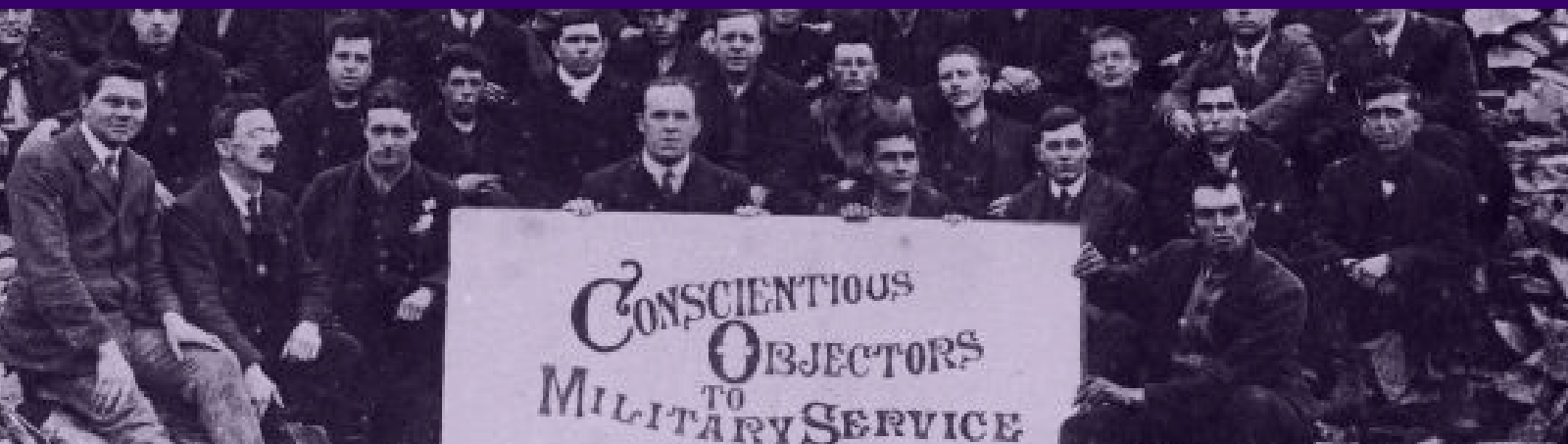


FACTSHEET EDUCATION FOR PEACE

Conscientious Objection during WWI



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 first known CO was Maximilianus, the son of a Roman army veteran. In the year 295 he refused military service for religious reasons. He was killed for his stance, and later became Saint Maximilianus.

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
- conscientious objection



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 WWI. 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.

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

