

OLLI HARINEN, JUKKA LESKINEN

General Conscription in an EU Country After 2008? Population's and conscripts' attitudes in Finland ¹

1. Introduction

In military circles, in military sociological research literature and in media there has been a lot of discussion about the end of conscription and the decline of the mass army.

This paper examines the security political attitudes in Finland at the end of the 1990's and after 2000. First Finland's current system of military defence, with its system of general conscription and large reserve is briefly described. Then some recent research results are presented about Finnish population's and conscripts' security political attitudes and especially their attitudes towards general conscription. Finally some of the **reasons** for these attitudes are examined as well as the reasons behind the marked differences in attitudes between Finland and some other EU countries.

2. End of conscription in Europe?

It is well-known that the move from conscription to voluntary force is often no on-off situation. There are many middle positions where different percentages of the male cohort are conscripted and different amounts of voluntary personnel are recruited to replace conscripts. If conscripts are replaced with paid personnel, this often happens in the more technical branches, or it is a question of special troops and so on. Even keeping this in mind, it can be said that conscription has been more or less abolished in many EU countries. Why?

According to a first explanation, conscription has been abolished because military technology has developed so much. There is no need for large mass armies any more, smaller, specially trained troops equipped with high technology are needed instead.

Another explanation is that the end of East-West-confrontation and the Cold War and the formation of EU have diminished the perception of large-scale military threat

¹ This article is based on the paper presented by the authors in Research Committee 01 Armed Forces and Conflict Resolution / International Sociological Association Conference in Seoul 13–17th July 2008. This paper reflects the opinions of the authors and not necessarily the official opinions of the Finnish Defence Forces.

and made large conscripted mass armies obsolete in Europe. New threats require different kinds of troops.

A third explanation says that even if something would remain of the former East-West-confrontation, countries which join the NATO do not need a “mass army” because of the security umbrella provided by the alliance.

Finland is an EU country which has retained general conscription and is outside NATO. This paper starts from a hypothesis that one of the reasons behind the decision to retain conscription are population’s security political attitudes, for instance towards conscription.

This paper attempts to shed light on the reasons behind some of these security political attitudes.

3. Finland’s system of military defence

One thing behind Finland’s system of military defence is that Finland is not a member of NATO. Another thing are the threat scenarios. Herranen wrote in a article published in 2006: “Finnish defence planning has at its starting point the worst-case scenario, that of a large-scale military invasion” (Herranen 2006, 185). After that he naturally writes about other kind of threats and preparations to cope with them too.

The doctrine of Finland is territorial defence. The war-time military force is a combination of territorial troops and mobile operational troops. About 80 % of the male cohort is conscripted for 6–12 months.

The wartime strength of the Finnish Defence Forces in the near future is relatively high, about 350 000 soldiers, more than 95% of which are reservists.

4. Current security political attitudes in Finland

In the following five tables some data is presented about Finnish populations’ and conscripts’

- will to defend the country
- attitudes towards general conscription
- opinions about seeking NATO membership.

Table 1. Finland's population's will to defend the country. (Source: Ministry of Defence, Advisory Board for Defence Information, report 19.12.2007)

"If Finland were attacked, should Finns, in your opinion, take up arms to defend themselves in all situations even if the outcome seemed uncertain?"

Year	YES %	Can't say %	NO %	All %
1989	67	13	20	100
1990	74	7	19	100
1995	80	5	15	100
2000	81	4	14	100
2005	77	5	17	100
2007	77	4	19	100

Table 2. Finland's population's attitudes towards general conscription. (Source: Ministry of Defence, Advisory Board for Defence Information, report 19.12.2007)

year	wants to retain general conscription %	wants to decrease number of conscripts %	cannot say %	favours professional army %	all %
2001	76	13	3	7	100
2004	77	15	0	7	100
2007	73	17	1	9	100

Table 3. Finnish conscripts' will to defend the country. (Source: General Headquarters and Department of Behavioural sciences, conscript survey in 2002.)

"If Finland were attacked, Finns should take up arms to defend themselves in all situations even if the outcome seemed uncertain"

Conscript rank	AGREE %	DIFFICULT TO SAY %	DO NOT AGREE OR N.A. %	All %
private	76	14	10	100
squad leader	88	6	6	100
platoon commander	93			100
all	81	11	8	100

Table 4. Finnish conscripts' opinions about general conscription. (Source: General Headquarters and Department of Behavioural sciences, conscript survey in 2002)

	%
the obligation should be the same for all men	73
only motivated/interested should go	16
smaller professional force and border guards	8
can not say	4

Table 5. Finland's population's attitudes towards seeking NATO membership. (Source: Ministry of Defence, Advisory Board for Defence Information, report 19.12.2007.)

