Journal of Military and Strategic Studies

VOLUME 25, ISSUE 1

Conscription as Civic Participation: Republican Citizenship and Civil–Military Relations in Germany

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Introduction

The current debate in Germany about reintroducing conscription for all male citizens, or about alternative forms of national service, is strikingly shaped by liberal ideas and arguments. At its core are individual freedoms, questions about the legitimacy and limits of state intervention, and the efficiency of voluntary recruitment systems. This perspective is historically understandable, particularly in light of Germany's past, as well as the normative design of the Bundeswehr as a "parliamentary army" under federal authority. However, a purely liberal framing of the issue falls short, as it systematically underemphasizes the relationship between citizenship, political participation, and collective responsibility for defence. This article does not claim that a republican framework is normatively superior to liberal approaches. Instead, it argues that republican political theory offers a distinct analytical lens through which the conscription

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ISSN : 1488-559X

debate can be reinterpreted, highlighting dimensions of civic responsibility and collective self-government that are often less visible in liberal framings.

Against this background, this article asks: How can the German debate on conscription be reinterpreted if one introduces a republican conception of citizenship alongside the dominant liberal framework?

The focus is not on replacing one normative model with another, but on clarifying what becomes visible when conscription is understood through different theoretical lenses. It argues that a republican perspective understands conscription not primarily as state coercion, but as an institutionalized form of civic participation grounded in a *right* to serve. This shift in perspective reconfigures the relationship between freedom and obligation: rather than viewing them as opposites, it interprets them as mutually constitutive elements of political self-government.Importantly, this argument is conceptual rather than prescriptive: it seeks to reconstruct how republican theory reframes questions of obligation, rather than to conclude that conscription is normatively required.

An alternative approach thus emerges from republican theory. Here, citizenship is understood not primarily as a bundle of individual defensive rights, but as a relationship of reciprocal obligations between citizens and the political community. Within this tradition, the willingness to defend the republic does not appear as an external imposition; rather, it is an integral component of *active citizenship*. Military service[2], in this sense, is not merely a duty, but a form of political participation. Historically, this view corresponds to the ideal of a *citizens' army*, in which political membership and military responsibility are institutionally intertwined.

This theoretical shift has important implications for civil–military relations. In liberal frameworks, the professionalization of the military and its separation from society are often seen as safeguards against political misuse. From a republican perspective, however, such separation may weaken the societal embeddedness of the armed forces and thereby erode a key dimension of democratic legitimacy. Germany represents a particularly instructive case in this regard, as it reveals a historically developed tension

[2] In this text, I am referring only to state military actors; private military and security companies are not relevant here.

between military professionalization and republican citizenship with particular clarity. As Eyal Ben-Ari and Efrat Elron (2001) point out, even multinational armed forces implicitly draw on this historical model of the Prussian corps.[3] However, this model represents a form of professionalization that is potentially at odds with republican ideals of broad civic participation.

Conceptually, this argument builds on a distinction between liberal and republican understandings of freedom, citizenship, and political obligation. While liberal approaches emphasize protection from state interference, republican theory highlights the conditions under which individuals can act as self-governing citizens within a political community. In this sense, the republic does not stand in opposition to liberal rights, but provides their institutional and political foundation. Freedom thus appears not only as a defensive right, but also as a right to participate and a responsibility for the political order.

Taken together, these distinctions are intended to clarify the analytical value of republican theory rather than to adjudicate between liberal and republican frameworks. The article contributes by conceptualizing conscription as an institutional expression of republican citizenship, thereby shifting the debate from coercion and voluntariness to the question of how democratic societies organize collective responsibility for defence. The aim is therefore not theoretical replacement, but conceptual differentiation within an ongoing debate about citizenship and collective defence.

Willingness to Perform Military Service as an Expression of Citizenship

With regard to current debates in Germany and elsewhere on recruiting soldiers to protect freedom, it would be reductive to equate republican thinking with a blanket call for universal conscription or with the rejection of standing or volunteer armies. Rather, one can argue that republican principles can also apply under the conditions of modern, professional armed forces. What matters is the extent to which citizens understand themselves as co-sustainers of the political order—whether they are willing

[3] Ben-Ari, Eyal, and Efrat Elron, "Blue Helmets and White Armor: Multi-nationalism and Multiculturalism among UN Peacekeeping Forces," *City & Society* 13, 2 (2001): pp.271–302.

to assume responsibility for its continued existence and to view the military as an expression of citizenship.

