

HEART OF CONFLICT

COERCION & CONSCIENCE

“It will all be over by Christmas”

When war was declared in late 1914 thousands of young men immediately signed up to go off to fight for their country. The rush to enlist was due to several factors: firstly national pride and a sense of patriotic duty. Secondly, some young men saw it as an adventure to go abroad and fight in a conflict which would, they had been repeatedly told, all be over by Christmas.

In the first few months of war, the reality became clearer as an average of 2,000 men were killed every week. Relatively quickly, volunteering gave way to coercion. The Government's Propaganda machine went into overdrive. Newspaper and magazine articles and advertisements aimed at women urged them to 'shun any man not in khaki', be it son, brother or boyfriend. Even in the music halls, pro-enlistment songs were sung by stars such as Vesta Tilly – and to great effect.

Women were also pressured into shaming men from outside their family into enlisting. The most infamous example is Admiral Charles Penrose Fitzgerald who founded an organisation called Order of the White Feather, in which female members were used to hand out a white feather (a symbol of cowardice) in public places to every man of enlistment age not in uniform. The White Feather Campaign was enthusiastically supported by the press that frequently ran headlines vilifying anyone they deemed 'cowards' or 'slackers'.

The country seemed divided into families that had already seen sacrifice and those that had all their family members safe at home. There was little of no sympathy for men who would not 'do their duty' and the press and government adverts stepped up the pressure, while still using women to apply emotional blackmail.

Into this fevered atmosphere, conscription was introduced.

The government had no expectation that anyone other than Quakers would apply for exemption from military duty on the grounds of pacifism or conscience. There was no plan in place to deal with the numbers of determined men who were to stick to their principles despite the strenuous efforts of the military – even to the point of death.

For men who were prepared to undertake alternative essential work outside the military, the concept of Equality of Sacrifice was introduced.

Equality of Sacrifice

Lord Kitchener (of the recruiting poster fame) devised the concept of Equality of Sacrifice. Today, this reaction to the utter determination of those that would not fight on the front line might seem like an over-reaction to the circumstances. But at the time the concept was greeted with enthusiasm, especially by newspapers and also many members of the public. It was certainly whole-heartedly embraced by the tribunal committees, many of whom went out of their way to enforce the most punitive of conditions.

Equality of Sacrifice in the most basic of terms meant that those who would not fight on the front line of war should not enjoy any of the comforts of home; they should suffer as much as the soldiers on the Western or Eastern Fronts.

For absolutist conscientious objectors (COs), this meant having to work away from your home and family; not working in your current occupation (the harsher the conditions the better from some of the tribunals); and only getting the very basic army pay. It is very unlikely that the families of

Conscientious Objectors would have received the equivalent of the Army Separation Allowance (around 17s per week) so in fact it meant greater financial hardship and therefore a greater sacrifice. Most of the so-called 'conchies' were not opposed in principle to the concept of Equality of Sacrifice, indeed they had the greatest of respect for the fighting men, it was that their principles were in opposition to the concept of war. Part of a resolution passed by No-Conscription Fellowship (N-CF) stated:

We appreciate the spirit of sacrifice which actuates those who are suffering on the battlefield and in the same spirit we renew our determination, whatever the penalties awaiting us, to undertake no service which for us is wrong.

If, following a tribunal hearing, a CO was granted exemption on condition he undertook work of national importance, the Tribunal could forward his case to the Committee of Work of National Importance, commonly known as the Pelham Committee because it was headed by H.W. Pelham, advised in bringing together COs and suitable jobs that met the criteria. The Committee also produced a work list which included agriculture and allied trades, forestry, mill work, transport, mining, education and public utilities.

However the Pelham Committee could only operate if tribunals sent cases to them. Sometimes tribunals or individuals within them acted maliciously and demanded the CO find his own work, only to then often reject any post the CO found. Work was not easy for a CO to find on his own as most employers did not want to give jobs to those who refused to fight. If the CO failed to find any work he was under threat of having his exemption revoked and would therefore be considered as having enlisted.

Teachers who applied for exemption as COs were ordered to leave their posts and undertake manual work. Most school authorities refused to allow these educated men to stay in post in case pupils were 'corrupted' by their thoughts and views.

Equality of Sacrifice, despite best intentions, may not have been as noble as it intended. The reduction in pay that most men endured, along with the physical and mental suffering, was also inflicted on their families, some or all of whom may have even held different views.

As an example in 1916, a bricklayer might earn 30 – 40 shillings, a printer 33s, a farm labourer 14s as opposed to a sapper, driver or private who earned 1s 1d a day (7s – 7d per week).

Harsh conditions enforced on the COs of World War One were changed for those that objected during World War Two, showing perhaps that the COs were very harshly treated indeed. It is not insignificant that the War Office ordered the destruction of ALL Conscientious Objector's Tribunal Records to be destroyed (except one, kept for study purposes).

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