"In your opinion, should Finland seek membership in NATO?"

Year	YES %	No opinion %	NO %	All %
2005	28	9	63	100
2006	26	10	65	100
2007	26	5	69	100

In Finland in the 1990's and also after the year 2000 both the population and the conscripts have had positive, favourable attitudes towards military defence and general conscription. Population has had relatively negative attitudes towards seeking NATO-membership.

International surveys show that the attitudes of both the whole Finnish population and of conscript are more positive towards military defence and conscription than in at least several other EU countries.

5. Reasons behind the Finns' positive attitudes towards military defence and general conscription?

One group of variables behind Finns' security political attitudes, besides not being in NATO and threat scenarios, includes the following variables:

- geopolitical location and military geography
- population size and population/land area ratio
- economic resources compared to population/land area ratio
- educational level of the country and it's available recruitable military personnel (voluntary or conscripted)

Finland is a small, democratic EU country, which is situated next to Sweden, Norway and Russia in Northern Europe with a very long western and eastern land border and sea border. While the population is small (only 5.3 million), the land area, which is roughly equal to that of Germany, is very large compared to the size of the population. – These kind of background factors influence security political attitudes, but they are just briefly mentioned here, not covered in this paper. (For more information about these, see Herranen 2006.)

The second group of variables behind the security political attitudes, which are the topic of this paper, include:

- historical development of a nation's system of military defence including conscription, (from the point of view of the formation of security political attitudes), especially the "lessons" of WW II
- the role of national identity for attitudes towards conscription.

5.1. Historical development of Finland's system of military defence including conscription, especially the "lessons" of WW II

Earlier history. In Finland and Sweden, differing from many other European countries like the Baltic countries and Poland, there has never been land serfdom. Finns and Swedes have always carried weapons for self-defence and hunting. The concept of "free peasant" has been used, although it is too simplified. These (more or less) free Finnish peasants have been known to organize voluntarily, with no orders from authorities, so called "free troops" (improvised guerrilla troops) during some wars to fight invaders if the regular army has not been able to do that. It would, however, be wrong to say that Finnish men have always been some kind of "warriors", since there have also been times when Finland has had no army of its own.

The feudal system with its often unpopular, feared or even hated local mercenary armies was not the prevailing system in Scandinavia. Before 19th century, when Finland belonged to Sweden, the soldiers, privates, NCO's and officers were recruited by the so called "military tenure" system (or allotment system). It was a militia system, in which a group of peasants' farms provided one soldier and his equipment. The soldier was given a house and land to be cultivated by the peasants, and he had to attend military training and go to war with his unit if ordered. This system, although it was a burden for the peasants, at the same time created quite good local relations between soldiers and the rest of the population, since the soldiers lived long periods like civilians among the civilian population.

In the nineteenth century and until WW I Finland was an autonomous Grand Duchy of Russia. In the beginning of that period there were Finnish military units based on voluntary Finnish personnel. After that there was a short period of the reactivation of the military tenure establishment. After that there were Finnish units compiled of conscripted men and reservists, whose purpose was to defend Finland, not to take part in Russia's other wars. "The Finnish people recognized its small army ... as its own, and men were generally happy to serve in it" (Lappalainen 1989, 163). After that there was a period when Finland had no army of its own.

The War of Independence (1918). The War of Independence in 1918, after which Finland was separated from Russia and became independent, left the country divided because it was also a civil war

– This historical background has thus included many elements which favoured or at least did not hinder the introduction of general conscription and population's positive attitudes to it. The military tenure system before 19th century and the conscripted army after 1878 both created positive and even personal local relations between armed forces and the population. In addition, in the 19th century the Finnish troops, although parts of the Russian army, were meant to defend only Finland. The civil war in 1918, however, left one part of the population fostering negative attitudes towards the defence forces and conscription, because the defence forces were in the beginning organized and led by the "winners".

When Finland became independent after WW I general conscription together with large reserve was adopted and the system has continued almost unchanged till the present time.

Second World War experiences. In WW II, Finland fought against the Soviet Union in two wars, the Winter War (1939–1940) and the War of Continuation (1941–1944). In 1939 Finland was attacked by vastly superior Soviet forces, but was able to defend itself. "The spirit of the Winter War" became a widely used slogan, meaning the unity of the people against the aggressor. At the end of the War of Continuation (1941–1944), the Finnish Defence Forces succeeded in stopping the Red Army in 1944. Finland remained independent despite casualties and loss of terrain.

