

Chapter 5 conclusion - the end of the 'war to end all wars'

An end to hostilities was declared on 11 November, 1918, and the guns stopped firing. The 'war to end all wars' was over. Many people hoped that conscription would quickly end and conscripted soldiers and conscientious objectors would soon be free men again, able to go about their lives as they wished. However the war ended earlier for some than others.

In February, 1919, work of national importance ended, followed by the closure of the Home Office Work Camps and Centres in April. The absolutists in prison were also released in April 1919, but until then the 'cat and mouse' system of returning prisoners to their military units at the end of their sentence had continued. COs in the Non-Combatant Corps were the last to be released when the NCC was demobilised in January, 1920.

Back at home many COs had difficulty finding work because of the stigma of being a 'conchie'. Until 1920 the government and civil service would not reemploy COs who had previously worked for them. They also refused to accept any new job applications from COs or to promote COs above ex-soldiers until 1929 when, despite protest from the British Legion, this regulation was dropped.

Police Forces refused to reinstate any conscientious objectors but very few had been policemen. Twenty years later, however, a conscientious objector from the First World War, Herbert Morrison, would become the Home Secretary and be responsible for all the police in England and Wales. A large number of COs had been teachers and they often, but by no means always, had trouble finding teaching work again.

Another result of having been a CO was disenfranchisement. The same new law in 1918 that extended the vote to all men from 21 and all women from 30 excluded many COs from voting for a period after the war. Other than those who had accepted the Non-Combatant Corps or had performed 'work of national importance', COs were not allowed to vote until August 1926.

In later life several conscientious objectors went on to hold other senior public positions. Fenner Brockway became a Labour MP and was also Chairman of the No More War Movement and the War Resisters International - peace organisations, which along with the Peace Pledge Union and several other groups sprang from the conscientious objectors of the First World War. The peace movement which still exists today in Britain owes much to those early ideas and campaigns developed by COs.

Fenner Brockway and three other COs (including Clifford Allen, Chairman of the No-Conscription Fellowship) were made Lords and a further ten COs became MPs. Fenner Brockway, together with fellow CO Stephen Hobhouse, also wrote a detailed report about the prison system. As former absolutists they both had a great deal of experience of prisons and their work led to prison reforms and more humane treatment of prisoners.

A total of 73 conscientious objectors died during the First World War and 37 went insane - about half of the deaths occurred in prison and Work Centres and Camps. The remaining number died shortly after release from prison, having been worn down physically and mentally by the strain of confinement, hard work, lack of food and medical care.

A wooden plaque to the memory of the 73 COs who died was carved in 1923. It was given to the German peace movement and erected in the headquarters of the German War Resisters League in Berlin. With the rise of Nazism in Germany the plaque was taken to Denmark in 1933 by the Secretary of the League who was fleeing persecution. When Denmark was occupied by the Nazis in 1940 it was buried in a cellar for safekeeping. After the Second World War it was re-erected in Denmark. With the death of the Secretary of the the WRL the plaque was returned to Britain

in 1958 and remains to this day in the Peace Pledge Union office in London.

Amongst the millions who died in the First World War 73 dead COs may appear insignificant. They were peaceful men, however, who refused to fight or use violence against others - but they died as a result of violence, nevertheless. They chose to stand aside from the killing, accepting that they might be the victim of violence but never the perpetrators. They believed violence encouraged further violence, and killing led to more killing. Their stand took courage, commitment and endurance and has inspired generations of peace loving people to oppose violence and militarism.

From their experience in the First World War the government and military authorities learnt a great deal about how to deal with conscientious objection to war. When conscription was again introduced in 1939 for the Second World War, the Tribunal system was made fairer and COs' views were more respected. As a result 60,000 men and women were recognised as conscientious objectors in Britain during the Second World War (of whom 3,000 went to prison) compared with 16,000 in the First World War (of whom 6,000 went to prison).

Although the government had learnt how to deal with conscientious objectors better, government policy did little to change the reason that men had become conscientious objectors: war itself. The ultimate aim of conscientious objectors was not simply to make sure they played no personal part in helping war to happen but to work towards a world where wars did not happen at all, so nobody would have to suffer in such a way again.

Few people understood the suffering of war better than the soldiers who returned from the trenches. In addition to the millions with missing limbs and terrible physical injuries many were 'shellshocked' and their nerves left in tatters. Many returned as broken men with memories that failed to go away - memories of seeing their friends killed in the most appalling ways and memories of doing the same to their German counterparts. Unable to talk about their experiences or share their feelings many returning soldiers never mentioned the war again. Most did not think of themselves as heroes but as victims of war who had been lucky enough to survive.

Although hailed as heroes, the reality for returning soldiers was very different. They often could not find jobs, had little medical or psychological help and lived in poverty. Many received little help from the government and had to rely on the support of charities, such as the British Legion, to help them cope with the lasting effects of war on their minds, bodies and families. Some begged for money on the streets.

Conscientious objectors wanted to make sure people did not suffer the consequences of war again - they wanted the 'war to end all wars' to be exactly what it said. The pacifist movement led by former COs recommended that the government invest time and money in finding ways to deal with disputes between countries



■ A plaque carved in memory of 73 First World War conscientious objectors who died as a result of their incarceration.

without war and to find ways to co-operate rather than compete with other countries.

Pacifists also proposed getting rid of the vast stockpiles of weapons remaining from the war and putting a halt to developing new weapons. Disarmament would save valuable resources and mean everyone had the chance of a good standard of living. It could also bring an end to the dangerous habit of arms races which had, in part at least, been one of the causes of the First World War. Also of great importance would be acknowledging that the First World War was a huge waste of lives and money by all sides and that reconciliation and trust-building with Germany was essential to avoid further war in the future.

Rather than condemning war and doing everything possible to avoid future wars, however, the government portrayed the First World War as a great victory instead of an international disaster. Returning soldiers were portrayed as heroes who had fought bravely and gloriously in the 'war to end all wars'. They were held up as a symbol of all that was great about Great Britain and proof that it was a strong, powerful and civilised country that had beaten down barbarism and 'Prussian militarism'. But Britain did not deal with its own militarism and, as a result, more war was almost inevitable.

By glorifying the war the government set the scene for continued public support for war as a tool to deal with disputes between countries. Celebration balls were held on the anniversary of the end of the First World War and thousands of memorials showing heroic soldiers doing heroic deeds were built to the 'glorious dead'.

With the failure to reach an agreement at the end of the war that could be accepted by all sides as fair, the opportunity for reconciliation with Germany was missed and the scene was set for another more devastating war in Europe. The Versailles Peace Treaty imposed punishing conditions on Germany and led to the resentment and anger that fuelled the Second World War. The best memorial that could have been left to those who died was a commitment to work by peaceful means to solve disputes and never to wage war again.

The conscientious objectors of the First World War stood up for the right to refuse to kill other people. To them, everybody's human rights were in need of protection and so they could not take part in war. Not only were they committed never to harm others but also to point the way to a more peaceful world, a world where arguments are settled without violence - a world without war.

ppu archives

The Peace Pledge Union's extensive Archive on Conscientious Objection in both world wars has been a valuable source in the preparation of this book.

The archive is open to access by researchers of all kinds, including those pursuing family history. Associated with the Archive is a database being created to cover individual British COs of all periods. The PPU welcomes, by prior appointment, not only enquirers but also people with information or material to contribute relating to individual conscientious objectors.

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