

FACTSHEET EDUCATION FOR PEACE

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.



Many COs endured very harsh conditions. Many showed immense courage, even though they were often portrayed as cowards.

COs at Dyce Camp in Aberdeen where 'they faced 10 years of hard labour'.

CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

In 1939 two thousand anti-conscription protestors marched through London. During the Second World War about 62,000 men and approximately 1,000 women in Britain applied for CO status.

Individuals could be

- granted unconditional exemption
- conditional exemption
- ordered join the Non-Combatant Corps
- having their application refused completely

Donald Saunders shared his experiences as a CO in a series of videos for Conscience Education For Peace.



e.g. to do agricultural or hospital work

very few cases

This group presented the main difficulties in the handling of the general problem

vast majority were refused

This factsheet is one of a series produced by Conscience Education for Peace. They are available, together with videos and other resources at consciencecampaign.org.uk

