

RESEARCH NOTE OPEN ACCESS

# The Ethnic Groups Military Recruitment Data

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## ABSTRACT

Military conscription affects how countries expand political rights and fight wars, as well as their citizens' view of the state and socioeconomic outcomes. Until recently, conscription was studied in a simplified fashion, missing cases where it only applies to specific societal groups. We introduce the Ethnic Military Recruitment (EGMR) data, which allows investigating selective conscription at the level of affected societal groups. The dataset is the first source providing global, systematic group-level military recruitment data for all countries that implemented conscription over the 1946–2010 period. We explain how the data were coded, describe the landscape of selective military conscription over the period of observation and begin to assess its correlates at both country and group levels. The EGMR data offer new pathways for research on the causes and consequences of ethnic groups' societal inclusion, as well as civil–military relations, colonial legacies and civil conflict.

## 1 | Introduction

Military recruitment policies are central to understanding the relationship between the state and its citizens. Existing research shows that how the state recruits its soldiers affects whether it democratises (Ingesson et al. 2018; Vasquez and Powell 2021), experiences coup attempts and mass protests (Choulis 2022; Cebul and Grewal 2022; Mehrl and Escribà-Folch 2024) and how it fights wars (Vasquez 2005; Horowitz et al. 2011; Anderson et al. 2023). Military recruitment strategies shape citizens' institutional trust, support for war and the military itself (Choulis et al. 2021; Horowitz and Levendusky 2011; Bove et al. 2024), as well as individual-level outcomes including education and socioeconomic attainment (MacLean 2008; Torun 2019).

How states assemble their militaries, and whether this occurs via conscription or voluntary recruitment, thus appears both substantively important and well understood. However, this literature, by focussing on the distinction between conscription and market-based recruitment, has important blind spots: States may adopt selective conscription, exempting certain

societal groups from military service while conscripting others (Atkinson et al. 2025). Atkinson and coauthors show that selective and universal conscription differ in how they affect states' war dynamics and provide new data covering military recruitment at the state level. This advances beyond research, which focuses solely on the distinction between conscript and all-volunteer forces. However, it also leaves a critical aspect of selective conscription unexplored: Which societal groups are included or excluded from the draft?

Existing research suggests that group's military inclusion and exclusion are crucial, as they affect groups' access to political participation (Krebs 2004), welfare benefits (Peled 1994) and how other citizens perceive of them (Siviş 2023). Along these lines, existing work understands conscription into military institutions as a *school for the nation*, promoting citizenship and patriotism among conscripts with diverse ethnic identities (Gaub 2010; Krebs 2004, 2005). Military institutions are then central in creating and maintaining political communities, and specific ethnic groups' involvement in the military is an important piece of information about their relationship with the state.

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Group's (exclusion from) military service may affect their political and economic outcomes, also raising the question how and why groups are excluded from conscription in the first place.

Attempts to understand the relationship between military recruitment policies and ethnic relations (see Enloe 1980, 1983; Peled 1994; Krebs 2004) have been hindered by a lack of data that would allow for systemic comparisons on various levels of analysis. For instance, while it has been established that, in the former British Empire, ethnic selectiveness in security institutions was associated with political exclusion (Jeong and Jeong 2024; Ray 2019), we lack the data necessary to understand the broader patterns driving the practice of exclusion itself. This, so far, has prevented efforts to identify patterns in how ethnic military recruitment may be associated with broader socioeconomic inequalities.

In this paper, we introduce the Ethnic Groups Military Recruitment (EGMR) Data, the first-ever source to provide time-series cross-sectional measures of the military recruitment methods central governments apply to ethnic groups. The data cover all 99 countries where conscription was used in 1946–2010 and are compatible with the ethnic group-level Ethnic Power Relations (EPR) dataset (Vogt et al. 2015). Moving beyond existing data collection efforts, the dataset allows the group-level study of ethnic groups' conscription status, and how it may affect their societal, political and economic inclusion, as well as propensity to challenge the central government.