From the perspective developed in this article, this does not imply a normative endorsement of any specific recruitment model, but rather highlights how republican theory changes the interpretive framework through which such models are assessed. Against this backdrop, the German debate appears predominantly framed in liberal terms, emphasizing individual voluntariness and freedom of choice. While these liberal concerns are central to democratic legitimacy, they may leave less visible the question of how collective responsibility for democratic self-preservation is conceptualized. Especially in a changing security environment, shaped by interstate conflicts and external threats, the question arises whether recruitment based purely on voluntariness can meet not only the quantitative but also the normative requirements of a democratic political community and its expectations of civic solidarity. This question is not intended as a critique of voluntariness per se, but as an illustration of how different normative frameworks prioritize different aspects of the same institutional arrangement.

From a republican perspective, the focus thus shifts: the key issue is not whether the state demands too much, but whether citizens are adequately integrated into structures of shared political responsibility. Read in this way, republican theory foregrounds a dimension of citizenship that is often less explicitly addressed in liberal accounts, namely the relationship between political membership and collective obligations. The position advanced here, therefore, suggests that republican arguments can be reintroduced as a complementary perspective within the German conscription debate. It is not enough merely to benefit from the democratic order. Those who live within it should actively support the liberal-democratic constitutional framework and, in principle, be willing to defend it.

This does not necessarily imply a return to traditional mass armies or a rejection of professional armed forces. Rather, a willingness to perform military service should be normatively anchored as an expression of republican citizenship and as a component of democratic self-government under contemporary security conditions.

Republican Citizenship

This article adopts a primarily republican normative framework. While liberal rights to individual autonomy remain essential components of modern democratic orders, they are here understood as institutionally dependent on the continued existence and collective maintenance of the political community. This prioritization is not intended as a rejection of liberal rights, but as a claim about their conditions of possibility within a political order. In cases of tension, republican requirements of civic responsibility and democratic self-preservation take normative precedence over individual opt-out claims. The question of the legitimacy of compulsory military service touches on a fundamental tension in political theory: the relationship between individual freedom and collective self-commitment.

Within this article, only the republican conception of freedom (non-domination) is used as the primary analytical lens, while liberal conceptions of freedom function as a contrasting reference point rather than as a competing normative standard. From this perspective, the willingness to defend the republic does not appear as an external imposition. Rather, it is a constitutive element of citizenship. Military service thus becomes intelligible not only as a duty, but as a component of political participation—an expression of a civic right to serve. This idea is not new. Already in the classical republican tradition, there is a close connection between political participation and military responsibility.

For Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527), for example, the idea of a citizens' militia is central to the stability of republican forms of rule. Unlike mercenaries or foreign troops, who fight primarily for financial motives, a citizens' army consists of the state's own citizens, who act in the interest of the common good and the protection of the republic. In his *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio* (1513–1517, published ca. 1517), Machiavelli argues that republics dependent on mercenaries are structurally prone to corruption, abuses of power, and military defeat.[4]

This citizens' army is not a permanent standing professional force, but is assembled temporarily from the population. Citizens typically serve only in times of defence and then return to civilian life. What matters for Machiavelli is not voluntariness

[4] Machiavelli, Niccolò, *Discourses on Livy*. Translated by Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Originally published ca. 1517.

in the modern sense, but obligation and loyalty to the republic. This bond to the republic grounds both the duty to serve and political membership itself. The citizens' army thus fulfills several crucial functions at once: it provides reliable military protection for the republic while strengthening the civic virtue (virtù) of its citizens. By this, Machiavelli means the capacity to act prudently, courageously, and responsibly for the common good. In this way, the citizens' army binds the population more closely to the political order. Military participation, therefore, functions not only as a means of defence, but as a practical school of republican citizenship. Those who take part in defence simultaneously gain experience in political responsibility and in serving the common good.[5] It is, in this sense, a form of active citizenship.

