

An introduction to conscientious objection

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 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).

Conscientious objection during the First World War



The first time conscientious objection was legally recognised in the UK was during the First World War when the Military Service Act (1916) introduced conscription (compulsory military service) and limited grounds for exemption. Around 20,000 men refused conscription into the British Army between 1916 and the end of the First World War⁽¹⁾. Many COs endured very harsh conditions⁽²⁾. Many showed immense courage, even though they were often portrayed as cowards. The photograph shows COs at Dyce Camp in Aberdeen where ‘they faced 10 years of hard labour’^(3,4).

Conscientious objection during the Second World War



In 1939 two thousand anti-conscription protestors marched through London⁽⁶⁾. During the Second World War about 62,000 men and approximately 1,000 women in Britain applied for CO status⁽⁶⁾. Individuals could be granted unconditional exemption, conditional exemption (e.g. with the condition that they did agricultural or hospital work), they could be ordered to join the Non-Combatant Corps, or their application could be refused completely^(7,8). Donald Saunders shared his experiences as a CO in a series of videos for Conscience Education For Peace⁽⁸⁾.



On the previous page we focused on conscientious objectors to military conscription in the UK. However, individuals from many different countries, and in many different contexts, have conscientiously objected to war. This is a photograph of Franz Jägerstätter, a Roman Catholic Christian, who was a conscientious objector in Austria during the Second World War⁽⁹⁾. In March 1943 he refused to ‘perform military service with a weapon’⁽¹⁰⁾. He stated that ‘he would be acting against his religious conscience were he to fight for the Nazi State ... that he could not be both a Nazi and a Catholic’⁽¹⁰⁾. Franz was executed in August 1943⁽¹¹⁾.

Conscientious objection in different countries today

People continue to conscientiously object to compulsory military service in different parts of the world today. In 2019 there were 60 countries which had active conscription, and a further 23 countries had conscription laws in place but were not actively drafting anyone⁽¹²⁾. Conscience Education For Peace has compiled information tables for each continent. These detail the situation in each country. The tables can be found on its webpage⁽¹³⁾.



Osman Murat Ülke is a Turkish conscientious objector. He burnt his military papers at a press conference in 1995. Over the following decade he was arrested and imprisoned repeatedly. His case was taken to the European Court of Human Rights, which ruled in his favour⁽¹⁴⁾.



Atalya Ben-Abba is an Israeli conscientious objector from Jerusalem. In 2017 Atalya refused conscription to the Israeli military. She spent 110 days in military prison^(15,16).

Conscientious objection to military taxation (COMT)

In countries such as the UK, which have armed forces but no physical conscription, people still face ‘financial conscription’ in that each citizen is obliged to pay for the military through their taxes. This has led to campaigns for individuals to have the right to be able to conscientiously object to military taxation⁽¹⁷⁾. The UK organisation, *Conscience: Taxes For Peace Not War*, campaigns for a change in the law to introduce this right. It has worked with MPs to try to introduce legislation which would enable individuals to register as conscientious objectors and opt for the military proportion of their taxes to be paid into a Peace Tax Fund^(18,19). While waiting for legislative change some individuals have chosen to withhold the military proportion of their taxes in advance of a legal mechanism being established. They are known as war tax resisters. They have had belongings seized, have been declared bankrupt, and have been imprisoned⁽²⁰⁾.