Here, we discuss existing data collection efforts on military recruitment policies and the unique contribution of the EGMR dataset. We explain the coding process, use the dataset to explore ethnically selective conscription and discuss potential pathways of using the new data.

## 2 | Military Recruitment Policies: Definitions and Existing Data

Military recruitment is typically organised either on a voluntary basis, where individual citizens choose to serve as professional soldiers, or on a mandatory basis, commonly referred to as conscription. Conscription can be defined as 'forced recruitment of citizens for temporary military service for little or no compensation' (Ingesson et al. 2018, 634). Conscription can be universal or selective (Atkinson et al. 2025), based on factors such as ethnicity or gender and employed during wartime as well as peacetime. Additionally, states may recruit non-citizens into their armed forces, with such legionnaires potentially staffing both rank-and-file and officer positions.<sup>1</sup>

The most prominent data source on military recruitment policies is the *Military Recruitment Dataset* (Toronto 2014), which underlies most quantitative research on recruitment. It provides global country-year data on states' methods of military recruitment, covering the years 1816–2008, distinguishing between conscription and voluntary military recruitment. More recently, the Military Labor Acquisition Data (MLAD; Atkinson et al. 2025) extends this data collection effort to span the period 1800–2015 and, more importantly, also includes selective conscription, but remains at the level of state-year observations.

Toronto's Military Recruitment data thus do not consider variation in the treatment of different social groups, and while the MLDA data do, they still provide aggregate, country-level information, insufficient for group-level analysis which would reflect differential treatment of various ethnic groups within a specific national context. In contrast, research on ethnic stacking within state militaries has produced datasets capturing which groups are represented in the military, and even more specifically in the officer corps (Harkness 2022; Johnson and Thurber 2020). However, these datasets are geographically limited to sub-Saharan Africa and the MENA region, respectively, and ignore the mode of recruitment. Data on ethnic stacking and ethnic participation rates in specific ranks are thus a valuable resource, yet geographically limited and lack group-level information on military recruitment methods.

The EGMR dataset presented here overcomes several limitations of existing datasets. First and most importantly, these data provide group-level information on ethnically selective conscription, capturing not only what countries implement conscription and whether it is universal or selective, but which ethnic groups are subject to it. And second, in contrast to ethnic stacking data, the EGMR data are also global in coverage. We next discuss how the EGMR data has been coded.

## 3 | Coding Procedure

The EGMR dataset is structured in accordance with the EPR dataset of politically relevant ethnic groups (Vogt et al. 2015). The EPR was selected for this purpose due to three reasons.

First, the EPR follow Weberian definitions of ethnicity, understood as a 'subjectively experienced sense of commonality based on a belief in common ancestry and shared culture' (Vogt et al. 2015, 1329). Accordingly, the dataset coding is based on the assumption that ethnicity can originate from various social identities, such as religion, language or race. Second, the EPR codes all politically relevant ethnic groups in a given country. Irrespective of a group's size, this includes groups whose interests are represented on the national level by at least one political actor, or groups whose members are systematically and intentionally discriminated against in the public political sphere, resulting in political exclusion. Third, the use of the EPR ensures compatibility with the EPR dataset family and with datasets that use the EPR as a skeleton for their original data.

As such, the EGMR data include EPR variables on country code (*cowcode*) and name (*country*), both coded following the *Correlates of War* project, ethnic group (*group*) and group code (*groupid*) and the year of observation (*year*). For each ethnic group-year, the EGMR data provide the *recruitethnic* and *recruitethnic\_comp* variables indicating whether members of the ethnic group were subject to conscription in military forces in a given year, based on decisions made by the central government. The variable *recruitethnic* is a dummy that takes the value 1 if an ethnic group is not subject to conscription, regardless of the cause for this. In contrast, *recruitethnic\_comp* takes into account country-level information on military recruitment, taking the value 1 if conscription occurs neither for the group nor the country in general, and 2 if the group is not subject to conscription

due to exemptions or being banned from it. The coding of both variables is outlined in Table 1.