A similar line of argument can be found in Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) in his "Du contrat social." (1762) Rousseau emphasizes that political freedom is inseparably linked to submission to the "general will."[6] Legitimate political order, for him, arises precisely from the active participation of all citizens in forming that collective will. Freedom, in this sense, does not mean individual independence from all rules, but obedience to laws one has prescribed for oneself. Those who are part of this order also bear responsibility for its preservation—including its defence.

Rousseau makes it clear that political indifference signals the end of a free order: "As soon as someone says, *What does it matter to me?* the state must be considered lost".[7] This statement is embedded in his broader argument about the duty of active participation in public life. On this basis, one can also conceive of a duty to defend the political community. For Rousseau, military service is not an external imposition, but an expression of collective self-legislation—since any form of self-determination necessarily includes a willingness to assume responsibility for the continued existence of that order. Historically, a similar logic is reflected in the ideal of the citizens' army, in which the categories of citizen and soldier are inseparably linked.

Modern republican theories have developed these ideas further without remaining tied to premodern military models. Philip Pettit (1997), for instance, defines freedom as *non-domination*" by which he means the absence of arbitrary, uncontrolled

[5] Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*.
[6] Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, *Du contrat social*, (Paris: Flammarion, 2001). Originally published in 1762.
[7] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Du contrat social* (Paris: Flammarion, 2001).

power over individuals. This conception implies not only that citizens must be protected from state overreach, but also that they should actively participate in securing the political order. On this basis, a republican justification for collective defence obligations can be derived: if freedom is only possible within stable, non-dominated institutional frameworks, then their protection becomes a shared responsibility of all citizens.[8]

Crucially, republican approaches are not necessarily tied to a specific institutional form of the military. While classical authors often favour citizens' armies over standing armies, this argument can be reinterpreted in functional terms: the key concern is to prevent a decoupling of the political community from the monopoly on the legitimate use of force. From this perspective, professional armed forces are not inherently problematic. The concern is not professionalization per se, but the potential weakening of democratic accountability when military service becomes socially detached from the citizenry. However, they must remain politically embedded and must not evolve into institutions detached from society. The decisive question, therefore, is not whether a state maintains a standing army, but to what extent that army is normatively and socially anchored in the citizenry—that is, whether it remains part of society.

Of course, the nature of warfare and the conduct of war have changed significantly over the centuries. The model of armies recruited from a people to fight, on behalf of one state, against the forces of another state reflects a conventional, interstate form of warfare that no longer exists in the same way today. Nevertheless, the question of how the military is tied back to society remains crucial—and in addressing it, the relationship between the people, recruitment, and the form of the state must be considered together.

The German Debate

The question of conscription in Germany has re-emerged in public and political debate, particularly in the broader discussions about the country's *Zeitenwende* in security policy.[9] Contemporary proposals range from the reintroduction of universal conscription to various forms of compulsory or semi-compulsory national service. While these proposals differ in detail, the underlying debate is largely structured around liberal

[8] Pettit, Philip, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[9] Schmoll, Melanie Carina, *"Zeitenwende in Germany – a New Realistic Worldview and Its Implications." Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 24, 2 (2025).

concerns, including individual freedom, equality of obligation, administrative feasibility, and the efficiency of recruitment for the armed forces.

At the same time, the institutional background of this debate is shaped by a significant structural shift. Universal conscription in Germany was suspended in 2011, marking the transition from a conscript-based model of the Bundeswehr to an all-volunteer force.[10] This change has had long-term consequences for the relationship between the military and society, as military service is no longer a shared civic experience across the population, but an occupational choice concentrated within a relatively small segment of society.[11] As a result, the armed forces have become more professionally specialized, but also more socially differentiated from the broader citizenry.

This development provides the background against which current debates must be understood. On the one hand, the suspension of conscription is widely interpreted as consistent with liberal-democratic principles, particularly the protection of individual autonomy and the reduction of state coercion in matters of personal life choices. On the other hand, it raises questions about the extent to which collective responsibility for national defence remains socially embedded within the political community.[12]

It can thus be concluded that the current German conscription debate is shaped by a one-sided liberal perspective, while key insights from republican theory are neglected. A stronger consideration of republican arguments makes it possible to understand military obligation not as a restriction of individual freedom, but as an expression of democratic self-organization. In this sense, the willingness to defend the political order appears less as an exception—as it often does today—and more as an integral component of modern citizenship. Such willingness is closely tied to the idea of republican virtues and the maintenance of a politically engaged citizenry.

