

Chapter 2

2.1 what is military conscription?

Conscription is a system in which a government orders men (and sometimes women) to join and work for the armed forces. In many countries conscription still exists today, whether there is a war or not. Where it does exist, people have to join the military for a period of time – usually between one and two years – and in some cases they have to return every year for a few weeks of top-up training.

At the start of the First World War the government saw no need for conscription in Britain. It sent an 85,000-strong army (the British Expeditionary Force) to fight the German army in Belgium and France. Meanwhile, Lord Kitchener (the Secretary of State for War, a retired Field-Marshal who had made his name in the 1899-1902 Boer War, where he also set up the world's first concentration camps) called for half a million volunteers to join the army.

A flood of volunteers answered Lord Kitchener's call - in a month over three quarters of a million men had come forward to join the army. One million men volunteered in the first six months of the war and the number rose to three million by 1916. For a while there were plenty of keen young men willing to kill and die for their country. In some cases all the men of a family, or even of a whole street would join up on the same day - often they would all die on the same day too.

For some, the army was appealing because conditions there (proper clothing, regular meals and pay) would be better than at home and it would be a change from the hard gruelling lives that many led. There was also pressure from family, work-mates and the military authorities to join-up and help the war effort.

By early 1916, however, far fewer men were enlisting in the army. One reason for the drop in new recruits entering the army was poor health. All volunteers had to undergo a medical examination, but two out of every five volunteers were found to be unfit. Many people, particularly the poor, could not afford to pay for doctors or hospital treatment and a poor diet combined with poor standards of housing meant many people were unhealthy. Nevertheless, the government was desperate for more soldiers, and doctors doing the medical examinations were paid more for passing a volunteer as fit to fight than for rejecting him.

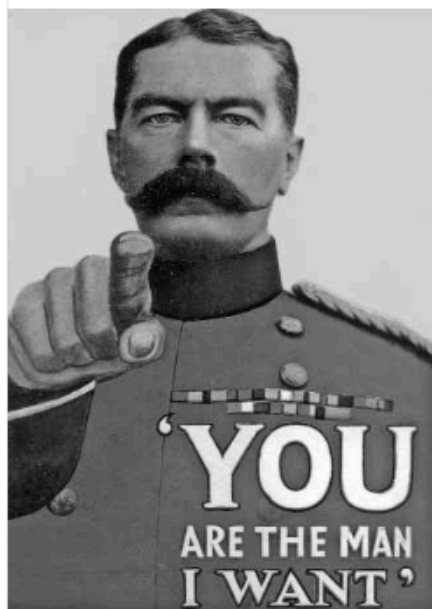
The main reason, however, for the drop in new volunteers was the high number of deaths and casualties. By the first Christmas of the war over 177,000 British soldiers had been killed - more than one thousand killed every day. People started to realise that the war would not be a glorious adventure, and although many had believed it, the war would not be 'over by Christmas'.

For the first twenty months of the war the spirit of adventure, patriotism, propaganda and peer pressure provided enough new recruits for the army. With the reduction in volunteers it was only a matter of time, however, before conscription would be introduced and people would be forced to join the army.

adventure with your Pals – a young man's dream

One reason that so many volunteered for the army was the chance of adventure. Army life offered excitement and the opportunity to break from everyday life. Life was hard for many poorer people in Britain, and the excitement and camaraderie, as well as the regular pay, proper food, clothing and accommodation provided by the army was appealing. For wealthier men it was an opportunity to go abroad and gain new experiences.

The military authorities wanted as many volunteers for the army as possible so they made it possible to join the army with friends, neighbours and work-mates, making the idea of life as a soldier much more enticing. The idea was first tested in Liverpool and within days there were enough volunteers to form four battalions, known



■ Recruitment posters shouted their message as patriotic fervour gripped the country. Around 100 different posters, such as this one featuring Lord Roberts an early advocate of compulsory military service, were produced.

The boys were treated quite well compared with other soldiers at Etaples, and soon grew fit and strong, ready for battle. Etaples was a huge military training base on the French coast, about 20 miles south of Boulogne, where new soldiers were 'toughened up' and punished severely for misbehaving. While the boys were stationed at Etaples a mutiny occurred amongst some of the adult soldiers. The mutiny was probably due to the harsh treatment soldiers received from the military police there, but none of the boys was involved.

In January 1918 the boys' camp was moved to Cayeux, at the mouth of the River Somme. Here they were carefully nurtured and nourished for war. Major H Cardinal-Harford was responsible for their training, but found it hard to look after them for so long, only to send them on to the trenches. Most would never return.

■ Vincent, seventeen: too young to vote but old enough to fight in the Gulf, 1991.



'Very few new boys were now arriving, the rush was over; but on the other hand, the monthly parade, which had always been held, continued. This was the parade for those who had reached the age of 18 and the Immatures who had been passed fit. These were sent to their various depots in France, en route to join their units.

It was a parade which I hated, they were such lads, and one had found oneself much drawn to them: and one hated to think, after the happy days we had spent together, that they were once more on the way to the Front Line with all its horrors. It was indeed strange, and almost unbelievable, looking at their youthful faces, to realise that all had served in the trenches and that Fate had decreed that they should again be due to return to them, instead of to the fair playing fields of their own country, to play football and cricket.'