In the EGMR dataset, conscription is understood as mandatory military service which can only be avoided at personal cost, whether it is an alternative service, fine or imprisonment. This coding includes both universal and lottery-based conscription systems. The variables only consider military institutions, leaving out enlistment to paramilitary forces. The condition of central government omits decisions made by occupying forces, unrecognised governments (such as Austria after World War II or the Taliban government in Afghanistan), or regional-level decisions.

The *recruitethnic* variable was coded as follows: First, all country-year observations coded as voluntary service in the Military Recruitment Dataset<sup>2</sup> (Toronto 2014), which covers 134 countries, were extended to all ethnic groups within a given country-year, indicating the application of voluntary enlistment to all ethnic groups. In contrast, country-year observations identified by Toronto as employing conscription were initially left blank as they required in-depth research to determine whether conscription was applied equally to all ethnic groups within the country for each year in the observation period.

Second, we conducted country-level research on states Toronto (2014) identified as employing conscription to establish its scope in terms of ethnicity. For this purpose, the previously introduced data by Harkness (2022) and Johnson and Thurber (2020) were consulted as a first step. Although they do not primarily focus on military recruitment methods, they provide information on the ethnic groups represented in military institutions across countries in Africa and the Middle East over time. These data thus allowed identifying groups requiring further investigation due to their absence from military institutions while ruling out those with significant military presences. We also utilised books on military recruitment, most importantly *World Armies* (Keegan 1979) and *Conscription: A World Survey* (Prasad and Smythe 1968) at this stage, which provided historical insights into military recruitment. In addition to the referenced datasets and books, we relied on country reports published in the *World Survey of Conscription and Conscientious Objection to Military Service* by War Resisters' International. These reports provide country-level information on the scope of conscription.

Third, when the country-level search provided no evidence of exemptions from conscription based on ethnicity, we investigated the individual ethnic groups listed in the EPR for the given country. This step focused on sources providing information

about the overall position of the ethnic group in the country or potential violations of their civic and human rights. We gathered this information from academic papers, reports by non-governmental organisations, media outputs and online sources.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the coding process, all ethnic groups in conscripting country-years were coded as conscripted unless explicit evidence to the contrary was found. Given the longitudinal nature of the dataset, we sought to determine the beginning and end of all conscription exemptions as precisely as possible. If exact dates could not be identified despite evidence of an exemption, the group was coded as exempt throughout the entire period observed in the dataset. We adapted this approach to avoid speculatively coding temporal cut-offs and creating artificial overtime variation and to ensure full transparency in the coding process. Coding decisions for all cases are documented in the codebook.

We demonstrate the coding procedure with two examples. Colombia relied on conscription throughout the entire observed period (Toronto 2014). Relevant country-level sources did not reveal any variation in military recruitment policies applied to the three ethnic groups identified as politically relevant in the EPR data: Colombians, Indigenous peoples and Afro-Colombians. However, ethnic group-level research found reports from non-governmental organisations indicating that Indigenous peoples were formally exempted from conscription in 1993 (WRI 2017; Bonilla Mora 2021). As there is no evidence for such practice occurring informally before 1993, we record the exemption as commencing in 1993 when it was made official.

In Turkey, the state also employed conscription throughout the entire observed period (Toronto 2014). Here, the SFE dataset (Johnson and Thurber 2020) was consulted during the state-level search, revealing that Turkey adopted universal conscription of citizens from all ethnic groups following Kurdish rebellions in the 1920s and 1930s. Turkish universal conscription was confirmed by other sources, such as a recent UK Home Office (2018) report.

The *recruitethnic* variable thus captures ethnic group-level conscription information, allowing researchers to understand whether a group's lack of conscription is in line with a country's general lack of conscription or represents an exemption. Importantly, it is not restricted to capturing exemptions codified in a country's law but also features practice-based de-facto exemptions that may not be formally established. An example of an official, codified conscription exemption is the case of Serbian citizens of Croatia between 1997 and 2001, which had been agreed on between Croatia, Serb representatives and the international community

**TABLE 1** | Coding the *recruitethnic* and *recruitethnic\_comp* variables.

Military recruitment system	Ethnic group	<i>recruitethnic</i>	<i>recruitethnic_comp</i>
Conscription	Conscripted	0	0
	Exempt	1	2
	Banned	1	2
Voluntary recruitment/professional army		1	1
Military does not exist		1	1

(Hedl 2001; UN 1997). In contrast, the exclusion of Asian British, Black British and Northern Irish men from military service in the United Kingdom between 1939 and 1960 is an example of practice-based exemptions (National Army Museum, n.d.). The de-facto conscription exemption of Northern Irish men also demonstrates that exemptions may be applied on a geographical basis, excluding inhabitants of a particular territory and resulting in the informal exemption of ethnic groups living there.

