

The pre-war generation.

Mobilization in dated parallel – 1933–1941 and 2022–2026.

Two speeches in late 2025 closed a comparison the Western public had been told was paranoid. On **18 November**, France's Chief of the Defence Staff told the nation's mayors to be ready **to accept losing its children**. On **15 December**, the United Kingdom's Chief of the Defence Staff endorsed the line by name and added: **more families will know what sacrifice for our nation means**. Five months later, the Pentagon opened talks with General Motors and Ford about putting US manufacturing on a wartime footing. This briefing dates the parallel — and marks where the present is already moving faster than 1938.

DATE

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AUTHOR

Jesse James

iPurpose · Intelligence with intent.

[linkedin.com/in/jessecares](https://www.linkedin.com/in/jessecares)

The calendar, not the rhetoric.

The pattern that produced the last industrial-age war between 1933 and 1941 — rearmament, normalization of casualty rhetoric, the return of conscription, restrictions on the mobility of fighting-age men, and the conversion of civilian industry to military output — is now visible across the Western bloc in dated, sourced moves between 2022 and April 2026. The point of this briefing is not that 2026 is 1938. The point is that the state actions which preceded the last general war are this time legible in real time, and the timeline is moving.

FIVE FINDINGS

- 01 **Casualty rhetoric crossed a threshold in late 2025.** France's CHOD, General Mandon, told the Mayors' Congress on 18 November to "accept losing its children." The UK's CDS, Air Chief Marshal Knighton, endorsed Mandon by name on 15 December and added "sacrifice for our nation." This register is closer to Churchill (May 1940, after Dunkirk) than to Chamberlain (September 1938, before Munich).
- 02 **Defence spending exceeds anything since the Cold War.** NATO allies committed to 5% of GDP by 2035 at The Hague Summit on 25 June 2025. Germany's Sondervermögen and 2025 debt-brake amendment unlock more than €600 billion. The European Commission's "ReArm Europe" plan unlocks up to €800 billion.
- 03 **Conscription has returned, in twelve states, on a five-year clock.** Latvia (Jan 2024), Croatia (parliament 24 Oct 2025, in barracks 9 Mar 2026), Denmark (women from 1 Jul 2025), Germany (WModG in force 1 Jan 2026), France (voluntary from summer 2026). Most are selective; the legal architecture for full conscription is in place.
- 04 **Germany has written exit-approval for fighting-age men into peacetime statute.** Inside the WModG (passed 5 Dec 2025, 323–272), §3(2) of the Wehrpflichtgesetz now requires men 17–45 to obtain Bundeswehr approval for stays abroad over three months. Enforcement is currently suspended by ministerial order (7 April 2026). The mechanism is now in the peacetime code.
- 05 **US industrial conversion talks have begun.** Wall Street Journal, 15 April 2026: Defense Secretary Hegseth has opened talks with the CEOs of GM, Ford, GE Aerospace and Oshkosh about a "wartime footing." Oshkosh confirms it has been in conversation with the Pentagon since November 2025. The FY2027 defence request is \$1.5 trillion, the largest in US history.

Recommendation

Decision-makers should do two things. **First**, treat the November–December 2025 speeches and the April 2026 WSJ story as load-bearing data, not as background. **Second**, demand of any institution making mobilization decisions a public answer to a single question: *what is the off-ramp, and who is authorized to take it?* In 1938 that question was not asked in time. In 2026, it can still be.

The two speeches that closed the gap.

Between 18 November and 15 December 2025, the chiefs of defence of two nuclear-armed permanent members of the UN Security Council, addressing civilian audiences in their respective capitals, used the same register that Churchill used at Westminster on 13 May 1940 — three days into the German offensive in the West. They were not, in November and December 2025, three days into anything. They were speaking to mayors and to a defence think-tank dinner. That is the new fact.

