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Criminality as a mobilization resource in the Armed Forces of Great Britain and Russia during the First World War: a historical-comparative analysis

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Abstract.

The purpose of this article is to conduct a historical-comparative analysis of the state policies of the British Empire, the Russian Empire, and post-monarchical Russia concerning the mobilization of convicted criminals during the First World War. The research is based on a wide range of literature, archival sources, and legal documents of the period. The **methodological foundation** of the study is the historical-comparative approach, which enables the identification of the essence of phenomena and processes by comparing the policies of different countries within a shared historical period and in relation to a common problem. The principles of objectivity and historicism are also employed – facts are analyzed within the broader context of socio-political developments and corresponding interdependencies. The **scholarly novelty** of the article lies in the fact that, for the first time in Ukrainian historiography, the social and political sentiments within the armies and societies of the British Empire and the Russian state during the First World War – as well as the criminogenic situation in the postwar period – have been examined based on the analysis of newly discovered sources and critical engagement with historical documents. The **conclusions** substantiate the thesis that there were significant differences in the approaches to involving the criminal population in military service. In the British Empire, the mobilization of individuals with criminal backgrounds was driven by the need for manpower. State and social institutions, on the whole, managed to cope with the challenges arising from the inclusion of asocial elements in the military and prevented their destructive influence on the army and postwar society. In contrast, the Russian Empire adopted an exclusionary approach, seeking to keep offenders out of the army. Following the February Revolution, the Provisional Government, guided by populist considerations, permitted the enlistment of amnestied convicts – an initiative that triggered a cascade of destructive consequences, including the disintegration of the army, loss of command and control, and the collapse of post-monarchical statehood.

Keywords: criminality, army, mobilization, First World War, moral and psychological state, society.

Криміналітет як мобілізаційний ресурс у збройних силах Великої Британії та Росії у роки Першої світової війни: історико-порівняльний аналіз

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Анотація.

Метою статті є здійснення історико-порівняльного аналізу державної політики Британської імперії, Російської імперії та постмонархічної Росії щодо мобілізації засуджених під час Першої світової війни. Дослідження базується на широкому колі літератури, архівних джерел та нормативно-правових документів того часу. **Методологічну основу** становить історико-порівняльний підхід, який дозволяє виявити сутність явищ і процесів шляхом зіставлення політик різних країн у межах спільного історичного періоду щодо подібної проблеми. Також застосовано принципи об'єктивності та історизму – аналіз фактів здійснюється в контексті розвитку соціально-політичних відносин і відповідних взаємозалежностей. **Наукова новизна** полягає в тому, що вперше в українській історіографії на основі аналізу нових джерел і критичного осмислення історичних документів досліджено соціально-політичні настрої в армії та суспільстві Британської імперії й Російської держави під час Першої світової війни, а також криміногенну ситуацію в післявоєнний період. У **висновках** обґрунтовується теза про суттєві відмінності в підходах до залучення криміналітету на військову службу. У Британській імперії мобілізація осіб із кримінальним минулим була зумовлена потребою в людських ресурсах. Державні та соціальні інституції загалом впоралися з викликами, які супроводжували залучення асоціальних елементів до війська, і не допустили їхнього руйнівного впливу на армію та повоєнне суспільство. Натомість у Російській імперії превалював підхід до виключення правопорушників з лав армії. Після Лютневої революції Тимчасовий уряд, керуючись популістськими міркуваннями, дозволив призов амністованих засуджених, що спричинило руйнівні процеси – розклад армії, втрату керованості та крах постмонархічної державності.

Ключові слова: криміналітет, армія, мобілізація, Перша світова війна, морально-психологічний стан, суспільство.

Problem Statement and Relevance of the Study. Historical experience demonstrates that the involvement of criminal elements in armed conflict has been practiced throughout the history of humankind. On the one hand, this approach allowed for the compensation of manpower shortages by recruiting individuals who, due to the nature of their lifestyles, were often better adapted to the extreme conditions of war. In this context, criminal elements were frequently employed by military leadership as a utilitarian resource for executing the most difficult and dangerous tasks – often with the tacit expectation of their eventual physical elimination.

On the other hand, military circles harbored hopes for the moral transformation of these individuals through exposure to the military environment, collective responsibility, and combat brotherhood. This fostered the illusion that the experience of war could assist in reintegrating offenders into normal social life and mitigate the risks of postwar crime waves.