Coding whether selective conscription did or did not occur in a systematic fashion requires sufficient information. As such, the

data record some countries where conclusive judgement on the occurrence of ethnically selective conscription was impossible due to lacking information on the character of general military recruitment. The *recruitethnic* variable is thus set to missing for cases where Toronto (2014) lacks recruitment data. The EGMR dataset reports cases where coding exemptions were impossible to maximise transparency. For the same reason, each country narrative in the codebook features an assessment of its coding confidence level.

The *recruitethnic\_comp* variable is coded by comparing *recruitethnic* with Toronto's (2014) country-level information on

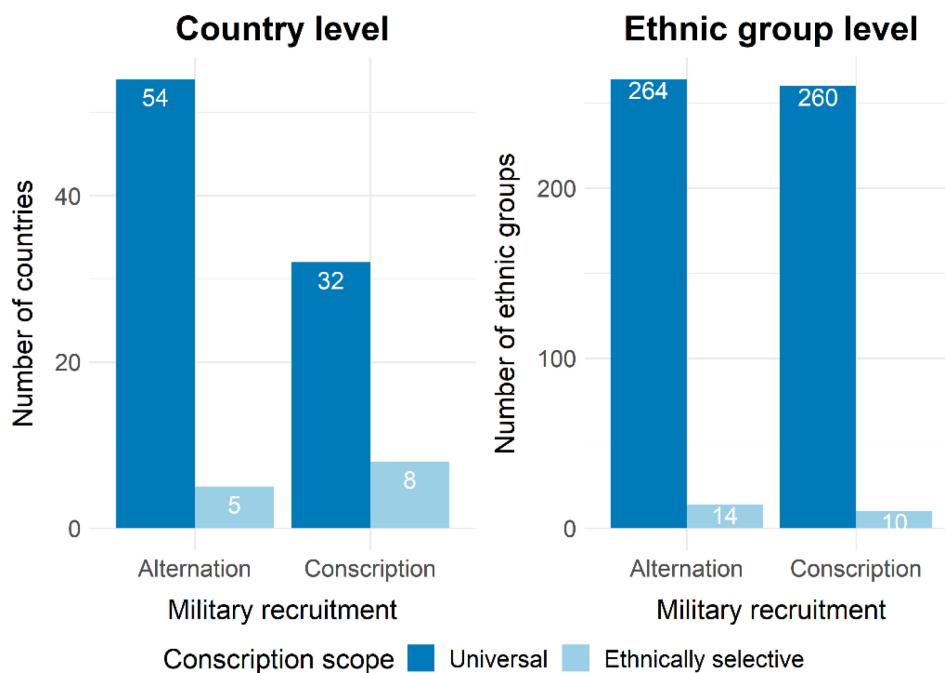


FIGURE 1 | Universal and ethnically selective conscription, 1946–2010. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