Child soldiers in the UK - the six year trap

'The Committee is deeply concerned that about one third of the annual intake of new recruits into the [United Kingdom's] armed forces are below the age of 18 years, that the armed forces target young people, and that those recruited are required to serve for a minimum period of four years, rising to six years in the case of very young recruits. The Committee is also very concerned at the widespread allegations that young recruits have been the victims of bullying, and the fact that children below 18 years take a direct part in hostilities overseas.'

United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2002.

Unlike almost all other European countries the UK enlists 16-year-olds into the armed forces. In 1914 nobody under the age of 18 (other than trainee bandmen) could be legally enlisted in the army, but today about one third of the annual intake of new recruits are below the age of 18. There are about 6,000 sixteen and seventeen-year-olds in the UK armed forces. While young people under the age of 18 can be trained to kill they are unable to vote or buy alcohol.

The contract that new recruits sign when they join the military is complicated and many young new recruits do not understand what they are signing up to – and which of their human rights they are signing away.

After the first 6 months of being in the armed forces young soldiers who join up when they are under 18 cannot leave until they are 22 (there is a five month 'window' after the first month when they can leave). So if a young person joins the British Army at 16 they have to wait 6 years for the first legal opportunity to leave. When they leave they are placed in the Reserves and can still be called up during another 6 years.

Not surprisingly, many teenagers who join the Army find their views, attitudes and interests change a lot by the time they are 22. It is no longer possible to 'buy yourself out' of the military contract.

'We believe it is important to recruit young people straight from school, including at the age of 16. If they are not caught at this point, they are likely to take up other careers and be permanently lost to the Armed Forces.'

House of Commons Select Committee on the Armed Forces Bill, 2001.

2.2 patriotism, propaganda & peer pressure

'Patriotism is a lively sense of collective responsibility.

Nationalism is a silly cock crowing on its own dunghill.'

Richard Adlington - English poet.

'For us, patriotism is the same as the love of humanity.'

Mahatma Gandhi - Nonviolent Indian leader.

'In time of war the loudest patriots are the greatest profiteers.'

August Bebel - German socialist.

Before conscription was introduced to force men to join the army, different means were used to encourage them to enlist voluntarily.

patriotism

To be patriotic is to love and to be proud of your country. A common problem, though, is that it can encourage the idea that one group of people (your own people) is superior to another (the 'enemy'). Patriotism can help unite people within a country but it also helps to divide them from people of another country.

Many young men were eager to volunteer for the British army, thinking it was the best thing they could do to help their country and their people. Many knew they might face death but were determined to do so proudly and gloriously for King and country.

Others, who loved their country just as much, believed that fighting the war was not in Britain's best interests. They argued that war would waste vast amounts of money, resources and millions of lives. They believed the best way they could help their country and people was to campaign against war and to refuse to fight.

As well as encouraging people to support the war by joining the army, patriotism made it much more difficult to openly object to war. People who were against the war, such as conscientious objectors, were often accused of being 'un-British' or of siding with the Germans. But COs were against the warmongering attitude of both the British and German governments, and stood between the two sides, believing that war and militarism were wrong, regardless of who was encouraging it.

Wilfred Owen was a soldier and a poet in the First World War. He was a reluctant soldier and his years in the army served to harden his views against war. In May 1917, in hospital with trench fever, he wrote to his mother that he now understood what Christ's teaching meant: *'Suffer dishonour and disgrace, but never resort to arms. Be bullied, be outraged, be killed; but do not kill...Am I not myself a conscientious objector with a very seared conscience?'*

His most famous poem, 'Dulce et decorum est', is a bitter account of the trenches which exposes the lie of patriotism: that it is a sweet and honourable thing to die for one's country.

Wilfred was killed in action just a week before the end of the First World War. His poems were collected and published after his death by fellow-soldier and fellow-poet Siegfried Sassoon.

Dulce et decorum est

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame, all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys! - An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And floundering like a man in fire or lime. -
Dim through the misty panes and thick green light
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams before my helpless sight
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.
If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Bitter as the cud

Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, -
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*
Pro patria mori.
Wilfred Owen

propaganda

Propaganda is selective and exaggerated information and ideas that are spread to promote a particular cause. It was used by all sides in the First World War to make sure the public thought and behaved how the government wanted them to. It was used to persuade men to join the army and to fight harder. Newspaper articles, posters, postcards and pin-badges were all used to spread particular messages and to encourage people to think in certain ways.

British propaganda at the start of the war suggested that the German war machine (Prussian Militarism, as it was called at the time) and German soldiers were evil, barbaric and uncivilised. British soldiers and British militarism, on the other hand, were portrayed as honourable, brave, civilised and manly. German propaganda did the opposite, of course.

Newspaper articles often missed out important facts (e.g. military defeats) and made up others (e.g. stories of heroism). There were reports of German soldiers crucifying a Canadian officer and of cutting the hands off Belgian children - both of which had no evidence to support them and were almost certainly untrue. Atrocities were committed by all sides in the war, as they are in all wars, but they were only reported if they had propaganda value and could be used to make the opposing side appear less human or civilised.

