

## CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTORS: Daring to resist

In September 1915, when the First World War had been underway for just over a year, the No-Conscription Fellowship (N-CF), which had been formed to resist conscription, issued a stirring manifesto. It stated that the N-CF respected and admired fighting soldiers but that its members would not pick up arms and fight. They said that if the British government introduced compulsory military service, they would resist, no matter what the penalties.

### Volunteers to conscripts

It was a few months before members of the N-CF were put to the test. At the time, and unlike other European nations, Britain did not have conscription, or compulsory military service. Instead men volunteered to join the army. When war broke out on 4 August 1914, men rushed to join up to 'do their bit' for a war that many thought would be over by Christmas. By the end of September 1914 some 750,000 men had enlisted and by January 1915, nearly a million had volunteered, being sent on their way by waving crowds and brass bands.

But as the casualties mounted and it was clear the war would not be over by Christmas, numbers of volunteers began to fall. Despite intensive propaganda often aimed at women, urging them to send their 'best boys' to the war, not enough men were coming forward. Lord Kitchener, Secretary of State for War, wanted some 3 million soldiers and the British government began discussing conscription.

There was opposition, not just from the newly formed No-Conscription Fellowship but also from Quakers, some MPs and even some Army officials. However, the needs of war were such that in January 1916 the British government passed the Military Service Act and conscription was introduced into Britain for the first time.

### The conscience clause

Under the terms of the Military Service Act, all eligible unmarried men, aged 18-41 were deemed to have enlisted for general service. From 2 March 1916 they were automatically conscripted into the army though not necessarily called up until needed.

The Act included a so-called 'conscience clause' by which men could apply for exemption if they had a 'conscientious objection to the undertaking of combatant service', that is if their conscience, or deeply held beliefs, would not allow them to pick up weapons and fight. Given war conditions it may seem strange that the British government included this clause. It was probably large due to the Quakers and No-Conscription Fellowship that it was in there.

'Conchies'

Between 16,000 and 20,000 men took their stand as conscientious objectors, or “conchies” as the press and public jeeringly called them. They came from all walks of life. They included single and married men, teachers, students, lawyers, scientists, librarians, artists, musicians, and engineers. Some came from privileged families, such as Hubert Peet, a Quaker from a wealthy family who had chosen to live simply helping the poor. Others were from humbler backgrounds, such as Fred Murfin, a printer. Most were in their twenties.

The reasons why these men refused to fight varied. Many, such as John Brocklesby, a lay preacher, or Dr Alfred Salter, had deeply held religious reasons. They followed the Bible’s commandment ‘thou shalt not kill’ and because of their faith refused to fight. Most religious objectors were Quakers but there were also Methodists, Anglicans, Jews and Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Others were politically motivated. Men such as Fenner Brockway and Clifford Allen, leading figures in the N-CF, were socialists: they saw the ruling class as the oppressors and were not prepared to take up arms against working men, whom they saw as their brothers. Still others had humanitarian or moral reasons. But, however much they varied, conscientious objectors had one thing in common: all of them were men of deeply held principles. All believed it was wrong to kill, and profoundly wrong of any government to force them to do so.

### Tribunals

Conscientious objectors knew they were sincere but this was not enough. They had to prove their sincerity before a tribunal. There were more than 2,000 tribunals in around Britain and they were similar to magistrate courts. Objectors appeared before a tribunal panel, which usually consisted of 5 or 6 elderly men, and a woman, and which hurled questions at them. A military representative was usually present.

Appearing before a tribunal could be daunting particularly for less confident men. A few tribunals were sympathetic but most had little or no sympathy. They believed it was a man’s duty to fight and die for his country; they viewed conscientious objectors as slackers and cowards and treated them accordingly, insulting and bullying them, asking them trick questions, and sometimes not even allowing them to speak.

### Outcomes

Very few conscientious objectors won full exemption from military service. About 6,500 were granted exemption, provided they did ‘alternative’ service doing work of national importance. This included work on the land and in hospitals. Conscientious objectors who were prepared to do some sort of service, provided it did not involve fighting, were known as ‘alternativists’. They included about 1600 men, who worked with the Friends Ambulance Unit (FAU), which was set up by Quakers to nurse the wounded both in Britain and abroad in France and elsewhere.