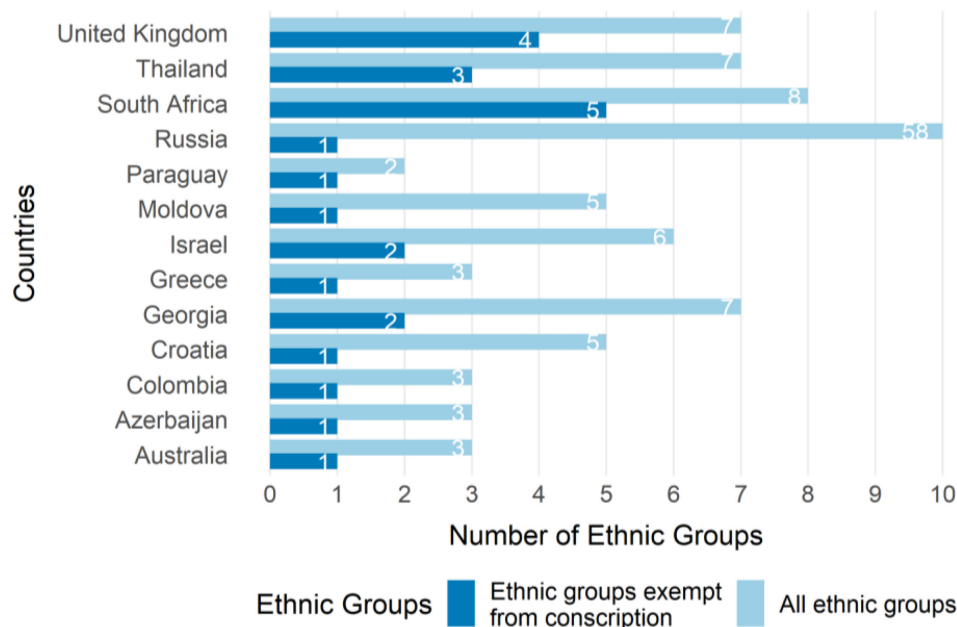


FIGURE 2 | Ethnic groups in countries employing ethnically selective conscription. ‘All ethnic groups’ bar for Russia truncated to enhance readability. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

conscription to facilitate use of the EGMR data. Additionally, the EGMR data also include two more variables directly sourced from Toronto (2014). These capture a country's general military recruitment method, *recruitgeneral*, and whether a military institution exists in a given year (*milexist*). Both are included to facilitate broader analyses of military recruitment.

#### 4 | Descriptive Statistics

We next use the EGMR data to explore the universe of ethnic groups' selective conscription over the 1946–2010 period, focusing on the 99 countries which, at some point during this period, applied conscription.<sup>4</sup> Among them, evidence of ethnically selective conscription could be found in 13 countries. In other words, of all the countries that employed conscription in 1946–2010, 13.1% did so in an ethnically selective manner. The left panel in Figure 1 further distinguishes among countries with enduring and alternating conscription policies, showing that selective conscription was more common in the former group. Its right panel presents the same data on ethnic group level, showing that there were 24 ethnic groups exempt from conscription in the observed period and that they were slightly more prevalent in countries with alternating military recruitment methods.

In Figure 2, we show which countries employed ethnically selective conscription and their respective number of nonconscribed and total politically relevant ethnic groups. Table 1 then lists the exempted ethnic groups, with their periods of conscription exemption.

Table 2 suggests the importance of group indigenous status and of religion, as indicated by conscription exemptions of Muslim minorities in non-Muslim countries such as Israel, Greece and Thailand. Additionally, it indicates that while some states may be using ethnically selective conscription to exclude specific groups from nation-building (e.g., Arabs and Palestinians in Israel), others may prevent them from conscription to maintain their protection and special status (e.g., Aborigines in Australia). However, more theorising and analysis are needed to determine such patterns. We provide a start to this below.

Additionally, we identified five additional cases where countries employed ethnically selective conscription but the ethnic group exempt from military service is not included in the EPR dataset, due to lacking political relevance. We list these groups in Table 2.

#### 5 | Exploring the Correlates of Ethnically Selective Conscription

We next investigate some broad correlates of ethnically selective conscription. While the main strength of the EGMR data is their focus on the group level, they also allow for cross-country comparisons. We thus first investigate these correlates at the country level before exploring the characteristics of specific ethnic groups.

