

conscientious objection

REPEAL THE ACT

Task

Here is a group of documents that explore censorship, propaganda and protest during the First World War. They are centred around a leaflet produced by Conscientious Objectors called "Repeal the Act". To "Repeal" and Act of Parliament is to cancel or abolish it - this leaflet discusses reasons why Conscriptio should have been legally repealed.

Soon after Britain's declaration of war in 1914, a group of politicians, philosophers and reformers formed the "No-Conscription Fellowship" (NCF) in response to the possibility of Conscriptio, which threatened to force men into the army. Despite widespread opposition to forcing men into the army, Conscriptio was introduced to Britain for the first time in 1916 and continued for the duration of the war. The NCF campaigned throughout the war to end it and the "Repeal the Act" leaflet was their first well-known action leading to harsh prison sentences for the writers.

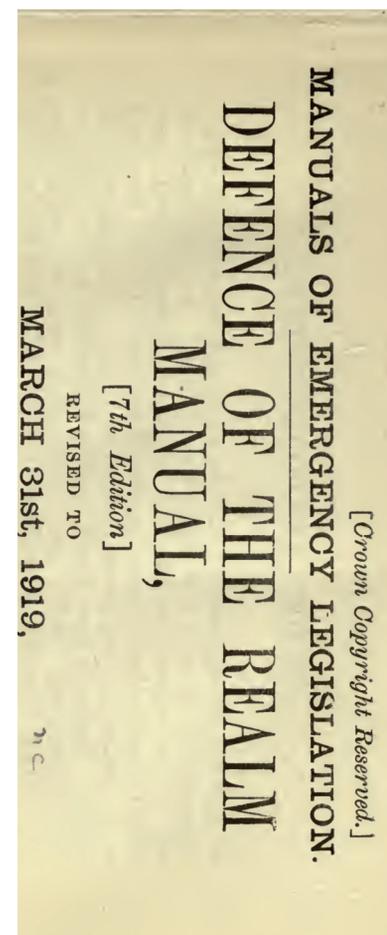
Using the background material and sources write about how the writers of "Repeal the Act" were treated by the British Government and why they were treated this way. Why were they arrested? How did they feel?

Following these points will help you get started:

1. Look through the sources and background material provided, making sure you understand what each source is, why it was made and who it was made for. Make a note of any different attitudes in each source.
2. Use the documents to answer the following questions:
 - What arguments are made for the repeal of Conscriptio?
 - Which sources explain why the writers of Repeal the Act were arrested? Why were they arrested?
 - Were the writers surprised by the arrests?
 - Do sources explaining this agree with each other?
 - Did arresting the writers of "Repeal the Act" stop the message being spread? Based on the sources, and using your own judgement
 - Did "Repeal the Act" break the law?
 - Did the leaflet harm recruiting for the army?
 - Was it intended to?
3. Write an explanation of why you think the writers of Repeal the Act were arrested. Think about the way each source explains the arrest. Who do you think was right?
4. Censorship exists in the world today. Films, Television programs, Video games and Newspapers are all censored by the British Government. Many of the laws used date back to the First World War.
 - Why do you think Censorship still exists?
 - Can you think of any examples of censorship in Britain?
 - Has censorship affected your own life?

Documents:

CO's Hansard Extract
Repeal the Act Leaflet
Mansion House Arrest Record
Defence of the Realm Act
The Tribunal
The Prosecution
The Reply
The Newspapers



Background

Conscription

At the beginning of the war in 1914, the British Army was entirely made up of volunteers - men who had joined the army for their own reasons. As the war ground on longer and longer huge numbers of British soldiers died or were seriously wounded. Though many men had volunteered at the start of the war, by 1915 the army considered that the numbers were no longer enough. As a result Conscription - forcing every man between 18 and 41 into the army - was introduced to increase army numbers in 1916. This was known as the "Military Service Act", which stated not just that men would be forced into the army, but they were already considered to be in the army, regardless of their positions or opinions!

Opinions on Conscription

Conscription was deeply unpopular. People from all over Britain with many different opinions on the war believed that conscription was wrong, and something that should be ended as soon as possible. Even pro-war politicians did not like conscription and were shocked when it was introduced (for the first time in British history) in 1916. Conscription was a huge change in British society. For the first time, a young man's life was not their own to live. Whatever his plans, hopes or dreams for the future, he would have to report to the army. Tens of thousands of these men died on the battlefields of the First World War.

Conscription was especially unpopular with people and groups that believed in civil liberties - that no-one should be forced to join the army - and with the many thousands of people who believed the war itself was wrong. Many of these people joined the "No-Conscription Fellowship" (NCF) in 1914. The NCF was set up to try to stop the introduction of Conscription and carried out many protests and campaigns in 1914 and 1915. Unfortunately for the NCF Conscription was introduced despite their best efforts and, in 1916, the organisation changed its focus - to support Conscientious Objectors and to try to Repeal the Military Service Act.

Actions of the NCF

The NCF worked tirelessly to convince the public that conscription was wrong. They produced a newspaper, held rallies and made public speeches whenever possible. As conscription came into force they began to record the experiences of men who refused to fight and used them as examples of why forcing men into the army was wrong.

One of the first major actions of the NCF in 1916 was to produce a leaflet called "Repeal the Act" (Source 2). This leaflet explained why the writers felt conscription was wrong, and stated the position of Conscientious Objectors - men who would refuse to be conscripted on moral, religious or political grounds.

"Repeal the Act" was important as it was a bold statement of what the NCF believed, as well as making their aim very clear. Anyone reading it would know that the NCF disagreed with Conscription and the exact reasons why Conscription was unpopular and what the NCF and its members were going to do when called up to the army. It was a very plain statement that they would resist any efforts to conscript them and that, despite any pressure, they would continue to campaign for an end to Conscription.

The Arrest

Walter Ayles, Percy Fletcher, William Chamberlain, Barratt Brown, Clifford Allen, and Fenner Brockway, the leaders of the No-Conscription fellowship, were summoned to the Mansion House magistrates' court on the 8th of June. They were to be prosecuted under the "Defence of the Realm Act" or DORA.

DORA was first passed in 1914 but was added to several times during the war. DORA allowed the government wide-ranging powers. It let the government censor any written material that they thought could harm the war effort.

“Harm the war effort” was never really explained. In practice, it meant that you could be arrested for whistling in the wrong place, or being in the wrong place at the wrong time, no matter what you were actually doing!

In the case of “Repeal the Act” the leaflet was said to be “injurious to recruitment”, which meant that it was harming the war effort by encouraging people not to join the army. This was considered a crime. The sources that accompany this worksheet will explore this further and you’ll be able to make up your own mind on whether the leaflet really did break the law.

Why was the arrest important?

When the six NCF leaders were summoned to their hearing, it became national news. “Repeal the Act” had been quite popular, with thousands of copies printed, but after the arrest and prosecution of the writers, its popularity exploded! Anti-Conscription groups around the country ordered many more and the leaflet, far from being suppressed by DORA, became a topic of conversation around Britain. The arrest also showed Conscientious Objectors and other Anti-War groups that they could and would be prosecuted for their ideas. For many this would give them extra determination to make their voices heard.

In most of the country, few people had heard of the No-Conscription Fellowship. Suddenly, with the arrest of six NCF members, the existence, aims and plan of the NCF was being reported in every newspaper (some of these extracts are included as a source in this pack). The term “No-Conscription Fellowship” became familiar and they gained a lot of free publicity from the prosecution!