

INTRODUCTION

CONSCRIPTION'S DEEP ROOTS

In his inaugural address at Tiwanaku in 2006, Evo Morales promised to complete the revolutionary struggles of Túpac Katari and Che Guevara by refounding the nation through a Constituent Assembly that would finally “end the colonial state.”¹ After more than a decade of social mobilization, Morales’s historic election marked the emergence of a new, indigenous-inflected nationalist project in a country whose indigenous majority had long been marginalized by the white and mestizo elite. His revolutionary 2009 Constitution went so far as to rename the country. It promised that the new Plurinational State of Bolivia would be “based on respect and equality for all, on principles of sovereignty, dignity, complementarity, solidarity, harmony, and equity in the distribution and redistribution of the social wealth, where the search for *buen vivir* [a harmonic life] predominates.”²

Everything had changed in Bolivia. Or almost everything. Amid these radical transformations in what it meant to be Bolivian, one thing remained strikingly similar—the requirement of male military service. In fact, four separate articles of the 2009 Constitution reiterated the duty of all men to serve.³ Article 108 identified sixteen separate obligations of Bolivians. Alongside their duties to protect natural resources in a sustainable way and “care for, protect, and help their ancestors” was the only gendered duty: “to give military service, which is obligatory for men.”⁴ The article that boldly restricted public service to those who speak at least two of the country’s thirty-seven official languages also mandated that male candidates complete military duties.⁵ The repetition of this obligation raises a question: Why did this new foundation for Bolivian governance and society take such pains to recommit the nation’s men to serving in the military, a violent and coercive institution that has long promoted assimilation into a mestizo national cultural ideal?

By analyzing military service from its establishment in the early twentieth century through the changes wrought after the 1952 revolution, this book explains the history of Bolivians’ paradoxical embrace of conscription by arguing that this coercive state project evolved into a pact between the state and society. This pact was not negotiated on equal terms, nor did it cre-

ate a unified nation devoid of hierarchy. But conscription was constitutive of citizenship and state formation in Bolivia. It was not only fundamental to establishing bureaucratic structures throughout the national territory but also the primary mechanism for efforts to instill a sense of national identity in indigenous and working-class men. Yet the Bolivian state lacked the coercive power to impose it through force, the bureaucratic power to impose it administratively, and the ideological power to impose it through nationalism. So it combined the coercive structure of conscription with arbitrary impressment while working to negotiate consent. I argue that many Bolivian men, especially from the lower classes, participated in military service (and pressured others to do the same) because it was a way to ascend the social ladder, forge patronage relationships, prove adulthood and manliness, and make claims on the state.

MILITARY SERVICE IN CONTEMPORARY BOLIVIA

The construction of a classed and gendered identity on the basis of military service has led this practice to thrive in Bolivia as it is being eliminated in some other parts of Latin America and the world. Since the 1970s, scholars have been discussing the decline of conscription as militaries have adjusted to an era of limited and unconventional warfare that often has only tenuous connections to national borders.⁶ The originators of the modern system of universal male military service, France and Germany, have ended or suspended the obligation. Although heightened geopolitical tensions in the 2010s have sparked some renewed interest in compulsory service, it is certainly no longer the norm. By the 1990s, notes military historian George Flynn, “the conscript’s day was over.”⁷

In Bolivia, however, twenty thousand young men enter the barracks as conscripts each January, with newspapers reporting on long lines outside of the most prestigious units and publishing pictures of the tents pitched days in advance by eager recruits.⁸ Men need military service documents (see figure I.1) to vote, run for office, or hold public employment. Having these documents has become “synonymous with being mature and responsible”; indigenous respondents to a 2002 survey presented this documentation as “indispensable” to their personal lives.⁹ As is true for many systems of supposedly universal service, they can obtain this paperwork without dedicating a year of their lives to the barracks. Twenty-thousand secondary students annually elect to complete pre-military training on weekends to earn their service documents, and those who want and can afford to forgo training altogether can pay a fee of three thousand bolivianos (about \$430, which would be out of reach for most working-class Bolivians).¹⁰ And many others simply go without these documents.¹¹ The conscription system in place today effective-



FIGURE I.1. Military service booklet of Hugo Murillo, 1941. Personal collection of Rosa Marina Murillo, La Paz. Used with permission.

ly staffs the ranks with men who choose to be there. They cannot be called volunteers, however, because of the legal compulsion that structures their military service. But their collaboration establishes them as patriotic citizens who have answered the call to defend the nation.

