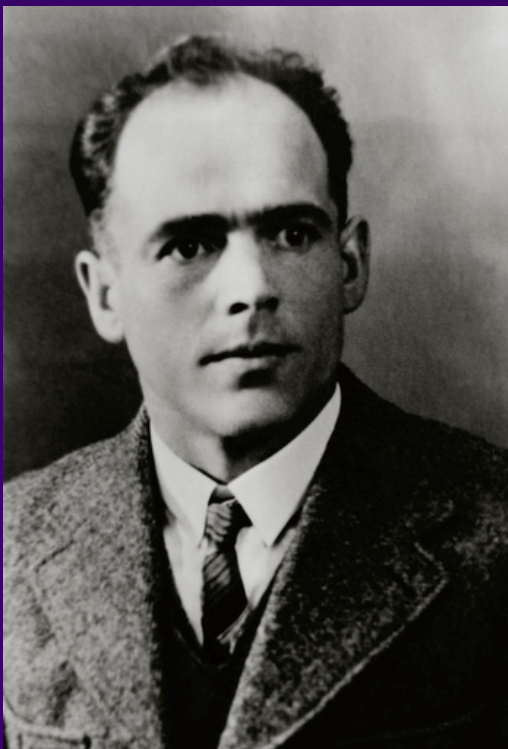


Conscience  
Education  
For  
Peace



# Conscientious objection to military service

*A series of fact sheets*



## 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<sup>(1)</sup>. Many COs endured very harsh conditions<sup>(2)</sup>. 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’<sup>(3,4)</sup>.

### Conscientious objection during the Second World War



In 1939 two thousand anti-conscription protestors marched through London<sup>(6)</sup>. During the Second World War about 62,000 men and approximately 1,000 women in Britain applied for CO status<sup>(6)</sup>. 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<sup>(7,8)</sup>. Donald Saunders shared his experiences as a CO in a series of videos for Conscience Education For Peace<sup>(8)</sup>.



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<sup>(9)</sup>. In March 1943 he refused to ‘perform military service with a weapon’<sup>(10)</sup>. 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’<sup>(10)</sup>. Franz was executed in August 1943<sup>(11)</sup>.

## 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<sup>(12)</sup>. 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<sup>(13)</sup>.



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<sup>(14)</sup>.



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<sup>(15,16)</sup>.

## 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<sup>(17)</sup>. 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<sup>(18,19)</sup>. 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<sup>(20)</sup>.



# Why do people become conscientious objectors?

## 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 No-Conscription Fellowship manifesto in 1915 said:

'Whatever the purpose to be achieved by war, however high the ideals for which belligerent nations may struggle, for us 'Thou shalt not kill' means what it says. The destruction of our fellow-men – young men like ourselves – appals us; we cannot assist in the cutting off of one generation from life's opportunities .... we deny the right of any Government to make the slaughter of our fellows a bounden duty ...' (1.a).

## Why do people become conscientious objectors?

People become COs for many different reasons. In her book, 'Conscientious Objectors of the Second World War', Ann Kramer summarised some of the reasons why people became COs. Often an individual arrived at the decision for a combination of reasons.

'Sometimes their views were formed as a result of growing up in a pacifist family ... others had been influenced by what they had read or teachings they had encountered. Many had deeply held religious convictions; others had moral objections to war and killing; and still others arrived at their stance for political or humanitarian reasons' (2.a).

Below we have included quotes from selected COs as examples of these different reasons.

### Early influences

Fred Vahey, a CO during the Second World War, was 'born into an impoverished family in Ireland ... he saw first-hand, not just the war wounded of the First World War, but also how working people were exploited ... He was determined to live a life that exploited neither humans nor land'. This was important in his decision to become a CO (2.b). Edward Blishen was born shortly after the First World War, in 1920; 'his father had fought in the trenches ... and had returned home wounded and suffering from shell shock'. As a young man during the Second World War, Edward decided to register as a CO, 'influenced by his father's experiences and by the anti-war literature he had read' (2.c).



Donald Saunders spoke to Conscience about his father's experience of being a CO during the First World War, his own early upbringing and Quaker roots, meeting Jewish children who had arrived in the UK through the Kindertransport, and how these experiences contributed to his own decision to register as a CO during the Second World War (3).