[10] Werkner, Ines-Jacqueline; *Die Bundeswehr im neuen Modus der Landes- und Bündnisverteidigung – Wehrpflicht revisited?* Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2023; Kümmel, Gerhard. "Frauen im Militär," In *Militärsoziologie – Eine Einführung*, eds. Nina Leonhard and Ines-Jacqueline Werkner, (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2023), pp. 455–489.
[11] Werkner, *Die Bundeswehr im neuen Modus der Landes- und Bündnisverteidigung – Wehrpflicht revisited?; Kümmel, "Frauen im Militär."*
[12] Grogan, Neil, *The All-Volunteer Force: Civil-Military Relations Hit Home—and Abroad* Washington, (DC: Center for a New American Security, 2020).

Against this backdrop, the German debate on conscription is not only about military personnel needs or organizational efficiency. It also reflects a broader tension concerning how democratic societies conceptualize the relationship between citizenship, obligation, and collective security. It is precisely this tension that makes the German case analytically significant for the present argument, as it highlights the contrast between an increasingly individualized understanding of citizenship and the question of shared responsibility for the maintenance of the political order.

Military Beyond Material Justification

In debates on military organization, it is often assumed that the role of armed forces can be primarily understood in instrumental or material terms. While such accounts capture important aspects of modern military function, they tend to overlook the broader normative and political dimensions of military organization that are central to republican accounts of citizenship and collective self-government.

A widespread argument against state-organized armed forces is the notion that the military is primarily a relic of premodern societies, whose central function lies in the material securing of economic resources. Within this tradition, Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), for instance, argues that military institutions would become increasingly obsolete in advanced societies, as economic and social progress reduces the likelihood of violent conflict.[13] In a similar vein, Wachtler contends that the economic function of military organization has largely become obsolete in modern industrial societies, as war is no longer primarily a means of securing wealth or strategic resources.[14]

However, this line of reasoning is too narrow both empirically and conceptually. First, the military remains present even in the absence of active warfare: it provides deterrence, secures strategic spaces, and stabilizes institutional power relations within an international system that remains structurally competitive. Second, contemporary geopolitical developments continue to demonstrate the persistence of the relationship between economic interests, territorial control, and military power. Examples such as the Russian annexation of Crimea or tensions surrounding critical infrastructure and trade

[13] Spencer, Herbert, *The Principles of Sociology*. 2, (New York: Appleton, 189).

[14] Wachtler, Jürgen, *Militär und Gesellschaft: Sozioökonomische Funktionen der Streitkräfte in der modernen Welt* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983).

routes illustrate that economic and strategic considerations cannot be neatly separated and overlook the strategic logic of modern security politics.[15]

At the same time, the significance of military organization cannot be reduced to these material or strategic functions alone. From the perspective of republican theory, it also becomes clear that the significance of military service cannot be understood primarily in economic or instrumental terms. From a republican perspective, military institutions are also sites in which collective responsibility, civic virtue, and political self-commitment become visible and socially enacted. Even when material justifications are absent or insufficient, the military remains an institution through which questions of citizenship and collective obligation are continuously negotiated.

Military organization is therefore not merely a relic of premodernity or functional instrument of security policy, but also a normative political institution embedded in broader questions of democratic self-government. In the framework developed in this article, this reinforces the argument that military service cannot be fully understood in purely instrumental terms, but must also be interpreted through the lens of republican citizenship and civic responsibility.

War Repression and Cultural Distance to the Military

Beyond theoretical and institutional arguments, the cultural dimension is also relevant for understanding the conscription debate in Germany. Rainer Joas and Knöbl (2008) describe a tendency toward *war repression* (*Kriegsverdrängung*), referring to social mechanisms through which modern democratic societies often distance themselves cognitively and normatively from military realities. In the German context, this tendency is frequently linked to historical experience, especially the legacy of the Second World War, as well as to a self-understanding shaped by pacifist and civilian normative orientations.[16]

[15] Von Hagen, Ulrich, and Hans Biehl, "Zivil-militärische Beziehungen,

" In *Militärsoziologie – Eine Einführung*, eds. Nina Leonhard and Ines-Jacqueline Werkner p (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2023), pp. 27–6.

