

Elizabeth Shesko, *Conscript Nation: Coercion and Citizenship in the Bolivian Barracks*

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In Latin America, obligatory military service – one of the hallmarks of nineteenth-century nation-building projects globally – was also a project of racial whitening and control. Bolivia conscripted its Indigenous and Mestizo men in order to recreate them as assimilated subjects and patriots even when Bolivian laws balked at giving these same men the rights of citizens. In this excellent book, Elizabeth Shesko argues that, despite the eugenicist goals of conscription, the experience of military service gave conscript men the language, connections and skills to insert themselves into the political life of the country in surprising, and surprisingly consistent ways. *Conscript Nation* shows how soldiers navigated a coercive system and remade barracks culture to their own ends, helping create a militarised society that involved a great deal of negotiation from below. Shesko makes clear that understanding the culture of conscription is central to any exploration of national popular culture in the Bolivian twentieth century.

Shesko's book offers a welcome contribution to the robust literature on race and Bolivian nation-building. At the same time, her work offers a timely reconsideration of the role of the military in Bolivian politics and history beyond questions of dictatorship. Consider, for example, the political trajectory of Evo Morales, Bolivia's first Indigenous president and the only democratically elected president in recent memory to have completed military service as a conscript. As a candidate, Morales proudly highlighted his military service to counter claims from political opponents that he was running on an Indigenous separatist platform. Even as Morales convened an assembly to rewrite Bolivia's constitution and re-founded the country as a plurinational, anticolonial republic, the constitution maintained the requirement for universal male service.

Morales' relationship to military service was easy to forget when, during the 2019 protests that ended his government, Morales-appointed General Williams Kaliman advised the president that it was in his and the country's best interest to step down. As Shesko's work shows, this was not the first time that a partisan general of a revolutionary government chose institutional loyalty over the party that appointed him. Nor is it, despite an official prohibition on political intervention, the first time that army officers have helped topple a government. *Conscript Nation* offers a window into the long history of military intervention, by conscripts as well as generals, in Bolivian politics, predating both Kaliman and the era of Cold War military dictatorships that lasted from 1964 to 1982.

As a military history, *Conscript Nation* situates Bolivian practices within a transnational history of conscription that dates back to the nineteenth century. With the exception of the Chaco War, in which Bolivian and Paraguayan conscripts fought each other with devastating results, most Latin American nations did not fight large-scale external wars during the era of military conscription. Instead, they used conscripts and the conscription of unruly populations to exert territorial and political control. Bolivia did both, and Shesko shows how, in the aftermath of the Chaco War (1932–5), non-citizen soldiers – who could not legally vote but who did often intervene in the political life of the nation – increasingly made claims to rights earned through national service, helping drive a social and political revolution by 1952. By exploring conscription's relationship to both geopolitical and internal concerns, Shesko joins a generation of scholars whose work helps us better understand the origins of the Bolivian nationalist revolution of 1952, while also offering a definitive English-language account of the Chaco War as experienced by conscripts and officers.

Conscript Nation begins with the seeming paradox of Bolivian military service: that it has been historically, and continues to be, both compulsory and voluntary. That is to say, Bolivians who are wealthy enough can avoid it, and so too can those who live marginally enough as to avoid needing paperwork to work and participate in their communities. Bolivian men must have a record of completing or buying out military service to run for office or complete most bureaucratic tasks, but many see military service as a rite of adulthood and a step towards social mobility. This functionally means that military conscription is chosen by a subset of working-class and rural Bolivian men with aspirations of social, political and economic mobility. It also means that those men both contest and internalise the hierarchies that sustain the military, remaking conscript culture while being remade themselves.

Shesko makes the case for more comparative work on conscription regionally, but this volume offers both a decisive account of Bolivian military cultures in the twentieth century and a contribution to our understanding of the way conscription shapes ideas about race, gender and political participation. The paradox of Bolivian military service as both coercive and negotiated from below allowed conscripts to assert themselves within a racist and classist social structure while upholding that structure and at times wielding it over others. As Shesko argues, the idea of military service as a masculine rite of adulthood in many parts of the country helps explain the persistence of compulsory conscription into the present day. In twenty-first-century Bolivia, where governing continues to require significant negotiation with popular sectors who may well have learnt political culture in the barracks as much as in a union or neighbourhood federation, conscription remains an important institution for historians and social scientists to understand.

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