At the country level, existing research shows that conscription is less likely in democracies and former British colonies

(Adam 2012; Asal et al., 2017; Cohn and Toronto 2017). We thus investigate the prevalence of ethnically selective conscription across regime types and colonial legacies, using data from Geddes et al. (2014), which distinguish between autocratic subtypes, and the ICOW colonial history data (Hensel and Mitchell 2007). Figure 3 shows the relationship between regime type and selective conscription. It suggests that while democracies are less likely to conscript than autocracies, they are equally likely to exempt some ethnic groups if conscription is in place. Intriguingly, however, four of the six autocracies coded as exempting ethnic groups from conscription are coded as having personalist elements to their rule, whereas monarchies and military regimes are absent from Figure 3. This points to commonalities between selective conscription and other aspects of civil–military relations, such as ethnic stacking, but also counterbalancing and legionnaire recruitment (Escribà-Folch et al. 2020; Mehrl and Escribà-Folch 2024).

Turning to colonial legacies, Figure 4 shows that ethnically selective conscription occurred in three former colonies of the

**TABLE 2** | Ethnic groups exempted from conscription.

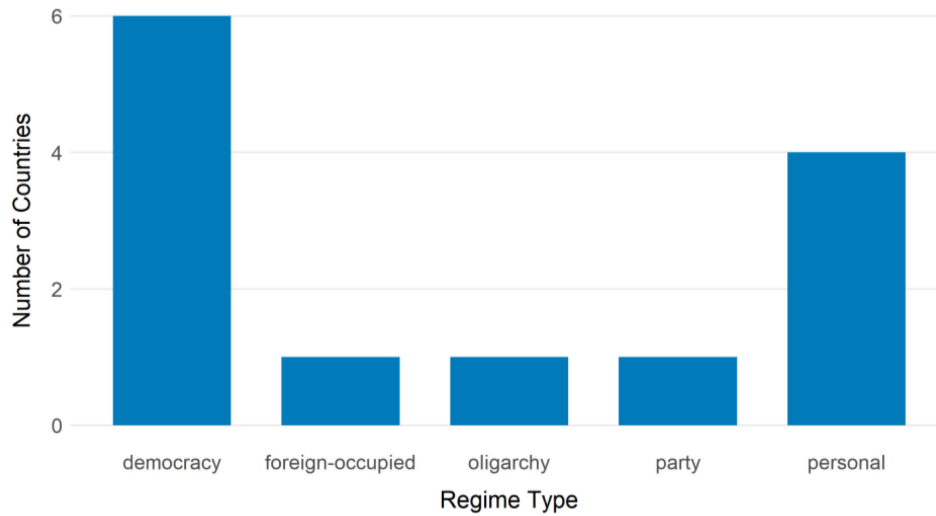
Country	Exempted ethnic groups
Australia	Aborigines (1951–1959; 1964–1972)
Azerbaijan	Armenians (1991–2010)
Colombia	Indigenous peoples (1993–2010)
Croatia	Serbs (1997–2001)
Greece	Muslims (1946–1960)
Israel	Israeli Arabs, Palestinian Arabs (1948–2010)
Moldova	Transnistrians (1991–2010)
Russia	Chechens (1970; 1992–2010)
Paraguay	Indigenous peoples (1992–2010)
South Africa	Asians, Coloureds, Zulu, Xhosa, Other Black African (1952–1994)
Thailand	Hill Tribes, Chinese, Malay Muslims (1946–2010)
United Kingdom	Asians, Afro-Caribbeans, Protestants in Northern Ireland, Catholics in Northern Ireland (1946–1960)
Georgia	South Ossetians, Abkhazians (1991–2010)
Israel <sup>a</sup>	Christians, Muslims
Finland <sup>a</sup>	Aland Islands inhabitants
Bosnia and Herzegovina <sup>a</sup>	Brcko region inhabitants
Syria <sup>a</sup>	Jews
Egypt <sup>a</sup>	Jews

<sup>a</sup>Observations excluded from data due to groups not featuring in EPR data.