## Moral / ethical grounds



Kathleen Lonsdale, a scientist, Quaker and pacifist, refused to be directed into compulsory fire watching duties during the Second World War (2.d) and served a month in prison. 'As a mother with three children under the age of 14, she could have gained exemption but chose to take her stand against war and against what she saw as the denial of civil liberties caused by compulsion'. Kathleen Wigham also refused to take up civilian work as directed and was sent to

prison. She registered as a CO and was directed to do hospital work. However, at the industrial tribunal she explained that she would not comply 'because I object to doing any work which will relieve anyone else to do military service' (2.e).

Howard Marten, a CO during the First World War, said:

'I wasn't prepared to do anything under military direction, or to be exempted in a very restricted way. I think people get the impression that it was only that people wouldn't fight. It was something more than that; it was an objection to having one's life directed by an outside authority'(1.b).



## Religious grounds

Dr Alfred Salter was a pacifist who, after the First World War, became the Labour MP for Bermondsey. In his powerful statement in 1914, 'The Religion of a CO', he asserted that it was impossible to imagine Jesus taking part in the war. About 1.5 million copies of his piece were distributed in Britain:

'In the matter of this war I must try to picture to myself Christ as an Englishman, with England at war with Germany ... Look! Christ in khaki, out in France, thrusting His bayonet into the body of a German workman. See! The Son of God with a machine-gun, ambushing a column of German infantry, catching them unawares in a lane and mowing them down in their helplessness. Hark! The Man of Sorrows in a cavalry charge, cutting, hacking, thrusting, crushing, cheering. No! That picture is an impossible one, and we all know it. That settles the matter for me. I cannot uphold the war' (1.c).

Among those with religious grounds for their conscientious objection were Quakers, Methodists, Anglicans, Christadelphians, Plymouth Brethren and Jehovah's Witnesses(1.d).

## Political grounds

Many COs objected / object to war, and being conscripted to military service, on political grounds. In his application for exemption from military service during the First World War, Fenner Brockway wrote:

"My Socialism is based on a belief in the sacredness of human life ... [War] destroys human life and denies the unity of humanity. To participate in war would be to outrage my conscientious and most deeply held convictions. I cannot do it' (1.e).



Tom Carlile, a conscientious objector during the Second World War, was an anarchist. He 'had been fiercely opposed to Hitler and Nazism since the early 1930s but did not consider that killing other human beings was any way to counteract them. He opposed conscription because he felt the state had no right to tell him who to fight and kill and refused to register' (2.f).

## Conscientious objection during the First World War

### What do we mean by conscientious objection?

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### 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<sup>(2)</sup>. 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<sup>(3)</sup>. 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 <sup>(3)</sup>.

## What happened next?

Cyril Pearce, who compiled a database of COs in the First World War, said, "Most tribunals took a very aggressive view, trying to catch men out and ridiculing them." An applicant could be given a conditional exemption e.g. if they agreed to serve in an ambulance unit. Some conscientious objectors refused 'to be involved in any part of the war machine'. They refused to obey military orders. Known as absolutists, they were often imprisoned <sup>(4)</sup>.



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 <sup>(5)</sup>.

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 <sup>(5)</sup>.

## Hostility towards conscientious objectors and their families

In 1914 Admiral Fitzgerald suggested that women distribute white feathers to conscientious objectors <sup>(6)</sup>, 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.



## Conscientious objection during the Second World War

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### Conscription and conscientious objection during the Second World War

Legislation during the First World War set a precedent for the introduction of conscription in Britain. It also set a precedent regarding recognition of conscientious objection, albeit in limited circumstances<sup>(1)</sup>. Many COs in the First World War endured very harsh conditions<sup>(2)</sup>.

In 1939, on the day Britain declared war on Germany, the National Service (Armed Forces) Act was passed, which made all males between 18 and 41 liable for conscription<sup>(3)</sup>. There were some exemptions; those who were medically unfit, those in key industries and jobs, and conscientious objectors if their reasons for refusing to join up were accepted by a tribunal<sup>(3)</sup>. Men aged 20 to 23 had to register in 1939<sup>(4)</sup>, men over 27 in 1940, and men over 40 in 1941<sup>(4)</sup>. In 1942 the list of people who could be conscripted was extended to include unmarried women and childless widows between 20 and 30, and men up to 51<sup>(5)</sup>.



### How many conscientious objectors were there during the Second World War?

During the Second World War about 62,000 men and approximately 1,000 women in Britain applied for CO status<sup>(1)</sup>. As an approximate comparison, around 20,000 men refused conscription into the British Army between 1916 and the end of the First World War<sup>(6)</sup>.