Press reports were controlled and censored by the government. British reports would grossly underestimate the numbers of British soldiers killed and would lie about what it was like to live in the trenches. Life in the trenches was portrayed as one of victory, glory and masculinity - a life fit for heroes. This helped to encourage more men to join the army. German reports were similarly biased.

peer pressure

Men who appeared to be the right age for the army came under a lot of pressure to join-up. Joining the army was, and still is, associated with masculinity - it was seen as a brave and manly act to join up and to protect women and children from the savagery of war. Women were expected to encourage men to join up. Military recruitment officers, work colleagues, passers-by in the street and even family members would pester men to join the army. They would call names, make jokes and ridicule those who were not in khaki (military uniform) and sometimes they did much worse.

Some women gave white feathers to men they thought were avoiding joining up. The white feather was meant as a sign of cowardice and to embarrass men for not enlisting. Some white feathers, however, were mistakenly given to men who were unable to join the army for health, employment or family reasons.

■ One of many British recruitment posters.



The government became so concerned that white feathers were being given to people working for the state - policemen, civil servants, teachers etc. - that they were given pin-badges saying they were serving 'King & Country'. This increased the pressure on men to join the army even more by making it easier to identify those who refused to join for whatever reason.

A famous conscientious objector, Fenner Brockway, who later became a Member of Parliament and eventually a Lord, claimed he had received so many white feathers that he had enough to make a fan! Another writer argued that the 'idiotic young women were using white feathers to get rid of boyfriends of whom they were tired'.

2.3 steps to conscription - National Registration Act

By 1915 the first Christmas of the war had come and gone but the war was still not over. The end of the war did not seem to be in sight and it looked likely to continue for a few more Christmases yet.

In February 1915 the Allies started the Dardanelles Expedition in Turkey to open up a new fighting front in the war. They tried to gain a foothold in Turkey by invading the beaches around Gallipoli, but the Expedition was an absolute disaster. 60,000 Allied soldiers and 65,000 Turkish soldiers were killed in the failed mission. The Allies gained no military advantage at all.

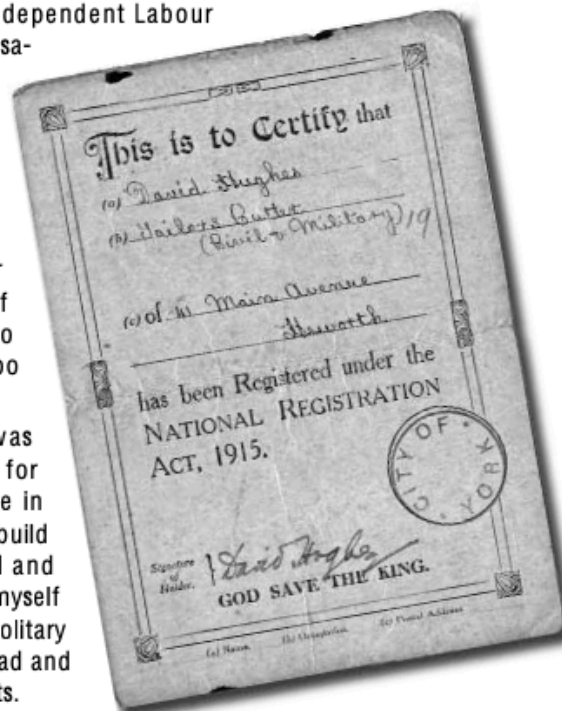
News of the massive military defeat and high death toll filtered back to the British public. It helped to discourage more volunteers for the army, and the number dropped to 70,000 per month from a height of 30,000 per day at the start of the war. With so many deaths and far fewer new recruits, the government felt it needed to do something to make up the numbers in the army if it wanted to continue the war - conscription looked increasingly likely.

As the number of new recruits to the army fell, the government felt it needed to do something to boost numbers. In July 1915 Parliament passed the National Registration Act. This new law required all people between 15 and 65 years old to put their names on a National Register. The register of names revealed the number of men still available for fighting who had not yet volunteered for the army. These men were targeted by the military authorities and put under pressure to 'voluntarily' enlist. Military recruiting officers paid door-to-door visits to all men aged 18-40 to put pressure on them to join the army. The pressure was often very forceful and difficult to resist.

The government was very concerned that opposition to conscription (both military and industrial) would grow and did its best to keep those who opposed conscription quiet. This included sending people to prison for speaking out against the idea of conscription.

Shortly before the National Registration Act was passed Fred Sellar, the Secretary of the Independent Labour Party, a strongly socialist organisation, distributed a leaflet about the proposed National Register. The leaflet rightly pointed out that the National Register was the first step to military conscription for men, and allowed for industrial conscription of women, as well as boys too young for the army and men too old.

On 7 August, 1915 Fred was imprisoned for several weeks for distributing the leaflet. While in prison he was ordered to help build up the prison wall. He smiled and refused, saying 'What! Build myself into a prison?' He was put in solitary confinement with only dry bread and water because of his comments.



Industrial conscription

In addition to military conscription, some people were concerned about the prospect of industrial conscription. Industrial conscription is forced work in factories, mines, shipyards etc. rather than forced work for the army. To fight the war the military needed vast amounts of weapons and munitions, uniforms, food, transport, coal, oil etc.