At the beginning of the War for Independence, Ukraine's senior military and political leadership did not consider it necessary to mobilize individuals with a criminal past. Until May 2024, citizens convicted of serious crimes (such as armed robbery, grievous bodily harm, extortion, or large-scale drug trafficking) or especially serious crimes (such as intentional homicide, treason, terrorism, or rape) were not subject to mobilization, even after their convictions were expunged – according to Article 37 of the Law of Ukraine «On Military Duty and Military Service». This policy was most likely rooted in concerns over security and maintaining discipline within the military. Individuals convicted of lesser offenses (petty theft, hooliganism, minor drug-related infractions), however, could previously be conscripted following the expungement or removal of their criminal records.

Nevertheless, the experience of combat operations in the ATO/JFO (Anti-Terrorist Operation / Joint Forces Operation) zones and during the full-scale war of 2022–2025 revealed that the scale and intensity of mobilization challenges required the state to reconsider its approach. Under these circumstances, on May 3, 2024, the Verkhovna Rada adopted Law No. 3633-IX, which allowed for the mobilization of all citizens with expunged or removed convictions, with the exception of those convicted of crimes against national security (including treason).

According to the Ministry of Justice of Ukraine, as of early September 2025, 10,100 individuals who had undergone early conditional release from correctional institutions were mobilized into the ranks of the Armed Forces (Released from prisons, 2025).

The study of historical practices of mobilizing this social group in the armed forces of both allied and enemy states holds significant applied value. Understanding the mechanisms and consequences of such policies allows for a better grasp of both historical and contemporary challenges facing military-political leadership. Such analysis may serve as a foundation for informed decisions that help minimize the destructive influence of criminal subcultures on the functioning of a nation's military structure and on societal stability in the postwar period. At the same time, historical experience is crucial for developing an effective system of psychological rehabilitation for veterans with criminal backgrounds – one that reduces the risk of potential increases in crime following the war's end.

Literature Review and Previous Scholarship. The issue of mobilizing former convicts during the First World War remains understudied, primarily because only a limited number of states ever applied such practices. In fact, only two countries – Great Britain and Russia – mobilized individuals with criminal backgrounds into their armed forces.

In British historiography, the earliest academic work that touches on this subject in passing is G. Mannheim's «War and Crime» (1941), dedicated to the impact of war on levels of criminality in the country. Mannheim notes that although quantitative estimates of criminals entering military service remain imprecise, such figures are likely underestimated. He further argues that as the war progressed and selection standards declined, the army became less stringent about prior convictions among recruits (Mannheim, 1941).

Aspects of the interaction between police and the penal system, particularly in relation to releasing prisoners for recruitment, are explored in K. Emsley's «A Short History of the Police» (Emsley, 2021). Notably, Emsley suggests that patriotic motivations often drove criminal elements to enlist in the British Army.

The most comprehensive study on this topic is by the modern British historian K. McKay: «“Probably They Will Make Good Soldiers”: Mobilizing Britain's Criminal Population during the First World War» (McKay, 2021). In that work, McKay argues for the objective necessity of incorporating criminal elements, examines the motivations of convict recruits, and traces their influence on the front lines and in postwar British society. Although he draws on a substantial body of law enforcement sources, McKay does not provide reliable statistical estimates of the total number of criminals mobilized.

Generally speaking, in official British historiography the involvement of persons with criminal histories in combat remained on the periphery of scholarly interest. This is due in part to the dominance of heroic mythologizing, glorification, and sanctification of martial traditions in the state's public discourse, which was at odds with the notion of recruiting socially marginalized individuals into the army.

In Russian historiography, scholarship tends to focus instead on the influence of amnestied criminals on the revolutionary events of 1917, the transformation of the penal system following the February Revolution, and the destructive role of criminal elements in the disintegration of the armed forces. Representatives such as S.V. Arkhipov, O.D. Tverdikova, E.E. Shumilova, and M.I. Petrenko have contributed to that literature. However, as in British studies, quantitative data regarding the participation of convicts in military operations remain absent.