## How did people apply to be conscientious objectors?



Applications for CO status were first assessed by local tribunals <sup>(1)</sup>. This is a picture of the North Midlands tribunal for conscientious objectors; 'on the left are members of the tribunal. Before them sit an objector and his adviser, with

supporters and other waiting COs looking on' <sup>(1)</sup>. Tribunals during the Second World War were seen, in general, as more impartial than those during the First World War. There were now no military representatives acting as prosecutors <sup>(7)</sup> and more effort was made to find alternative work for COs <sup>(1)</sup>. Individuals facing a tribunal 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 <sup>(7,8)</sup>.

It was found that 'tribunals varied greatly in their attitudes towards conscientious objection to military service and the proportions totally rejected ranged from 6% to 41%' <sup>(7)</sup>. The 'political and moral views of the tribunal chairman' were seen as 'vitally important' <sup>(7)</sup>. Some conscientious objectors refused to obey military orders, or to do alternative work. They were known as absolutists and faced prison sentences <sup>(1)</sup>.

## Conscientious objectors' experiences

Sidney Greaves was a Quaker and conscientious objector. After refusing to serve in the armed forces, he received a sentence of six months in Wormwood Scrubs Prison:

"We were locked up in the early evening, about half past five, and let out again about seven in the morning. There were the usual appalling insanitary conditions, with a bucket in the cell. Slopping out in the morning was a dreadful experience, faeces and urine everywhere. The warders on the whole were hostile to COs. People who were in for robbery with violence got much more respect from them. They made it very clear that we were regarded as the scum. There was a subdued patriotic bias. One or two of the screws were better, but by and large that was the attitude" <sup>(9)</sup>.

Donald Saunders, also a Quaker conscientious objector, has shared his experiences in a series of Conscience videos <sup>(8)</sup>. Gwendolen Potter, who was evacuated to Aldermaston, recalls:

"I remember also there were some conscientious objectors living on the edge of Savernake Forest, and they were not liked at all. They used to come down fishing on the canal sometimes, and there was a great furore. They had a very bad time with the local people. There was one family of COs, they were living in a very isolated place - most of them worked for the Forestry Commission - and nobody would ever speak to them" <sup>(10)</sup>.

Researched and written by Sarah Croft & Karen Robinson

January 2022

1. Photo of tribunal and related text © IWM HU 62359 <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205082343>
2. Conscience Factsheet. Conscientious Objection during the First World War. <https://conscienceonline.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Factsheet.-CO-during-WW1.-9.3.21..pdf>
3. <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/yourcountry/overview/conscriptionww2/>
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6. <https://menwhosaidno.org/> 7. <https://spartacus-educational.com/2WWco.htm> 8. <https://conscienceonline.org.uk/conscience-education-programme/conscientious-objection-ww2/>
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# Conscientious objection to conscription: a review of the current situation worldwide

## What is conscription?

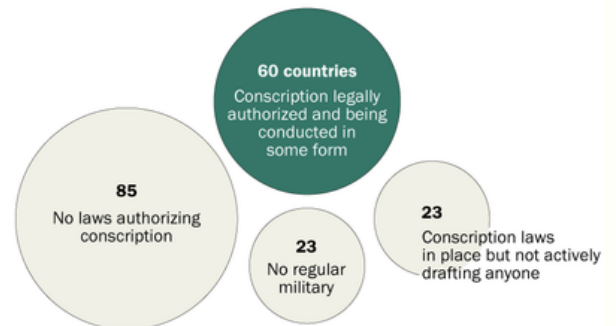
Compulsory military service, or conscription, is when citizens of a country are required by law to spend a certain amount of time in military training / military service.