The government considered industrial conscription but strong opposition from workers' trade unions and socialist groups, such as the Independent Labour Party (ILP), meant that it was not introduced in the First World War (there was industrial conscription during the Second World War). Through propaganda and peer pressure men and women were strongly encouraged, instead of forced, to do industrial work for the war effort, just as young men were pressured to volunteer for the army.

Many people were very keen to work in munitions factories or other parts of industry. They did so partly in a patriotic rush to help the war effort but also because they welcomed the wages and new experiences. Women in particular often experienced a new-found freedom because they could be paid for doing jobs that had previously only been done by men, such as working on buses or farming.

2.4 the No-Conscription Fellowship

Knowing that conscription was likely, it was opposed by some people long before it was even introduced. On 12 November 1914, just a few months into the war, Fenner Brockway had a letter published in a newspaper which led to the formation of the No-Conscription Fellowship (NCF).

Dear Sir,
Although conscription may not be so imminent as the press suggests it would perhaps be well for men of enlistment age who are not prepared to take the part of combatant in the war, whatever the penalty for refusing, to band themselves together so that we may know our strength. As a preliminary, if men between the years of 18 and 38 who take this view will send their names and addresses to me at the address given below a useful record will be at our service.
Yours etc.
Fenner Brockway,
Marple Bridge,
Stockport.

Fenner Brockway received 300 replies to his letter and soon the NCF had almost 10,000 members. The NCF was an organisation which campaigned against conscription and supported conscientious objectors. Other anti-conscription organisations included the (Quaker) Friends Service Committee and the National Council Against Conscription. All three worked closely together, but the No-Conscription Fellowship was the leading anti-conscription organisation of the time.

In the spring of 1915 the NCF produced a manifesto, set up offices near Fleet Street, London and appointed Fenner Brockway as Secretary and Clifford Allen as Chairman. Both were 26 at the time. At first, membership of the NCF was only open to men who were liable for conscription. Before long, though, the NCF had support among men not liable for conscription, as well as from women.

Women would play a key role in running the NCF in the future. Many leading male members of the NCF were arrested for refusing to join the army, which caused disruption to the running of the NCF. Because women could not be arrested for refusing to join the army, they ensured the NCF ran smoothly.

No-Conscription Fellowship - Manifesto

We have been brought to this standpoint by many ways. Some of us have reached it through the Christian faith in which we have been reared, and to our interpretation of which we plead the right to stand loyal. Others have found it by association with international movements; we believe in the solidarity of the human race, and we cannot betray the ties of brotherhood which bind us to one another through the nations of the world. All of us, however we may have come to this conviction, believe in the value and sacredness of human personality, and are prepared to sacrifice as much in the cause of the world's peace as our fellows are sacrificing in the cause of the nation's war.

The majority of NCF members were socialists and members of the Independent Labour Party. The next largest group was the Quakers (the Religious Society of Friends) followed by smaller numbers of a range of religious and political organisations. Socialists were strongly opposed to the war and to conscription. They believed the war was unnecessary and was an argument between the capitalist classes. Quakers have a long history of pacifism and resistance to all war.

The NCF held large meetings and set-up a system of local NCF groups around the country to provide information and moral support for those who objected to conscription. They also produced their own weekly newspaper, *The Tribunal*, which was first published on 8 March, 1916.

opposition to the NCF

Because it opposed conscription and the war itself, the NCF was very unpopular with the government, the military authorities, some newspapers and some of the public.

At the first large meeting of the NCF in Bishopsgate, London, there was almost a riot outside. While NCF members and supporters discussed ways to bring about peace and how to resist conscription, an angry mob of civilians and off-duty soldiers tried to batter down the door. The crowd outside were particularly angered when they heard clapping coming from the meeting and were determined get to those inside. In an attempt to pacify the angry mob Clifford Allen, the chairman of the NCF, said 'So as not to disturb the crowd outside, wave your handkerchiefs' rather than clap. This peaceful means of crowd control worked and the meeting was able to finish.

Many of the popular newspapers at the time were against the NCF. The Daily Sketch accused the NCF of producing propaganda and preaching mutiny and treason.

The letter from the seven soldiers in Hounslow Barracks referred to in the Daily Sketch article appeared in The Tribunal 20 April, 1916:

'We, seven conscientious objectors, would like you to know our present condition. In all cases the tribunals have refused exemption from military service. We have been arrested by the police, imprisoned in the cells, brought before courts, and handed over to the military. We have, as politely as possible, refused to obey all military orders, but they have forced us into solitary confinement, dragged us to be forcibly examined by the doctor. Today our clothes have been wrenched off our bodies and a uniform forced on. When we removed it on principle, they took us from the cells to the detention room, and left us with only an undershirt for four and a half hours, with no heating. We were made to stand thus naked before officers in front of the door and in view of the public highway, while certain particulars were taken for a court-martial to be held, probably on Friday at 11am. We demanded counsel, but Mr. Larkman, to arrange for it, was obliged to cross barrack yard with only a blanket.'
Signed: Templeman, Larkman, Jones, Jones, Ebeling, Forrester, Moat.

The government believed the NCF to be a threat to the security of the country because it was openly opposing the war and conscription. It was concerned that others would join those speaking out against the war and so they sent undercover police to spy on NCF meetings and report what happened. Some of those who opposed the NCF could be very aggressive and violent. Some meetings were violently broken up by 'patriotic' mobs and groups of angry young soldiers in uniform. The police, both undercover and uniformed, stood aside and watched.

