the *Bundeswehr* could not match. Furthermore, the *Bundeswehr* potentially faced a higher hurdle than many of its neighbors in making itself an attractive employer. For much of the educated population, a career in the military is not desirable for largely historical reasons. In a 2008 study conducted by the *Bundeswehr Social Science*
Institute, the armed services ranked in 22nd place in a list of employers selected by young men as most desirable (p. 130). Fifty-five percent of male participants could never imagine a career with the Bundeswehr, increasing to 63 percent when limited to those who had obtained the qualifications for university entrance (p. 142). The effort to create a new German identity after the Second World War has resulted in a demilitarized social consciousness, to the detriment of the Bundeswehr. In other words, the reeducation has been too successful (T. Wiegold, personal communication, January 24, 2011). An all-volunteer force would require a strong marketing campaign and increased financial incentives, further adding to costs of recruitment without guaranteeing successful results.

Social Service Sector

The perceived electoral consequences of base closures and military recruitment concerns worked together with a third factor to buttress the Wehrpflicht against the growing pressures for reform since 1990: the dependence of the social service sector on the cheap labor of conscientious objectors. Much of the public debate in Germany over conscription has focused on the social rather than the military dimension of reform. Germany’s Basic Law establishes the right of conscientious objection and provides the legal basis for Zivildienst as the alternative social service to the Wehrpflicht (GG, §12a). Consequently, the end of the Wehrpflicht also means the end of Zivildienst. As argued in a 1990 cover story by Der Spiegel (“Dann machen”), conscientious objectors had become an “irreplaceable stopgap” for Germany’s beleaguered social service sector. While fewer soldiers in the barracks concerned almost no one, a decline in the number of available conscientious objectors threatened the German care system with total collapse.
The development of this dependency can be traced back to 1984, when a new law abolished the oral examination requirement for avoiding military service. The de facto ability for young men to choose between military or social service resulted in growing numbers of conscientious objectors. The Federal Office for Civilian Service responded by increasing the number of positions open to the so-called “Zivis” (“Dann machen,” 1990). Table 5 shows the development in the number of conscientious objectors vis-à-vis conscripts between 1984 and 2009, as well as the number of available Zivildienst positions.

<table>
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<th>Year</th>
<th>Recruited for Civil Service</th>
<th>Recruited for Mil. Service</th>
<th>Ratio Civ : Mil</th>
<th>Civil Service Positions</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Recruited for Civil Service</th>
<th>Recruited for Mil. Service</th>
<th>Ratio Civ : Mil</th>
<th>Civil Service Positions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>48,886</td>
<td>184,638</td>
<td>1:3.8</td>
<td>88,397</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>124,888</td>
<td>144,647</td>
<td>1:1.2</td>
<td>190,222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>52,587</td>
<td>192,614</td>
<td>1:3.7</td>
<td>98,416</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>130,248</td>
<td>129,441</td>
<td>1:1</td>
<td>192,222</td>
</tr>
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<td>1989</td>
<td>61,938</td>
<td>173,184</td>
<td>1:2.8</td>
<td>111,474</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>136,008</td>
<td>123,812</td>
<td>1:1</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>94,731</td>
<td>188,697</td>
<td>1:2</td>
<td>120,735</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>105,484</td>
<td>102,600</td>
<td>1:1</td>
<td>159,067</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>74,450</td>
<td>210,981</td>
<td>1:2.8</td>
<td>124,323</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>91,346</td>
<td>79,850</td>
<td>1:1.1</td>
<td>150,793</td>
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<td>1993</td>
<td>102,268</td>
<td>160,611</td>
<td>1:1.6</td>
<td>165,969</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>82,966</td>
<td>71,321</td>
<td>1:2.1</td>
<td>122,186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>106,050</td>
<td>156,964</td>
<td>1:1.5</td>
<td>166,875</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>84,225</td>
<td>67,823</td>
<td>1:2.1</td>
<td>114,872</td>
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<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>110,976</td>
<td>167,450</td>
<td>1:1.5</td>
<td>171,819</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>85,149</td>
<td>68,270</td>
<td>1:2.1</td>
<td>111,450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>127,203</td>
<td>169,730</td>
<td>1:1.3</td>
<td>177,343</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>90,555</td>
<td>68,304</td>
<td>1:1.3</td>
<td>111,499</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Data on military and civil service recruitment from Spiegel Online, Gesamtzahl der Einberufungen zum Zivildienst und zum Grundwehrdienst pro Jahr [Graphic]. Reflects total number of men called to service during the year and does not indicate the number of men in service at any one point in time. Note. Data on civil service positions from Bundesamt für den Zivildienst (2011). Indicates total number of available positions, both open and filled.