These young men enter the barracks because they understand the experience of military service to be a meaningful one for social, cultural, political, and gendered reasons. It has become embedded in the fabric of Bolivian society, at least for men from the working classes, especially in some rural communities. Although the obligation to perform military service is still explicitly male, the armed forces offered 180 conscript spots for female volunteers for the first time in 2018.¹² Opening up this experience to young women, even in this very limited way, suggests that many Bolivians see military service not as an onerous duty to be avoided but rather as one that carries prestige.

The term “conscript” has gendered, class-based, and nationalist meanings in today’s Bolivia. When campaigning for president in 2005, Evo Morales prominently invoked his time in the military as proof of his patriotism, pointing out that his opponent, who had called him an indigenous separatist, had never donned a uniform or taken the conscript’s oath to the flag.¹³ In April 2017, Vice Minister of Decolonization Félix Cárdenas advocated that all candidates for president, vice president, and the legislature be required to speak an indigenous language and, if male, have entered the barracks as

conscripts. “In Bolivia, the only president who has done obligatory military service is called Evo Morales, all the others were *omisos*, none of them went to the barracks.”¹⁴ Conscription has become a marker of pride and nationalism for non-elite men.

FROM LIBERALISM TO REVOLUTIONARY NATIONALISM

This book tells the story of the militarization of Bolivian politics and society in the era prior to the rule by generals (with brief civilian interludes) from 1964 to 1982. Following Maya Eichler, I define militarization as “any process that helps establish or reinforce a central role for the military in state or society.”¹⁵ In Bolivia, these processes had two threads, the interrelation of which this book teases out. The first is the intermixing of military and civilian cultures through conscription during times of both war and peace. The second is the role of military officers (and sometimes even conscripts) in high politics, despite the institution’s constitutional mandate to be “a fundamentally obedient institution” prohibited from political participation (*deliberar*).¹⁶

This study of conscription thus analyzes politics and belonging during Bolivia’s periods of liberalism (1900–1936), reform and reaction (1936–1952), and revolutionary nationalism (1952–1964). Before 1952, Bolivia severely limited formal citizenship, which was defined as the right to vote and be elected.¹⁷ Although the discursive use of the term “citizen” was far less rigid, referring to a general sense of belonging, nationalism, and rights that applied far beyond the limited pool of voters, this broader definition still encompassed only a limited proportion of those living within the national territory.¹⁸ A substantial number of men in the barracks were thus what I call noncitizen soldiers, meaning they had neither formal citizenship rights nor a strong sense of duty and belonging to the Bolivian nation.

Although masked by the language of inclusivity, the project of obligatory military service in fact originated as part of an attempt to limit indigenous communities’ sense of belonging to Bolivia. After defeating Conservatives in an 1899 civil war, Liberals worked to restrict the power of the indigenous allies who had made their victory possible. The military service law contributed to these efforts by making conscription obligatory for all men, which ended previous exemptions for tribute-paying Indians. Drawing on congressional debates, War Ministry records, and Prefecture records, the first chapter of this book shows that military conscription in the early twentieth century was structured by Bolivia’s persistent and pervasive racism and thus reinforced racialized hierarchies.

The second chapter, however, takes readers inside the barracks to argue that the experience of military service was never within the control of the liberal state that instituted it as part of its nation-making project. Throughout

the twentieth century, soldiers cultivated their own countervailing cultural practices within a larger military culture, both investing in and contesting the norms, punishments, labors, and living conditions imposed by their officers. Fundamentally different concepts of legitimate authority clashed in the barracks as Bolivia haltingly transitioned from an army based on impressment to one based on patriotic service.

The fracturing of the Liberal Party after 1914 created a new atmosphere of fear and suspicion in the barracks as officers engaged conscripts in plots to bring favored civilians to power. Formally educated conscripts had long drawn on patron-client ties to complain about the barracks, claiming that the institution had failed in its obligations to them. However, in a time of heightened partisan conflict, authorities interpreted the expression of these grievances as politically motivated mutinies that might signal the next coup. Chapter 3's analysis of four conscript-led mutinies in La Paz between 1920 and 1931 shows that literate and politically engaged conscripts were emboldened by the factionalized context to bypass the command structure and use the idea of citizen soldiers to make demands about the conditions of military service. Instances of rebellion and insubordination thus haunted the Bolivian army as tensions grew over the border in the Chaco.

