

**The life of a conscientious objector in Britain during the First World War was one dominated by institutional abuse and harsh treatment. Is this an accurate portrayal of their experiences, or were the authorities more tolerant of those who refused to fight?**

This assignment will reflect upon the life of a conscientious objector and the treatment they received during the First World War in Britain.

Amongst the many men who enlisted, a number of them were conscientious objectors who wanted and felt they needed to support the war effort but morally could not fight. By the war's conclusion, roughly one-third of Quakers deemed eligible for compulsory service had already been a part of the military. However, this does not divulge the number of men who were involved in the non-combatant and medical units.<sup>1</sup> Many men chose to support the war and their comrades by joining organisations that provided aid for the men fighting; one of these was the Friends Ambulance Unit, a civilisation-run volunteer ambulance service established by a collection of Quakers at the start of the war. Its members involved both Quakers and non-Quakers under the patronage of the British Red Cross and St. John Ambulance, one of many groups that allowed men to serve their country without fighting and killing, which they felt went against their beliefs.<sup>2</sup>

The life of a conscientious objector during the First World War was difficult, made exceedingly worse with the introduction of conscription in 1916. By the middle of 1915, it became evident to the British government that more substantial efforts were needed to attain and continue an establishment of this extent. The government reacted by passing the National Registration Act in July, which allowed for a labour census for the all British public. The census found that there were:

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<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Wynter, *Conscientious Objection & Conscription. Quakers & the First World War: Lives & Legacies* (2017) <[https://www.academia.edu/42027078/Conscientious\\_Objection\\_and\\_Conscription\\_Quakers\\_and\\_the\\_First\\_World\\_War\\_Lives\\_and\\_Legacies](https://www.academia.edu/42027078/Conscientious_Objection_and_Conscription_Quakers_and_the_First_World_War_Lives_and_Legacies)> [accessed 20 April 2024]

<sup>2</sup> Religious Society of Friends, *About the Friends Ambulance Unit* (2014) <<https://fau.quaker.org.uk/>> [accessed 20 April 2024]

'Some 5.1 million men of military age remained in civilian life in England and Wales. Of these, 1.5 million were employed in starved occupations, while a further 600,000 - 900,000 were assumed to be medically unfit, leaving a pool of 2.7-3 million men potentially available for military service'.<sup>3</sup>

Pressure for conscription was heightened, and the results of the Derby Scheme, which allowed men to testify their readiness to fight, found only under one million men who were both fit and available; it was deemed absolute that conscription was inevitable.

On the 5th of January 1916, Prime Minister Herbert Henry Asquith presented a compulsion bill to the House, and on the 2nd of March 1916, it was enacted. All unwed British men, between the ages of 18 and 41 on the 15th of August 1915, were forced to enlist in the armed forces; this also included men who were widowed with no underage children. The act allowed for exemptions; these were:

- (a) 'on the ground that it is expedient in the national interests that he should...be engaged in other work in which he is habitually engaged or... is being educated or trained for any work, that he should continue to be so educated or trained.
- (b) On the ground that serious hardship would ensue if the man were called up for Army Service, owing to his exceptional financial or business obligations or domestic position.
- (c) On the ground of ill-health or infirmity.
- (d) On the ground of a conscientious objection to the undertaking of combatant service.'<sup>4</sup>

As a consequence of the Military Service Act being imposed, several Military Service Tribunals were arranged to listen and pass judgement on applications and appeals for exemption from the Armed Forces. Men requesting exemptions would initially apply to their Local Tribunal, most commonly at a town or borough level. The applicant could appeal the decision of the Tribunal and move it up to the County Appeal Tribunal. The third and final level was the

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<sup>3</sup> James McDermott, 'Conscience and the Military Service Tribunals during the First World War: Experiences in Northamptonshire', *War in History*, 17.1 (2010), 60-85 (p.61) <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epdf/10.1177/0968344509348303>>

<sup>4</sup> Military Service Act 1916, Section 2. Certificates of exemption (1916) p.3-4 <[https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1916/104/pdfs/ukpga\\_19160104\\_en.pdf](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1916/104/pdfs/ukpga_19160104_en.pdf)> [accessed 16 April 2024]

Central Tribunal in Westminster, reserved for unique or complex applications.<sup>5</sup>