Two trends are clear from the data presented in Table 5. First, the number of conscientious objectors has grown significantly since 1984, increasing every year until 2002 and surpassing the number of military conscripts since 2001. Second, the number of available positions for conscientious objectors tripled between 1984 and 2001,
reaching a peak of 192,222 before subsequent reductions. Although Zivildienst is legally limited by the principle of labor market neutrality, which means that conscientious objectors cannot be used to replace existing positions or prevent the creation of new job openings, employers often ignored these limitations and saddled the young men with responsibilities beyond their qualifications (Deggerich, 2004). The resulting system preserved an artificially low level of full-time professionals in favor of a functional dependence on Zivildienst (“Dann machen,” 1990).

This social dimension of Bundeswehr policy increased the perceived electoral consequences of suspending the draft. As Dyson (2007) has argued, political leaders wished to avoid the question of how the social service sector would transition away from Zivildienst. They feared committing to higher social spending, a likely consequence of replacing the cheap labor of conscientious objectors with professionals at market value. For example, in the run-up to the 1998 federal elections, SPD strategists concluded that abolishing conscription would be a vote loser. An internal discussion paper found that the end of Zivildienst would both increase costs and reduce the quality of services provided to society’s most vulnerable (Dyson, 2007, p. 77). SPD leadership was particularly affected by what Dyson (2007) has called the ‘mobilization of bias’ (p. 96) within the social policy sphere, which worked to prevent an open discussion on reforming conscription in order to preserve Zivildienst. As the self-proclaimed party of social solidarity, the SPD again avoided the issue before the 2002 federal elections (p. 97). Thus the social service sector’s direct benefit from the existing “military-civil service complex” worked to preserve conscription despite military-strategic arguments that
favored an all-volunteer force (U. Winkelmann, personal communication, January 28, 2011).

It is important to note that resistance from within the social service sector to reform has diminished significantly in recent years. Similar to the Wehrpflicht, the length of Zivildienst has been progressively reduced since 1990 from 20 months to 6 months. As a result, conscientious objectors can no longer perform advanced tasks due to inadequate training and service time. In response, most service providers have reduced their numbers of employed conscientious objectors and transitioned to a more stable staffing model (Deggerich, 2004). As described in a July 2010 report by the Center for Conscientious Objectors (Zentralstelle-KDV), the end of Zivildienst would in no way lead to a social catastrophe. The social service sector presently employs 3.5 million people, only 1 percent of whom are providing Zivildienst (p. 4). Table 5 captures this development, showing a 42 percent reduction in the number of positions open to conscientious objectors between 2001 and 2009. Thus, the Zivildienst factor has lost much of its factual basis over the past decade, though it has remained prominent in the public debate.
CHAPTER 5
EXPLAINING THE REFORM’S SUCCESS

Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg’s plan to shrink the Bundeswehr and transform it into an all-volunteer force initially met with stiff resistance in the summer of 2010, especially from within his own Christian-democratic party (“Zoff um Wehrpflicht,” 2010). The factors which had precluded such a fundamental reform in the past remained. Zu Guttenberg’s recommended force size of 165,000² would close the doors on a large number of military bases, and the suspension of conscription would challenge the Bundeswehr and the civilian service sector to attract professionals on the competitive labor market. Old, familiar themes dominated the political debate, with the Wehrpflicht defended as a central pillar of the Union’s platform and a symbol of Germany’s post-war identity (Fischer, 2010). Then, suddenly, political resistance crumbled. The Christian-democratic parties lined up behind the reform, and in December 2010 the government coalition agreed to an all-volunteer Bundeswehr of 185,000. July 1, 2011 will mark the end of conscription in Germany (“Bundeswehrreform,” 2010).

Following two decades of piecemeal reform and paralyzed debate, zu Guttenberg achieved a fundamental transformation of the Bundeswehr within a few short months. Three primary factors enabled this success: changing economic conditions, the growing

² General Volker Wieker, Chief of Staff of the Bundeswehr, presented five alternative structural models to the Cabinet in a June 2010 report, both including and excluding conscript elements. Zu Guttenberg advocated model 4. The full report can be accessed at www.bmvg.de (Bericht des Generalinspekteurs der Bundeswehr zum Prüfaufrag aus der Kabinettssklausur vom 7. Juni 2010).
problem of inequity in the conscription selection system, and zu Guttenberg’s immense popularity.

