



CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION



“War will exist until that distant day when the Conscientious Objector enjoys the same reputation and prestige that the warrior does today.”

- John F. Kennedy,
President of the United States 1961 - 1963

Most Conscientious Objectors (COs) applied for exemption because of their firmly held belief that war and killing another man was against Christ's teaching.

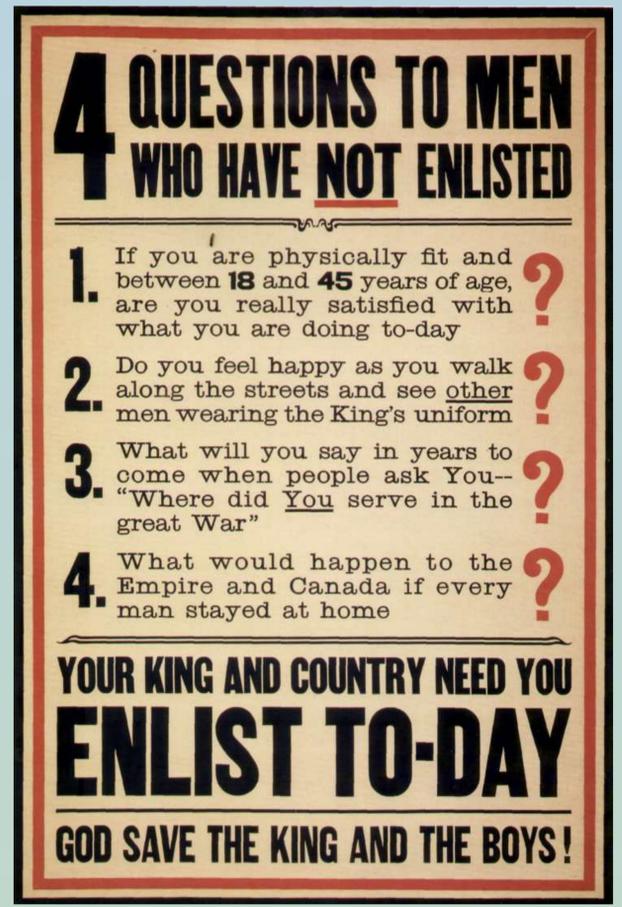
Some Socialists or Communists objected on political grounds that they had close bonds with workers in other countries.

Many members of the Reform Churches were committed Socialists.

Some considered their stand as an active protest against what they considered the greatest evil in the world - killing another human being.

Those seeking not to enlist had to appear before a Military Services Tribunal. The Tribunal would declare one of the following:

- ❶ Absolute exemption.
- ❷ Performance of alternative civilian 'service of national importance'.
- ❸ Service as a non combatant in the Army wearing military uniform, but not fighting.
- ❹ Refusal of their application. Then the man had to decide whether to join up or to make a stand against enforced conscription.



16,000 were recorded as Conscientious Objectors.

7,000 had noncombatant duties (the Non Combatant Corps, NCC) around the big military bases or in medical teams near the Front.

The **Friends Ambulance Unit** was established by the Quakers in 1914 and provided medical support on ambulance trains and hospitals. More than 1400 served and 21 died in service.

3000 were allocated to special work camps.

6,000 had their application refused and were allocated to be conscripted and join the Army but were then imprisoned when they refused to obey orders. Prison conditions were harsh with hard labour, a poor diet and a rule of silence.

Conscientious Ojectors sentenced to Death - but sentence commuted

When the COs did not respond to be being forcibly stripped of their civilian clothes, or refused to follow orders, the Army made a plan to make an example of some of the more resistant prisoners. Secretly they sent 42 COs to France where they would be liable to Martial Law.

On arrival at Boulogne the COs refused orders, were court martialled and sentenced to death.

Due to pressure from the Prime Minister the sentence was changed to 10 years in prison and they were sent back to England.

Imprisonment

Over 1,000 refused to cooperate in any way and were sent to civilian prisons for the whole of the war. For the first two weeks the prisoner was not given a mattress to sleep on. There was a rule of absolute silence, they had a very poor diet and often abusive warders.

Fenner Brockway refused to abide by the silence rule and was given eight months of solitary confinement.

In December 1917 three hundred of the 1,300 in prison were released due to ill health, but remained disenfranchised for 5 years.

By mid 1919 all Concientious Ojectors were released, often in poor physical condition. 69 had died and 39 had been declared insane. Most struggled to get employment and to continue their previous lives.



*Blessed are the Peacemakers
by George Bellows, 1917*

Many supporters of Conscientious Objectors progressed in politics

Ramsey McDonald - the first Labour Party Prime Minister.

George Lansbury - Leader of the Labour Party 1931-35

Bertrand Russell the great logician and philosopher was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1950 and was appointed to the Order of Merit by King George VI.

He was the first President of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

Fenner Brockway campaigned for peace all his life and became a Peer. In 1979 he founded the World Disarmament Campaign.



Princetown Work Centre ~ (Dartmoor Prison)

On 1st March 1917, 900 Concientious Objectors were taken to Dartmoor Prison which had been renamed Princetown Work Centre. The doors were not locked but conditions were sparse with inadequate clothing and bedding and occasional maltreatment. The COs worked in the fields or the quarries.

SOME THOUGHT THEY SHOULD FIGHT