

Conscientious objection during the Second 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 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).

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⁽¹⁾. Many COs in the First World War endured very harsh conditions⁽²⁾.

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⁽³⁾. 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⁽³⁾. Men aged 20 to 23 had to register in 1939⁽⁴⁾, men over 27 in 1940, and men over 40 in 1941⁽⁴⁾. 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⁽⁵⁾.



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⁽¹⁾. As an approximate comparison, around 20,000 men refused conscription into the British Army between 1916 and the end of the First World War⁽⁶⁾.

How did people apply to be conscientious objectors?



Applications for CO status were first assessed by local tribunals ⁽¹⁾. 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' ⁽¹⁾. 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 ⁽⁷⁾ and more effort was made to find alternative work for COs ⁽¹⁾. 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 ^(7,8).

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%' ⁽⁷⁾. The 'political and moral views of the tribunal chairman' were seen as 'vitally important' ⁽⁷⁾. Some conscientious objectors refused to obey military orders, or to do alternative work. They were known as absolutists and faced prison sentences ⁽¹⁾.

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" ⁽⁹⁾.

Donald Saunders, also a Quaker conscientious objector, has shared his experiences in a series of Conscience videos ⁽⁸⁾. 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" ⁽¹⁰⁾.

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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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