Financial Realities

The global financial crisis and fears of a Eurozone collapse created the economic conditions necessary for zu Guttenberg to argue that the status quo was no longer sustainable. The Bundeswehr reform agenda benefitted from a political climate of urgency or even panic, as European leaders took bold steps to slow the recession. After taking part in a series of emergency bailouts for embattled states and a €750 billion bid to stabilize the Euro, Germany positioned itself as an example of fiscal responsibility (“Sondersitzung,” 2010). In the context of a historic austerity package passed in June 2010 with the aim of saving €80 billion by 2014, the Ministry of Defense was asked to contribute to the effort with cuts totaling €8.3 billion over four years (Marsh, 2011). Zu Guttenberg presented his structural reform as the only viable option to meet the savings goal (U. Winkelmann, personal communication, January 28, 2011).

Conscripts cost the Bundeswehr €400 million each year, a personnel investment with low returns in light of their limited skills and deployability. In addition, conscription employs between 10,000 and 20,000 professional soldiers with training and organizational tasks (“At ease,” 2010). Zu Guttenberg argued that the financial austerity measures required a significant cut to force size, with the suspension of conscription as the least complicated and most effective method to this end (T. Wiegold, personal communication, January 24, 2011). Ending conscription would quickly remove 55,000
soldiers from the equation and allow the professional soldiers tasked with supporting the *Wehrpflicht* system to be used more effectively (Wieker, 2010, p. 55).

Zu Guttenberg was heavily criticized for framing the reform as a response to the budget crunch and stepped back from his initial economic argument, choosing to stress the security dimension behind the transformation to a smaller, more mobile all-volunteer force. His argumentation included all of the talking points of the liberal-progressive side of the debate: a transformation of the international security environment, an increase in the complexity of technology and mission parameters, the geographic and training limitations of conscripts, and the need to increase the Bundeswehr’s deployability and competencies in out-of-area missions. Though this strategic argument is very strong, it had never alone been sufficient to disturb the political comfort of maintaining the status quo. The economic crisis and subsequent austerity measures removed the option of staying the course and maintaining present troop levels, opening a window for fundamental reform. In zu Guttenberg’s words: “We needed a loud wake-up call to prove the need for reform. If we had just had a political debate about security, I am not sure how much the future of the Bundeswehr would have been discussed beyond expert groups” (Marsh, 2011).

The economic case for a smaller *Bundeswehr* is clear. More questionable from a purely budgetary standpoint is the preference for professional over conscript soldiers. A professional soldier costs upward of three-times the amount of a conscript per year (Unterseher, 2003, p. 65). As discussed previously, neighboring states who had already made the transition to all-volunteer forces were unable to avoid rising personnel costs as a consequence. As the strategic argument in favor of an all-volunteer force has remained
relatively static, its explanatory powers for the rapid success of the reform are limited. More decisive in this case is the question of *Wehrgerechtigkeit*, or the equity of the draft. The justice of the conscription system is directly related to the size of the armed forces, as downsizing requires fewer men to serve. If downsizing continues past a certain point, conscription can no longer be legitimated. As explained in the next section, the *Bundeswehr* had reached this point.

*Wehrgerechtigkeit*

The increasing misfit between the supply and demand of young men for basic military service played a decisive role in the decision to abandon the *Wehrpflicht* in Germany. As stipulated by Article 12 of the German Basic Law, “No person may be required to perform work of a particular kind except within the framework of a traditional duty of community service that applies generally and equally to all.” Article 12a further defines conscription or an alternative service as one such traditional duty for young men upon reaching the age of 18. A pressing concern for the government from a constitutional perspective was an increasing sense of arbitrariness in the conscript selection process. The decline in demand for conscripts was a consequence of a shrinking *Bundeswehr*, further intensified by a decreasing conscript to volunteer ratio. What developed was a de facto selective conscription system that potentially violated the constitutional requirement for *Wehrgerechtigkeit*, placing the burden of service on an ever-smaller percentage of eligible young men (Trenkamp & Wiemann. 2009).
Table 6
Overview of Wehrgerechtigkeit, 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Birth Year</th>
<th>Cohort Size</th>
<th>Unfit to Serve</th>
<th>Percent Unfit to Serve</th>
<th>Conscripted</th>
<th>Percent Conscripted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>445,564</td>
<td>109,947</td>
<td>24.7</td>
<td>97,928</td>
<td>22.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>437,465</td>
<td>118,173</td>
<td>27.0</td>
<td>81,821</td>
<td>18.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>435,898</td>
<td>128,314</td>
<td>29.4</td>
<td>72,977</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>436,412</td>
<td>144,551</td>
<td>33.1</td>
<td>67,227</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>451,151</td>
<td>185,685</td>
<td>41.2</td>
<td>67,509</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Data from Bundesregierung answer to German Bundestag, Drucksache 17/1281, March 30, 2010

Note. These numbers are final in so far as men are ineligible to be drafted after the age of 23. 1986 is the last age cohort to qualify.

