Chapter 1

1.1 what is a conscientious objector?

If you are called for military service but you refuse to go because you believe it is wrong to take part in war, or preparations for war, you are a conscientious objector (CO). Conscientious objectors are deeply opposed to war and killing. It is not simply that they prefer not to do military service, that they are scared to fight, or that they have something better to do with their time: they believe it is wrong to hurt or kill other people.

Arthur Creech Jones was a conscientious objector in the First World War and later went on to be a government minister. At his Court-martial he stated his views about the stupidity of war - views which many COs shared:

> 'I believe in human brotherhood and in the common humanity and common interests of all nations. I believe in co-operation, and not competition to the death, between individuals and nations. I view war as merely the test of might... It is a stupid, costly and obsolete method of attempting to settle the differences of diplomatists, in which the common people always pay with their blood, vitality and wealth. I believe there is a better way... I cannot, therefore, participate in any military organisation, every part of which is designed to make the machine of militarism efficient, and the method of which is the destruction of human life. I claim liberty of conscience and, therefore, cannot obey military orders.'
>
> 31 August, 1916. Arthur Creech Jones - Court-martial.

What is a conscientious objector?

This is how the Reverend Fuller Gooch saw it. *'What do we mean by conscientious objector? Is a shirker a conscientious objector? Is a coward a conscientious objector? No; a man is not a conscientious objector unless he has principle or religion behind him. That man I would stand by with all my heart and power... If a man's convictions are honest, sincere convictions, he ought to be honoured for them.'*

21 May, 1916.

In the First World War 16,000 British men refused to fight for the British army because they believed fighting and killing was wrong. These conscientious objectors were followed in the Second World War by another 60,000 who refused to fight and a further 10,000 in the period of compulsory national military service up to 1960 following the Second World War. This book is about the conscientious objectors of the First World War and human rights.

It was not easy to be a conscientious objector during the First World War. You had to be willing to stand out from the crowd no matter how unpopular it made you or how hard life would be as a result. To dare to be different you had to be convinced you were right to stick to your principles. You also had to be willing to accept both physical and mental hardship.

Most conscientious objectors in the First World War were treated quite well, but some suffered terribly due to the harsh treatment they received in prisons and work camps. Seventy-three COs died as a result of their treatment by the British authorities and thousands were kept in appalling conditions in prison. Despite this, they continued to refuse to fight or to follow military orders. They knew they could be sent to prison where they could be forced to do hard labour and almost starved to death, but they preferred to suffer themselves rather than to make other people suffer.

Of course, life as a regular soldier during the First World War was also very difficult and full of hardship. Many regular soldiers suffered much more than conscien-

tious objectors. Millions of men and boys of all nationalities experienced the terror and pain of war: millions died and millions more would never be the same again. Surviving in the trenches, no matter which side of no-man's land they were on, men saw and did horrific things that would stay with them for the rest of their lives.

Conscientious objectors were determined not to make other people suffer in the way that so many did in the trenches. They refused to take part in war and believed it was wrong to kill or injure someone deliberately, regardless of which nationality they were or the beliefs they held. They insisted there were better ways to settle arguments that did not depend on the slaughter of millions of people.

There is a range of viewpoints on war and conscientious objection. Some people think it wrong to fight under any circumstances, others believe it is sometimes necessary and inevitable. But the issue is not straightforward. Even among those who believe it is wrong to fight there are different opinions. Some men who became conscientious objectors wanted nothing at all to do with the army, while other conscientious objectors were willing to join the army but not to fight.

The same is true among people who believe it is necessary to fight in wars. Some men volunteered to join the army at the first opportunity, while others would only join if they were ordered to (conscripted).

conscience (noun),

conscientious (adjective)

the part of your mind that tells you whether what you are doing is morally right or wrong.

1. You didn't do anything wrong, you should have a clear conscience (= not feel guilty).

2. It was his guilty conscience that made him offer to help.

3. I can't tell you what to do - it's a matter of conscience (=something that you must make a moral judgement about).

4. He didn't want somebody's death on his conscience.

5. prisoner of conscience (=someone who is in prison because of their political or religious beliefs)

1.2 why become a conscientious objector?