TREASON AND MUTINY ARE STILL RAMPANT Authorities Should Put Their Foot On No-Conscription Party Its Insidious Propaganda

The country is at present discussing the question of all-round compulsion.

And while we are debating whether or no every man with wife and family and home duties should be compelled to fight, a certain organisation is allowed to preach treason and mutiny in the broad daylight, to incite young unmarried men to evade service, and to incite soldiers to disobey all military orders.

That organisation is the No-Conscription Fellowship. Its chairman is Clifford Allen; its secretary is Fenner Brockway; its organiser is W.J. Chamberlain. Among the list of sympathisers figure prominently the names of Philip Snowden MP, and James Ramsay MacDonald MP.

The Fellowship has its own newspaper, *The Tribunal*, now in its sixth number, published by the Fellowship at 8

Merton House, Salisbury-court, Fleet-street, and bearing the imprint of the National Labour Press Ltd, 74 Swinton Street, London, W.C.

Its Flouting Of Authority

An unsigned article mentions with gratification that 'in practically every case our members have refused all military orders', and you are invited to view as grossly unfair the treatment of Private Everett, E.J., who refused to obey all orders, was court-martialled, and sentenced to two years' hard labour – instead of being shot, as he deserved.

There is also a letter from seven soldiers now confined to Hounslow Barracks, commenting on the methods by which they were urged to put on khaki. Nothing more is needed to convict the Fellowship and its officers of treasonable conspiracy and of inciting soldiers to mutiny.

Daily Sketch, 21 April 1916



■ Violent demonstration outside peace meeting 1917.

Ramsay MacDonald, a Member of Parliament for the Independent Labour Party (and later Prime Minister) and one of the leading members of the No-Conscription Fellowship complained in the House of Commons about the violent interruptions to peaceful NCF meetings. His complaints were dismissed and his reports of violence were contradicted by the undercover police present.

2.5 conscription is introduced

people : government - a changing relationship

At the start of the First World War Britain was unusual in Europe because it had a long history of having an army made up of paid volunteers. It was the only European country in the First World War that did not already have a conscripted army and people were not used to being forced by the government to fight. Conscription would change all this and would be the biggest limitation to individual rights and freedoms ever experienced in Britain and the furthest that government control over the people had ever been pushed.

Before the First World War the connection between people and government was much looser than it is now. People received little from the government and the government asked for little in return, except for taxes. People relied on family, friends and charity for help during hard times - they knew that the government would not help them and did not expect it to.

Today, most people hardly notice there is a close connection between people and government. We mostly obey the rules and regulations made by the government and accept that the government has the authority to tell us to do, or not to do, something. We pay taxes on our earnings, on our houses, when we buy things, for the right to drive on the roads and if we consume alcohol or fuel, for instance. We need a licence to drive a vehicle or sell food and there are regulations for employing people or even putting up a sign on a public highway. We expect help from the government when we are sick, elderly, unemployed, homeless or suffering from floods, fire or crime. The government plays a large part in our lives every day.

Conscription threatened to dramatically change the relationship between people and government. No longer would people be free to go about their lives with little or no influence from the government. Men would be forced to join the army, probably to kill other people and possibly to die themselves. They would no longer be masters of their own lives.

the Bill becomes an Act

The Military Service Bill (the proposal in parliament to make a new law introducing conscription) was debated in the House of Commons in January 1916. The government, led by the Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, knew the Bill would be very controversial and that there would be fierce opposition to conscription from some MPs - particularly Quaker MPs and members of the Independent Labour Party.

To deal with the expected opposition to conscription, the government had included a section in the Military Service Bill known as the 'conscience clause'. This allowed people exemption from conscription 'on the ground of a conscientious objection to the undertaking of combatant service'. The government knew there would also be strong opposition to the conscience clause from a large number of MPs.

Many MPs objected to the conscience clause. They believed exemption should only be for those with ill-health, unsupported dependants (e.g. children or elderly parents), or important civilian jobs. Some MPs agreed that COs should only be allowed exemption if they were Quakers or members of churches which had a tradition of refusing to fight or take part in war - to allow exemption for others, so they said, would be

Press gangs

During the 18th and early 19th century conditions for the average sailor in the Royal Navy were very bad, and pay was low. To provide enough men for the Navy, 'press-gangs' roamed port towns to force men on board ship. Men of seafaring habits between the ages of 18 and 55 years could be forcibly dragged away or duped into joining the Navy. Often, press gangs would quietly drop a shilling into an unsuspecting sailor's beer. When he had finished his drink they would tell him that as he had accepted the 'King's shilling' as his first payment he was now under the command of the Royal Navy. Press gangs did not listen to arguments but corruption was rife and they could often be bribed to choose someone else. Press-ganging was criticised for being oppressive and unjust and was very unpopular. However, unlike conscription in the First World War, it did not apply to all men - only those with sailing experience - and you were just particularly unlucky if you were caught by a press gang and forced to work and fight for the Navy.

to write a 'slackers' charter'. MPs debated long and hard about which types of conscientious objector the new law would recognise.