PARIS · 18 NOVEMBER 2025 · 107TH MAYORS' CONGRESS

General Fabien Mandon — Chief of the Defence Staff, France

« *Si notre pays flanche parce qu'il n'est pas prêt à **accepter de perdre ses enfants**, parce qu'il faut dire les choses, de souffrir économiquement parce que les priorités iront à de la production défense, alors on est en risque.* »

*"If our country falters because it is not ready to **accept losing its children** — because things must be said — to suffer economically because priorities will go to defence production, then we are at risk."*

→ Mandon took post 1 September 2025. Macron defended him on 22 November. Mélenchon, Roussel and Chenu condemned the speech.

LONDON · 15 DECEMBER 2025 · RUSI ANNUAL DEFENCE LECTURE, BANQUETING HOUSE

Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton — Chief of the Defence Staff, United Kingdom

*"**Fabien Mandon was right.** Sons and daughters. Colleagues. Veterans... will all have a part to play. To build. To serve. And if necessary, to fight. **And more families will know what sacrifice for our nation means.**"*

Knighton acknowledged that direct confrontation with Russia remains "remote" — but added that "does not mean the chances are zero."

→ First time since the early 1980s that a serving UK CDS has told the British public, on the record, in plain language, to prepare for losses.

The closest 1933–1941 analogues come later than memory suggests. Churchill's "blood, toil, tears and sweat" came on 13 May 1940, three days into the German offensive in the West. Mandon and Knighton are delivering, in peacetime in late 2025, the kind of language Churchill delivered under bombardment.

Then and now, in eight moments.

Each pair below sits at a comparable position in the sequence. Read down a column for the pattern within each era. Read across for the rhyme.

THEN

1933 – 1941

16 March 1935

Rearmament declared. Hitler reintroduces conscription via the "Law for the Building up of the Wehrmacht" — 36 divisions, 550,000 peacetime army, in open breach of Versailles.

12 November 1936

Allied warning. Churchill in the Commons: "decided only to be undecided... the years that the locust hath eaten." A year after Germany's conscription move.

13 May 1940

Military to civilians. Churchill, three days into the German offensive: "blood, toil, tears and sweat." Wartime, not pre-war.

13 May 1940

The casualty line. Churchill: "victory at all costs... without victory, there is no survival." Delivered after Belgium and the Netherlands had fallen.

26 May 1939

Peacetime conscription. UK Military Training Act receives Royal Assent. US Selective Training and Service Act follows on 16 September 1940 — first peacetime draft in US history.

3 September 1939

Mobility of men. UK National Service (Armed Forces) Act, signed the day of the declaration of war, covers all men 18–41.

18 April 1941

Industrial conversion. Ford breaks ground on the Willow Run B-24 plant. Civilian US auto production halts on 10 February 1942 by War Production Board order.

29 December 1940

The arsenal speech. FDR Fireside Chat 16: "We must be the great arsenal of democracy." Fifteen months into the European war.

NOW

2022 – 2026

27 February 2022

Rearmament declared. Scholz, Bundestag: "Zeitenwende... €100 billion... more than 2% of GDP, year after year." NATO commits to 5% of GDP by 2035 at The Hague Summit, 25 June 2025.

15 January 2024

Allied warning. UK Defence Secretary Grant Shapps, Lancaster House: "from a post-war to a pre-war world." Polish PM Tusk follows on 29 March 2024: "the pre-war era."

24 January 2024

Military to civilians. Gen. Sir Patrick Sanders, UK Chief of the General Staff: the British public is a "pre-war generation" who must be "prepared mentally to fight." Adm. Bauer at NATO HQ, 17 Jan 2024: "anything can happen at any time."

18 Nov · 15 Dec 2025

The casualty line. Mandon to French mayors: "*accepter de perdre ses enfants.*" Knighton at RUSI: "more families will know what sacrifice for our nation means." Peacetime, on the record.

1 January 2026

Peacetime conscription. Germany's WModG enters into force (passed 5 Dec 2025, 323–272). Latvia 1 Jan 2024; Croatia in barracks 9 Mar 2026; Denmark women 1 Jul 2025; France voluntary summer 2026.