The 1932–1935 Chaco War with Paraguay was the deadliest interstate conflict in twentieth-century Latin America.¹⁹ After mobilizing an unprecedented number of men, Bolivia suffered losses proportional to those of European nations in World War I.²⁰ Drawing on military-justice testimony, the fourth chapter argues that recruitment processes and the treatment of deserters were remarkably flexible and that accommodations did not always correlate to men's social status. Archival sources from Bolivia and Paraguay show that frontline soldiers were far more diverse than previously recognized and included volunteers, draftees, and men violently impressed into the ranks. Military and diplomatic mistakes quickly turned the war into a disaster for Bolivia, as its soldiers suffered the ravages of not only combat but also disease and dehydration. Yet this mass participation and shared suffering led to increased investment in military service and laid the foundation for Bolivia to become a conscript nation.

Economic crises, coups, strikes, and uprisings characterized the postwar period as reformist and revolutionary parties challenged the traditional elite. Although the military should have emerged disgraced by the war, it instead dominated the country's labyrinthine politics, with officers holding the presidency for eleven of the next sixteen years. Some of these leaders had been part of the high command during the war, but others were junior officers who saw themselves as representing the noncitizens who had fought. These reformers challenged the established order and called for profound societal change. They promised to forge a new Bolivia, redeemed and united by veter-

ans' sacrifice. Detailing the increased engagement with the state that resulted from efforts to reward veterans and punish evaders, chapter 5 argues that veterans, including some from rural areas identified as indigenous, assumed a new authority and expressed a rhetorically powerful sense of belonging to the Bolivian nation. The postwar era thus added a new form of distinction to Bolivia's deeply rooted hierarchies.

Conscription thrived after the war due to the increased importance of military service documents, the state's capacity to devote more resources to recruitment, social pressure from peers and veterans, and individuals' power to use service to make claims on the state.²¹ However, most of the men who had served on the front lines in the Chaco and who filled the barracks in the 1940s still lacked formal citizenship rights, as the 1938 Constitution explicitly retained literacy restrictions on suffrage. The reformist administrations of Toro (1936–1937), Busch (1937–1939), and Villarroel (1943–1946) proved unwilling to break from entrenched notions of hierarchy. However, the nation they imagined to have been forged in the Chaco and in the barracks included only those willing to assimilate and participate in their version of nationalism. Despite this continuity, chapter 6 shows that mass participation in a failed war and the circulation of new ideologies did affect attitudes and cultural norms in the military.

Wartime service had exposed a generation of young elite and middle-class men to the indigenous masses that made up the bulk of the Bolivian army. Already familiar with the revolutionary and reformist ideologies based in Marxism that were circulating in the 1920s and 1930s, these men returned from the front convinced that Bolivian society needed to change profoundly. Seeing themselves as allied with and speaking for the masses, they formed new political parties during and after the war to oppose the oligarchy. One of these new parties was the Revolutionary Nationalist Movement (MNR) led by Víctor Paz Estenssoro. After participating in the reformist military government of Major Gualberto Villarroel from 1943 to 1946, the MNR attempted to take power by force several times. Although Paz Estenssoro won the majority of votes in the 1951 presidential election, a military junta sent him into exile.

Supported by miners, factory workers, and the *carabineros* (militarized police force), the MNR staged a coup on April 9, 1952, that soon became a revolution. During its first sixteen months in power, the party made suffrage universal, nationalized the three largest tin mines, and enacted far-reaching agrarian reform. The revolution threatened the survival of the military, which had long supported the oligarchy by repressing strikes and uprisings. Antimilitary sentiment proliferated after the revolution; the MNR slashed the budget, shuttered the Military Academy, purged the officer corps, and drastically reduced the number of conscripted troops. Symbolizing a pro-

found shift in power, militiamen in the mines and rural areas, many of whom had already served as conscripts, proudly wielded army rifles to protect their revolutionary conquests and the new administration.