A notable contribution to the social history of Russia's 1917 revolution is the work of the American historian of Japanese origin Tsuyoshi Hasegawa. In his seminal study «Crime and Punishment in the Russian Revolution: Mob Justice and Police in Petrograd» (Hasegawa, 2017), he focuses on the rise of crime, the breakdown of law and order, the collapse of police institutions, and mass mob justice during revolutionary transformation. By drawing extensively on archival sources, his analysis reveals how the criminal element not only survived but began to play a significant role in shaping the emerging revolutionary reality. His findings are crucial for understanding the context in which the Provisional Government adopted policies to mobilize amnestied convicts and the consequences of those decisions.

Hence, while individual facets of convict participation in war have been studied in British, American, and Russian scholarship, these works remain fragmented and do not capture the full spectrum of social, political, and psycho-moral implications of their mobilization. At the same time, within Ukrainian historiography this topic has scarcely been explored – its coverage is largely confined to the context of the 1917 Ukrainian Revolution.

What remains largely neglected, and is the focus of our study, is the comparative analysis of how different states – particularly Russia and the British Empire – approached the mobilization of criminal elements into their armed forces. Equally underexplored are the institutional, social, and political factors driving those approaches; the influence of convicted recruits on the moral climate of the military; their interaction with other categories of conscripts; the degree of their adaptation to military life; and their postwar destinies.

The purpose of the article is to conduct a historical-comparative analysis of state policies concerning the mobilization, control, and combat deployment of individuals with criminal backgrounds in the armed forces of the British Empire and post-monarchical Russia during the First World War. Particular emphasis is placed on identifying the civilizational and sociocultural differences between British and Russian societies, as well as on assessing their impact on the military effectiveness of incorporating criminal elements into the armed forces and on the nature of their integration into postwar civilian life.

The results of the research. At the beginning of the 20th century, the world entered a period of escalating military and political tensions, manifested, in particular, through the formation of opposing military-political alliances, which ultimately led to the outbreak of the First World War. A defining feature of military development during this era was the transition (since the second half of the 19th century) toward the establishment of mass armies. This was facilitated by a combination of factors that, at the time, eliminated the need to enlist individuals with criminal records into the ranks of the armed forces.

Firstly, the introduction of conscription based on universal military service provided a sufficient number of recruits. Secondly, the wars in Europe in the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries were generally short in duration: combat operations were usually limited to one or two summer campaigns. Under such conditions, the belligerent parties, as a rule, did not exhaust their available mobilization reserves, including the trained and qualified military personnel.

As a result, most states involved in the First World War consciously refrained from the idea of mobilizing prison inmates. This was due to both the objective absence of a need for additional manpower and the limited fitness of prisoners for military service due to health conditions. Within the overall mobilization structure, they constituted a very small percentage and could not significantly influence the outcome of mobilization campaigns. At the same time, military command in most countries was wary of the potentially destructive influence of the criminal element on the troops, justifiably believing that individuals with a criminal mindset often did not share the fundamental ethical norms that underpin military discipline and collective responsibility.

The only exceptions were the United Kingdom and Russia (after the fall of the monarchy in February 1917), where criminal offenders were partially integrated into the armed forces.

The United Kingdom: From a Volunteer Army to Universal Conscription

Prior to the First World War, there was no system of universal military conscription in the United Kingdom. The British land forces were formed exclusively on a voluntary basis and, therefore, were significantly smaller in size compared to the standing armies of continental European powers. By 1914, the British Army comprised approximately 400,000 volunteers, nearly half of whom were stationed in colonial garrisons across the British Empire (Beckett, 2007, p. 289).

With the outbreak of war, amidst a wave of patriotic enthusiasm, recruitment of volunteers and reservists was initially quite active. By early 1915, tens of thousands of Britons had enlisted. The motivations of these individuals varied – from sincere patriotic conviction to purely pragmatic considerations. For instance, nine out of ten unemployed men in Bristol volunteered for military service in August 1914, a moment that coincided with economic instability caused by the financial crisis (Ferguson, 1999, pp. 206–207). As early as 5 September 1914, the total number of new recruits who had voluntarily joined the army surpassed 225,000 (Encyclopedia, 2005, p. 503).

However, by the end of 1914, it became clear that the limited resources of the professional army were insufficient for securing victory in a protracted war, and that a substantial expansion of the mobilization base would be necessary. At the same time, by early 1916, a sharp decline in the number of volunteers was recorded. This was partly due to the “reservation” of workers in the defense industry. Between 1914 and 1916, nearly one million workers were exempted from military service to ensure the uninterrupted operation of defense-related industries (Dewey, 1984, p. 214).