On the day of the final vote on the Military Service Bill there was great tension in the parliament. Everyone knew the seriousness of the proposed new law and knew what a dramatic change it would be for Britain (Ireland was not included in the Bill). Out of 630 MPs in the House of Commons at the time 165 of them were already in the army or navy and most of those had come wearing their military uniform. Only 36 MPs opposed the Military Service Bill and so, on 27 January, 1916 the Bill received the Royal Assent and became the law of the land.

The new law would come into operation on 3 February 1916 and from 2 March all unmarried men aged 18-41 would be 'deemed to have enlisted' in the army. In just a few months conscription would be extended to married men also.

continued opposition

Opposition to conscription continued long after the new law was passed. W.P. Cahill was a CO who was refused exemption at his Tribunal hearing and was ordered to join the army. He refused to follow military orders and at his Court-martial he talked about the effect the Military Service Act had on his life and beliefs.

'I am a Pacifist. The Military Services Act is a direct challenge to the principles I have held firmly and practised for years. My principles, far from being weakened by a state of war, are actually strengthened to the extent that I have been long removed from the realm of fear, and can face with calmness, and I hope with dignity, all the terrors that Tribunals, Police Courts, Courts-Martial and Prison, aye, and Death itself, have to offer.

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.

It may be that you will conceive it to be your duty to pronounce judgement against me. I, on my part, must continue my course, meeting violence and force with the only weapons a Pacifist can handle – passive resistance and the unconquerable power of reason: the proudest possession of man and that which alone can rescue him from falling to the level of the brute beast.

Time will show how discredited the military ideal has become; but I take this opportunity of recording my deep regret that there are to be found in this country (which once boasted of its freedom) men willing to assist in the operation of a Parliamentary sham, ushered in after a campaign of intrigue and dishonesty that can hardly be paralleled in the history of England.

I am not concerned with what may happen to me in the future; that responsibility must remain always yours according to the decision at which you may arrive.'

25 November, 1916. W.P. Cahill - Court-martial.

The No-Conscription Fellowship also continued its opposition to conscription and produced a leaflet called 'Repeal the Act'. The leaflet criticised the government and Military Service Act - particularly that men were 'deemed to have enlisted' in the army without having agreed to do so.

THE PRIME MINISTER'S PLEDGE

To Married Men is now being redeemed by Parliament.

But let the young unmarried men themselves redeem that Pledge by joining under the Group System

TO-DAY.

DO NOT FORCE YOUR COUNTRY TO FORCE YOU TO FIGHT, BUT COME OF YOUR OWN FREE WILL

'We strongly condemn the monstrous assumption by parliament that a man is 'deemed' to be bound by an oath that he has never taken and forced under an authority he will never acknowledge to perform acts which outrage his deepest convictions.'

The government did not like the criticism and claimed the leaflet could be a danger to the security of the country by undermining its recruitment programme and promoting bad behaviour in the army. It decided to clamp down on the NCF's activities and 8 of the 10 signatories to the leaflet were summonsed to court to face criminal charges under the Defence of the Realm Act.

After the court hearing, newspaper reports varied. The pictures and headlines from the following newspaper articles in the *Daily Express* and *Manchester Guardian* illustrate the different opinions the newspapers had about the NCF.

'PASTY FACES' CONVICTED

Eight agitators to pay £100 each and costs

Eight officers and members of the No-Conscription Fellowship were each fined £100 and £10 costs with an alternative of sixty-one days imprisonment in default of distress, at the Mansion House yesterday for an offence under the Defence of the Realm Act in respect of a leaflet which they issued, entitled 'Repeal the Act'.

The charge against them was that they had made statements in the leaflet likely to prejudice the recruiting and discipline of his Majesty's military forces. The small court at the Mansion House was uncomfortably crowded by a large Pasty Face contingent.

Daily Express, 18 May, 1916.

THE NO-CONSCRIPTION FELLOWSHIP

Leaders Heavily Fined

Pamphlet That 'Prejudiced Recruiting'

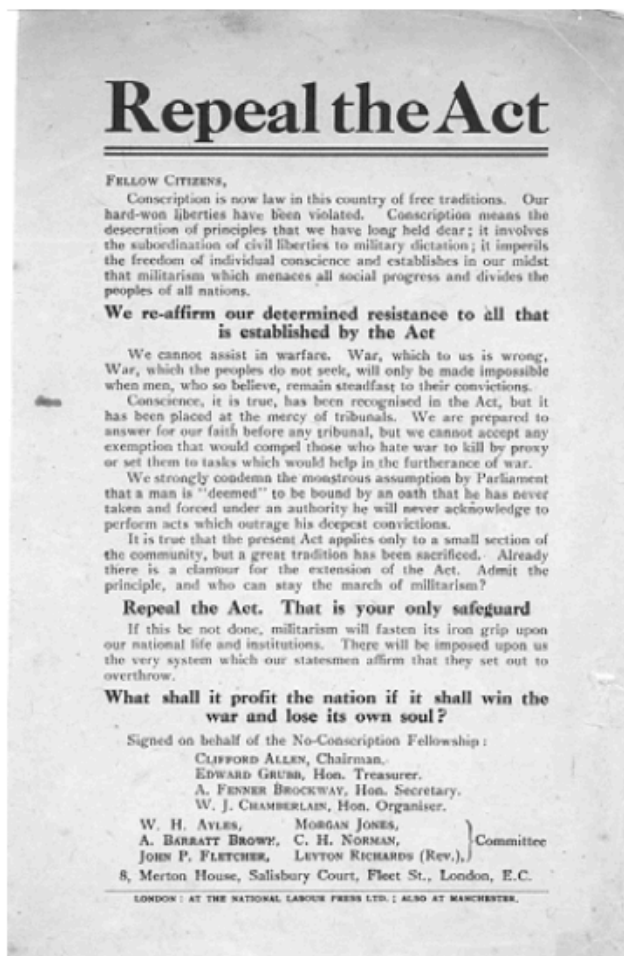
Eight leaders of the No-Conscription Fellowship were summonsed at the instance of the Director of Public Prosecutions at the City Police Court in the Mansion House today for an offence under the Defence of the Realm Act in 'making statements in the form of a leaflet called 'Repeal the Act', likely to prejudice the recruiting and discipline of his Majesty's Forces'.