However, key MNR leaders believed that the institution could be remade to serve party goals as the "Revolution's Army." The military's long-standing claims to embody the nation and prepare its youth for citizenship resonated with the MNR's nationalism. Chapter 7 explains the institution's survival after 1952 and its return to power after 1956, charting continuity and change in the conscript experience. Although the assimilatory purpose of military service remained, as did the violence and hierarchy of barracks life, new rhetoric about conscripts and their labor indicates that the new state no longer dismissed them as noncitizen soldiers but actively sought their support as citizens of the revolutionary nation.

CONSCRIPTION IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

The growing scholarship on Latin American militaries has moved away from Miguel Centeno's pathbreaking work, which argued that limited wars in Latin America led to limited states that tended to be despotic and have a weak institutional capacity.²² Instead, historians have examined military service in terms of gender, race, and social mobility. A large literature looks at the role of military service in non-elite nationalism, especially during the long nineteenth century. This vein of research has examined how indigenous and Afro-Latin people both shaped armies and were shaped by their participation in them.²³ These works begin to present military service as more than simply coercive but rather as a balancing act between state and individual needs.

Much more limited, however, is work on the systems of supposedly universal male conscription that spread throughout the region in the early twentieth century. Although its origins can be traced to the ancient world and the French Revolution, the modern form of obligatory military service dates to the mid-nineteenth century, when extensive peacetime conscription became the norm in Europe and spread throughout the world.²⁴ Between 1896 and 1916, every South American country except Venezuela and Uruguay passed conscription laws along these lines. These laws sought to replace armies based on the arbitrary and forcible recruitment of the poor (the *leva*) with ones made up of honorably conscripted citizen soldiers.²⁵

Instead of a few men serving for long terms, conscript armies featured quite limited service by the masses in order to ensure that a significant portion of the male population had experience in arms and could be called up in case of international conflict. Putting what were essentially civilians in uniform necessarily led to changes in military culture. Spreading conscription

to the masses also affected society, as states had to make and fulfill promises to get and retain men in the military. The coercive force of poverty led to the barracks' becoming a site of social mobility.²⁶ And the exclusive recruitment of men meant that conscription served to legitimize authority over women and became a marker of violent and dominating versions of masculinity.²⁷

Universal male military service has long been associated with the ideal of citizen soldiers who have a stake in their own defense. This concept constructs soldiering as honorable because true citizen soldiers fight out of a sense of nationalism rather than for material benefit or out of fear of physical punishment. In theory, the military thus becomes an organic representation of the people rather than an institution with its own interests.²⁸ In Bolivia, this rhetoric elided the fact that property and literacy requirements barred many soldiers from enjoying formal citizenship rights.

In many Latin American countries, internal reasons for instituting compulsory military service trumped the geopolitical ones that had principally motivated European states. As neighbors turned toward conscript armies, border concerns were certainly part of the Latin American calculus. However, these states passed conscription laws more to assert control over the national territory, strengthen bureaucratic systems, gain access to labor, and nationalize and improve the population through a soft form of eugenics. Despite using liberalism's language of universality, governing elites, often over the objections of military officers, targeted for conscription men they viewed as most in need of discipline and instruction in literacy, public health, and nationalism.²⁹ Yet fear of race war also undergirded these conscription projects, as elites moved to militarize the very men that their armies were so often called on to repress.³⁰ Work on conscription thus supports Centeno's contention that Latin American militaries were organized around fighting internal enemies "defined racially, along class lines, and by critical ideological struggles."³¹

Although states adopted obligatory military service for similar reasons, implementation and communities' responses varied widely at both the national and subregional levels.³² In Argentina, mass immigration, an ideologically charged atmosphere, and the unlikelihood of international conflict led to strongly coercive administrative methods, which produced comparatively high levels of participation. Unlike in Bolivia, Argentine conscripts secured the right to vote (without any literacy or property restrictions after 1912) through military service, and this association provided a rationale for denying women suffrage.³³ Work on Chile is more limited but suggests that the conscription system struggled with widespread exemptions and evasion.³⁴ Although Peru might be the most analogous country to Bolivia, no work has yet explored conscription in the early twentieth century except to suggest that discharged conscripts became peasant leaders.³⁵ Focused more on the

late twentieth century, the scholarship on Ecuadorian conscription shows that the country did not actively pursue indigenous participation in military service until the 1940s.³⁶ And when Mexico experimented with a universal male draft in the 1940s, it produced limited results and led to significant physical, bureaucratic, and discursive resistance from both conscripts and the local authorities responsible for implementation.³⁷

