

Chapter 1 - Conscientious Objection to Military Service

teachers' notes

in brief

This first chapter examines what it is to be a conscientious objector (CO) and introduces the idea of human rights.

The definition of conscientious objection is outlined and some of the reasons why men in the First World War were COs are explained. The three main categories of CO - alternative, non-combatant, absolutist - are described in addition to some of the dilemmas COs faced. Students are challenged to think about where they would draw the line if they were to be COs and some more recent examples of conscientious objection in the Vietnam War, Israel/Palestine conflict and Iraq wars are described.

further **RESOURCES**
Conscientious objection

The human rights material outlines the state of human rights at the start of the First World War and students are introduced to the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Attention is focused on the relationship between war and human rights with specific reference to the right to life (Article 3) and the right to conscientious objection (derived from Article 18).

learning objectives by sub-section

Students will be able to:

- 1.1 what is a conscientious objector?
 - define what a CO is and gain knowledge and understanding of conscience.
- 1.2 why become a conscientious objector?
 - explain the different reasons for being a CO during the First World War.
- 1.3 where do you draw the line?
 - describe the three different types of CO; what they would and wouldn't do and some of the dilemmas COs faced.
- 1.4 examples of conscientious objection since the First World War
 - give examples of conscientious objection since the First World War.
- 1.5 human rights focus - past & present rights
 - describe some human rights recognised in Britain before the First World War and explain the purpose of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
- 1.6 human rights focus - war & human rights
 - identify ways in which war denies human rights.

questions and answers

1.1 what is a conscientious objector?

1. Write a definition of a conscientious objector (CO) in your own words.

A conscientious objector is a person who refuses to be a soldier on grounds of conscience because he/she objects to killing people or taking part in war.

2. How many conscientious objectors were there during the First World War? How many people were COs during the Second World War?

16,000 in the First World War and 60,000 in the Second World War.

3. What kind of treatment did First World War COs receive?

Many COs were treated well but others suffered appalling conditions in prisons and work camps. 73 COs died as a result.

4. Discussion: Do you agree or disagree with the statement Arthur Creech Jones made at his Court-martial? If he genuinely believed these words, do you think he should have been forced to fight, or should he have been allowed exemption from fighting?

'I believe in human brotherhood and in the common humanity and common interests of all nations. I believe in co-operation, and not competition to the death, between individuals and nations. I view war as merely the test of might... It is a stupid, costly and obsolete method of attempting to settle the differences of diplomatists, in which the common people always pay with their blood, vitality and wealth. I believe there is a better way... I cannot, therefore, participate in any military organisation, every part of which is designed to make the machine of militarism efficient, and the method of which is the destruction of human life. I claim liberty of conscience and, therefore, cannot obey military orders.'

31 August, 1916. *Arthur Creech Jones - Court-martial.*

Students' own answers.

5. Research: Do you know any conscientious objectors? Were there any conscientious objectors in your area? What did people think of conscientious objectors during the First and Second World Wars? Use the local library or Internet to research newspapers from the First World War, or ask older members of your family to find out more about conscientious objectors.

Encourage students to find out as much information as possible about conscientious objectors. If they do not have elderly relatives who were conscientious objectors themselves, they probably know people who were alive during the Second World War and the period of National Service afterwards who have opinions about COs. Students can also contact the Peace Pledge Union to conduct research into COs in their own family or locality.

1.2 why become a conscientious objector?

1. Why did some religious people become COs?

Because their religion told them it was wrong to fight or kill.

2. Why did some pacifists become COs?

Because they believed it was counter-productive to fight and kill. They believed there were better, non-violent ways to deal with disputes between countries.

further **RESOURCES**
Pacifism

3. Why did some socialists become COs?

Because they believed the First World War was a fight between the 'ruling classes' and that 'workers of the world' should not fight each other on behalf of the ruling classes.

4. Discussion: Who should make important decisions about your life? You? The government? The United Nations? The military? Your parents? Your god? Teachers? Somebody else? Read the statement Sydney Turner made at Deptford Tribunal and discuss the questions.

'I deny the right of the State to compel me to undertake any service to which I have a conscientious objection. My life is my own and I claim to dispose of it as I will...'

1916. Sydney Turner - Deptford Tribunal.

One way to start the discussion is to consider what decisions about our lives are usually taken by other people e.g. which school we go to, where we sit in class, how fast we can drive a car, whether we have to wear a seatbelt etc. Then consider what decisions we are usually able to take ourselves e.g. who we can get married to, whether we smoke cigarettes or not, whether we have children, whether we enlist in the armed forces etc. Next, discuss how it would feel if the decisions we are usually able to take ourselves were taken by someone else, such as the government. This could lead onto a discussion about the role of rules in our lives, who makes rules, and whether it is ever acceptable to break rules.

5. Writing: Do you think it was right to be a CO in the First World War? Do you think you might have become a CO if you found yourself in the same circumstances? Say why you agree or disagree with the reasons (religion, pacifism, socialism) people became COs during the First World War.

