

Law on the Introduction of Universal Military Service in Prussia (September 3, 1814)

Abstract

The desire to mobilize the people to overthrow Napoleonic hegemony in Germany lay at the heart of the post-1806 Prussian state reformers' program. By this law, anticipated in the general call to arms of 1813 which led to Napoleon's decisive defeat at the battle of Leipzig, the Prussian government permanently abolished the eighteenth-century recruitment system, which drew soldiers mainly from the villages and also relied on foreign mercenaries. That system was replaced by universal military service, which was obligatory for all able-bodied men. Still, when it came to service requirements, distinctions were drawn between the educated classes and the common people.

Source

Law on the Responsibility to Serve in War, 3 September 1814

The common effort of our loyal people, without exception or distinction among them, has brought about, in the just now so happily ended war, the liberation of the [Prussian] Fatherland. Only by such means will it be possible to sustain this freedom and the honorable status that Prussia has attained.

The arrangements that yielded this happy success, whose continuation the whole [Prussian] nation desires, shall shape the basic laws of the state's military structure and underlie all military formations. For the arming of the nation under law is the most secure guarantee of a lasting peace. The older existing laws on conscription into the army are therefore now repealed and instead it is decreed that:

1. Every native-born man, upon completion of his twentieth year, is obliged to defend the fatherland. To ensure that fulfillment of this general obligation, especially in peacetime, does not hinder the progress of science and industry, the following distinctions will apply regarding character and term of service.
2. The armed forces will consist
 - a) of the standing army
 - b) the reserves of first call
 - c) the reserves of second call
 - d) the inactive reserve [*Landsturm*].
3. The numbers of the standing army and the reserves will be determined by prevailing circumstances of the state.
4. The standing army is prepared at all times to take the field. It is the whole nation's chief schooling for war and includes all branches of military knowledge.
5. The standing army consists
 - a) of those who report for service with the intention of gaining further promotion, and who submit themselves to corresponding tests to this end;

b) of volunteers who wish to devote themselves to military service, but who cannot pass the tests;

c) of a part of the nation's male youth from the twentieth to twenty-fifth year.

6. In the first three years the standing army's soldiers remain uninterruptedly at their posts. In the last two years they are furloughed to their homes, serving in case of war to supplement the standing army.

7. Young men from the educated classes who can clothe and arm themselves shall have permission to be enrolled in the riflemen's corps [*Jäger- und Schützenkorps*]. After one year's service they may, at their request, be furloughed to continue their professions. At the expiration of their three obligatory service years, they enter the reserves of first call, in which they will have, according to their capabilities and other circumstances, first claim on officers' posts.

8. The reserves of first call will, in case of war, support the standing army, both at home and abroad. In peace, apart from necessary time for training and exercises, they are furloughed to their homes.

They are chosen

a) among all young men from the twentieth to twenty-fifth year who do not serve in the standing army;

b) among those who have been trained in the riflemen's corps;

c) among men from the twenty-sixth to thirty-second year.

The exercises of the reserves of first call are twofold:

a) on certain days in small units in their home districts;

b) once a year in larger units in concert with parts of the standing army, which for this purpose assemble at the reserves' stations.

9. So as not to interfere with [young men's] physical and educational development, the end of the twentieth year is fixed as the beginning of military service. But it is left to each young man, following his seventeenth year, if he has the necessary physical strength, to report for military service, in which case he will fulfill his various obligations so much the earlier.

10. The reserves of second call, in case of war, will either strengthen the garrisons or garrison battalions or, according to momentary need, be employed to man and strengthen the army. They will be selected from among all men who completed service in the standing army and reserves of first call, and men capable of bearing arms to the end of their thirty-ninth year.

11. Since the reserves of second call will consist mainly of former servicemen, they will in peacetime be assembled in their home districts only on particular days in small units. If youths from the seventeenth to twentieth year wish to take part in the exercises of the reserves of second call, this shall be permitted, without this entailing their entry into the reserves before their twentieth year.

12. Those men who serve in the reserves may, should their civilian circumstances require it, after previous application to their superiors, be allowed without hindrance to change their place of residence, entering then into the reserves of their new locality.

13. The inactive reserve [*Landsturm*] assembles only on My command when enemy attack befalls the provinces. In peacetime it is subject to a special ordinance, whereby the government may use it in individual cases for the maintenance of public order. It consists of all men

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- a) to their fiftieth year who are not assigned to the standing army and reserves;
 - b) all men discharged from the reserves;
 - c) all sturdy youths from the seventeenth year onward.

14. The inactive reserve consists of

- a) burgher companies in the large cities;
- b) in provincial companies formed, according to county-structure, in the middle- and small towns and in the countryside.

15. In peacetime, the years stipulated for entry into and discharge from the various army divisions in the aforementioned laws are binding. But in war, they are governed by necessity, and all branches of services called to duty will enlist according to circumstance those men previously unconscribed or those newly reaching conscription age.

16. Those who volunteer for the standing army enjoy the advantage of choosing their weapon and regiment of preference. Those who are summoned to war service by the authorized officials will be assigned their duty by the War Ministry.

17. Whoever in the standing army, following fulfillment of his three-year term, chooses to serve further will oblige himself to six years, receiving in return a public decoration; in case of a second prolongation of service he receives a pay-supplement and a claim on being cared for, should he become unfit for further duty.

18. Those who, after fulfilling their legally prescribed terms of service in the reserves of first or second call, wish on their own initiative to serve further will likewise receive a public decoration and a claim on advancement befitting their abilities in their regiments.

19. To lead in order and justice these various units of men obliged to bear arms, there shall be formed in every county an official board, consisting of an army officer, the county administrator [*Landrat*] and rural and urban landowners [*Gutsbesitzer*].

Source: *Gesetz-Sammlung für die Königlichen Preußischen Staaten 1814*. Berlin: Georg Decker [1814], pp. 79–82; reprinted in Walter Demel and Uwe Puschner, eds., *Von der Französischen Revolution bis zum Wiener Kongreß 1789-1815*. Deutsche Geschichte in Quellen und Darstellung, edited by Rainer A. Müller, Volume 6. Stuttgart: P. Reclam, 1995, pp. 392–99.

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