1 January 2026

Mobility of men. Germany's amended §3(2) Wehrpflichtgesetz requires men 17–45 to obtain Bundeswehr approval for stays abroad over three months. Enforcement suspended by Pistorius order, 7 April 2026. Ukraine bars men 18–60 from leaving since 24 Feb 2022.

15 April 2026

Industrial conversion. WSJ: Pentagon (Hegseth) opens talks with CEOs of GM (Barra), Ford (Farley), GE Aerospace and Oshkosh re "wartime footing." Oshkosh confirms talks since Nov 2025. Rheinmetall Unterlüß opened 27 Aug 2025.

4 March 2025

The arsenal speech. Ursula von der Leyen, Brussels: "We are in an era of rearmament... This is Europe's moment." €800 billion ReArm Europe.

What is being committed, in numbers.

Scale is the second register in which the present is moving faster than 1933–1939. Britain's 1936 White Paper on Defence proposed an additional £1.5 billion over five years. The contemporary Western posture eclipses the Chamberlain-era response within a single budget cycle.

€600B+

Germany's Sondervermögen plus 2025 debt-brake amendment, off-budget for defence and infrastructure.

Bundestag, 18 March 2025

5.0%

NATO defence-spending commitment as share of GDP by 2035 (3.5% core + 1.5% security-related).

NATO Hague Summit, 25 June 2025

€800B

EU "ReArm Europe" plan, four-year envelope under von der Leyen.

European Commission, 4 March 2025

\$1.5T

US Department of War FY2027 budget request — the largest single-year defence request in US history.

Pentagon FY2027 submission, 2026

450,000

Israel's reservist call-up cap as of May 2025 — largest mobilization since 1973.

Times of Israel, May 2025

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European states that have introduced, expanded or formally legislated for conscription return since 2022.

Author analysis, primary sources

04.1 The accelerants

Three accelerants are absent from the 1933–1939 baseline and present today. **First, an active land war on the European continent** — Ukraine since February 2022, and a second front in Israel and the wider Middle East since October 2023. **Second, a defence-industrial bottleneck** visible in 155mm shell production, Patriot interceptor stocks, drone-defence systems and shipyard throughput, which is the operational reason the Pentagon is now in conversation with US automakers. **Third, the rhetoric of inevitability** — German Inspector General Carsten Breuer narrowing his "5 to 8 years" window to "four years" between July 2024 and February 2025; Tusk's "pre-war era"; Knighton's "remote does not mean zero." None of these is a declaration. All of them are the grammar of preparation.

"An era of rearmament has begun in Europe and for Rheinmetall it brings growth prospects in the coming years that we have never had before."

— Armin Papperger, CEO, Rheinmetall AG · press conference, 12 March 2025

Berlin's exit-approval law: latent, automatic, real.

The single most novel legal development of the past nine months in Western Europe is buried inside a 200-page conscription-reform statute. It deserves to be read on its own terms — neither dismissed as a clerical accident nor inflated into a Ukrainian-style exit ban.

05.1 What the law says

The **Wehrdienst-Modernisierungsgesetz** (WModG) was approved by the German cabinet on 27 August 2025, passed by the Bundestag on 5 December 2025 by 323 to 272 with one abstention (CDU/CSU and SPD in favour; AfD, Greens and Die Linke against), approved by the Bundesrat on 19 December 2025, and entered into force on 1 January 2026. It creates the Pistorius-designed Swedish-style selective service: mandatory questionnaires to all 18-year-old men born in 2008 or later, voluntary for women, medical examinations (*Musterung*) from 1 July 2027, and a statutory parliamentary trigger to activate needs-based conscription by lottery if recruitment targets fall short. Inside the same bill is an amendment to **§3(2) of the Wehrpflichtgesetz**: men aged 17 and older must obtain approval from the competent Bundeswehr Karrierecenter before leaving Germany for stays of more than three months — covering men up to the end of the year they turn 45. The statute reads *soll erteilt werden* ("is to be granted"), making approval bound and automatic so long as the applicant is not subject to call-up.

