

Conscientious Objection during the First World War

What do we mean by Conscientious Objection?

Conscientious objection is when someone objects to a course of action on moral, ethical, political or religious grounds. The proposed action is against their conscience and they refuse to take part in it. The term is most commonly used in the context of individuals having a conscientious objection to serving in the military. These individuals are called Conscientious Objectors (COs). The first known Conscientious Objector was Maximilianus, the son of a Roman army veteran. In the year 295 he refused military service for religious reasons. He was killed for his stance, and later became Saint Maximilianus.

Conscientious Objection in the UK during the First World War

The first time conscientious objection was legally recognised in the UK was during the First World War. In 1914, at the beginning of the war, soldiers served voluntarily. However, by the end of 1915 so many soldiers had been killed that the government decided to introduce conscription (compulsory military service).

The Military Service Act which introduced conscription was passed in January 1916. The Act applied to all single men between the ages of 18 and 41, and listed four grounds for exemption: illness or infirmity, financial hardship, employment in work of national importance, and conscientious objection. In May 1916 a second law was passed extending conscription to married men.



How many Conscientious Objectors were there? Why did they object?

Around 20,000 men refused conscription into the British Army between 1916 and the end of the First World War. Men objected to the war, and serving in it, for a range of reasons; moral, ethical, political and religious. They did not agree with or support the actions of war.

How did they apply to be Conscientious Objectors?

In 1916 those wanting to object had to apply for a certificate of exemption by 2nd March. Individuals had to apply to a Local Tribunal. Approximately 2,000 Local Tribunals were created across Britain.

What happened next?

Conscientious Objectors were often ordered by the Tribunals to conduct medical work or other work of national importance e.g. on the roads or on the land. Some conscientious objectors refused to obey military orders. They were known as absolutists and were often imprisoned.

One man's experience - Howard Marten



Howard Marten was a 30-year-old bank clerk living in central London at the beginning of the First World War. He campaigned against the war and joined the No-Conscription Fellowship. When conscription was introduced he applied for exemption on the grounds of conscientious objection. The decision of the Tribunal was 'exemption from combatant service only'. Howard was called up to serve in the Non-Combatant Corps. He refused to report to the army and was arrested. He refused to drill and was sentenced to be detained in Harwich.

He was then sent to Felixstowe and then on to France. He knew he faced the death penalty if he refused orders while on 'active service': "After our second court martial we were taken out to the parade ground ... an officer in charge of the proceedings read out the various crimes and misdemeanours – refusing to obey a lawful command, disobedience at Boulogne and so forth. And then, 'The sentence of the court is to suffer death by being shot'... And then, 'Confirmed by the Commander-in-Chief'... Then another long pause and, 'But subsequently commuted to penal servitude for ten years'". Howard was sent back to prison in England. His death sentence in France had been commuted as a result of political pressure back in Britain.

Hostility towards Conscientious Objectors and their families

In 1914 Admiral Fitzgerald suggested that women distribute white feathers to conscientious objectors, as a symbol of cowardice. Most media portrayed conscientious objectors in a very negative light. 'Conchie' became a slang term for a man who rejected military involvement. Objectors were portrayed as lazy, effeminate and traitors.