In this context, the mobilization of convicted criminals into the army made it possible to simultaneously solve several problems: to increase the number of available conscripts while preserving the skilled labor force at strategically important enterprises.

Eventually, in January 1916, universal military conscription was introduced – initially for unmarried men, and beginning in May, for all men between the ages of 18 and 41 (Beckett, 2007, pp. 291–295). By the end of the war in 1918, the size of the British land forces had reached four million (Encyclopedia, 2005, p. 504). This approach not only increased the manpower of the British Army but also contributed to a decline in crime rates across the country by “redirecting” the most at-risk demographic group – young men – into military service.

As the demand for manpower continued to grow, criminals began to be conscripted on nearly equal terms with the rest of the population. It was not uncommon for defendants to request that their sentence be replaced with deployment to the army. In the early months of the war, courts generally rejected such petitions, believing that the motives of these individuals were primarily selfish and driven

by a desire to evade legal responsibility. Furthermore, at that time, the judiciary lacked formal guidelines for handling such cases, and decisions were made at the discretion of individual judges (McKay, 2021, p. 585).

However, while in 1914 most judges rejected requests from convicted individuals to be enlisted in the army, by 1916 the courts themselves increasingly began offering defendants a choice between imprisonment and military service – effectively encouraging them to choose the latter. This option was also extended to those already serving prison sentences, allowing them to be conditionally released on the condition of joining the military. As a result, a significant number of criminal offenders expressed a willingness to serve the state. According to estimates by B. Thomson, Head of the Criminal Investigation Department, approximately 1,100 individuals classified as «ordinary criminals» were recruited into the army during the war (Thomson, 1922, p. 50).

This development was closely related to the enactment of the Military Service Act in January 1916, which introduced universal conscription. At the same time, the government was guided not only by mobilization needs but also by economic considerations: the release of prisoners allowed for reduced expenditures on maintaining the penitentiary system – an especially urgent matter in the context of a wartime economy. Thus, the humanitarian or patriotic rhetoric that accompanied the release of convicts often concealed more pragmatic objectives of state policy.

The statistical data are also telling. In 1915, the number of incarcerated individuals in England and Wales decreased by 37,320 compared to the previous year. In Scotland, the prison population reached its lowest level since 1869 (Report, 1915, p. 5; Annual Report, 1915, p. 4). This trend, among other things, eased the burden on police structures, which themselves were experiencing personnel shortages due to mobilization.

At the same time, the war period saw a significant expansion in the use of prison labor for the needs of the front: by 1918, over 4.5 million units of goods produced by inmates had been delivered to the Admiralty and the War Office (Report, 1918, p. 25). Although the items were not technically sophisticated, the engagement of prisoners in routine labor allowed skilled civilian workers to focus on the production of high-tech weaponry in the defense industry.

Equally important was the mental and psychological factor. Total mobilization required a transformation of public consciousness – from peace-oriented to war-oriented. In this context, representatives of the ruling establishment believed that convicts – individuals with diminished levels of empathy and better adapted to harsh conditions – were more capable of functioning in the extreme environment of war than members of the «civilized» population who were unprepared for killing. This, in turn, served as a moral justification for their participation in combat and was used as an argument in favor of relaxing policies toward criminal recruits.

It is worth noting that alongside a strictly pragmatic approach to the mobilization of individuals with criminal backgrounds, there existed within British society and the prison administration a more idealistic belief in the potential of the army as an instrument of resocialization. War was seen as a chance for redemption – a «second opportunity» for offenders to gain a new social identity and escape from criminal surroundings. British and Irish prison officials believed that military service would contribute to the development of a more positive social environment, insulate individuals from criminal influences, and potentially foster moral rehabilitation among prisoners (Reidy, 2009, p. 183).

As the war dragged on and recruitment standards declined, members of the criminal population were accepted into the army more readily. Nevertheless, skepticism persisted among the political establishment regarding some segments of the convict population. It was argued that many of them suffered from physical or psychological impairments and would be rejected as medically unfit (Mannheim, 1941, pp. 97–100).

A particularly prejudiced attitude was observed toward thieves and petty criminals. They were regarded as excessively individualistic, selfish, and incapable of military solidarity. Concerns also arose regarding potential «ethical disruption» – the transmission of behavioral norms into military units that were incompatible with military discipline and hierarchy. This reflected the influence of social Darwinism, which asserted that certain social groups were naturally less fit to serve society and the nation (Hawkins, 1997, pp. 42–45).