[16] Joas, Rainer, and Alexander Knöbel, *Kriegsverdrängung und gesellschaftliche Verantwortung: Die Deutschen und ihre Streitkräfte*. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2008)_.

In this context, military institutions are often perceived as socially and culturally distant from everyday civilian life, which reinforces a tendency to treat military issues primarily as technical or administrative matters rather than as questions of collective political responsibility. This form of war repression operates on several levels: it shapes political discourse, which tends to frame military service primarily through liberal categories—such as individual freedom or cost-benefit considerations—and it influences collective expectations toward the Bundeswehr.

With regard to the development of the Federal Republic of Germany since the Second World War (1939–1945), another reason for the growing distance between military organization and society becomes apparent: a profound cultural shift toward a "post-heroic society". Herfried Münkler describes this development as the result of repeated experiences of war, societal modernization, and increasing individualization. War and military virtues have largely disappeared from everyday life, and values such as courage, willingness to sacrifice, and collective responsibility are now only weakly transmitted culturally within the broader normative framework of contemporary society.[17]

This decoupling of military and society is visible not only in public perceptions of the armed forces but also in political discourse: the Bundeswehr is often regarded as a "foreign body," and debates on conscription or voluntary service are primarily conducted through liberal, individualistic categories. The post-heroic character of society thus reinforces the mechanisms described in the concept of war repression: citizens perceive themselves as too modern to assume military responsibility directly and instead delegate it institutionally to specialized professional structures of the state.[18]

As early as the mid-1990s, Edward N. Luttwak (1995), in a controversial argument, pointed to a similar development: in post-heroic societies, the willingness of citizens to risk their own lives for national values and interests declines significantly. Instead, a pronounced risk aversion emerges, which in turn directly affects societal acceptance of military operations.[19]

[17] Münkler, Herfried, *Kriege und Krisen der Gegenwart: Die postheroische Gesellschaft und die Bundeswehr*, (Berlin: Rowohlt, 2015).
[18] Joas and Knöbel, *Kriegsverdrängung und gesellschaftliche Verantwortung*.
[19] Luttwak, Edward N. "Toward Post-Heroic Warfare," *Foreign Affairs* 74, 3 (1995): pp. 109–122.

The broader transformation of values in modern societies also plays a significant role in this context. Emphases on self-determination, autonomy, and self-realization—even extending to individualistic or egoistic orientations—contribute to the cultural gap between military and societal values.[20] Haltiner refers to this as the "demilitarization of societies."[21] Against the backdrop of the theoretical considerations developed so far, this cultural distance contributes to a framing of military obligations predominantly in individualistic terms. From a republican perspective, however, this tendency is normatively significant because it weakens the social visibility of collective defence as a shared civic responsibility.

Within the framework of this article, this development is relevant insofar as it reinforces the broader tendency to interpret military service through the lens of individual choice rather than collective obligation. This highlights a structural tension between liberalized conceptions of citizenship and republican notions of shared political responsibility.

Recruitment and its Effects on Civil–Military Relations

The form of personnel recruitment has fundamental implications for the structure of armed forces, their societal embedding, and civil–military relations. Werkner emphasizes that the choice between universal conscription and an all-volunteer force is not merely an organizational decision, but also carries normative dimensions. The recruitment model shapes the relationship between the military and society, the public perception of the armed forces, and citizens' willingness to assume responsibility for the defence of the political order.[22] In the German case, this relationship is shaped by a specific institutional constellation: a parliamentary army embedded in a post-authoritarian democratic order, combined with a professional volunteer force following the suspension of conscription in 2011. While formal command authority remains firmly

[20] Wiesendahl, Elmar, "Wertewandel und motivationale Kriegsunfähigkeit von Streitkräften," *Sicherheit und Frieden* 8, 1 (1990): pp. 25–29.
[21] Haltiner, Karl W., "Demilitarisierung der Gesellschaft?" In *Die Bundeswehr – von der Wiederbewaffnung bis zur Transformation*, eds. Thomas Jäger and Gerd Kümmel, (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2004), pp. 226–241.
[22] Werkner, *Die Wehrpflicht und ihre Hintergründe*; Werkner, *Die Bundeswehr im neuen Modus der Landes- und Bündnisverteidigung – Wehrpflicht revisited?*

under democratic control (Article 65a *Grundgesetz*, Basic Law), the social pathways through which citizens encounter military service have been significantly reduced.