People become conscientious objectors for different reasons. These include moral, religious and political reasons but it is usually a combination of factors which makes someone become a CO. The question of who has authority over your life is also important.

authority

> 'I deny the right of the State to compel me to undertake any service to which I have a conscientious objection. My life is my own and I claim to dispose of it as I will, particularly as the State has had no part in my introduction to this part of the earth, nor has it assumed any responsibility for my life in the past.'
>
> 1916. Sydney Turner - Deptford Tribunal.

Some people learn that if they are told to do something by someone in authority (e.g. a police officer, judge, the government or military officer) they should always obey. Others believe that it is right to question those in authority and only do what they personally believe to be the right thing to do - they follow their own moral code or conscience.

Many conscientious objectors in the First World War obeyed their own moral code and refused to follow orders which went against their beliefs. They believed that they were the highest authority when it came to decisions about their own lives - particularly if those decisions involved taking other people's lives. For some this meant refusing to join the army at all; for others it meant only obeying army orders if they did not go against their own fundamental beliefs.

religion

Some people lead their lives according to their religion. For them the highest authority is their god and their understanding of what following their religion involves. Many people during the First World War were COs because they believed their religion told them it was wrong to hurt or kill. They obeyed their religion before they obeyed the government. Followers of the same religion, however, could interpret their responsibility to their religion differently. In the First World War it was common

The biblical view

'blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God' Matthew 5:9

'love your enemies' Matthew 5:44

'They shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more' Isaiah 2:4

for Christians to be fighting against each other in the name of the same god.

Most religious COs in Britain in the First World War were Christians - from a variety of different churches. While some Christians believed their religion told them not to fight, others believed fighting and killing was acceptable to their religion. In the First World War it was common for Christians to be fighting against each other in the name of the same god. Christianity, like other religions, has been interpreted differently over time and in different places.

Early Christians were pacifists, believing that all war and killing is wrong. When the Roman Empire adopted Christianity as its religion in the 3rd Century pacifism gave way to the idea of a 'Just War' (here, 'just' means fair or righteous). The Just War doctrine states that wars can be fought if they are conducted according to a set of agreed rules, such as not attacking civilians. During the First World War, although many Christians believed that war was acceptable if fought according to agreed rules, a lot of Christians disagreed and said that war, no matter why or how it is fought, is never justified or acceptable because of the appalling suffering that accompanies all war.

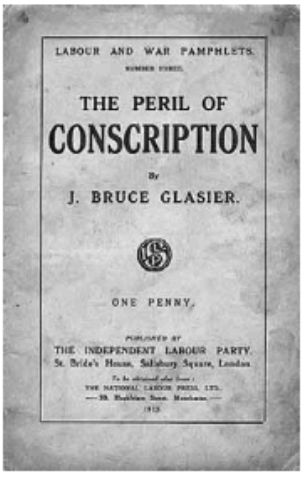
pacifism

'I have strong objection to becoming a soldier as I am certain that warlike methods will never end war… Violence tends to separate and creates misunderstandings, whereas on the other hand, love creates an atmosphere of confidence and regard. It is because of my belief in the latter method that I resist attempts to make me a soldier'.

1917. Frederick Walker at his 3rd Court-martial.

Of course, many people do not need religion to tell them that killing is wrong. For pacifists, taking action and making preparations to avoid war is a better way to achieve peace than preparing for war. Rather than fighting, pacifists recommend negotiating a settlement and disarmament on all sides. Negotiating a settlement at an early point in a dispute means fewer people die, resentment does not grow so much and there is hope of a lasting peaceful relationship between opposing sides. Disarmament halts dangerous arms races and allows valuable resources to be used for the positive benefit of the people rather than destruction of lives and property.

Pacifists believe that fighting and killing is counterproductive and adds to problems rather than solves them. They say that fighting to achieve peace is contradictory because violence encourages further violence in retaliation - 'an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind'. In this way a small dispute can quickly lead to violence and war, particularly if opposing sides have weapons at the ready and people to use them.


LABOUR AND WAR PAMPHLETS.

THE PERIL OF
CONSCRIPTION

By
J. BRUCE GLASIER.