Table 6 above illustrates the increasing inequity in the conscription selection process across five male cohorts. One striking trend is the increasing percentage of males found unfit to serve and thus freed from any service obligation. This number increased from 24.7 percent of the 1982 cohort to 41.2 percent of the 1986 cohort. The expansion of qualification requirements reflected a clear political strategy (Flohr & Popp, 2007). As the courts had interpreted the measure of draft inequity as the percentage of men fit to serve but not drafted, a policy which raised the bar for qualification had the effect of distorting the statistics to make the conscription process seem more legitimate. A truer indicator of the justice of the draft is the percent of men from each cohort who actually fulfilled the obligation of military service. This number decreased from 22 percent of the 1982 cohort to 15 percent of the 1986 cohort.

In 1999 the District Court of Potsdam ruled in favor of defendant Volker Wiedersberg, who had refused to render either military or civilian service. The court suspended the legal action against Wiedersberg, ruling that the Wehrpflicht was no longer a legitimate infringement on an individual’s fundamental rights given the changed geopolitical environment (“Ex-Verteidigungsminister,” 1999). In a landmark 2002 judgment, the Federal Constitutional Court rejected the lower court’s request for a
constitutional review of the *Wehrpflicht*, ruling that decisions of national military defense were “issues of political prudence and economic expediency” and could not “be reduced to a constitutional question” (Federal Ministry of Defense, 2002, p. 32). The court’s decision that it had no jurisdiction in questions of geopolitical calculus was a clear victory for the government, but the question of draft equity remained highly contested and open to legal challenges.

In 2004 the District Administrative Court of Cologne ruled that conscription no longer upheld the principle of *Wehrgerechtigkeit*. This decision was appealed by the government and overturned by the Federal Administrative Court in Leipzig, which as previously mentioned, interpreted draft equity with a calculation including only those men deemed fit for military service but not drafted (“Wehrgerechtigkeit gewahrt,” 2005). In 2008 the District Administrative Court in Cologne again ruled in favor of a plaintiff who complained that the *Wehrpflicht* violated the constitutional principle of *Wehrgerechtigkeit* and referred the case to the Federal Constitutional Court. The court rejected the case, arguing that the lower court had not provided sufficient evidence for its ruling. The media interpreted the court’s refusal to review the case as a clear reluctance to decide the fate of such a politically loaded issue (Titz & Leffers, 2009). However, it is unlikely that the Federal Constitutional Court could have avoided ruling on the equity of the *Wehrpflicht* in the long-term. In an interview with *Bild am Sonntag* in August 2010, zu Guttenberg stated that the *Bundeswehr* was already a de facto all-volunteer force, warning that the *Wehrpflicht* would not survive a legal challenge in front of the Constitutional Court (Backhaus & Eichinger, 2010). A legal ruling against the constitutionality of the *Wehrpflicht* would be an embarrassment to the government and
the Bundeswehr. Zu Guttenberg wanted to preempt this situation, recognizing that if conscription could not be sustained, the transition to an all-volunteer force would be more successful and enjoy greater legitimacy as part of a politically negotiated military reform.

The zu Guttenberg Factor

To summarize the points made so far, conscription in Germany continued to exist as an essentially closed system after 1990, despite the fundamental transformation of the international security environment in which it was embedded. Previous Bundeswehr reforms did not have a deep impact on the model, aiming only for minimal adaptation by making small adjustments in the length of service time or the conscript ratio. Internally, the system suffered from a structural weakness: the inverse relationship between equity and force size. As the Bundeswehr diminished in number, the structure of the model became increasingly unstable. The external shock of the financial crisis and subsequent austerity measures further destabilized the system. A final factor, quantitatively difficult to capture but nevertheless essential to explain how such an entrenched policy was reformed out of existence, is the quality of the man behind the reform: previous Minister of Defense Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg. His ability to communicate the need for change and attract popular attention to the reform of a traditionally unsexy ministry acted as a final catalyst in the push to modernize the Bundeswehr into an all-volunteer force.