In contrast, attitudes toward offenders convicted of violent crimes were more ambivalent. Military leadership tended to interpret such acts – particularly «crimes of honor» – as manifestations of impulsive but potentially controlled aggression, which could be seen as an asset in combat situations (Conley, 1986, p. 532). This illustrated the underlying dilemma between the risks posed by social dangerousness and the utilitarian value of such individuals. Violent offenders were perceived as potentially less damaging to military cohesion than thieves, who undermined trust, interdependence, and team unity within the armed forces.

By contrast, individuals convicted of homosexual acts (recorded in official documents as «gross indecency») were viewed entirely negatively. They were deemed unfit for service due to their perceived «unnaturalness» and lack of heteronormative masculinity – an ideal closely associated with the imperial soldier archetype (McKay, 2021, p. 593). Even former officers, once exposed for such

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offenses, were either returned to the ranks as privates or, more commonly, removed from service altogether through blacklisting by the Home Office (Harvey, 2001, pp. 313–319). However, in His Majesty's Navy, some degree of tolerance reportedly existed toward such sexual relationships – provided they were consensual and discreet (McKee, 2002, pp. 192–193).

Another source of mobilization came from borstal institutions. Military service was viewed as a means of instilling patriotism, discipline, and self-sacrifice among juvenile offenders. This belief was supported by the reformist ideas of the early 20th century, particularly the provisions of the Criminal Justice Administration Act of 1908, which established the borstal system – specialized reform institutions for young offenders (Prevention of Crime Act 1908). This legislation laid the legal foundation for the concept of rehabilitation through labor, discipline, and social integration, aligning perfectly with wartime expectations for the army's role in reforming young delinquents.

Following the introduction of the 1916 Military Service Act, it became common practice to release these youths early in preparation for enlistment once they reached the age of 17. According to reports from the Commissioners of Prisons for England and Wales, 340 juveniles were released for military service during the first year of the war alone, and at least 958 individuals from borstals were mobilized over the course of the war (McKay, 2021, p. 588).

In contrast to the British Army, the Admiralty of the United Kingdom adopted a more cautious stance regarding the enlistment of individuals with criminal backgrounds into the ranks of the Royal Navy. This approach stemmed from the naval command's desire not only to enhance the combat effectiveness of its units but also to improve the public image of both the recruits and the Navy itself.

Moral and social considerations played a significant role in this process – including the influence of Christian morality, the active temperance movement, and concerns over the potential spread of venereal diseases associated with the recruitment of individuals exhibiting antisocial behavior. These factors led to the implementation of policies aimed at improving the moral and physical condition of sailors, grounded in the traditional values of the British naval service (Smith, 2020, pp. 53–77).

The Everyday Conduct of Mobilized Offenders in the British Armed Forces: Between Resocialization and Recidivism

Despite prevailing concerns, a significant proportion of former convicts fulfilled their military duties conscientiously during the war. Some were even recommended for officer commissions (McKay, 2021, p. 597). Many acknowledged that army service had a transformative effect on their behavior and worldview, allowing them, in their own words, to “become a man” by rethinking their role in society (Meyer, 2009, pp. 24–25).

At the same time, the extreme conditions of war should not be idealized as a path to moral purification. By its very nature, war does not foster the humanization of the individual. Some mobilized offenders returned to their previous criminal lifestyles after the cessation of hostilities.

Nevertheless, the hypothetical threat posed by criminal recruits to unit cohesion, military discipline, and the esprit de corps was not substantiated in practice. Supporting this conclusion is the statistical data from the British Army's field courts-martial during 1914–1918. In total, 5,952 officers and 298,310 enlisted personnel – just over 3% of the entire army – were brought to trial. Of these: 89% were convicted; 8% were acquitted; The remaining cases either lacked confirmation of the verdict or were later overturned.

The most common offenses included: Unauthorized absence – 30%; Drunkenness – 15%; Desertion – 14% (only 3% of these occurred in active combat zones); Disobedience – 11%; Loss of military equipment – 11%; Other offenses – 19%.