ONE PENNY.

PUBLISHED BY
THE INDEPENDENT LABOUR PARTY,
St. Bride's House, Salisbury Square, London.

'To me the killing of a man is murder, and in my opinion all the conceit and vanity of society expressed in terms of Victoria Crosses, Military Crosses, and medals and the like cannot remove the guilt of so grave a crime'.

1916. W.P. Cahill - Court-martial.

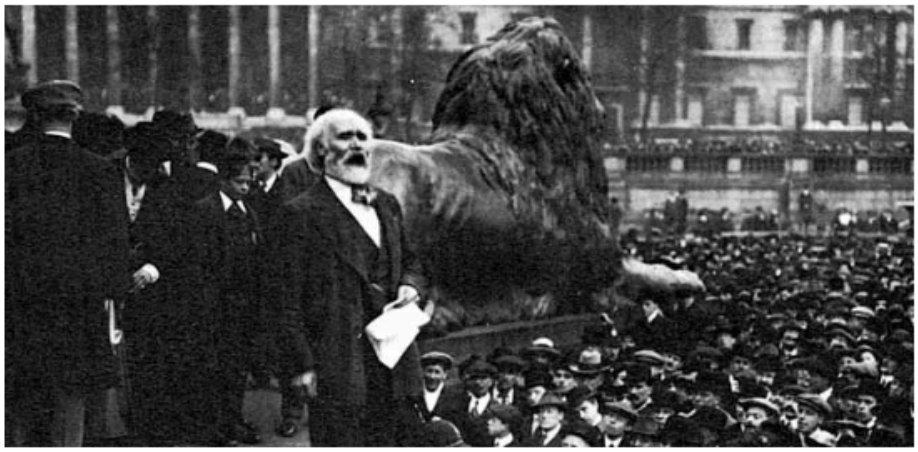
Pacifists believe that making preparations for war (building military ships, planes and tanks, stockpiling weapons, training an army to fight) increases the chances of war happening. Countries competing in an arms race (e.g. Britain and Germany before the First World War) fear their opponent's growing military power which leads to a desire for even more military equipment. Pacifists were against the whole military system, which they believed provoked war, and hid the cruel reality of war and justified killing.

socialism

'Whatever may be the rights and wrongs of the sudden, crushing attack made by the militarist Empire of Austria upon Serbia, it is certain that the workers of all countries likely to be drawn into the conflict must strain every nerve to prevent their Governments from committing them to war'.

1914. Keir Hardie.

Some men refused to fight in the First World War because of their political views. Socialism was very popular in many countries across Europe at the time of the First World War and there was a strong feeling of 'internationalism'. Socialists from different countries often had more solidarity with each other than they had with non-socialists in their own country. Their socialist beliefs came before their patriotism or nationality.



■ Keir Hardie speaking at an anti-war rally in Trafalgar Sq, London. 1913

'Out of the darkness and the depth we hail our working-class comrades of every land. Across the roar of guns, we send sympathy and greeting to the German Socialists. They have laboured unceasingly to promote good relations with Britain, as we with Germany. They are no enemies of ours, but faithful friends.'

Statement issued by Independent Labour Party, 1914

Socialists believed that the ruling classes created wars which the working class fought for them. Rather than workers from different countries fighting each other, socialists believed that the 'workers of the world' should unite across national borders in a struggle against the ruling classes.

'The workers of the world must unite in the political and industrial fields to work out their own salvation. To say the least, it is unreasonable to ask me to assist in the oppression of the poor by taking part in the military machine, which has always been used for that purpose in all countries during industrial and other disputes'.

E.W. Harby - Court-martial.

In common with pacifists, socialists were also concerned about disarmament and the arms race. In the two years before the First World War they exposed the growth of private armaments companies who were profiting from making weapons and military equipment in the build up to war. As socialists, they were opposed to private companies making large profits from the sweat and hard work of working-

class employees. When the end product of the workers' labour (weapons and other military equipment) was to be used against workers in other countries they found it especially difficult to accept. They believed industry should be owned by and for the workers.