The combination of a parliamentary army, a republican state structure, and a post-heroic societal culture leads to a relative distance between the population and the armed forces. This is particularly evident following the suspension of universal conscription in 2011: since then, the Bundeswehr has operated as a volunteer force. While this preserves individual freedom of choice, it also reduces the societal embedding of the military. Volunteers tend to join for specific professional reasons, while the broader population rarely gains direct experience of military responsibility.

As Werkner notes, this transformation contributes to a narrowing of the social basis through which military service is experienced and understood, which in turn affects the perceived proximity between citizens and the armed forces.[23] A similar pattern can also be observed outside Germany, particularly in the United States. There, too, only a small portion of society has personal contact with military personnel. In such contexts, public perceptions of military action are largely mediated through political communication and mass media rather than direct social experience.[24]

Steinbrecher additionally demonstrates that levels of information and interest in foreign and security policy in Germany and other countries are comparatively low, and that the so-called Almond–Lippmann[25] consensus still retains validity regarding the stability of public opinion despite limited information.[26]

Taken together, these institutional and societal conditions suggest a structural decoupling between military service and broader civic experience. Voluntary recruitment, while consistent with liberal principles of individual choice, tends to

[23] Werkner, *Die Bundeswehr im neuen Modus der Landes- und Bündnisverteidigung – Wehrpflicht revisited? military strategy in the Russo-Ukraine war*

[24] Grogan, *The All-Volunteer Force*.

[25] The Almond-Lippmann Consensus refers to the view put forward by Gabriel Almond and Walter Lippmann in the 1950s that public opinion on foreign policy issues is generally uninformed, unstable, and easily influenced, and is therefore of limited value as a reliable basis for political decisions.

[26] Steinbrecher, Markus, "Militär und Öffentlichkeit." In *Militärsoziologie – Eine Einführung*, edited by Nina Leonhard and Ines-Jacqueline Werkner (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2023), pp. 263–288.

reinforce this decoupling by concentrating military experience within a limited segment of the population rather than distributing it more broadly across the citizenry.

From a liberal perspective, it is emphasized that democratically legitimized political leadership defines the framework and objectives within which the military operates autonomously.[27] From a republican perspective, however, the key question is how collective responsibility and civic duty can be institutionally anchored in a modern democracy without abandoning the principle of voluntariness altogether.

Within a republican framework, the central issue is therefore not only the efficiency of recruitment systems, but the extent to which different institutional models succeed in maintaining a visible and socially shared connection between citizenship and collective defence responsibilities.

Republic, Democracy, and the System of Military Service

The relationship between political order and military structure has long been contested in both historical and theoretical terms. From a republican perspective, however, it can be argued that republic and democracy belong together in a specific normative sense, insofar as democratic self-government implies a degree of collective responsibility for the preservation of the political order.

From a republican perspective, however, it can be argued that republic and democracy belong together—unlike in historical *republican monarchies*, in which republican elements were often only weakly embedded in society. In a democratic republic, the protection of the political order against both external threats and internal vulnerabilities is ensured through the integration of citizens into collective responsibility and thus through a structurally embedded link between citizenship and defence obligations.[28]

Cunis emphasizes that the recruitment system of an army cannot be considered in isolation, but must be understood as an expression of a broader political order. The form of state organization thus generates military functions that serve to secure the polity:

[27] Von Hagen and Biehl, "Zivil-militärische Beziehungen."
[28] Cunis, A., *Demokratie und Wehrsystem: Über die Funktion der Streitkräfte in republikanischen (Staaten*. München: Oldenbourg, 1968).

those who defend the political order simultaneously perform a civic function. In this perspective, the military system is not primarily determined by technological or strategic necessities, but by the normative structure of the state and its underlying conception of citizenship.