05.2 What enforcement looks like, today

On 7–8 April 2026, Defence Minister Boris Pistorius announced via dpa that "in the current peacetime, there will be no approval procedures." The Ministry committed to publishing an **Allgemeinverfügung** in the *Bundesanzeiger* such that "applications for foreign stays need not be submitted." SPD legal spokesperson Carmen Wegge called the requirement "incomprehensible." Legal commentators at Legal Tribune Online characterized it as a *gesetzgeberisches Versehen* — a legislative oversight in which the pre-2011 tension- and defence-situation approval rule was made always-on. No legal challenge has been publicly filed as of mid-April 2026.

05.3 The honest reading

Germany has not, today, banned fighting-age men from leaving the country. Berlin has, however, done three things that did not exist in German peacetime law before 1 January 2026: built the legal architecture of registration, medical examination and mobility-approval for men 17–45; kept a parliamentary trigger in hand to switch from selective to lottery conscription; and written the approval requirement into peacetime statute rather than keeping it inside the emergency-powers chapter where it had lived since 1956. The Ukraine comparison is stronger as a structural parallel than as a current-enforcement parallel — Kyiv's exit ban is live, forced and brutal; Berlin's is latent and bound-approval. **The latent mechanism is now inside the peacetime code. That is what is new.** Mechanisms in legal codes have a way of being activated by the contingencies for which they were written.

What is true. What is partially true. What is adjacent.

A briefing of this kind lives or dies on its load-bearing facts. The ledger below discloses where the public claims that motivated this analysis are confirmed by primary sources, where they are partially confirmed, and where the framing requires adjustment. This page exists so that hostile readers can find the seams before sympathetic readers do.

TRUE

Ukraine forced conscription.

Martial-law exit ban on men 18–60 since 24 February 2022. "Busification" — forced street press-gang recruitment — documented by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights (8 July 2025). Desertion cases rose from ~25,000 in 2023 to 89,000 in 2024 to 110,000+ in the first half of 2025.

TRUE

UK and French commanders telling civilians to be prepared to lose sons and daughters.

General Mandon, Paris, 18 November 2025: "*accepter de perdre ses enfants*." ACM Knighton, RUSI Banqueting House, 15 December 2025, explicitly endorsing Mandon: "Sons and daughters... more families will know what sacrifice for our nation means." Both verified to primary transcripts.

TRUE

Pentagon approached GM and Ford about weapons production.

Wall Street Journal, 15 April 2026, "Pentagon Approaches Automakers, Manufacturers to Boost Weapons Production." Named participants: Defense Secretary Hegseth, GM CEO Mary Barra, Ford CEO Jim Farley, GE Aerospace executives, Oshkosh leadership. Oshkosh Chief Growth Officer Logan Jones confirmed talks since November 2025.

PARTIALLY
TRUE

Germany requires fighting-age men to obtain approval to leave the country.

Architecture exists in §3(2) Wehrpflichtgesetz as amended by the WModG, in force 1 January 2026, covering men 17–45 leaving Germany for more than three months. Approval is statutorily bound. Enforcement was suspended on 7 April 2026 by ministerial order; an Allgemeinverfügung waiving applications has been promised. **The mechanism is in the peacetime code; the enforcement is suspended by administrative fiat.**

ADJACENT

A German general told the public to prepare to lose sons and daughters.

German military leadership has repeatedly used the framework of *Kriegstüchtigkeit* ("war-capability") and the "5–8 years" (later "four years") timeline. Defence Minister Pistorius told the Bundestag on 5 June 2024 that Germany "must be war-capable by 2029" and "in an emergency we will need young women and men who can defend this country." This is adjacent to the Mandon–Knighton register but does not use the "lose children" phrasing.

PARTIALLY
TRUE

Macron and other "old school leaders" pushing militarization.