Many COs were both Christian and pacifist, socialist and pacifist, Christian and socialist or a combination of all three. They came from different backgrounds, rich and poor, from urban and rural areas, and with a range of views on all aspects of life. Despite the different backgrounds and reasons for conscientious objection, there was a unity of feeling among COs in the First World War. Together, they were united in their refusal to be conscripted to kill other human beings.

1.3 where do you draw the line?

'Conscience is essentially an individual matter; and different people, considering what is and what is not permissible to them, draw the line at different points'.

Compulsory Military and Alternative Services. No-Conscription Fellowship booklet.

In the First World War there were three main categories of conscientious objector: 'Non-combatants', 'Alternativists' and 'Absolutists'. They all refused to fight or kill but they varied in what they were prepared to do and in the responsibility they felt to the government and military authorities.

non-combatant COs

Non-combatants reluctantly accepted being in the army and wearing uniforms. They would follow orders, salute, drill and train alongside regular soldiers, just like any other soldier - except they would not fight and would not use weapons, nor would they take part in combat training. Most were in the Non-Combatant Corps (NCC) – a unit set up specifically for conscientious objectors – or they were in medical and hospital units such as the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC).

■ Ist Aldershot Non-Combatant Corps outside their hut.

Non-combatants did not oppose the whole military system, unlike some other COs. They were prepared to accept the right of the government and military authorities to take charge of their lives for a period of time as long as they were not required to fight or handle weapons. They believed the state had the right to order them to do work on its behalf and that they had a responsibility to work for the state in times of need.

alternativist COs

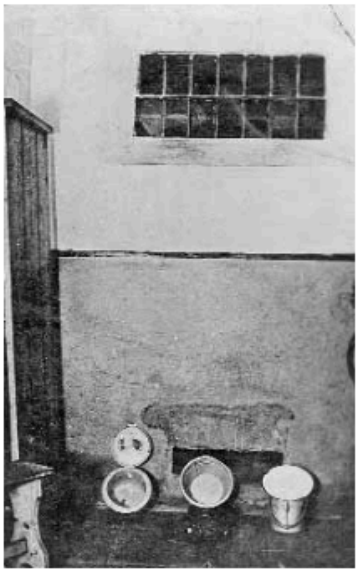
Alternativists were so called because they did 'work of national importance', also known as 'alternative service'. They did civilian service as an alternative to military service. They sometimes worked in schools and hospitals, but usually they were employed in forestry and farming. They would not wear army uniform or obey military orders and they were free to live wherever they pleased as long as they had a full-time job doing 'work of national importance'.

Alternativists were willing to work under civilian authority but not military control. They did not oppose working on behalf of the government to help civilians, but they refused to work for the military or to do any work which would help the military. These COs felt a responsibility to help other civilians and accepted that the government had the right to take control of their lives for some time. They did not accept the army had any authority over them.

absolutist COs

Absolutists were opposed to the system of compulsory military service (conscription) as well as to war and killing. Most of them were committed pacifists and were opposed to the whole idea of armed forces and war. They absolutely refused to help wage war in any way at all. This included refusing to be forced to work for the government as well as the military. Because they refused to be controlled or follow orders by the government or army most absolutists spent time in prison for their beliefs – some for many years.

Absolutists felt no responsibility at all to the military or to the government's wartime policies - they only felt a responsibility to other civilians, including civilians from countries the British army were fighting. They believed that doing any kind of alternative service or forced work - under civilian or military control - would contribute to the war effort and, therefore, to killing people. They said they had the right to go about their lives as free people and that nobody had the right to order them to do anything against their will.



■ Inside an absolutist's prison cell.

dilemmas

All men called to join the army in the First World War faced dilemmas and had difficult decisions to make. Is it right to kill somebody under any circumstances? Would I obey an order to fire at another soldier? What would I do if ordered to shoot at civilians? Do I have a responsibility to fight in the army for my country? Do I have a responsibility not to harm other people? How will my family cope while I am away?