## How many countries have compulsory military service / conscription?

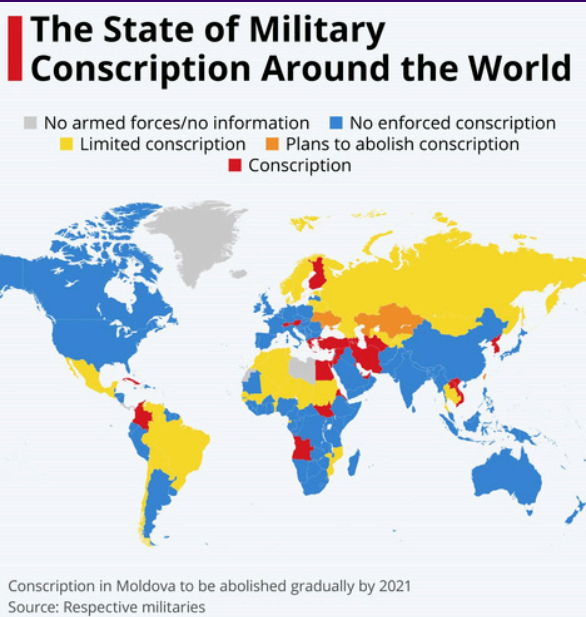
In 2019 the Pew Research Center produced this diagram showing that 60 countries had active conscription and a further 23 countries had conscription laws in place but were not actively drafting anyone (1).

The remaining 108 countries had no conscription. Of these, 85 had armed forces but no conscription and 23 had no regular military forces at all.

### Fewer than a third of the world's countries draft people into their militaries



Note: Excludes five countries where the central government lacks monopoly on legitimate use of force or where conscription status is unclear.  
Source: Pew Research Center analysis of external data.



## Which countries have conscription?

This map shows the status of military conscription in different countries around the world in 2020. The 'No enforced conscription' category includes countries with no conscription and those which have conscription on the law books but are not currently drafting anyone (2).

## How does conscription vary between countries?

The details of compulsory military service vary between countries, e.g. whether it is men only or men and women, the age at which citizens are required to do their military service, the length of service etc. Some countries may have *selective conscription* when all eligible citizens are required to register for military service but only some are selected to do it. Conscription laws may apply in wartime and in peacetime, or just in wartime. Countries with a conscription law may also vary in how strictly they apply it:

'Despite the fact that Senegal has had a law on conscription since it became independent, usually this law is not applied. In general, Senegal's army is made up of volunteers, who can join at the age of 18' (3).

## Where is the right to conscientious objection recognised?

The right to conscientious objection to military service is recognised in some countries which have conscription, but not all. Conscience has produced a detailed information table for each continent, listing whether countries have compulsory or voluntary military service (or none), whether the right to conscientious objection has been recognised, and giving further details of the situation in each country (3,4,5,6,7).

Looking at these tables it is clear that situations in countries vary, and are not necessarily static. Compulsory military service may be suspended or abolished and the right to conscientious objection suspended or abolished with it. Equally there have been countries where conscription has been re-introduced after a few years or introduced for the first time:

'Sweden has reintroduced conscription for all; Ukraine, Georgia, Lithuania and Kuwait have reintroduced conscription for men after short hiatuses; Qatar and the United Arab Emirates have introduced conscription for the first time' (8).

## How do conscientious objectors' experiences vary?

Conscientious objectors from different countries may have different experiences:

In Algeria 'conscientious objectors are considered deserters and they can be imprisoned for 30 days in a military prison. Then, when they are released, they are automatically drafted for military service. They could be in the military for up to two years' (3).

'Australia has a law (from 1903) recognising the right of conscientious objection. Interpretation of this right has been evolving since then, and including other motivations as well as religious ones. However, there is no recognition for selective conscientious objection yet (objection to participation in a specific war)' (7).

'Since 2019 there has been an option in Turkey to pay in order to avoid military service. Conscientious objection is not recognised. Those who declare themselves as conscientious objectors are prosecuted. They can be imprisoned and they face a "civil death" where they are excluded from all social, cultural and economic life. As a result many conscientious objectors decide to leave the country' (6).





## Conscience Education For Peace

Conscience Education For Peace has been developed to complement and inform the campaigning work of *Conscience: Taxes For Peace Not War*. The education programme is aimed at adults, members of the public and potential supporters. It aims to present basic information around conscientious objection to military taxation, and related issues, in a clear, simple way.

We are very grateful to have received a grant from Quaker Peace & Social Witness for our education programme. Many thanks too to everyone who contributed to our Conscience Education Crowdfunder.

## Conscientious objection to military service

This booklet gathers together our fact sheets on different aspects of 'Conscientious objection to military service'. You can find related video excerpts and other educational resources on our webpage:

<https://conscienceonline.org.uk/education-for-peace>

We will be producing a companion booklet on 'Conscientious objection to military taxation'.

*Conscience: Taxes For Peace Not War* works for a world where taxes are used to nurture peace, not pay for war.

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