Many of these works have productively focused on competing narratives of masculinity surrounding barracks life. They tend to agree that states used gendered narratives to attract men to obligatory military service, promising “domination over women in exchange for fealty to the state and the social order.”³⁸ Yet defining military service as the masculine honor of protecting the nation conflicts with the widespread use of humiliating physical punishments to discipline soldiers and the feminized nature of barracks work.³⁹ Different ideas about masculinity thus developed and clashed in the barracks, often resulting in an aggressive form of machismo based on physical dominance.⁴⁰ Working-class and rural men sometimes came to use a militarized masculinity gained in the barracks to question the manliness of the elite men who dominated society.⁴¹

Guatemala and Brazil offer the best cases for comparison due to the state of the scholarship on conscription and the existence of similarly racialized divides. Guatemala included indigenous people in the conscription system around the same time as Bolivia, whereas Brazil needed the geopolitical impetus of World War I to overcome the context of federalism and the fear of military interference in politics.⁴² Brazil’s system focused on the “‘honorable’ urban poor” and led to the “emergence of urban populism.”⁴³ Although Bolivia’s system was also disproportionately urban prior to the 1950s, in the 1910s and 1920s it produced a significant number of educated and middle-class conscripts who invoked the ideal of citizen soldiers to make demands and object to the conditions of service.

Guatemala, on the other hand, mostly used impressment to conscript rural indigenous men. Like their Bolivian counterparts, Guatemalan elites used conscription as a tool of integration and indoctrination as part of a modernizing state project.⁴⁴ Yet work by David Carey shows that during Jorge Ubico’s administration in the 1930s, Guatemala incorporated indigenous men into the nation explicitly as Indians, embracing ethnic markers in the barracks—something that would have been quite unthinkable in Bolivia.⁴⁵ As was the case in Bolivia, however, many Kaqchikel conscripts experienced empowerment through military service, gaining confidence and concrete skills in the barracks.⁴⁶ The two countries diverged due to the 1954 coup and subsequent civil war that devastated rural Guatemala, which led indigenous people to successfully demand the end of conscription in the 1990s rather than embracing it as many Bolivians did.⁴⁷

This scholarship on the mechanisms and experience of obligatory military service in Latin America consists of several isolated case studies, which limit the explanatory power of comparison. Only Peter Beattie's work on Brazil has the breadth and depth of sources comparable to this book. Although extensive work exists on Paraguay's wartime experience, scholars have yet to explore peacetime military service. More case studies are thus needed to clarify comparative aspects, but Bolivian conscription stands out in several respects. First, Bolivia was the only country (other than its opponent, Paraguay) to fight a large-scale, external war in the era of obligatory military service. This effort mobilized not only reservists but also many men without prior military training. It produced a generation of veterans from a variety of regions and social classes, all of whom had a clear avenue for claims-making based on wartime service. Veterans' relationship to the military institution and to the Bolivian state was essential to spreading awareness of and compliance with the obligation. Second, the 1952 revolution made all conscripts formal citizens and brought to power a government that needed their support at the polls and in the streets. Finally, Bolivia's particularly weak and localized state apparatus allowed for considerable individual and local manipulation of the obligation, experience, and meaning of conscription. Although conscripts throughout the region and world have co-created military service, affecting the institution and creating their own military culture, Bolivia appears to be an extreme case in that this process was so extensive that "conscript" became a term of pride.

INDIGENEITY AND STATE FORMATION IN BOLIVIA

The military has received little scholarly attention in spite of its fundamental role in Bolivia's history. Over the course of the twentieth century, the armed forces shaped the political system, drew people into the state through annual conscription and armed conflict, served as a school for citizenship, claimed to incarnate the nation, and helped define dominant masculinities. The military and military service are crucial to understanding some of the scholarship's biggest concerns: state formation, indigenous identity, revolutionary nationalism, and dictatorship. Yet because of the devastating consequences of the Chaco War and the Cold War dictatorships that took over after the fall of the MNR, the literature on the Bolivian military has been disproportionately focused on the details of campaigns, the actions of specific leaders, and officers' intervention in politics.⁴⁸ These works address a limited set of concerns, seeing the military in terms of leaders, battles, and tactics. Soldiers thus become merely bodies following orders rather than diverse subjects of state engagement.