Those who were considering applying to be a conscientious objector had some very difficult decisions to make indeed. They had to think about whether they would be helping other soldiers to kill by supporting them behind the front line. If they offered to be a stretcher-bearer would that release another soldier to go to the front line to kill or be killed? Does working on a farm release another civilian to go to the army? If they helped sick and wounded soldiers would they be contributing to the war effort by helping soldiers get fit enough to fight again? Some COs wondered if staying in prison and refusing to do any civilian or military work actually helped the cause of peace. Is there something else they could do to end war and promote peace?

1.4 conscientious objection since the First World War

Conscientious objection to war is not just something that happened long ago. The last man to be officially discharged on grounds of conscience from the UK armed forces was in 1996. Since the First World War thousands of men and women have been conscientious objectors in hundreds of different wars around the world.

This section examines some of the examples of conscientious objection but it is important to remember that in many parts of the world there is no recognition of conscientious objection at all.

wars in Iraq

In the first Gulf War (1990-91) a British soldier in the Royal Artillery, Lance Corporal Vic Williams, was jailed for 14 months for desertion after he went absent without leave (AWOL). He had a conscientious objection to fighting this war (though not all wars) but he did not know that UK soldiers have the legal right to leave the military if they develop a conscientious objection while already serving in the armed forces.

Most people in the armed forces do not know they have this right. For this reason those who develop a conscientious objection to war whilst in the military tend to go AWOL when they realise they cannot take part in killing any longer.

In the more recent war in Iraq (2003 – present) there have been a number of cases of conscientious objection to this war by members of the UK and US armed forces.

Moshin Khan joined the Royal Air Force but, like many young men, he was unsure of his political and religious views. He joined the RAF to find a sense of purpose in life and because of the glamorous image of heroism associated with the job. He trained as a medic but left the RAF in April 2001 after becoming disillusioned.

Still on the list of reserves, Moshin received call-up papers in 2003 for the latest war in Iraq. Since leaving the RAF, however, he had found a new career and his religion had grown more important to him. He objected to the war in Iraq and said, *'I felt it was wrong from the beginning. They said it was war with one evil man, but that wasn't the way I saw it. I saw it as an attack on innocent people.'*

In February 2003 after going home at the weekend he decided not to return to the RAF. 'I thought, I have to do whatever it takes. I have to stand up for my beliefs.' Two weeks later he was arrested for being absent without leave (AWOL) and was handed over to the military police.

Moshin had never heard of conscientious objection and did not realise he could seek discharge from the RAF on grounds of conscience - nobody had ever told him about conscientious objection. *'I never heard the words. People think I should have known about it, but there are officers who have been in the RAF for 20 years who don't know about it.'*

■ Demonstration at the Pentagon, Washington DC against the Vietnam war. 1972. Resistance to conscription and burning of draft cards was widespread.

Vietnam War

During the Vietnam War the US government introduced compulsory military service. The war lasted for over a decade and in 1971 alone, over 34,000 men claimed conscientious objector status. The average age of a US soldier was nineteen. Many of these young men left the country to avoid being forced into a war they did not agree with. Between 1963 and 1973, over 9,000 were prosecuted for refusing to serve in the US Army, including Muhammad Ali, the world heavyweight boxing champion. Some young men burnt their draft cards (call-up papers) in public demonstrations and received a lot of support from the public.

Keith Franklin was not a conscientious objector but the following letter outlines what little choice he felt he had and how inevitable he thought his death was if he fought in Vietnam. The letter was only to be opened on his death. He was killed in Vietnam on 12 May, 1970.

'If you are reading this letter, you will never see me again, the reason being that if you are reading this I have died. The question is whether or not my death has been in vain. The answer is yes. The war that has taken my life and many thousands before me is immoral, unlawful and an atrocity... I had no choice as to my fate. It was predetermined by the warmongering hypocrites in Washington. As I lie dead, please grant my last request. Help me inform the American people, the silent majority who have not yet voiced their opinions.'

Israel/Palestine

In Israel all Jewish men and women (except full-time religious scholars) have to do a period of compulsory military service. Men have to serve three years and women 21 months. After their initial three years, all men under 42 are also required to do up to a month of military service every year. Women have the option of working in the non-military national service but men are not allowed to.