Main types of punishment imposed: Three months' imprisonment – 24%; Field punishment No. 1 (attachment to a fixed object) – 22%; Fines – 12%; Six months' detention – 10%; Demotion – 10%; Field punishment No. 2 (handcuffs without immobilization) – 8%.

A total of 3,080 servicemen (1.1% of those convicted) were sentenced to death, of whom 89% were pardoned. In the end, 346 individuals were executed. The most frequent capital offenses were: Desertion – 266; Murder – 37; Cowardice – 18; Abandoning post – 7; Violence against superior officers – 6; Disobedience – 5; Mutiny – 3; Sleeping on duty – 2; Throwing down arms – 2.

Among those executed, 91 individuals were already serving conditional sentences, including 40 under suspended death penalties (Military crimes).

These figures support a well-founded conclusion: the high level of civilizational development in British society, the efficient organization of the military system, and clear mechanisms for social control and integration enabled the state to minimize the risks associated with the inclusion of individuals with criminal backgrounds. Their participation did not undermine the combat effectiveness or moral integrity of the armed forces.

Moreover, predictions of a potential postwar crime surge due to the return of former offenders did not materialize. According to police statistics for Great Britain in 1919–1920, of the 6,461 ex-servicemen who were imprisoned during this period, only 1,398 (22%) had prior convictions, while

3,411 (53%) were first-time offenders (McKay, 2021, p. 599). These figures suggest that the majority of individuals from marginal or antisocial backgrounds were effectively integrated into both the military environment and postwar civilian life.

Thus, despite the initial caution exhibited by British state institutions – particularly the Admiralty – regarding the mobilization of individuals with criminal records, the realities of wartime gradually led to the development of a rational model for their employment as a manpower resource. In most cases, the participation of former convicts in military operations did not produce catastrophic consequences for the army's morale, discipline, or postwar crime rates. On the contrary, their demonstrated capacity to adapt to military conditions and reintegrate into civilian society provided grounds for cautiously optimistic assessments of their contribution to the defense of the empire.

At the same time, there are currently no consolidated and reliable statistical data on the overall number of individuals with criminal backgrounds mobilized into the British armed forces. Based on available sources, it can be asserted that their involvement was most likely limited in scale and did not extend to full participation in operational-strategic level planning or execution. In the overwhelming majority of cases, these contingents were likely used at the operational-tactical level, serving as force multipliers during periods of personnel shortages.

Nevertheless, the very fact of employing representatives of the criminal underworld within an institution grounded in fundamentally opposing ethical and legal norms – such as military service – raises considerable scholarly interest. This allows us to interpret the British experience as a case of limited yet controlled mobilization of antisocial elements under conditions of total war.

A comparison of this experience with the practices of the Russian Empire – and later, of the Provisional Government following the collapse of the monarchy – reveals fundamental civilizational, cultural, and political differences in the approaches adopted by the two empires. The next section will examine the mechanisms of conscription, societal responses, internal military dynamics, and postwar consequences of the incorporation of criminal elements into the Russian armed forces – within the broader context of revolutionary upheaval, state collapse, and the moral disintegration of the military establishment.

The Mobilization Policy of the Russian Empire: Between Security and Discipline

At the outbreak of the First World War, the Russian Imperial Armed Forces numbered approximately 1.423 million personnel, including over 40,000 officers. As a result of general mobilization, this figure increased to 5.338 million, with the number of officers rising to 80,000 (Jones, 2002, pp. 227–248). According to calculations by the military historian Lieutenant General M.M. Golovin, 23 mobilization waves were announced between 1914 and 1917, resulting in the conscription of approximately 25 million individuals into the ranks of the Imperial Army (Golovin, 1931, pp. 48–49). Under such conditions, unlike in the case of Great Britain, the Russian military and political leadership saw no urgent need to mobilize individuals from criminal backgrounds.

It is known that during the first two years of the war, the Ministry of War received dozens of petitions requesting the termination of legal proceedings or the revision of sentences for individuals accused of various crimes, on the condition that they would voluntarily enlist for military service. The petitioners represented different social estates and age groups and included individuals convicted of document forgery, robbery, rape, and other offenses. This phenomenon can be explained both by the wave of patriotic enthusiasm that swept Russian society in 1914 and by the pragmatic desire of convicts to avoid the harsh conditions of incarceration. Nonetheless, only a handful of these petitions received a favorable response – positive decisions remained the exception rather than the rule.