Understanding the military as constructed through its relationship with conscripts, my work assimilates the lessons of operational and political mili-

tary history but asks questions about military culture, soldiers' experiences, and the impact of the military and conscription on broader society. Narrating the goals and experience of military service over six decades, this book builds on the foundational work of Bolivians and Bolivianists who have parsed out the changing legal framework of conscription, helped explain how conscription functioned in the 1910s and 1930s, and explored men's wartime experiences.⁴⁹

Existing work overwhelmingly focuses on military service as the machinery of an oppressive state that has perpetuated "colonial-type relations" by encouraging passive citizenship and teaching conscripts that indigeneity "was a worthless and stigmatizing cultural sign."⁵⁰ This is, of course, true. Designed to make conscripts less indigenous, the physical and cultural violence of military service played an active role in Bolivia's fluid and situational classificatory matrix, which is based on shifting sociocultural markers such as dress, hairstyle, language, diet, surname, schooling, occupation, region, residence, and income.⁵¹ My work deepens this line of scholarship by showing how entrenched hierarchies structured who served and under what circumstances. More importantly, it explains how military service obscured the role of race and class in these hierarchies, instead expressing difference in terms of ability, honor, and patriotism.

But this book depicts consent as more than just complicit or opportunistic submission. Recent Bolivianist scholarship has productively focused on indigenous mobilization and citizenship, looking at the acculturative goals central to modernizing projects and the equivocal ways that the leaders of indigenous communities both engaged with and resisted the state.⁵² Yet those who opted to assimilate, internalizing the stigma placed on indigeneity, have received less attention, which is why this book focuses on both coercion and consent. It also moves away from the study of indigenous activists to look at the daily interactions between the central institution of the Bolivian state and ordinary Bolivians from across lines of region, race, and social class. Because the state lacked the power to compel military service except through arbitrary impressment, it worked to negotiate consent. Multiple layers of claims-making, negotiation, and accommodation therefore characterized the state formation built around military service. I argue that conscription was embraced from below because it provided a space for Bolivians from across divides of education, ethnicity, and social class to negotiate their relationships with each other and with the state.

Internal military records drive this new interpretation of Bolivian state formation. Materials from Bolivia's *Estado Mayor* Archive depict the inner workings of the military institution and the practice of conscription. Informed by rich testimony from mutiny, abuse of authority, and desertion proceedings, the book takes readers inside the barracks and narrates con-



FIGURE I.2. Brass band playing at Gran Poder festival, 2006, La Paz. Photo by the author.

scripts' experiences of labor, insubordination, punishment, and homosocial camaraderie. I also draw on thousands of service records from the Ministry of Defense's Territorial Archive to elucidate the background of individual soldiers and chart the changing face of conscription across the national territory during the 1940s and 1950s.

Perhaps the ubiquity of brass bands in Bolivia encapsulates the unintended and unexpected effects of obligatory military service. Anyone who has been to Oruro's Carnaval, La Paz's Gran Poder, or any number of local festivals in neighborhoods and villages throughout Bolivia recognizes the central role of the brass bands that accompany the costumed men and women danc-

ing the *morenada*, *tink'u*, or *caporales*. Anthropologists have commented on the importance of these *entradas* to affirming a “sense of common belonging” and expressing a Bolivianness “composed of multiple regional and ethnic identities.”⁵³ Individuals identifying as indigenous participate in, and indigenous communities host, such festivals, but they are expressly Bolivian rather than exclusively indigenous. Yet they are still associated with indigeneity. As Roberto Albro notes, urban people use these costumed dances to maintain an “active connection to their indigenous heritage.”⁵⁴ The brass bands that provide the beat for these dancers have their origin in the military bands that played at festivals for patriotic celebrations, raised soldiers’ spirits during long marches, and convoked men to war.⁵⁵ Former conscripts, many of whom learned to play these instruments in the barracks, appropriated this and other aspects of military service and invested them with new meanings. Over a half century, they forged a conscript nation that was still hierarchical and divided by profound differences but was never simply an assimilatory project.