At the same time, Kernic cautions against drawing overly simple conclusions such as universal conscription equals democracy, standing armies equal absolutism. The relationship between the political system and military organization is far more complex and mediated by historical, institutional, and cultural factors. Accordingly, there is no one-to-one correspondence between regime type and force structure.[29]

Building on Kernic, it can therefore be shown that concepts such as the citizen army and comprehensive defence should not be understood primarily as fixed organizational models, but as expressions of different ways of conceptualizing the relationship between state and society. What is at stake is not a specific military structure as such, but the extent to which political communities institutionalize the idea that collective security is a shared civic responsibility.[30] From this perspective, the state can be understood as a framework of collective self-organization in which security is not solely delegated to specialized institutions, but remains normatively anchored in the citizenry. This does not imply the dissolution of professional armed forces, but rather their embedding within a broader conception of civic responsibility. It is precisely at this point that recruitment policy becomes relevant: procedures must be transparent, and the armed forces should, in a meaningful sense, reflect the diversity of society as a whole in order to sustain their democratic legitimacy and societal embeddedness.[31]

Social Composition and Societal Embedding of the Military

The social composition of the armed forces becomes a central question of legitimacy. If the military is understood as part of societal self-organization, its public acceptance is closely linked to the extent to which it reflects the society from which it emerges. In this sense, questions of representation within the armed forces are not merely

[29] Kernic, Peter, *Demokratie und Wehrsystem: Strukturen und Funktionen moderner Streitkräfte*. (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2004).
[30] Kernic, *Demokratie und Wehrsystem*.
[31] Grogan, *The All-Volunteer Force*.

sociological observations but relate directly to the broader issue of democratic legitimacy and civic inclusion.

The integration of women is especially revealing in this regard. Their inclusion reflects broader transformations in the understanding of citizenship and gender equality, and contributes to the perception of the armed forces as embedded within, rather than separate from, democratic society. Through their integration, the military is once again more firmly linked to republican ideas. The military and national defence are thereby understood as not exclusively male domains, but as civic ones. This implies that women, as "civic equals to men," are equally expected to contribute to the protection of the polity and its freedom within a framework of equal citizenship rights and obligations. Kümmel further points out that civic duty may also entail that individual rights can, under certain circumstances, be subordinated to the overarching interests of the community and its preservation and protection.[32]

The concept of a citizen army or *comprehensive defence* is based on the idea that a polity's defence capability does not lie solely in the destructive power of its armed forces, but in the resilience of society as a whole. Kernic shows that such a structure can also generate a specific form of deterrence: a potential aggressor is not confronted only with a military opponent, but with an entire society that can be mobilized politically, socially, and infrastructurally. The costs of occupation or subjugation thus increase significantly, as not only an army must be overcome, but an entire societal system must be controlled and politically neutralized.[33] At the same time, however, such concepts also carry the risk of a form of generalized militarization of society.

If taken to an extreme, models of comprehensive defence may blur the boundary between civilian and military spheres. However, the more moderate republican interpretation adopted here does not imply such a conflation. An important conceptual distinction can be drawn here: the idea of comprehensive defence does not necessarily lead to a form of total societal militarism. Rather, it can also be understood as a model of the *social embedding of the military* (*Vergesellschaftung des Militärischen*), in which military

[32] Kümmel, "Frauen im Militär."
[33] Kernic, *Demokratie und Wehrsystem.*

capabilities and resources remain integrated within society without permanently dominating it or redefining civilian social orders in military terms.[34]

The decisive factor in this model is the exceptional character of military mobilization: the military does not become the guiding principle of social order, but remains functionally limited to crisis and defence situations. In this sense, defence capability is not based on the everyday militarization of society, but on the credible possibility of its temporary activation in the event of a crisis under democratically controlled conditions.

This perspective thus connects the idea of a *latently available* citizen army with a clear primacy of the civilian order, in which the military is not abolished, but deliberately reserved for the state of exception while remaining normatively subordinate to democratic civil authority. This highlights a more general tension within democratic societies between individual rights and collective obligations, which is not specific to gender but structurally embedded in all systems of civic duty, including military service.