There are many Israeli conscientious objectors today. Most are known as 'selective' conscientious objectors because they refuse to fight in certain wars, but not all wars. The 'refuseniks', as they have become known, refuse to serve the Israeli military on territory they believe to be Palestinian. The refusenik movement in Israel grabbed the spotlight in January 2002 when 52 reserve officers and soldiers signed a letter saying they would not serve in the territory they believed to be illegally occupied by Israel.

Over 1000 men and women have publicly registered their refusal to serve in the occupied territories, braving social pressure and ridicule, putting their future prospects on hold and risking a prison sentence. The number includes officers, elite unit commandos and pilots. All are refusing to fight beyond the 1967 borders of Israel. They refuse to follow orders which they believe to be illegal and object to what they regard as an illegal war of occupation against the Palestinians.

'Our greatest admiration must go to those brave Israeli soldiers who refuse to serve beyond the 1967 borders. These soldiers, who are Jews, take seriously the principle put forward at the Nuremberg trials in 1945-46: namely, that a soldier is not obliged to obey unjust orders - indeed, one has an obligation to disobey them.'

Susan Sontag, 2004.

■ Alex Kohn, one of many young men who refused to take part in military service in Israel in 2006.

United Kingdom

'John' is a young British man who was persuaded by a friend to join the Marines after working in a factory with no career prospects. The sudden death of a colleague brought John to realise that he was in a job that ultimately was concerned with killing others equally suddenly. After much thinking, he knew that his conscience would not allow him to continue as a Marine, and despite several times being encouraged to 'soldier on', he persisted in his application until he appeared before the Advisory Committee on Conscientious Objectors, who recommended his immediate discharge in 1996.

It is not only military personnel that play a part in war, however. Some people are involved in war in other ways, by working in factories producing military equipment, for example, or by providing services to the military.

In January 2003 a number of civilian freight train drivers in Motherwell, Scotland, realised the part they were due to play in the war in Iraq. They did not want to help the war effort, so they refused to drive trains loaded with military supplies to military bases. Nobody else was qualified to drive the freight train on the specific route they were to take, so their refusal to support war held up supplies for several days. The military equipment was unloaded onto trucks and driven across the country. In a small way, the train drivers had obstructed the military drive to war by their conscientious objection. For the train drivers they had the satisfaction of knowing they had not helped the war effort: they had obeyed their consciences.

1.5 human rights focus - past & present rights

Life in Britain just before the First World War was very different from today and there was not such a clear understanding or concern for human rights. It is important to keep these differences in mind, and not to judge people in the past according to ideas about human rights which are common now.

Many people were very poor and for them life was particularly difficult. Living conditions were appalling, and many people lived in small damp overcrowded houses with inadequate food. Diseases which are simple to treat now, such as influenza or tonsillitis, often killed people and many children died as infants.

The government did very little to help those who could not help themselves. If

you were poor, sick, unemployed or homeless the only help the government provided was through the Poor Law, which set up a system of workhouses. To get into a workhouse, already poor people had to give up the last of their possessions and put up with awful conditions. Workhouses were cold, damp, unhealthy places where death was common - particularly for the very old or young.

> 'The first time I went into the place [workhouse] I was horrified to see little girls seven and eight years on their knees scrubbing the cold stones of the long corridors. These little girls were clad, summer and winter, in thin cotton frocks, low in the neck and short sleeved. At night they wore nothing at all, night dresses being considered too good for paupers. The fact that bronchitis was epidemic among them most of the time had not suggested to the guardians any change in the fashion of their clothes.'
> Emmeline Pankhurst, 1914.

Only better off, property-owning men could vote and no women at all were allowed to. This meant that very few people chose the government and most had no say in what the government did at all.

People were imprisoned for petty crimes and adults could be executed for serious crimes. Capital punishment for children had only ended in 1908 but corporal punishment – usually caning – still existed in schools, workhouses and prisons. Most children left school at the age of 13, or younger, and could look forward to a life of hard work and few personal possessions.

People did have some important human rights, however. Everyone had a right to a fair trial if arrested. There was a right to free speech and to follow your own religion. People could own property and live in their own homes. There was the right to work, to find your own employment and the right to go on strike.

UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Our understanding of human rights now comes mainly from the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Universal Declaration was written in 1948 shortly after the end of the Second World War and was the first time a widely agreed set of human rights had been established. It was developed in response to the war crimes of totalitarian regimes in the Second World War (particularly the Holocaust) and was intended to make a more humane world in which the rights of all people would be upheld.

The Universal Declaration contains thirty short paragraphs or 'Articles'. Each deals with a particular right or freedom which every human being has a claim to. The Articles of the Universal Declaration are supposed to encourage 'the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want'.

The Universal Declaration was not written until 1948 so we should not expect all the rights in it to have been recognised during the First World War. There was an awareness of human rights though, and while we cannot hold people in the First World War to the standard of human rights declared in the Universal Declaration we can expect them to have had humane values and attitudes.

The General Assembly of the United Nations adopted and proclaimed the Universal Declaration on behalf of all countries of the world. All these countries agree to respect and uphold the human rights in the Declaration for every person. However, every time one of these countries takes part in war it breaks many, if not all, of the agreed human rights. War is essentially made up of human rights violations.

1.6 human rights focus - war & human rights

> 'War is made up of human rights violations. It is based on a fundamental division between 'us' and 'them', which makes human rights – based on fundamental equality – a nonsense. Even the notion of the protection of 'innocent civilians' (as against soldiers, who are therefore by implication guilty) has nothing to do with human rights, which do not depend on innocence and guilt, but are unconditional.'
>
> Diana Francis 2004, 'Rethinking War & Peace'

Wars are often fought to protect or establish a particular way of life, a way of organising the economy, or a type of government. They are fought to gain power and money, to control people, land and natural resources, or to satisfy the desires of rulers to be strong and powerful.

Today, people often say wars are fought to protect human rights. It is impossible, however, to have a war without denying people their human rights. Death, injury, rape, torture, disease, hunger, exploitation and theft are all common in wars. Property is destroyed or seized by armies, and people are forced from their homes, jobs and families.

Food is often scarce in times of war as armies blockade ports, destroy crops to punish their enemy, or take the food for themselves. Civilians usually suffer from hunger before soldiers, and children suffer the most. Following the First World War there was famine across much of Europe.

Eglantyne Jebb, founder of Save the Children Fund, said in 1919, 'All wars are waged against children'. Eglantyne set out to feed hungry children and to uphold all children's rights. In 1923 she wrote the 'Declaration of the Rights of the Child', which was adopted by the League of Nations in 1924, and later became the basis of the 1959 United Nations 'Declaration on the Rights of the Child'.

During war, people are denied the freedom to do as they choose. People are often imprisoned simply for being in a particular place, for speaking to the wrong person, or for having a certain religion or ethnicity. They may be forced by their own government, or by whomever is deemed to be the 'enemy', to do things they do not wish to (such as become a soldier or leave their homes).

Governments and other powerful groups place restrictions on what can be said on TV, radio, newspapers and other media, or simply to family and friends. This may be to stop sensitive information being released, but it can also be a way to stop people criticising their own government's actions. Often there are restrictions on movement and whether people can meet in public and private. Sometimes the police and secret security services follow and intimidate individuals and groups who disagree with the government. The Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) was used in this way during the First World War.

Propaganda in wartime is used to by governments and armies to encourage or discourage certain attitudes and beliefs and to control what is acceptable for people to say and think. This makes it difficult to openly oppose war, and people are often accused of being unpatriotic or even traitorous if they speak out against war.

With so many human rights denied during war, it is difficult to argue that war protects human rights. It should be remembered that all people have an equal claim to human rights - soldiers and civilians on all sides, including those we think of as 'guilty' as well as those we believe to be 'innocent' (see quote above). We certainly can say, however, that war has a huge impact on the human rights of all people involved in war, whether they are soldiers, civilians or conscientious objectors. The most significant effect on people's human rights, of course, is that war denies people the right to life.

Widespread hunger in Germany and Austria resulted from the allied blockade, maintained long after the war, to force Germany to sign a punitive 'peace' treaty in 1919.