Tribunals sent about 5,500 objectors into the Non-Combatant Corps, a special army unit formed in 1916 to cater for conscientious objectors, and at least 2,500 conscientious objectors had their applications dismissed completely, and were sent directly into the army for combat duties.

## Resistance

At least 6,000 conscientious objectors refused to accept the tribunal decisions. Known as 'absolutists', these men resisted every attempt to force them to become soldiers. Many refused call-up papers, whereupon they were arrested, and escorted into army units, whether non-combatant or regular army. Once in the army, absolutists refused all orders; they did so politely and non-violently but they firmly refused to put on uniforms, to drill or to obey any orders.

The army's response was often brutal. Conscientious objectors were beaten, abused, thrown into military detention, forced to stand for hours in their underwear on freezing parade grounds, humiliated, dunked into cold water and put on half rations. Some stood for hours, tied to a post in a crucifixion position, their feet barely able to touch the ground. In an extreme instance, the army secretly sent about 50 conscientious objectors to France, where they were court martialled and sentenced to death. At the very last moment, the death sentence was changed to 10 years' prison with hard labour but it demonstrated just how far the army tried to intimidate conscientious objectors. It also showed that conscientious objectors were prepared to die for their principles.

## Prison

Around 5,000 – 6,000 conscientious objectors served time in prison, usually following an army court-martial for refusing to obey orders. Sentences varied from 6 months to 2 years. Some objectors served up to six separate sentences as a result of the 'cat and mouse' system that sent objectors back into army regiments once their sentence was complete. Objectors once again refused orders and were once again sent back to prison.

Conditions in prison were appalling, as they were for all prisoners. Objectors were kept separately from other prisoners. Rules were strict, including a silence rule, forbidding prisoners to speak. Naturally objectors resisted, finding ways to communicate and sometimes going on hunger or work strike. Harsh punishments followed: Fenner Brockway, for instance, spent 8 months in solitary confinement, three months on bread and water.

As time went on objectors became ill and emaciated from lack of food. A few went mad. Some objectors were sent to special work camps, where conditions were slightly easier but the work was back breaking and food was limited. Many were sent to Dartmoor, re-named Princetown, where they broke rocks or did other harsh manual labour.

## Legacy

Fighting ended on 11 November 1918 but more than 1,000 conscientious objectors were still in prison. They were not finally released until April 1919. The post-war years were hard; by and large the British public hated conscientious objectors and it was difficult for many to find work. Many were also suffering ill health.

Despite these problems, conscientious objectors knew they had stuck to their principles. Compared with the numbers of men who enlisted, conscientious objectors were only a small minority. But their influence was enormous. They had proved it was possible to resist the state and their determination and courage helped to motivate and increase the numbers of conscientious objectors who took their stand twenty years later in the Second World War. Many of the First World War conscientious objectors also continued their anti-war work during the inter-war years, helping to found the War Resisters League and the No More War Movement, among other peace organisations.

The legacy of those early war resisters continues to inspire anti-war activists to this day, among them American draft dodgers of the Vietnam War; Joe Glenton who refused to fight in Afghanistan and the Israeli refuseniks who have been imprisoned for refusing military service.

[Optional drop-in quotes]

“I know what it is to kill a pig; I won’t kill a man.” Stephen Winsten, First World War conscientious objector

“We deny the right of any government to make the slaughter of our fellows a bounden duty.” No-Conscription Fellowship Manifesto, 1915

“My case was heard on March 23<sup>rd</sup>. It was a terrible ordeal....How does one feel when trying, in public, to convince people, who are out to misconstrue everything one says, that because of one’s religious convictions .... no war service is possible?” Fred Murfin, printer, conscientious objector

“I am conscientiously opposed to everything that destroys human life.” David Thomas, teacher, conscientious objector

“I was frozen right through with exposure...I just sat there and set my teeth to stick whatever came.” George Dutch, punished by being left in an army tent in vest and pants during the depths of winter. He lasted 10 days and 10 nights before the medical doctor ordered him to be brought in.