It could be said that Finland's system of national defence, which was based on general conscription and a large reserve, was proved successful in WW II.

From WW II to membership in EU (1945–1995). After the war the Finnish communists tried to increase their influence. During "the years of danger" (1945 – early 1950's) there were many people who thought that Finland would eventually end up in the eastern block like Hungary and Czechoslovakia. The communists won seats in Finnish parliament and their power grew in trade unions. Still it was the moderate Social Democratic Party which came up as the winner. The communists still had influence, but they were eventually assimilated into the parliamentary system. In this way it became clear only several years after WW II that the defensive battle and its civilian aftermath had really succeeded in keeping the country independent. (One difference between Finland and for instance Czechoslovakia was that Finland was not occupied, i.e. the army's role in WW II.)

In 1948 a Treaty of Friendship, Co-operation and Mutual Assistance was concluded by Finland and the Soviet Union. This treaty differed from an agreement on military alliance.

The defence expenditure after WW II (percentage of GNP) has been one of the lowest in Europe. Maybe this is the prize for the fact that all political parties, uttermost left included have approved the Finnish Defence Forces and general conscription.

The consensus has been strengthened by the work of the so-called Parliamentary Defence Committees, where all political parties have worked together to form common opinions concerning the development of military defence. Despite this formal consensus, there has also been opposition to conscription. Especially in the 1960's and 1970's there was a lot of youth activity like demonstrations against the Vietnam War and conscription. In the beginning of the 1970's the population's will to defend the country reached an all-time low in surveys. In the beginning of the 1980's the situation had stabilized and was relatively stable until the end of Cold War (see table 6).

Table 6. Finland's population's will to defend the country from 1970 to 1988. (Source: Ministry of Defence, Advisory Board for Defence Information: MTS-tutkimukset 1990–1997, Helsinki 1998)

"If Finland were attacked, should Finns, in your opinion, take up arms to defend themselves in all situations even if the outcome seemed uncertain?"

Year	YES %	Can't say %	NO %	All %
1970	42	7	51	100
1982	67	8	25	100
1987	73	6	21	100
1988	61	11	28	100

When the Cold War ended, the will to defend the country increased and has stayed that way in 1990–2007 (see table 1 in chapter 4).

One thing that might have had influence on security political attitudes in Finland is the economic depression in the beginning of the 1990's. It has been said that the move towards post-modern values which Ronald Inglehart predicted (from collective and economic survival values to post-modern values of self expression, individualism, denial of authority and so on) which was seen in surveys in 1980's was at least partially "turned backwards" in Finland in 1990's.

5.2. The role of Finnish national identity behind current security political attitudes?

As told above, it is a hypothesis of this paper that behind the Finns' present security political attitudes, including their positive attitude towards conscription, is partly their strong national identity and the special nature of that identity.

Before more can be said about this, the formation and development of Finnish national identity must be examined closer. Finnish national identity began to form long before WW II already in the 19th century, when Finland was a part of the Russian empire, in a strong national movement. This “national awakening” resembled similar movements in a group of other European countries, which then became independent nations after WW I.

Finland belonged to a group of countries which became independent in the process that began as nationalist movements in 19th century and culminated in the first part of the 20th century and WW I, when Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires disintegrated creating several new nation states like Finland, the Baltic countries, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary.

It is useless to ponder why Finland retains conscription when Britain does not, but it is more relevant to compare Finland to some of these new nation states born after WW I. It is another hypothesis of this paper that until WW II positive attitudes towards general conscription were closely connected to the national identity in this group of countries, but the different experiences of these countries during WW II have influenced the way these countries view general conscription and NATO membership today.

It can be argued that the present Finnish national identity was thus formed in three different processes. First in the national movement that was started in the 19th century. Secondly in the War of Independence in 1918 which, however, left the country divided because it was also a civil war: after this war same kind of national identity was not shared by the whole population. And thirdly during WW II when unity between different segments of society was reached better than before. It can also be argued that because of the combination of Finland’s war-time conscript and reservist army and Finland’s WW II experience the national identity attained features which have to do with military defence and general conscription.

