

conscientious objection

Tribunals and Tribulations

Task

Here is a group of documents that relate to a Conscientious Objector called Carl Titford. Carl is unusual because we have many documents relating to his application for exemption from Military Service and the Tribunal hearing that judged his case.

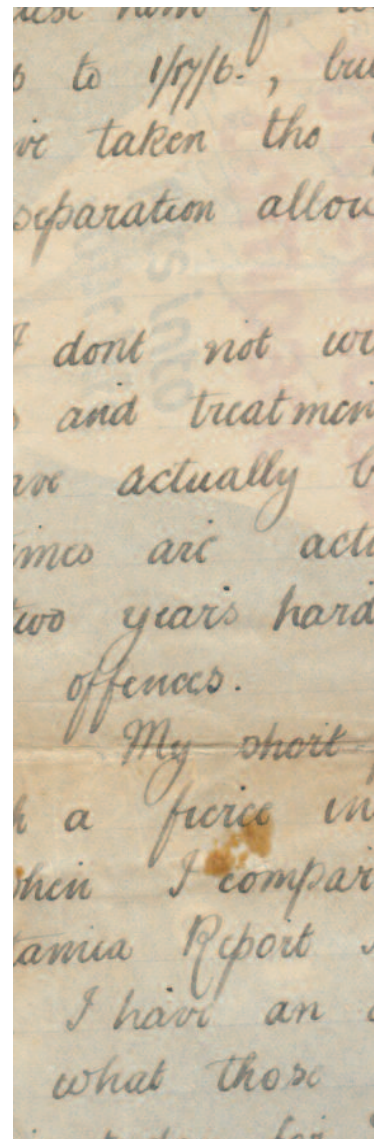
Write a history of Carl's Military Service Tribunal hearing thinking about the aims, ideas and actions of everyone involved.

Following these points will help you get started:

1. Put the sources in the right time order following the template of a Tribunal hearing given above.
2. Make a note of the aims and goals of the Tribunal – write down what they should, could and could not do.
3. Make a list of who is at the Tribunal hearing. Why are they there? What are their aims?
4. Use the documents to explain the following questions:
 - What are Carl's reasons for becoming a CO?
 - How do you think Carl felt at his hearing?
 - Did the Tribunal listen to Carl?
 - What was the verdict? Was it the verdict you expected?
 - Was Carl treated fairly by the Tribunal?
 - How do you think you would have felt in Carl's place?
5. Write up your own verdict on Carl's Conscientious Objection and explain why you decided on your answer.

Documents:

Military Service Act Extract
Newspaper Articles discussing Conscientious Objection
Tribunal Hearing Notice
Supporting Letter One
Supporting Letter Two
Questions asked by the Tribunal
Tribunal Transcript
Tribunal Photograph
Cartoon drawn by CO



Background Material

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 army. 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 out.

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. They were staffed by aldermen, councillors, mayors and other local government officials, alongside respected figures from the local community - Trades Unionists, Clergymen and occasionally prominent women. Each Tribunal would have one or two men acting as representatives of the Military, whose job it was to try to get as many men into the army as possible.

Most of the people on the Tribunal would be old enough to have avoided Conscription. They could do their jobs and carry on their lives without having to worry about being sent to the front lines - though their sons, employees could be forced to join up. Their job was to fairly, and without bias, assess the needs of individual applicants and judge whether or not to grant them exemption.

Men could apply to be exempted for several reasons. How they were treated at Tribunal varied. Some Tribunals had a reputation for being very hard on men applying for exemption. Others were seen as very fair.

Tribunals and Conscientious Objection

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 above 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.

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.

Carl Titford

Charles “Carl” Titford was a Conscientious Objector who lived in Tottenham, London. He was an Absolute CO - a man who could accept no military service in any capacity. Carl recognised that a modern

army needed many different types of men - including some working in a non-combatant role. Non-combatant roles such as carrying supplies or building roads freed up soldiers willing to fight and kill, and Carl believed that this was as bad as joining the army to fight himself. He was assigned to the Non-Combatant Corps by the Tribunal, but found this unacceptable, rejecting the verdict. Carl, like 6-8 thousand other Absolutist Conscientious Objectors would be arrested soon after, tried by a Magistrates Court as a deserter and handed over to the military authorities. While under army control he faced court martial for refusing orders, before being sent to Wormwood Scrubs prison. Upon release in late 1916, he was called up to the army again, and the whole business started once more - another court martial, prison sentence and eventual release.

Conditions in prison were very hard for all inmates, and especially so for COs. COs were usually kept in cold, damp cells and would often be fed punishment diets designed to provide only the barest minimum of food and nutrition after breaking some of the prison's many harsh rules. Many COs would suffer illness and death as a result of their imprisonment

Carl was finally released from prison in May 1919, in one of the last groups of COs to be discharged. He had served three prison sentences and more than two years total, simply for refusing to kill, or to help others kill, during the First World War.