Zu Guttenberg consistently ranked as the most popular politician in Germany during his time in office. According to a February 2011 ARD-DeutschlandTREND poll, which asked respondents about their level of satisfaction with leading politicians, zu Guttenberg scored highest with 68 percent. Similarly, the ZDF Politbarometer showed zu
Guttenberg to be Germany’s most beloved politician since he took over the Ministry of Defense in October 2009. This is an astonishing fact given the acknowledged “friendly disinterest” in security policy in Germany (Köhler, 2005). If one has ambitions for a political career, a general rule is to keep away from the Ministry of Defense. Journalists rarely report on military issues, politicians do not debate them, and the public does not care to listen (C. Thiels, personal communication, January 31, 2011). In contrast to his predecessors, zu Guttenberg had the charisma factor. He exuded a young, modern, and transatlantic attitude. As described by a former defense correspondent who traveled with the Minister, his self-esteem seemed to come through every pore (U. Winkelmann, personal communication, January 28, 2011). When he spoke, he electrified the room. In short, zu Guttenberg was just the type of political animal needed to shake the Union into abandoning such a symbolically loaded policy as the Wehrpflicht.

Zu Guttenberg’s resignation from office on March 1, 2011 following allegations that he plagiarized sections of his doctoral thesis may result in renewed political debate over the feasibility and implementation of the planned Bundeswehr reforms, but his popularity has not suffered as a consequence. In fact, he has emerged from the scandal more popular than before. In a March 2011 ARD-DeutschlandTREND poll, 73 percent of respondents expressed satisfaction with his performance. Zu Guttenberg’s uncanny ability to attract attention and shape public opinion in an era dominated by information overload will be sorely missed by his party and Bundeswehr advocates.
Following two decades of gridlocked debate, the *Bundeswehr* has made the transition to an all-volunteer force under the policy leadership of former Minister of Defense Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg. In the context of the general European trend toward abandoning conscription since the end of the Cold War, this development seems inevitable in hindsight. However, the reform faced serious roadblocks. Electoral politics mobilized stiff opposition from federal, regional, and local politicians, who saw military base closures as jeopardizing their political ambitions. The Ministry of Defense and military leadership believed that an all-volunteer *Bundeswehr* would be incapable of recruiting professional soldiers from the competitive labor market. Finally, *Zivildienst* had developed into a pillar of the social service sector, and politicians wished to avoid the financial and social consequences of its suspension.

Three developments converged to question the sustainability of the status quo and allow for the suspension of conscription in Germany. First, the unprecedented financial crisis and near collapse of the Eurozone demanded decisive action from the government, who responded with a strict austerity package. A *Bundeswehr* of 250,000 was no longer a financial possibility. Second, rising concerns of injustice in the conscript selection system, whereby only 15 percent of a cohort reported to the barracks, threatened to send the issue of the *Wehrpflicht* in front of the Constitutional Court. Third, zu Guttenberg’s
extreme popularity gave him the legitimacy and political power to finally push through transformational structural reform.

The aim of this thesis was limited in scope, providing a general understanding of the forces and faces behind Germany’s delayed transition to an all-volunteer force. An interesting question now arises. How will Germany choose to use its new Bundeswehr? Chancellor Merkel has heralded the reform as a symbol of Germany’s readiness to change. But change into what? The suspension of conscription may be the next step in a larger security strategy development, in which Germany will claim a greater stake in the international security infrastructure and adopt a “normalized” posture toward the use of force. Conversely, the financial necessity of the reform could be a signal that Germany will continue to slash its defense budget and further retreat into an already markedly force-adverse culture after its departure from Afghanistan.

Based on Germany’s policy of multilateral integration and its increasing participation in out-of-area missions, the first hypothesis is more likely. An interesting development that deserves further research is defense synergy on the European level. Europe spends about the same on defense as the U.S., but it doesn’t get the same power (C. Thiels, personal communication, January 31, 2011). Each state uses its own assault rifle and its own type of ammunition. As all EU states are under pressure in regards to their defense budgets, it makes sense to pool resources and capabilities on a supranational level (U. Winkelmann, personal communication, January 28, 2011). Germany’s increasing participation in this process is especially interesting, as strict Parliamentary control over mission parameters presents a sizeable problem for a common European defense strategy.
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