The case to be mentioned here is Winter War’s (1939–40) Infantry Regiment 11. This famous regiment was founded in Finland’s capital Helsinki in 1939 and was composed of reservists. Private soldiers were mainly leftist workers from the capital, while reserve officers and NCO’s came from upper strata of the society. There were ill forebodings that the conflict still prevalent in Finnish society, left by the civil war twenty years earlier, would mean that this kind of regiment would not be cohesive and effective. This did not happen, vice the versa, the regiment fought extremely well. After Winter War the veterans of IR 11 formed a regimental veterans’ association, which was soon followed by the foundation of a country-wide national veterans’

union in Helsinki. It has been said that the conflicting elements in Finnish society were brought together in this process, first in the war and then in this national union. This very large and influential organization supported the government in subsequent war efforts and fostered the will to defend the country. (See Harinen 2008.) Even after the war, during the so called “years of danger” (1945 – early 1950’s), when Finnish communist tried to seize power, the so called invisible “axis of brothers-in-arms” between social democrats and conservatives, formed in the national veterans’ union, was in action behind the facades to stop communist influence in trade unions, parliament, municipal government and elsewhere in society. (This axis was “invisible”, because the national veterans’ union was disbanded and forbidden “as a fascist organization” by the will of the Soviet Union in connection with the peace negotiations.)

The biggest difference in the WW II experiences between Finland and other countries in the above-mentioned group of countries is that Finland was not occupied and retained its independence. There is something almost unique in Finland’s WW II experience. Of all countries presently in EU which took part in WW II, Finland and Britain are the only ones that were not occupied. All other EU countries were occupied, some of them more than once (for instance the Baltic countries and parts of Poland were occupied three times). Besides this some of these countries suffered, unlike Finland, from terror bombings, mass deportations and so on. There are also two EU countries, Sweden and Switzerland which did not take part in WW II at all.

The experience of WW II was naturally traumatic for Finland, as it lost territory and human lives, but compared to the Baltic countries, Poland, Czech and Hungary it was much less traumatic. While for a long time after the war in Finland there was a widespread feeling that Finland had “lost” the war, this view was later, especially in the 1990’s replaced by the concept of “defensive victory”.

Even if it were true, as the above hypothesis claims, that Finnish national identity was formed and strengthened in the WW II experience, one can still ask what happened to this kind of national identity when a new generations came forward in the 1990’s. There is even more reason to ask this question when this happened in a situation where Cold War has just ended and Finland was joining the EU. Why should young people care for what their grandfathers had done in WW II?

There are many things that have influence on young people’s security political attitudes, but one of them can be the handling of WW II in Finnish media. In the beginning of 1990’s, just when the Cold War had ended, Soviet Union had disintegrated and Finland was joining EU, it happened that 50 “round years” had aptly passed from Finland’s four-year experiences in WW II. This resulted in large media cove-

rage of Finland's role in WW II first in 1989–1990 (fifty years from the Winter War) and then again in 1994 (fifty years from the last decisive battles). Many new books and films appeared and much positive was told in Finnish media about “Finland's defensive victory” in WW II. It can be argued that in a new, more free post-Cold War atmosphere the role and accomplishments of the Finnish Defence Forces (based on general conscription) in WW II were re-evaluated in a very positive way. Part of the WW II experience was probably thus conveyed to younger age groups.

Naturally the Finnish Defence Forces also try to use the 6–12 months conscript period to make the conscripts acquainted with the WW II experience and to foster their will to defend the country. (At the same time phenomena like hazing influence in different direction.) If conscription were abolished, this could influence youth and population attitudes, perhaps also national identity.

5.3. National identity as a disappearing phenomenon in Europe?

Ever since EU was founded and new countries have joined it, there has been discussion about European identity or even EU identity which would perhaps replace or at least weaken national identities. Below are some results from Finnish conscript surveys.

Table 7. *Finnish conscripts' national or other identity. (Source: a conscript survey in 2005, reported in Sinkko, Harinen & Leimu 2008)*

“What kind of person are you when you think about the following alternatives?”

	%
Global	9.3
Citizen of an EU member country	6.2
Nordic	7.5
Finnish	71.2
“Does not matter”	5.6

Most conscripts answered that they are “Finnish”. Roughly similar answers were also given in another conscript survey.

Although Finnish conscripts' national identity (here meaning roughly and unscientifically a person's feeling that he belongs to a certain country, or people in that country compared to other alternatives) does not seem to be disappearing very fast, **the concept itself**, “national identity” has received scientific criticism. From 1980's onwards “nationalism” and concepts like “national identity” have received growing scientific critique. In the 19th century, when nationalist movements were born in many countries, and (at least) in the first part of the 20th century nationalism and national identity were seen as something positive in a moral sense. Modern critics (Benedict

Anderson, Gellner, Hobsbawm and others) look at these concepts critically, often, but not always, using examples like Germany in the 1930's and Japan during WW II.