‘Everyone has the right to life, liberty & security of person.’

the right to life & the right to refuse to kill

There is one right in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which is essential for all the other rights to have any meaning at all. Article 3 states:

‘*Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.*’

A human being will not be able to enjoy any human rights at all if their right to life is denied: without life you have no rights.

When we think about human rights, we often think of rights such as the right to freedom of speech, the right to vote and the right to fair treatment and a fair trial if we are arrested for a crime. These are civil and political rights. Other human rights, such as the right to have a job, food and housing, for example, are called economic, social and cultural rights. Without these rights, the right to freedom of speech is not worth so much. However, without the right to life found in Article 3 of the Universal Declaration all other rights become meaningless - dead people cannot claim any human rights.

Members of the armed forces, just like civilians, have family and friends, thoughts and desires, likes and dislikes. They also have all the human rights that civilians have. A significant difference, however, between civilians and soldiers is that during war governments give soldiers the legal right take another person’s human right to life. It is a soldier’s job to kill when ordered to do so.

War always involves killing people. If someone is killed they have been stripped of all their rights. The right to life was taken from 9,500,000 million people in the First World War – 70% of the dead were military personnel. In the Second World War 50,000,000 people had their right to life taken from them – 70% were civilians. In today’s wars, up to 90% of deaths are amongst civilians, a great many of them children.

Some people believe it is wrong to kill other people intentionally at any time – whether there is a war or not. In the First World War millions of men were required by law to join the army – often against their will. The government said they must join the army and be trained to fight and kill. If they killed someone while working as a soldier, the government would say they were just doing their job. If they had killed someone as a civilian, however, they would be regarded as criminals guilty of murder.

16,000 men refused to join the British army in the First World War because they refused to kill people, or help others to kill. It was against their deepest beliefs, they thought more harm than good would come of the war and they felt they could not live with a clear conscience if they took part in war. They refused to take another person’s right to life, or, to put it a different way, they claimed the right to refuse to kill.

Britain was unusual during the First World War because even when most young men were ordered into the army the government gave some men (COs) the right to refuse to join - the right to refuse to kill. It was not easy, however to secure the right to conscientious objection.

Anti-war groups and Members of Parliament argued long and hard with the government for a ‘conscience clause’ in the new law that would allow the government to order people into the army. The ‘conscience clause’ was the part of the new law which granted the right to conscientious objection. These arguments and debates took place at the same time as millions of men were killing and being killed in the trenches of the First World War, so it was a difficult process to argue that some people should not be forced to fight.

Granting recognition of the right to conscientious objection was a very modern move for the time, and many people were extremely grateful that their government

did not force them into the army. Arrangements for deciding which men were COs, however, were not without serious problems.

Conscientious objectors had the right to refuse to kill but proving that they were genuine COs - with a genuine objection to killing based on conscience - was often very difficult. The system of tribunals to test the sincerity of claims of conscientious objection was badly run, and many people, including those in charge, did not understand the system. The result was that thousands of men who were genuine COs were still forced to join the army - some went quietly, some not so quietly, others refused to join under any circumstances and spent the war in prison.

Twenty years later, at the time of the Second World War, the government had learnt a lesson and made the system for testing the sincerity of conscientious objectors much fairer and easier to understand. In that war there were 60,000 British conscientious objectors.

Despite growing recognition of the right to refuse to kill, specific reference to conscientious objection to war was not written into the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, Article 18 states:

'Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion... to manifest his [or her] religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.'

From Article 18 people derived the right to refuse to kill and the right to be a conscientious objector to war.

Many groups around the world have argued for a clearer expression of the right to be a conscientious objector. In 1987, after much campaigning, many meetings and letters from people around the world, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights urged universal recognition of the right to conscientious objection.

As a result, today, across the whole world, everyone has the right to claim the status of conscientious objector to war if called to join the armed forces by their government. Whether their government respects and recognises their claim to conscientious objection is a different matter, however, as many countries, even in the 21st Century, refuse to recognise the right to conscientious objection. There can be no doubt, though, that so long as there are wars there will always be conscientious objectors who refuse to fight them.

■ Eleanor Roosevelt, widow of US President Franklin Roosevelt, with the first printed copy of the Universal Declaration 1948.

'Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion... to manifest his [or her] religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.'