Direction is verifiable: Macron's 26 February 2024 "strategic ambiguity," 25 April 2024 Sorbonne II "Our Europe is mortal," accelerated LPM 2026–27 (€6.5bn extra), and 27 November 2025 voluntary military-service announcement place him among the most forward-leaning European leaders on rearmament. Motive characterizations are political, not adjudicated here.

Where on the 1933–1941 calendar is April 2026?

The comparison fails if it is collapsed to a single year. The Western bloc in April 2026 is at different points on different clocks — and the rhetoric clock is running fastest.

PACE VERDICT

*On a 1933–1941 timeline, April 2026 is somewhere between **late 1938 and early 1940** — with the rhetoric clock running ahead of the conscription clock, and the conscription clock running ahead of the industrial-conversion clock.*

Rearmament clock: approximately 1938–1939. Germany's Sondervermögen tracks the 1935 Wehrgesetz; NATO 5% tracks British rearmament acceleration of 1939; ReArm Europe is without precedent until Lend-Lease.

Conscription clock: approximately April–September 1939. Peripheral states (Latvia, Lithuania, Croatia, Denmark) are at the UK Military Training Act phase; Germany's WDMoG sits at the Chamberlain-announced-but-not-yet-general moment.

Industrial conversion clock: approximately early 1941, pre-Lend-Lease. The 15 April 2026 WSJ story is a documentary "we are now considering this" event, not a Willow Run groundbreaking.

Rhetoric clock: approximately May 1940. Mandon and Knighton in late 2025 are speaking in the register Churchill used three days into the Battle of France.

07.1 Where today is faster than 1936

The casualty-rhetoric threshold (Mandon–Knighton, November–December 2025) was crossed without a single square kilometre of NATO territory having been invaded. In 1938 Chamberlain was still promising "peace for our time." Defence-spending trajectories are steeper. Industrial-conversion inquiries are occurring before any American declaration of war.

07.2 Where today is slower than 1939, and the honest limits of the analogy

No European power has yet imposed full compulsory mass conscription of the 18–41 cohort. Germany's law is selective and bound-approval. France has ruled out full conscription. No civilian auto-production ban has been ordered. There has been no Rhineland, no Anschluss, no Munich. Nuclear deterrence, integrated alliance structures, globalized supply chains, and the absence of a Versailles-style revisionist program in major Western capitals make a 1939-style general war substantially harder to start and substantially more catastrophic if started. Russia is not Nazi Germany. The 2026 EU is not the League of Nations. **This briefing does not predict war. It dates the infrastructure that makes war executable.**

The dates to put on the wall.

The question put to the Swedish public by Civil Defence Minister Carl-Oskar Bohlin in Sälen on 7 January 2024 — "*med osminkad tydlighet, det kan bli krig i Sverige*", "with unvarnished clarity, there could be war in Sweden" — is the question now being put to every electorate in NATO, including those whose governments have not yet phrased it that plainly. That question was asked in Stockholm before it was asked in Paris, before it was asked in London, before it was asked in Berlin. By April 2026 it has been asked in all four. Every adult citizen of a NATO member state should be able to identify when, where and by whom it was first asked of them.

The state actions that preceded the last industrial-age war are, this time, dated, sourced, and visible in real time. They are moving faster than the 1933–1939 baseline in three specific registers: the willingness of serving officers to tell civilians to prepare for casualties, the scale of committed defence spending, and the pre-emptive tempo of industrial-conversion inquiries. They are moving more slowly in two registers: no general peacetime conscription of the prime military-age cohort in a major Western power, and no civilian-production ban.

The record does not say war is inevitable. The record says the state infrastructure that makes war executable is being built, in daylight, faster than it was built between the Rhineland and Poland.

THE LOAD-BEARING DATES · 2022 - 2026

27 Feb 2022	Scholz Zeitenwende, Berlin	17 Jan 2024	Bauer at NATO HQ, Brussels
24 Jan 2024	Sanders, "pre-war generation," London	25 Jun 2025	NATO 5% by 2035, The Hague
18 Nov 2025	Mandon to French mayors, Paris	15 Dec 2025	Knighton at RUSI, London
1 Jan 2026	WDMoD in force, Germany	15 Apr 2026	WSJ Pentagon–GM–Ford, Washington

*The question for the reader is the one Bohlin put to Swedes:
who are you if war comes?*

The state has begun answering it on behalf of its citizens.