Republican Duty and NATO

With the integration of the Bundeswehr into NATO, the reference point of military responsibility shifts from the purely national level to a broader collective security framework. However, this does not replace the normative relationship between citizens and their own democratic polity, but rather embeds it within a wider system of collective defence.

The NATO alliance is not merely a military pact, but also a community of states committed to shared security interests and, in many cases, common democratic values.[35] Here, a tension becomes visible: on the one hand, the so-called alliance effect can reduce perceptions of national conscription obligations, as collective security guarantees shift parts of the burden of defence to the alliance level.[36] Multinational cooperation has

[34] Kernic, *Demokratie und Wehrsystem.*

[35] Bundesregierung, *NATO: Verteidigungsbündnis und Wertegemeinschaft*. (Berlin: Bundesregierung, 2025); NATO. *Member States of NATO*. https://www.nato.int.

[36] Haltiner, Karl W., "Demilitarisierung der Gesellschaft?" In *Die Bundeswehr – von der Wiederbewaffnung bis zur Transformation*, eds. Thomas Jäger and Gerd Kümmel p (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2004), p. 226–241.

become an operational norm.[37] On the other hand, from a republican perspective, this does not dissolve the responsibility of citizens for the defence of their own political order. Rather, alliance membership modifies but does not replace the locus of civic responsibility: the primary relationship between citizens and their democratic state remains normatively central, even when security provision is organized multilaterally.

The composition of NATO illustrates the compatibility of different political systems with collective defence arrangements. The alliance includes both republics and constitutional monarchies, such as Germany, France, Poland, the United Kingdom, Spain, and the Netherlands. This institutional diversity underscores that membership in collective security structures does not determine specific national recruitment systems, which remain politically and normatively contingent on domestic conceptions of citizenship and obligation.

From a republican perspective, this leads to a twofold implication: first, citizens' responsibility for the defence of the political order persists even within an alliance framework. Second, this responsibility is no longer exclusively national in operational terms, but is coordinated within a system of shared defence commitments. NATO thus functions as an external institutional framework within which republican obligations are exercised, without displacing the underlying civic relationship between citizens and their democratic polity.

Conclusion / Summary

The analysis has shown that contemporary German debates on conscription and military recruitment are predominantly framed in liberal terms, emphasizing individual autonomy, voluntariness, and the legitimacy of state intervention. A republican perspective directs attention toward a different set of questions by focusing on citizenship, political obligation, and collective self-government.

[37] Kanter, Christian, and Semih Sandawi. "Der Nationalstaat und das Militär." In *Militärsoziologie – Eine Einführung*, edited by Nina Leonhard and Ines-Jacqueline Werkner (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2023). pp. 113–145.

Within this framework, military service can be understood not merely as an object of state authority but also as a potential form of civic participation connected to the maintenance of the political community. Political freedom, from a republican perspective, entails not only protection from arbitrary interference but also participation in sustaining the institutional conditions that make self-government possible. Military service may therefore be interpreted as one possible form of civic engagement through which rights and obligations become interconnected within a broader conception of citizenship.

This shift in perspective moves the debate beyond a narrow opposition between voluntariness and coercion, as well as beyond purely functional considerations of military effectiveness. Instead, it highlights the broader question of how democratic societies distribute and institutionalize responsibility for collective defence.

Historically, conscription has often been linked to the ideal of the *citizen in uniform*, which sought to maintain a connection between military institutions and civilian society. Even after its suspension in Germany in 2011, this ideal continues to inform debates about obligation, fairness, and social cohesion. By contrast, professional volunteer forces may offer advantages in terms of flexibility and specialization, while potentially concentrating defence responsibilities within a comparatively small segment of the population.

From a republican perspective, this raises broader questions about the societal distribution of defence obligations and the institutional mechanisms through which citizens remain connected to collective security. Conscription can therefore be understood not only as a recruitment system but also as a particular way of organizing the relationship between citizenship and defence.

The contribution of the republican perspective lies in making visible dimensions of civic responsibility and collective self-government that often remain in the background of predominantly liberal approaches. In this sense, republican theory offers a complementary framework for understanding how democratic societies negotiate the relationship between freedom, obligation, and collective defence.

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