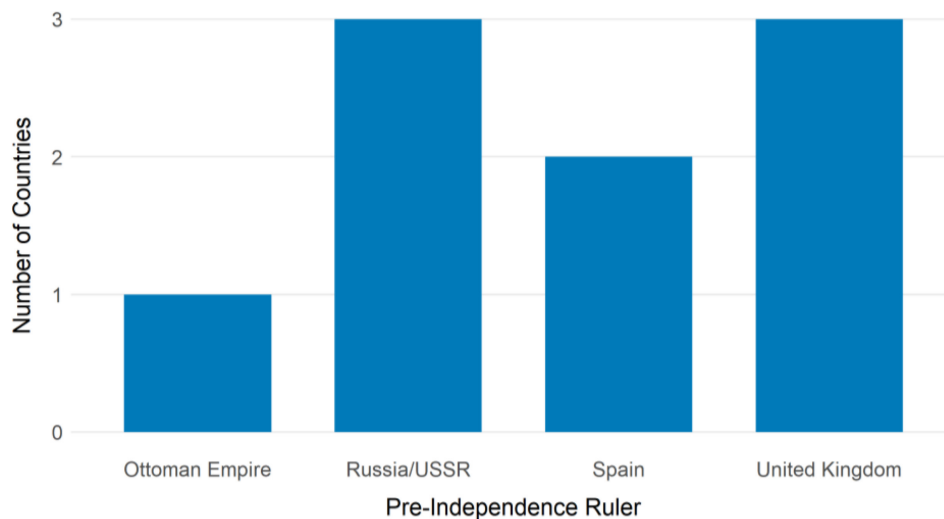
British Empire (and in the United Kingdom itself). However, ethnically selective conscription was also employed in three Russian and two Spanish former colonies, as well as one former part of the Ottoman empire. This suggests that ethnically selective military recruitment is not linked to a single colonial legacy. As it occurred across colonial empires (Barua 1995; Uyama 2007; Zürcher 1998), it instead appears to also have continued across them, indicating a path dependence akin to that seen in other post-colonial security institutions (Eck 2018; Mehrl and Choulis 2021). Accordingly, Figure 4 also suggests that former French colonies are not only more likely to maintain conscription but also to include all politically relevant ethnic groups within it.

Relatedly, the broader literature on colonial legacies suggests that, at least in former British colonies, ethnic groups' involvement in colonial security forces reduces their political exclusion in the postcolonial period (Jeong and Jeong 2024;

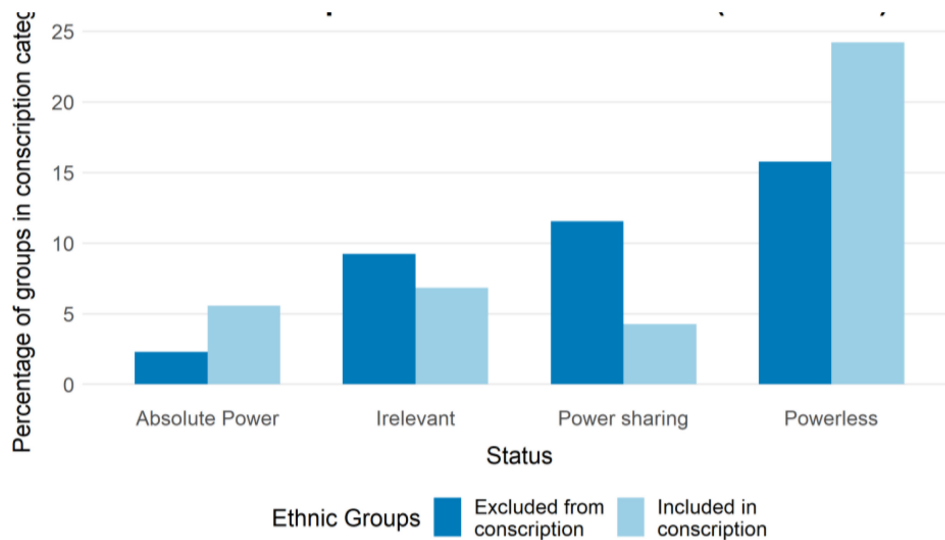
Ray 2019). Along these lines, we use the EPR data (Vogt et al. 2015) to investigate how ethnic groups' conscription and access to state power align. Here, access to state power is distinguished along three categories, based on groups' degree of political representation in the state executive: (1) 'absolute power' for ethnic groups holding monopolistic or dominant power, (2) 'power sharing' for groups who are junior or senior partners in broader coalitions and (3) 'exclusion' for groups that have regional autonomy, are powerless or discriminated. Figure 5 maps access to state power and conscription across all ethnic groups in countries where selective conscription exists. It suggests an intriguing link between groups' conscription status and political position, as a higher share of conscription-exempted groups are listed as politically irrelevant, but also as powerless, than of conscripted ethnic groups. At the same time, a smaller share of nonconscripted groups enjoy absolute power or are entirely powerless as compared to conscripted groups.<sup>5</sup>



