

4.4 Case study: Conscientious objectors in the First and Second World Wars

Learning outcomes

- Understand how the law on military service changed.
- Know and understand the punishments used against those who refused to fight.
- Be able to explain the extent of change in the treatment of conscientious objectors between 1916 and 1945.

Conscription in the First World War

Up until 1916, everyone was free to have their own personal beliefs on war and violence. But, in 1916, the Military Service Act was passed, introducing conscription in the UK for the first time. There was much debate about this new law in Parliament as it was such a big change. Compulsory service in the armed forces had never been used in Britain on this scale before and many politicians were concerned about the moral consequences. Previously the system had relied on men volunteering to fight, but this change made it illegal to avoid taking an active part in the war.

From March 1916, all unmarried men aged 18–41 were called up to join the armed forces. By May that year, married men were also included in the call-up; and in 1918 the upper age limit was raised to 51 years.

Conscientious objectors in the First World War

Some men refused to fight, because they said their conscience would not allow it. They were known as Conscientious Objectors (COs). Many refused to fight because their religious beliefs didn't allow it; others refused for political reasons, because they thought the aims of the war were wrong.

People who refused to support the war in any way were called absolutists: they believed that even indirect support for the war was wrong, as it meant the conflict could continue. Most absolutists were pacifists – people who feel that violence in all circumstances is immoral.

Others refused to carry weapons or serve in the military, but were prepared to support the war effort in other ways: these were known as alternativists. Some agreed to do jobs such as stretcher bearer, which was very

dangerous work, at the frontline. Others undertook roles as ambulance drivers or other auxiliary (support) work, such as helping distribute food supplies.

Source A

A 1916 poster explaining the opportunity to seek exemption from conscription into the armed forces.

MILITARY SERVICE ACT, 1916

Every man to whom the Act applies will on Thursday, March 2nd be deemed to have enlisted for the period of the War unless he is exempted or exempt.

Any man who has adequate grounds for applying to a Local Tribunal for a

CERTIFICATE OF EXEMPTION UNDER THIS ACT

Must do so BEFORE **THURSDAY, MARCH 2**

Why wait for the Act to apply to you?

Come now and join of your own free will. You can at once put your claim before a Local Tribunal for exemption from being called up for Military Service if you wish.

ATTEST NOW

Tribunals

The Military Service Act did allow for people objecting to joining the armed forces. It included a section called the conscience clause which allowed men to ask for exemption on the grounds of conscience. Some 16,500

men made this request, and had to appear before a special court, called a tribunal, to judge if their claims were genuine.

The tribunals did not always give COs a fair hearing, because:

- they were held locally and the judging panel was selected by the local authority, so there was wide variation from area to area
- members of the panels were generally too old to be called up themselves, but often had very clear views about other people's duty to fight.

Treatment of COs

Many absolutists who refused to support the war in any way were imprisoned. Sometimes they faced solitary confinement so they could not mix with other prisoners. The authorities hoped this would weaken their determination.

Some COs were punished by being sent to France, to the front line of the fighting. Once there, they were given orders, and if they refused to follow them they were sentenced by a military court. A small number were sentenced to death. The prime minister intervened to stop this happening, and reduced the punishment to ten years imprisonment.

Source B

COs in a quarry on Dartmoor. About 1,000 COs were imprisoned at the prison on Dartmoor and made to work in the local granite quarries.



Source C

Jack Foister, a CO in the First World War, describes being sentenced to death at a court martial on 14 June 1916. His sentence was later reduced to ten years imprisonment.

I was brought from the cell to the office and stood at attention in front of a table at which three officers were seated. The one in the centre lectured me quietly but firmly on the sin of disobeying orders on active service, said he was going to give me an order, if I did not obey, I should be court-martialled for disobedience, the punishment for which could be sentence of death. There was a soldier standing to attention in the same office. The order given me was to fall in behind this soldier for drill. "Right turn, quick march," came the order. There was no response. The greatest strain that I ever experienced was when that order was given because I knew it was the final point and I was the first one to be given the order and my mind went quickly round. Will the others do what I am going to do? But it was all in a flash you see. I didn't have minutes to think about it... a couple of seconds. I was not going to fall in. I was ready to do whatever happened.