The magistrate (Sir Alfred Newton), remarking that no ordinary persons could come to any other conclusion other than that the leaflet would have those effects, imposed the maximum penalty on each defendant of £100 fine and 10 guineas costs or 61 days' imprisonment. It was intimated that there would be an appeal.

Manchester Guardian, 18 May, 1916.

For publishing a leaflet calculated to 'prejudice recruiting, training, discipline or administration of His Majesty's forces' the eight leading members of the NCF were severely punished. Three of the eight convicted chose to pay the £100 fine - a very large sum for the time. The others refused and accepted a prison sentence.

In an article about the court's verdict in the following edition of *The Tribunal* (the NCF newspaper) part of the



Sermon on the Mount was reproduced - 'Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you'. In the same article the NCF cheekily asked the government if these words would also 'prejudice recruiting, training, discipline or administration of His Majesty's forces'. No answer was received.

Despite the fines and prison sentences the NCF felt they had achieved a victory. As a result of the 'Repeal the Act' case their arguments against conscription were widely publicised - (the *Manchester Guardian* printed the leaflet in full without suffering any legal action) and the *The Tribunal* was pleased to note that the contents of the leaflet 'have been made known through the columns of the press in every home in the country and to every soldier who reads a daily paper'. Whatever the consequences, the NCF was determined to continue its opposition to conscription and stand up for the right to refuse to kill.

2.6 human rights focus - rights & responsibilities finding a balance

We all have rights - but we also have responsibilities. If we had rights without any responsibilities people could do anything they liked with no thought of the consequences of their actions on other people. The strongest, richest and most powerful would most likely always win, while the weakest would always lose out.

For every right there is a corresponding responsibility. For example, the right to freedom of speech must be balanced with the responsibility not to say things which could endanger someone else or abuse their right to privacy or dignity. Our first responsibility, therefore, is not to deny other people their rights.

When conscription was introduced in 1916 the British government had a very modern approach to human rights for the time. The Military Service Act was an attempt to find a balance between rights and responsibilities. The government



Daily Sketch May 15, 1916

'In matters of conscience the law of the majority has no place.'

Mohandas Gandhi, famous for his nonviolent teachings and for leading India to independence from Britain in 1947.

accepted that its right to form an army did not override the rights of a minority (COs) to refuse to kill or take part in war. As a result the 'conscience clause' was written into the Military Service Act and conscientious objectors had the right to refuse to take part in war. The problem the COs faced, however, was convincing the Tribunals they were genuine in their beliefs.

It has often been said that majorities (e.g. the government and majority of the people) are more concerned with responsibilities while minorities (e.g. COs) are more concerned with rights. Finding a suitable balance between rights and responsibilities can be a difficult process at any time, but during war the balance often tips in favour of more responsibilities for people and fewer rights.

war - more responsibilities, fewer rights

Even before conscription started, men were told they had a moral responsibility to volunteer for the army and to defend (the human rights of) their wives, sisters and children. They were told they had to do this by killing the enemy - the husbands, brothers and fathers of wives, sisters and children in other countries: people just like themselves. Women were told it was their responsibility to support the war effort by encouraging men to enlist and fight.

Once conscription became law, the moral responsibility for men to join the army became a legal responsibility. For many people (COs in particular) this was going too far. The government had done little to uphold their rights in the past, so it was asking too much to impose a new responsibility to fight - particularly as it meant taking someone else's right to life.

'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 it in the past'

1916. Sydney Turner - Deptford Tribunal.

At the same time as the government imposed more responsibilities on the people of Britain it also took away some of their rights. The Defence of the Realm Act (DORA - passed by parliament on 8 August, 1914 without any debate) gave the government new powers to suppress criticism and to censor newspapers. It reduced the freedom of speech so that people could not print anything about the war or any other news which might cause a conflict between the public and military authorities. DORA was used to censor newspaper reports (at the start of the war only one journalist was allowed to publish reports about the war and his writings were personally vetted by Lord Kitchener) and soldiers' letters home.

DORA was also used to control civilian behaviour and led to regulations about alcohol consumption, some of which still exist today. People were not allowed to buy drinks for each other, and opening times for pubs were reduced to 12.00 noon to 2.30pm and 6.30 to 9.30pm. Before DORA, pubs could stay open from 5am to 12.30 at night.