It was evident that there were massive issues with these tribunals. Time constraints, prejudices, bias and the mood of the men could impact and determine the outcome where the particulars of an application were not adequately capable of being assessed by the act. It is certain that numerous injustices occurred.<sup>6</sup> Even though members of the Tribunal were required to be unbiased, it was evident that a great deal of members were prejudiced against Conscientious Objectors. The members were normally extremely patriotic and generally held limited sympathy and compassion for men who were opposed to war. Furthermore, they hardly ever had any judging experience of other men's principles and beliefs in a just and impartial way; this caused many issues for Conscientious Objectors. However, only 2% of cases at the local tribunals were exemptions for conscientious objectors.<sup>7</sup>

Harold Holttum, a Quaker, was granted exemption; he described his experience of going through a Tribunal.

'I had to put my name down as a conscientious objector in some way, I'm not quite sure of the details as to how that was done...The Tribunal, who I think must have all – or most of them – been local magistrates, decided in their wisdom that this bloke might as well be exempted, provided he did useful work. But in some cases it might have been that the Tribunal was more rigorous than mine was. Because I'd been known locally, I'd lived in that village 18 months, you see. In a big town I can quite imagine that all the young fellows that came up before them were strangers. What the tribunals had

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<sup>5</sup> National Archives, *Survey of First World War Military Service Tribunal records across England and Wales* (2016) <<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Military-ServiceTribunal-survey-Dec-2015-copy.pdf>> [accessed 16th April 2024]

<sup>6</sup> James McDermott, 'Conscience and the Military Service Tribunals during the First World War: Experiences in Northamptonshire', *War in History*, 17.1 (2010), 60-85 <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epdf/10.1177/0968344509348303>>

<sup>7</sup> Peace Pledge Union, *Men Who Said No* () <[https://menwhosaidno.org/context/context\\_tribunalsintro.html](https://menwhosaidno.org/context/context_tribunalsintro.html)> [accessed 17th April 2024]

to decide was, is this chap genuine or isn't he? In my case they decided I was.'<sup>8</sup>

Of all the men conscripted in Britain, 16,000 men applied for exemption from local tribunals for fighting for being a conscientious objector. They did this for moral, ethical, religious and political reasons; for a number of religious groups, including Seventh-Day Adventists, Plymouth Brethren, Mennonites, and Quakers, resistance to violence was fundamental to their beliefs. Jehovah's Witnesses were also opposed to the war and compulsory service as they believed that, to an extent, the measure of state control exercised impeded God's power. Men belonging to various other religious sects, comprising of Anglicans, Unitarians and Methodists, believed that fighting and killing people at war was in opposition to their beliefs despite the pro-combat attitude of numerous conventional churches.<sup>9</sup>

Many conscientious objector's opposition was political. Many liberal men supported the international brotherhood of man. Several of these men and religious sects joined together and collaborated in three organisations: No-Conscription Fellowship, Friends' Service Committee, and the Fellowship of Reconciliation.<sup>10</sup>

The No-Conscription Fellowship was formed in the autumn of 1914 by Fenner Brockway and his wife, Lila Brockway, who were against the creation of compulsory military service. Brockway stated that:

'The interesting thing was that it was not only young socialists, it was young religious people, mostly young Quakers but others as well – Methodists, Primitive Methodists. And as all these names poured in, those who had been most active in bringing them together formed

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<sup>8</sup> Harold Holtum/Imperial War Museum, *Voices of the First World War: Conscientious Objection* () <<https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/voices-of-the-first-world-war-conscientious-objection>> [accessed 17 April 2024]

<sup>9</sup> Rebecca Wynter, *Conscientious Objection & Conscription. Quakers & the First World War: Lives & Legacies* (2017) <[https://www.academia.edu/42027078/Conscientious\\_Objection\\_and\\_Conscription\\_Quakers\\_and\\_the\\_First\\_World\\_War\\_Lives\\_and\\_Legacies](https://www.academia.edu/42027078/Conscientious_Objection_and_Conscription_Quakers_and_the_First_World_War_Lives_and_Legacies)> [accessed 20 April 2024]

<sup>10</sup> Rebecca Wynter, *Conscientious Objection & Conscription. Quakers & the First World War: Lives & Legacies* (2017) <[https://www.academia.edu/42027078/Conscientious\\_Objection\\_and\\_Conscription\\_Quakers\\_and\\_the\\_First\\_World\\_War\\_Lives\\_and\\_Legacies](https://www.academia.edu/42027078/Conscientious_Objection_and_Conscription_Quakers_and_the_First_World_War_Lives_and_Legacies)> [accessed 20 April 2024]

themselves into an ad hoc committee under the chairmanship of Clifford Allen.'<sup>11</sup>

Their initial aim in 1914 was to prevent the introduction of compulsory conscription, and when this failed, they campaigned to obtain a 'conscientious clause' to be added to the Military Service Act 1916. Following the act's introduction, they offered assistance to conscientious objectors throughout Britain.