**FIGURE 3** | Regime type in countries which employed selective conscription. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jana.12047)]



**FIGURE 4** | Colonial past of countries which employed ethnically selective conscription. Excludes United Kingdom, Russia and Thailand as they had no external pre-independence ruling state. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jana.12047)]



**FIGURE 5** | Ethnic groups' conscription status and access to state power. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jana.12047)]

## 6 | Conclusion

This paper introduces the EGMR data, which for the first time provides global, group-level information on ethnically selective military recruitment over the 1946–2010 period. We have introduced the data and how it was coded, discussed differences to existing datasets on military recruitment, and used the data to explore where ethnically selective conscription has occurred, which ethnic groups are affected by it, but also how it is associated with countries' regime type and colonial past, and ethnic groups' political position.

These initial analyses point to several future research avenues where the EGMR data can be used. Most importantly, they allow researchers to investigate the ethnic group-level causes and consequences of conscription exclusions. Along these lines, they may be combined with Ray's (2012, 2019) data on groups' colonial status to investigate whether exclusion from conscription may be a colonial inheritance. But they are also straightforward to combine with the EPR dataset family, facilitating research into more contemporary predictors and consequences of ethnically selective conscription. Here, they can facilitate research on how conscription exemptions shape groups' political inclusion, economic standing and access to public services. Along these lines, it appears that exemptions from conscription may exist to exclude groups from nation-building, but also to maintain their special status. Beyond the preliminary explorations presented here, the EGMR data accordingly facilitate comparative research into questions related to ethnic groups' position within the state, ethnic politics and the politics of military recruitment, from a quantitative, but also a qualitative perspective where the data will be useful for case selection and understanding the universe of cases.

However, the EGMR data also have shortcomings future work may seek to improve upon. For instance, they do not currently distinguish between cases of selective conscription that are codified into law and those that exist de-facto. Constitutions or laws on military service usually state that all citizens are subject to conscription, with no evidence of exemptions. However,

exemptions regularly exist and can be traced empirically, reflecting the oftentimes vague and informal nature of military recruitment policies. The EGMR data could also be extended in their temporal scope or number of groups covered.

These limitations notwithstanding, the EGMR data open up the potential for comparative and systematic research on ethnic groups' selective conscription. Additionally, this further dataset on military recruitment policies may provide a push to integrate this and other existing data on military recruitment (Atkinson et al. 2025; Johnson and Thurber 2020; Harkness 2022; Toronto 2014) to construct a comprehensive data source on military organisation.

Beyond research into ethnic groups' selective conscription, the data will be of interest to scholars studying civil–military relations, colonial legacies and civil conflict, as well as citizenship and ethnic boundary-making.

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### Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available in the [Supporting Information](#) of this article.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Recent research presents systematic data on and investigates the causes and consequences of legionnaire recruitment (Hanson and Lin-Greenberg 2019; Grasmeyer 2021; Mehrl and Escribà-Folch 2024; Escribà-Folch et al. 2025).

<sup>2</sup> As Toronto's original data end in 2008, we use Choulis' (2022) extension for 2009–2010.

<sup>3</sup>See the codebook for a full list of used sources.

<sup>4</sup>Out of 134 countries investigated, 99 applied conscription at some point between 1946 and 2010. The remaining countries either always relied on voluntary recruitment or never had military institutions.

<sup>5</sup>This result does not change when using the EPR's more fine-grained categories of access to power.

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### Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section. **Data S1:** EGMR Codebook. **Data S2:** EGMR dataset.