Why were COs treated so harshly?

The casualty rate of soldiers in the First World War was so high that the authorities were determined to stop pacifist ideas spreading. They needed to recruit lots of men, and wanted to prevent a wide resistance movement against the war from growing up.

The government presented fighting as a man's duty to his country. Refusing to fight was presented as 'unmanly' and even traitorous. The press also spread views of COs as cowardly and unpatriotic. The harsh punishments handed out to COs were publicised to put people off refusing to fight, and to make their harsh treatment more widely accepted.

Most people had close family and friends who were fighting and who had been killed or injured. They often felt that COs were unfairly shirking their responsibilities. Some COs and their families were isolated by friends and neighbours. Some received hate mail or white feathers in the post as a symbol of cowardice.

Source D

First World War postcard portraying COs as scared to fight and not 'real men'.

**Key terms****Propaganda***

Deliberate mass persuasion.

Peace Pledge Union*

An organisation founded in the 1930s that opposed war and sought to find peaceful means to resolve conflicts around the world.

Changes in treatment of COs during the Second World War

During the Second World War (1939–45), COs were offered alternative occupations such as farm work. Prison was generally used as a last resort rather than as a standard deterrent to other potential objectors. However, the authorities still expected people to support the war and used lots of propaganda* to build support.

Those who actively campaigned against the war could find themselves in court. For example, members of an organisation called the Peace Pledge Union*, who posted anti-war posters, were put on trial, but their case was dismissed by the judge.

Changes in social attitudes

During the Second World War, official attitudes to COs were quite different from the First World War. In the Second World War people were being asked to unite against Hitler as a tyrant, and Nazism as a movement that persecuted minorities. In this context, harsh punishments for COs would have been seen as hypocritical.

On the other hand, public opinion could still be hostile towards those who refused to fight, when most people felt they were making great sacrifices for the war. Some COs were verbally abused in public – or even attacked. Others lost their jobs, because their employers disapproved of their actions.

Source E

Joyce Allen was a member of the Peace Pledge Union (PPU). Here she describes what happened after she decided to register as a CO.

“When conscription came in I was teaching. I could have asked for exemption, but I wanted to register as a CO... [Even though the school wanted to sack me they] didn't get rid of me: it was difficult to get staff then. I had over 40 supportive letters – the bulk of them from men in the RAF! I think they were scared out of their wits, these young chaps dropping bombs, and wished they could get out of it. The man who was giving me Latin lessons, though, refused to teach me. A member of the PPU offered to teach me instead, and she put the fee I paid her into the PPU funds.”

Activities ?

- 1 Write down two headers – ‘Positive reactions’ and ‘Negative reactions’. From Source E, identify reactions to Joyce’s decision to be a conscientious objector, and note each under the relevant header.
- 2 Write a list of questions that Joyce could have been asked at the tribunal. They could cover her motives, her views about the war, and other war work that she would be willing to do instead.
- 3 Discuss with a partner how Joyce might have replied to each question.

Exam-style question, Section B

Explain one way in which treatment of witchcraft in the period 1500–1750 was similar to the treatment of conscientious objection in the 20th century. **4 marks**

Exam tip

For this question you should identify a similarity and add information from both periods to support it. You could show knowledge of the actions of either the authorities or the general public.

Summary

- Some men refused to fight in the war as they said their conscience would not allow it. After 1916 they were viewed as criminals.
- The Military Service Act included a section called ‘the conscience clause’ which allowed men to refuse conscription on the grounds of conscience. Very few were granted this exemption.
- Prison was the most common punishment for COs who refused war work in the First World War.
- In the Second World War, government attitudes to COs were less harsh, but public opinion was generally still hostile.

Checkpoint

Strengthen

- S1 Name three punishments faced by COs in the First World War.
- S2 What types of work were COs offered by the authorities in the First World War?
- S3 What was the Peace Pledge Union?

Challenge

- C1 What was the significance of the 1916 Conscription Law in changing the treatment of those who opposed fighting?
- C2 Why did the government imprison absolutists during the First World War?

How confident do you feel about your answers to these questions? Discuss any you are unsure about with a partner then try rewriting your answers together.