The No-Conscription Fellowship recorded and organised records of every conscientious objector, including the reason for objection, his pre-tribunal appearance, civil courts, court-martial, and to which prison they were sent. They kept in contact with the conscientious objectors, arranged visits, and held protests at prisons. The fellowship endured harassment from the police, army, government, churches and the press, which fuelled opposition to the conscientious objectors.<sup>12</sup>

Men who were denied exemption on the grounds of being a conscientious objector suffered great hardship, abuse and humiliation. The army members were often furious about conscientious objectors's disobedience; George Dutch was a Quaker who established the Tunbridge Wells branch of the No-Conscription Fellowship. He felt that as a Christian and a socialist, he could not play any part in the war that would leave millions dead. The local Tribunal denied George's application, and he was transported to barracks, where he received harsh punishment for his disobedience:

'They stripped me of my own clothing and put the uniform down beside me and said 'Now you've got to put it on'. I said 'Well, I will not put it on'. 'Alright, you've got to sit there'. I sat there for a day or two and the whole camp was interested... He must have noticed it, because after a day or two suddenly my tent was taken up and taken right up on top of the cliff overlooking the sea. This was in November and it was pretty cold, misty weather. And I was taken up there and my uniform

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<sup>11</sup> Imperial War Museum, *Voices for the First World War: Conscientious Objection* (2024) <<https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/voices-of-the-first-world-war-conscientious-objection>> [accessed 18 April 2024]

<sup>12</sup> Peace Pledge Union, *Men Who Said No* () <[https://menwhosaidno.org/context/context\\_tribunalsintro.html](https://menwhosaidno.org/context/context_tribunalsintro.html)> [accessed 17th April 2024]

put beside me again...and I could sit there and freeze. Which I did. And the orders were that no one was to come near me until I dressed and came down. Well I didn't dress and I didn't go down and I stayed there and I'm not quite sure how long it was, but I think it must have been at least ten days. Just sitting like that in the tent and before I'd been there many hours I was frozen right through with exposure. So that I didn't feel a lot, I was just insensitive. I just sat there, day and night, just set my teeth to stick whatever came. Then suddenly a whole group of them turned up. The medical officer, the doctor, and the NCOs that had put me up there and rolled the tent walls up. The doctor was very angry. So he said to his men, 'Get him down to the tent, down to the medical tent.'<sup>13</sup>

This would not be the only harsh treatment George would face; George's family would also pay for his decisions. His father worked as a domestic gardener and lived in a lodge owned by his employer. George's views of anti-conscription and anti-war resulted in his father being fired, losing the family's rent-free home and having to go back to being a money-strapped subcontract gardener.<sup>14</sup>

After conscientious objectors were denied on appeal, they were viewed as soldiers who were 'absent without leave' and, therefore, were able to be arrested. Conscientious objectors who joined the military service were also arrested as they refused to follow military orders. More than one-third of the 16,000 conscientious objectors were sent to prison at least once, which included most of the absolutists.

The depictions of conscientious objectors in the press were intensely negative. 'Conchie' became a derogatory moniker to refer to men who refuse to be conscripted. In the press, they were denounced and portrayed as idle men who evaded their obligations. They were occasionally depicted as the county's

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<sup>13</sup> Imperial War Museum, *Voices to the First World War: Conscientious Objection* (2024) <<https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/voices-of-the-first-world-war-conscientious-objection>> [accessed 18 April 2024]

<sup>14</sup> Imperial War Museum, *George Fredrick Dutch (oral history)* (1974) <<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80000355>> [accessed 18 April 2024]

enemy and labelled as traitors or cowards who were too scared to go to combat. In an environment where there was widespread fervent support for the war, the men who enlisted were commemorated as heroes in propaganda, whilst conscientious objectors were viewed as committing treason against their country. In addition, the men who refused to serve were displayed in newspapers as lacking muscular strength and unhealthy. Contrary to the pristine khakis of soldiers, conscientious objectors were frequently depicted as shabbily clothed, which implied that they could not look after themselves. Instead of achieving the stereotypical view of the hero soldier, they could be portrayed as blundering halfwits unable to be a 'real man'.<sup>15</sup>