The powers given to the government by DORA were also used against people who printed criticism of the war or the government. Fred Sellar and the eight signatories to the 'Repeal the Act' leaflet were imprisoned or fined under DORA. Whilst the government believed that criticism would jeopardise the war effort, COs believed it was their right to speak freely and their responsibility to tell others about the reality of war.

Conscientious objectors took their responsibility to other humans very seriously, and for them it did not matter that the country was at war - they could not kill other people, no matter what nationality they were. They disagreed with the government,

which said it was their responsibility to fight. COs believed it was their responsibility to try to bring about peace by refusing to fight and by encouraging negotiation and co-operation between warring sides. For them killing was a crime, and they believed that defending human rights through war was like trying to put out a fire by throwing petrol at it.



Screen images from
Voices for Peace
interactive CD
which contains a
wealth of material
about COs including
audio and video.
See page 67 for
more information.

minority rights

In certain circumstances exceptions are made so that an individual's or a minority group's human rights are respected.

Think about wearing a crash helmet on a motorcycle. Should individuals have the right to choose to wear, or not wear, a crash helmet? Surely in a free country people have the right to wear what they like, don't they? But what happens if the person has a serious accident without a helmet on and it costs the NHS £30,000 to care for them in hospital? Should that one person cost so much in taxpayers' money simply because they object to wearing a helmet? And what if someone else dies in the meantime because the doctors and nurses are too busy looking after the motorcycle accident victim?

The current law in the UK is that individuals must wear crash helmets – a sign that the rights of all taxpayers override the right to choose what you can wear on your head. But it is not as simple as that. If your religion (e.g. Sikhism) requires you to wear a turban, you are legally entitled not to wear a crash helmet. A special exception is made because it would offend Sikhs so much to have to remove their turban (and deny the right to follow one's own religion) that they do not have to wear a crash helmet on a motorcycle.

as 'Pals' Battalions. Joining up with friends quickly became very popular and other towns and cities soon had their own Pals Battalions.

Pals Battalions were made up of men from the same local area, employer or background. For example, there was the Accrington Pals, the Leeds Pals, the Glasgow Tramways Battalion and the Tyneside Irish Battalion. There were battalions made up of sportsmen only, such as a battalion from London formed of footballers, and even one comprised of public-school-boys. The drawback of Pals Battalions was that a whole town could lose most of its military-aged men in battle in a single day.

'The British Army recruits its regiments by county and town, but the trend was exaggerated in the Kitchener armies. They made a promise very early on when they weren't sure how many volunteers they were going to get, that if they joined up in a group, the group would be kept together. And so you got what was to prove this tragic situation – ghastly situation – of whole streets of young men going off together, all sorts of little factories of young men going off together. It was ghastly because they were all going to get killed together.'

John Keegan, Historian.

The Pals Battalions spent most of 1914 and 1915 training in Britain to prepare for the Somme offensive in July 1916. There were 65,000 British casualties in the first day of the battle - 20,000 of them were killed. By October, when the rain finally put an end to the carnage and the battle ground to a halt, 400,000 British, 200,000 French and 450,000 Germans had killed or wounded each other. The Allies only gained a few miles of ground.

Of the 720 Accrington Pals, 584 were killed, wounded or missing. 750 of the 900 Leeds Pals were killed, and both the Grimsby Chums and the Sheffield City Battalion had half of their men killed. This had a devastating effect on the communities they came from, with whole streets of men wiped out. As one Pal put it, *'Two years in the making. Ten minutes in the destroying. That was our history.'*

Percy Holmes, whose brother was one of the Accrington Pals noted *'... when the news came through to Accrington that the Pals had been wiped out. I don't think there was a street in Accrington and district that didn't have their blinds drawn, and the bell at Christ Church tolled all the day.'*

boy soldiers

Eighteen years old was the minimum age for active service in the army. Many boys lied about their age, though, because they were keen to join up and experience the adventure of fighting in foreign lands. Birth certificates were not required for proof of age, and many recruiting officers were well aware that some boys were lying about their age. 120,000 boys under 18 years old, some as young as 14 years old, enlisted in the army but despite protests in Parliament by some MPs, the government refused to acknowledge there were any underage soldiers in the army at all.

Some parents of the boys attempted to get their sons returned from the army. If they knew where their son was stationed, they sent his birth certificate to the War Office and applied for him to be released from the Army. Some boys were returned, but the applications soon grew to such numbers that the army had a change of plan. They collected the boy soldiers together in a camp in Etaples, France, and trained them until they reached the age of 18. Only then were they reunited with their units to be sent forward to the trenches.



■ Promise of adventure, bravery and glory 'at the front!'

Some European countries have had conscription since the early 19th century, and still have it today. In Britain it did not exist until March 1916 – twenty months into the First World War. It ended in the summer of 1919, several months after the war ended. In the First World War conscription was only to the army - there was no conscription to the Navy and despite the army having a small number of aeroplanes, the air force did not exist until 1918. Conscription was reintroduced for the Second World War in 1939 and continued until it was finally scrapped in Britain in 1960. The period of conscription from the end of the Second World War to 1960 is usually known as 'National Service'.