One theme in some of this critique is the claim that national identity, in many occasions, is not based on "real" or genuine, authentic historical or cultural background, but is often, if not forged, then at least "constructed" to suit some current political or other needs and functions at a much later time. For instance, Hobsbawm and Ranger have published a collection of articles called "Invented Traditions". In this book it is claimed that, for example, the Scottish kilt, supposed to be a part of national historical heritage, was in fact created much later. In his dissertation about Finland, "Visions of Past Glory, Nationalism and the Construction of Early Finnish History" Fewster has studied critically how for instance historians have written about Finland's earlier history. There are, however, other researchers of nationalism, for instance professor Anthony D. Smith, who have a much more moderate position and do not go as far as Gellner and Hobsbawm.

Even assuming, just for the sake of the argument, that it were partly true that also in Finland the national identity (which has cultural, ethnic and historical dimensions) was at least partly "constructed" before WW II like Fewster (2006, following researchers like Gellner) says, the tentative hypothesis in this paper is as follows.

Fewster (2006) studied Finnish history and culture mainly connected with national identity before the Second World War. But it can be argued that Finnish WW II experience was a new, different phase in the process where Finnish national identity was formed. It is thus possible that Fewster's analysis is not completely relevant when Finnish WW II experience is analyzed. In WW II battles the Finns transformed this construction, national identity, farther towards objective reality (in psychological, social-psychological and sociological sense) because they believed and wanted to believe in it. If the defensive battles first in 1939–40 and then again at the end of the war in 1944 (see chapter 4.2. above) had not been successful, the consequences to Finnish national identity could have been different. And subsequently the security political attitudes, including attitude towards general conscription, might be different today.

It is also possible that Finnish WW II experiences made this social-psychological construct, Finnish national identity, more permanent and harder to change than similar phenomena in a) some countries with very traumatic WW II experience (the Baltic countries, Czech, Poland etc.) and b) in a country like Sweden which did not take part in WW II at all.

* * * *

In Finland the national identity has included, from the historical reasons described above, an unyielding spirit of armed defence of the country. It has remained very strong, partly also because of our country's geopolitical location as a "country that is between East and West on the wrong side of the sea". The end of Cold War, the disintegration of Soviet Union and Finland's membership in EU have strengthened our cultural bonds with the West and increased the mobility of students and labour. The integration of EU has began to change the national identity, in such a form as young people experience it, more diversified. Along with the feeling that they are Finnish many young people experience that being European is also a significant part of their identity and self. Besides readiness for military defence the new, larger identity may include, beside transnationalism, areas like, for example, valuation of language, culture and nature. At the same time new values which have to do with individualism and self-realization are added to the more traditional set of Finnish values. When identity becomes more diversified it will certainly also influence the will to defend the country. Some weak signals of this are already visible in the preliminary analysis of some recent Finnish survey results.

General conscription fosters the will to defend the country for several reasons. It offers realistic knowledge about military defence and strengthens the belief for defence forces' ability to fulfil its obligations. In addition the conscript time functions as a maturation rite, during which young men are socialized into adulthood and society. At its best conscription binds young men or women into society, makes them full members of society. Conscription creates and produces social capital, the experience that society can be a system which is based on reliable contracts, but a system whose functioning also presupposes a personal investment, which can mean, in the last analysis, armed defence.

REFERENCES

- Advisory Board for Defence Information (ABDI), Ministry of Defence (2007) report 19.12.2007
- Advisory Board for Defence Information, Ministry of Defence (1998) MTS-tutkimukset 1990–1997 (ABDI research 1990–1998), Helsinki
- Fewster D. (2006) Visions of Past Glory Nationalism and the Construction of Early Finnish History
- Harinen, O. (2008) Ässä-rykmentin eli talvisodan helsinkiläisen Jalkaväkirykmentti 11:n aseveliyhdistys ja sen sosiaalinen toiminta vuonna 1940. (The social work of the veterans' association of Infantry Regiment 11 in 1940). National Defence University, Department of Behavioral Sciences, Publication series 1, no 4/2008.
- Herranen, H. (2006) General Conscription and Wartime Reserve in Finland. In Curtis Gilroy and Cindy Williams (editors): *Service to Country*. Massachusetts.
- Lappalainen, M. (1989) Aspects of Finnish National Defence and Society. Forum International Bd. 10. Sozialwissenschaftliches Institut der Bundeswehr (SOWI), München
- Sinkko, R., Harinen, O., Leimu, H. (2008) Suomalaisten varusmiesten maanpuolustustahto ja siihen yhteydessä olevat tekijät vuonna 2005 tehdyn kyselyn ja haastattelujen valossa. (Finnish conscripts' will to defend the country and the factors connected to it based on a 2005 survey and interviews) National Defence University, Department of Behavioural Sciences, Publication series 1, number 2/2008