Jesse James

Strategic analyst · Victoria, British Columbia

iPurpose · Intelligence with intent.

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Methodology and primary sources.

All sources are open and unclassified. Where a public claim could not be verified to a primary transcript, it was reframed (see ledger) or excluded. Quotations in French and German are presented in the original language with English translation.

CASUALTY-RHETORIC THRESHOLD

Mandon, Fabien. Address to the 107th Congress of the Mayors of France, Paris, 18 November 2025. Transcript and reaction: Franceinfo, France Bleu, Euronews FR, RTS, 19–23 November 2025. Knighton, Sir Richard. RUSI Annual Defence Lecture, Banqueting House, London, 15 December 2025. Official transcript: gov.uk; coverage: World Socialist Web Site, RT International, Forces News.

REARMAMENT AND DEFENCE SPENDING

Scholz, government statement to the Bundestag, 27 February 2022 (Zeitenwende). NATO Hague Summit communiqué, 25 June 2025. Bundestag Drucksache 21/1853 (debt-brake amendment + €500bn fund), NPR coverage 18 March 2025. Loi de Programmation Militaire 2024–2030, promulgated 1 August 2023; Macron acceleration 13–14 July 2025. European Commission "ReArm Europe" plan, 4 March 2025. SIPRI Commentary, March 2022.

CONSCRIPTION RETURN – PRIMARY SOURCES

Latvia: State Defence Service law, signed 18 April 2023, effective 1 January 2024 (LoC Global Legal Monitor). Germany: Wehrdienst-Modernisierungsgesetz (WDMoG), Bundestag Drucksache 21/1853, passed 5 December 2025 (323–272–1); Wehrpflichtgesetz §3(2) as amended (Gesetze-im-Internet); ICDS analysis 2025–26; Legal Tribune Online, Berliner Zeitung, Frankfurter Rundschau, Vorwärts, Augen Geradeaus — April 2026. Croatia: Parliament vote 84–11, 24 October 2025; first conscripts 9 March 2026. Denmark: 2023 amendment, women from 1 July 2025; service extended to 11 months from 1 January 2026. France: Macron, 27 November 2025, voluntary 10-month service. Lithuania: Seimas reforms 2024; expansion for 2026. Sweden: Defence Resolution 2025–2030, 17 December 2024. Ukraine: 2 April 2024 conscription laws; martial-law exit ban since 24 February 2022; Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights report, 8 July 2025.

INDUSTRIAL CONVERSION

Wall Street Journal, "Pentagon Approaches Automakers, Manufacturers to Boost Weapons Production," 15 April 2026. Reuters wire 08:07 PM EDT 15 April; reproductions: AOL, Yahoo News (Independent), Fox Business, Newsweek, Automotive World. Rheinmetall AG: Unterlüß plant, opened 27 August 2025; Baisogala plant groundbreaking, 4 November 2025. Defense Production Act: Trump EO 14241 (20 March 2025); 23 May 2025 §303 waiver memorandum (DCPD-202500637).

PRE-WWII PRIMARY SOURCES

Hitler, "Law for the Building up of the Wehrmacht," 16 March 1935. Churchill, House of Commons, 12 November 1936; 13 May 1940. Chamberlain broadcast, 3 September 1939. Roosevelt, Fireside Chat 16, 29 December 1940 (Miller Center). UK Military Training Act 1939, Royal Assent 26 May 1939; National Service (Armed Forces) Act 1939, 3 September 1939 (House of Commons Library briefing CBP-10226). US Selective Training and Service Act of 1940, signed 16 September 1940. Ford Willow Run plant, groundbreaking 18 April 1941; civilian US auto production halt 10 February 1942.

CORRECTIONS

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