The General Staff of the Imperial Army rejected the proposal to enlist individuals with criminal records from the earliest months of the armed conflict. This stance remained unchanged even after the exhaustion of the trained mobilization reserve and the disastrous consequences of the Great Retreat in 1915, which revealed a sharp decline in the army's combat effectiveness (Astashov, 2021). Even the fact that some convicts were former servicemen with combat experience was not considered a sufficient argument to revise this policy.

Thus, the official state policy of the Russian Empire regarding mobilization during the First World War was explicitly aimed at prohibiting or, at the very least, severely limiting the enlistment of criminal elements into the armed forces. On this issue, the War Ministry maintained an uncompromising position, regarding the presence of convicted individuals in military units as a threat to the moral climate, command hierarchy, and overall discipline within the army.

The Provisional Government's Policy on the Mobilization of Convicted Offenders (1917)

Following the February Revolution of 1917, the policy regarding the mobilization of individuals from the criminal milieu underwent a radical transformation. The views of the new political elites on pre-revolutionary prisons were shaped primarily through the lens of the Tsarist regime's repressive nature. As a result, these institutions were unilaterally associated with manifestations of arbitrary administration, unbearable living conditions, and violations of personal rights, while the criminal-legal

specificity of the prison population was largely ignored. This perspective contributed to the adoption of the Provisional Government's Decree of March 17, 1917, «On the Easing of the Fate of Persons Convicted of Criminal Offenses», which effectively proclaimed a general amnesty for those sentenced for non-political crimes. According to Article 101 of the decree, release was granted on the condition of the individual's consent to be mobilized into the army (Sbornik, 1917, p. 277). As a result, by April 1, 1917, the prison population had decreased by 75%, numbering only 41,509 individuals (Hasegawa, 2017, pp. 19–26).

However, the majority of those amnestied failed to fulfill their military obligations: some deserted immediately, others never appeared at their assigned units, and some returned to criminal activity. Those who were mobilized often did not join combat units due to the command's unwillingness to accept individuals with questionable backgrounds. Many were sent to reserve formations deep in the rear, which often led to an increase in criminal activity in those regions.

A telling example was the riot in the Ukrainian town of Ostroh, Volhynian Governorate, on September 28, 1917. According to investigative findings, it involved amnestied former prisoners who had been mobilized into the 266th Reserve Infantry Regiment (TsDIAK, f.317, op.1, spr.6100, fol. 4). Official documents stated that “these murderers, thieves, and robbers, disguised in soldiers' uniforms, brazenly burst into private homes, conduct illegal searches, loot, rape, and spread terror” (Sbornik, 1917, p. 364).

The state's response to the rising violence was contradictory. Measures aimed at tightening control – such as authorizing the use of capital punishment in cases of resistance – failed to stabilize the situation and often incited mass instances of vigilante justice. According to contemporary sources, spontaneous lynchings of criminals caught in the act became widespread across various regions (Hasegawa, 2017, pp. 214–220).

Realizing the destructive consequences of its policy, the Provisional Government issued a new order on July 14, 1917, restricting the recruitment of conditionally amnestied individuals, allowing their enlistment only with the approval of commanding officers (Sbornik, 1918, p. 584). Subsequently, attempts were made to restore stricter law enforcement practices: on July 12, 1917, military-revolutionary tribunals were introduced and the death penalty was reinstated for a range of serious crimes (Welch, 2014). However, the effectiveness of these measures remained questionable amid the collapse of state institutions.

Disciplinary control within the army was maintained only locally and often thanks to the efforts of individual commanders – such as General Lavr Kornilov, who reinstated capital punishment in the armies of the Southwestern Front. Nonetheless, such efforts yielded only short-term effects (Hula, Perederii, 2018, pp. 57–59).

One of the most detrimental consequences was the growing influence of criminal elements within soldiers' committees, which had been established as part of the democratization of the military. Former prisoners, drawing on their experience of informal prison self-governance, quickly rose to leadership positions within these new structures. Combined with widespread alcoholism, the collapse of discipline, ideological disorientation among officers and soldiers, and stagnation on the front lines, this led to the rapid disintegration of the army (Hula, Perederii, 2025, p. 245).

Thus, the Provisional Government's policy of amnesty and mobilization of criminal offenders – implemented without clear mechanisms of control and amid the broader collapse of the imperial state and army – became one of the key factors contributing to the breakdown of military command and authority.

