

HEART OF CONFLICT

CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTORS

Casualty rates on the Western Front forced the wartime government to bring in compulsory conscription in 1916: more fighting men were needed.

The Military Service Act 1916 came into force in March that year. Conscription applied to all single men over the age of 18 and under the age of 41 and they were required to report for duty. (This was extended to married men in April 1916).

There were exceptions: men already in the army or reserves, those discharged for injury, men in the navy, priests and those who were exempt.

There was also a clause to allow for genuine conscientious objectors to apply for exemption via a local tribunal.

There were four grounds under which a man could apply for exemption:

1. Employment in work of national importance
2. Ill health or infirmity
3. Serious hardship would be caused to a dependent
4. Conscientious Objection to undertaking combatant service for these reasons:
 - a. Religious Beliefs (Quakers, Christian Fundamentalist)
 - b. Humanist (belief it was wrong to kill another human)
 - c. Political Beliefs (left wing activists considered it an imperialist war)
 - d. Anti-establishment (thought government had no right to intervene)

Exemption could be temporary, conditional or absolute.

Although undoubtedly some of the 16,000 men that applied for exemption did so because they did not want to go to war for practical or selfish reasons, there were many more who were prepared to sacrifice everything for their religious or political beliefs, even if that meant facing the ultimate sanction of a firing squad.

If a 'conchie' was not prepared to accept a conditional exemption by taking a Non-Combatant role (such as in the Friends Ambulance Unit (FAU) or Royal Army Medical Corp (RAMC), nor undertake 'essential war work' he was termed an 'absolutist' and faced imprisonment. The other option for the tribunal was full exemption, but these were very rare, with only a total of 400 ever being granted throughout the war. Somewhat ironically – considering it was a principle of COs not to kill – a tribunal in Market Bosworth gave full exemptions to all men in the local hunt!

In total, 6,100 men were jailed. Some, once released, were sent back again for sticking to their principles – some up to five times – in a process dubbed 'cat and mouse'.

When they were eventually released (some up to nine months after the end of war) they found that employers would not accept Conscientious Objectors – even openly stating this in job advertisements. They were also deprived of the vote under the Representation of the People Act 1918 for five years after the end of the war.

However, despite public hatred and press persecution of the COs, opinions changed a few years later. Ten former conscientious objectors were elected as MPs. Two more, including the nephew of Cornish human rights campaigner, Emily Hobhouse, became prison reformers as a result of their awful experiences in His Majesty's Prisons.