Conscientious objectors were also viewed to be contorting gender roles, and newspapers often labelled them as sissies. Propaganda posters and postcards displayed them in women's clothing and conducting conventional women's duties. A small number of men were accused of being homosexuals, which was a crime at that time and portrayed them behaving in a camp fashion. These illustrations were intended to subvert and shame them. The mockery widened to include literature, artwork and popular ballads. A popular song during the time was Alfred Lester's 'The Conscientious Objector's Lament' which:

'Presents a comic picture of an effeminate, cowardly, intellectual and no doubt homosexual pacifists. The cowardly narrator explains that he doesn't 'object to fighting hunns but should hate them fighting me!'. His use of the word 'conscience' at all is presented as ridiculous.'<sup>16</sup>

At the conclusion of the war, Conscientious Objectors were held in prison for a further six months with the aim for ex-soldiers to have a kickstart for jobs over the Conscientious Objectors. They were also denied their right to vote until 1927. As time passed, most men found a way to get back into society and be accepted.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Charlotte Tomlinson, *English Heritage: First World War Attitudes To Conscientious Objectors* (2024) <<https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/richmond-castle/history-and-stories/attitudes-to-cos/>> [accessed 19 April 2024]

<sup>16</sup> John Mullen, *The Show Must Go On! Popular Song in Britain During the First World War* (London: Routledge, 2015)

<sup>17</sup> Imperial War Museum, *Voices for the First World War: Conscientious Objection* (2024) <<https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/voices-of-the-first-world-war-conscientious-objection>> [accessed 21 April 2024]

British soldier Eric Nun recounted how he felt towards conscientious objectors to the Imperial War Museum; he confessed he did not have a good opinion of them until he was wounded in 1918:

'He told me he was a conscientious objector. I thought he was a great fellow. He really must've been a conscientious objector, 'cos he was right there in the middle. He wasn't dodging the action in any way or form, he was right there in the middle with me and all the others. Right in the middle of it, he wasn't dodging anything. He must've been really a conscientious objector. I take my hat off to him. It must take a lot of moral courage to stand out and be a conscientious objector in a country at war. You know you are going to be misunderstood and misrepresented, don't you?'<sup>18</sup>

Following the war, perceptions of conscientious objectors steadily began to shift. By the start of World War Two, the decision of men being conscientious objectors was significantly more accepted. During the Second World War, more than 60,000 men throughout Britain were registered as conscientious objectors, nearly four times more than in 1916.<sup>19</sup>

To conclude, being a conscientious objector throughout World War One was a challenge. Men had to be inclined to publicly break away from the crowd despite how hated it made them or how difficult life would be as a consequence. To stick to their principles, these men had to tolerate and endure mental and physical suffering. The majority of conscientious objectors during the war were treated reasonably well if their application was successful at tribunals. However, those whose applications failed suffered being moved around the country away from their home, family and community and forced into prisons where they were subjected to gruelling and strenuous work simply because they would not kill another. Many men faced abuse from the army before they were thrown into prison and endured severe treatment in prison and

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<sup>18</sup> Imperial War Museum, *Voices to the First World War: Conscientious Objection* (2024) <<https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/voices-of-the-first-world-war-conscientious-objection>> [accessed 21 April 2024]

<sup>19</sup> Charlotte Tomlinson, *English Heritage: First World War Attitudes To Conscientious Objectors* (2024) <<https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/richmond-castle/history-and-stories/attitudes-to-cos/>> [accessed 21 April 2024]

labour camps. Some were even driven to insanity in solitary confinement; it is estimated that 100 men died in prison due to poor living conditions and neglect by prison officers and doctors.<sup>20</sup>

Since the war, views about conscientious objectors have become a lot more sympathetic; perhaps on reflection, many people in Britain had wished their loved ones who had fought and died or did not return from the war the same person had wished that their loved had refused to fight and die as they did.

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<sup>20</sup> Peace Pledge Union, *Men Who Said No* () <[https://menwhosaidno.org/context/context\\_tribunalsintro.html](https://menwhosaidno.org/context/context_tribunalsintro.html)> [accessed 17th April 2024]

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