Conclusions. A comparative analysis of the practices of mobilizing the criminal contingent during the First World War reveals a strong dependence of military and personnel decisions on the overall level of political and legal culture, the condition of state institutions, and the dominant societal values (see Table 1). Based on the examined cases of Great Britain and Russia, a number of conclusions and generalizations can be drawn.

Table 1.

Comparative analysis: Mobilization of Convicted Offenders in the Armed Forces of the British Empire and Russia During the First World War

Criterion	British Empire	Russian Empire / Provisional Government
1. Pre-war recruitment system	Volunteer army, absence of conscription before 1916	Conscription-based system established in the 19 th century
2. Initial policy toward mobilization of persons with criminal records	Generally cautious; selective enlistment was permitted. However, volunteers with a criminal background were often rejected.	Strict prohibition on the mobilization of individuals with a criminal background by the imperial military and political leadership in order to preserve military discipline. Strict prohibition on the mobilization of convicted offenders

3. Key change during the war	Gradual liberalization of recruitment standards; acceptance of some offenders as part of general mobilization	Post-February 1917 amnesty and mass mobilization of former prisoners by the Provisional Government
4. Motivations for mobilizing convicted offenders	Manpower shortage, economic and pragmatic considerations, belief in the army as a tool for resocialization	Populist political motives, underestimation of risks, ideological rejection of the Tsarist penal system
5. Legal Framework of Mobilization	The Military Service Act of 1916, which introduced compulsory conscription. Offenders could be released from punishment on the condition of military service.	Decree of the Provisional Government dated March 17, 1917, on amnesty and the possibility of military service.
6. Forms of recruitment	Conditional release in exchange for enlistment, judicial substitution of sentences with military service	General amnesty in exchange for enlistment (often not fulfilled), automatic conscription of ex-prisoners
7. Integration into the army	Relatively successful; some were granted officer ranks; minimal negative impact on military discipline.	Predominantly unsuccessful; most amnestied individuals avoided the front; commanders refused to accept former convicts, leading to a sharp rise in crime within military units and disorganization in the rear, a breakdown of discipline, and the intensification of anarchy.
8. Post-war consequences	No significant spike in crime; former offenders generally reintegrated into society	Contributed to the disintegration of army discipline and rise in criminal violence; accelerated collapse of military order
9. Overall assessment	Controlled, pragmatic mobilization with limited risks and some benefits	Ill-conceived, destabilizing policy that weakened the army and state institutions

The reasons for conscripting criminal and socially marginalized elements into the armed forces differed diametrically between Great Britain and post-Romanov Russia.

Whereas the mobilization of this contingent into the British Imperial Army was primarily aimed at addressing utilitarian, practical, and financial-economic needs – and was dictated by the objective necessity of increasing the manpower pool for the land component of the armed forces – the decisions of the Russian Provisional Government were mostly based on populist and idealistic notions, which had little in common with the realities of the Russian situation. This policy was a form of political gesture rooted in revolutionary ideas about the “rehabilitation” of the criminal through his participation in the «defense of the Fatherland», rather than in realistic assessments of the army’s moral condition, discipline, and combat effectiveness.

At the same time, up to 1917, the Russian Empire – despite the exhaustion of its mobilization resources and the overall deterioration of its army’s combat potential – categorically refused to conscript individuals with a criminal background. This reflected an attempt to preserve the stability of military discipline and the traditional social hierarchy.

In comparing the outcomes of criminal contingent mobilization in Great Britain and Russia, it must be acknowledged that the strong democratic traditions of British society, its high level of civilizational development, and the presence of a system of parliamentary oversight over the armed forces helped minimize the negative impact of conscripting individuals with a criminal past – both during wartime and in the postwar period.

In contrast, the longstanding traditions of autocratic subjecthood, the near absence of democratic institutions, the dominance of the principle of «supreme autocratic power», and the widespread legal nihilism among the population of the Russian Empire – and later, the chaotic populism of the Provisional Government – led to a rapid and uncontrollable process of social criminalization, military disintegration, the paralysis of governing institutions, and the creation of conditions that enabled the Bolshevik coup. This, in turn, opened the way for the construction of a new type of 20th-century totalitarian state dominated by a repressive apparatus – an apparatus which, in many respects, grew out of the logic of using marginalized social groups as a political power base.

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