

# conscientious objection

## Walter Hohnrodt

### Task

Here is a group of documents that discuss the experiences of a First World War Conscientious Objector called Walter Hohnrodt. Walter was the son of a German immigrant to Britain and faced a great deal of discrimination and hardship as a result of his family background and decision to become a Conscientious Objector. During the First World War, people with German or Austrian sounding names could expect to be treated very poorly - suspected of being spies, their homes and businesses were often vandalised. It did not matter whether or not these families were actually German or not! Conscientious Objectors likewise suffered from terrible treatment, often insulted, bullied or even attacked once their opinions on the war became known.

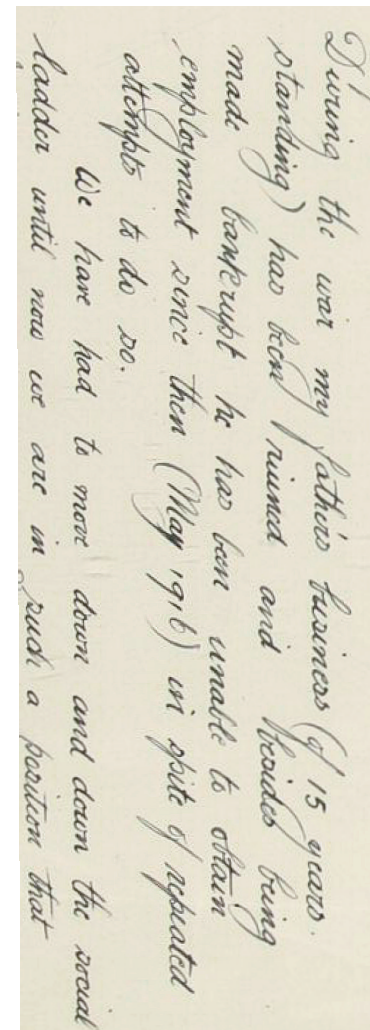
Write about Walter's experiences in the First World War, paying close attention to how he may have thought and felt about the war.

Following these points will help you get started:

1. Look through the sources provided, making sure you understand what each source is, why it was made and who it was made for.
2. Make a note of the different attitudes shown in each source - write down what each source is about, who it supports and who it is against.
3. Use the documents to answer the following questions:
  - What is Walter's reason for objecting to war?
  - What reason does his Tribunal give for Walter's objection
  - Why are they different?
  - What happened to Walter's Father? Was this fair?
  - How might Walter have felt about Britain before, during and after the war?
  - How do you think you would have felt in Walter's place?
4. Write a letter explaining how you think Walter must have thought and felt about joining the army during the First World War. Try to include your own thoughts on Walter's Conscientious Objection.

### Documents:

1911 Hohnrodt Census transcript,  
Military Service Tribunal Statement  
Military Service Tribunal decision  
Letter One  
Letter Two  
Article discussing Walter's father  
Anti-German propaganda 1  
Anti-German propaganda 2  
Anti-CO propaganda



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## Background Material

### Britain and Germany

Before the First World War, Germany and Britain were rivals in building huge navies, each trying to outdo the other to have more weapons. For most ordinary people though, both countries were very similar and thousands of German people moved to work in Britain during the 50 years before the war. Many of these people settled in London and raised families. Many British people moved to Germany for the same reasons.

As the war approached, many people and groups stressed the similarities of German and British people. Politicians made speeches declaring that British and German people were the same and that fighting between such similar nations was a crime, while many ordinary people objected to fighting people so similar to themselves. Many Conscientious Objectors also thought that working people in Britain had more in common with workers in Germany and Austria than they did with the people running the British government. The general public was sympathetic to this idea and food and music from Germany was very popular.

At the start of the First World War, the Government started to monitor German people living in Britain and it began to register them as "enemy aliens". The Government was worried about German spies and imprisoned thousands of innocent people in camps around Britain. As the war continued and the British public realised how terrible the slaughter in France and Belgium was the Government organised more and more ways to encourage people to support the war, including stirring up hatred towards Germans. A well organised system of propaganda posters, newspaper articles and public lectures encouraged the British public to hate and fear German people, including the sons and daughters of German immigrants born in Britain.

### Conscription and the Tribunals

At the beginning of the war in 1914, there were millions of men around the world who wanted to join their armies. Some men of all nations were enthusiastic about the conflict, which seemed as if it would be short, easy and adventurous. After two years of trench warfare, the enthusiasm of the early days was gone. People of all nations realised that the war was a desperate and equally balanced struggle, filled with horror, pain and death. The flow of eager young recruits was dying away.

In order to sustain the war, the British Government introduced a controversial measure: Compulsory Conscription. The Military Service Act of 1916 stated that all men aged 18-41 would be forced to join the army - regardless of their position or opinions.

The only way men could be exempted from Military Service was through applying to a Tribunal. The Tribunals were local committees created to assess the millions of applications for exemption.

Conscientious Objectors (COs) were men who would not take part in the violence of war. Though from many different backgrounds and having many different reasons for objection to war, the vast majority of them applied for exemption from the Army through a Tribunal hearing. Conscientious Objection to Military Service was only one of the reasons a man would apply to a Tribunal, but it was certainly the most controversial. Some of the documents in this exercise will show you why this was.

Tribunals had the power to say that a Conscientious Objector was "genuine" - that he truly did believe that war and killing was against his conscience. They would ask a CO questions intended to find out whether or not a man was truly against the war. The idea was that the Tribunal could then fairly judge which men were COs and which men were pretending to be. Unfortunately for COs the Tribunals were more likely to think every man was pretending to have strong views and often refused to accept that a man was a CO.

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For many COs the Tribunal hearings were very difficult. Most men did not manage to gain exemption. Some COs would be ridiculed or insulted at their Tribunal hearing. Others felt that the men sitting on the Tribunal did not attempt to understand their point of view.

Around 20,000 men applied as Conscientious Objectors to their local Tribunals. Only around 300 would be given the Absolute exemption they were entitled to. Many others would receive verdicts they could not agree with, leading some to prison, torture and death.

### **Walter Hohnrodt**

Walter Hohnrodt was a Conscientious Objector from Hornsey in North London. Walter was a Socialist CO who believed that working people all over the world were essentially the same - a "brotherhood" of working people that had more in common with each other than their respective Governments. Walter argued at his Tribunal that he was a Socialist and the son of a German immigrant - two reasons why he would refuse to participate in the war.

Walter faced discrimination and hatred before he was conscripted in 1916. The area he was living in was home to many German families, but there was still a great deal of intolerance and racism - homes and shops belonging to Germans were vandalised, businesses were boycotted and the lives of these German-British families were viewed with great suspicion.

Walter's Tribunal did not grant him exemption from military service, and instead sent him to the Non-Combatant Corps of the Army, a role Walter could not accept. Walter believed that doing any work to help the military was morally the same as killing another person - a CO who believed this was called an "Absolutist" during the war. Because of this belief Walter would not obey any Military orders, so he was soon sent to prison. He would stay in prison until January 1919 after going on hunger strike in protest that while the war had ended, he was still stuck in prison. COs found this very unfair - with the war over, why were they still being punished for refusing to fight in it? . Walter had stuck to his principles even though he was faced with discrimination, unfair treatment and hatred.