Students' own answers.

1.3 where do you draw the line?

1. What were the three categories of CO?

Non-combatants, Alternativists and Absolutists.

2. Write a definition for each type of CO and explain what they would or wouldn't do.

Non-combatants were in the army but did not fight or handle weapons. They wore a military uniform and followed military orders but would not train to use weapons or move weapons or munitions for other soldiers

Alternativists did 'alternative service' (also known as 'work of national importance'). They worked on the land in forestry and farming, and also in schools and hospitals. They would not wear a uniform or obey military orders.

Absolutists would not help the government or military at all. They absolutely refused to help the 'war effort'. They would work to build peace in their own way but not under the control of any civil or military authority.

3. Why were some COs willing to do things which others refused to do?

Their conscience's told them different things. For example, some COs felt it was right to help the country by working on farms, while others believed this contributed to the war effort.

4. Discussion: Conscientious objectors had to find their own answers to some very difficult questions. Look at the following questions and think how you would answer them. When you have finished, consider how different kinds of CO might have answered them.

- a Would you be prepared to put your own life at risk for someone else?
- b Would you be prepared to put other people's lives at risk for your own?

- c Would you be prepared to defend your family by killing somebody?
- d Would you be prepared to kill somebody else's family?

- e Is it wrong to kill somebody who is trying to kill you?
- f Is it wrong to kill somebody who isn't trying to kill you?

- g Would you be prepared to shoot somebody you have never met or spoken to if ordered to do so in the army?
- h Would you be prepared to shoot somebody you know if ordered to do so?
- i Would you be prepared to fire a missile 200 miles at a town, knowing that it will kill a large number of civilians?

- j Would you help build a hospital for injured soldiers?
- k Would you help build a hospital for injured civilians?

- l Would you be willing to do farming or forestry work if ordered to do so by the government?
- m Would you be prepared to take another person's job knowing that they would be sent to fight on the front line?

- n Would you be prepared to suffer hardship, criticism and rejection for your beliefs?
- o Would you be willing to join the army?

*Students' own answers. Care is needed to ensure students are not upset or disturbed by these questions. An alternative way to approach the questionnaire is to ask students to pretend they are a CO (tell the student he/she is an *alternativist CO*, a *non-combatant CO* or an *absolutist CO*) and to answer the questions accordingly.*

5. Writing: Imagine you are a CO (choose which type) in the First World War. Write a short letter to a friend explaining why you refuse to fight and the dilemmas you faced in making your decision.

Students' own answers.

1.4 examples of conscientious objection since the First World War

1. Why did Vic Williams and Moshin Khan go Absent Without Leave (AWOL) from the UK armed forces? Why didn't they apply to leave the armed forces as conscientious objectors?

They developed a conscientious objection to war and did not know they could apply to leave the armed forces as a conscientious objector.

2. How many US conscientious objectors to the Vietnam War were there in 1971? What did many young men do to show their opposition to fighting in the Vietnam War?

There were 34,000 COs. Many of them burnt their draft cards or left the country.

3. Think of a time when you were asked or told to do something you believed to be wrong? Explain how you felt and what you did? Are there any similarities to how COs might feel when ordered to become soldiers?

Students' own answers. This question could be set for written homework or discussed in class.

4. Research: The 'refusenik' conscientious objectors in the Israeli military believe they have been given illegal orders. Should soldiers obey illegal orders? Who is responsible if they do? To help you answer these questions, do some research into the Nuremberg Trials after the Second World War and find out what was said about obeying illegal orders.

further **RESOURCES**

Nuremberg Trials
Illegal orders

External links in this documents provide additional information but do not indicate any endorsement on the PPU's part

Soldiers should not obey illegal orders. If they do, they are personally responsible. At the Nuremberg Trials after the Second World War, leading Nazis were tried for the actions they took. The most common defence was that the accused were "just following orders" and therefore not personally responsible for their actions. However, the International Military Tribunal which oversaw the Nuremberg Trials rejected this defence, arguing that soldiers had an obligation to disobey illegal orders which violate international law.

5. Writing: Imagine you are one of the civilian train drivers in Scotland who refused to move munitions for use in the Iraq War. Write a letter to other train drivers explaining what you did and why.

Students' own answers.

1.5 human rights focus - past & present rights

1. Look at the Universal Declaration. How many different human rights are there? When was it written? Why do you think it was written at this time?

30 Articles. 1948. After the appalling violence and suffering of the Second World War there was a widespread desire to ensure human rights were upheld.

2. The Preamble (the introduction) to the Universal Declaration states: 'the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world'. What does inalienable mean?

Inalienable rights means the rights cannot be taken away from someone.

3. Which of the following rights do you think could be found in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights? Look at the Universal Declaration to check your answers.

- a The right to live in a big house.
- b The right to get married.
- c The right to eat chocolate.
- d The right to grow long hair.
- e The right to leave your country.
- f The right to healthcare.
- g The right to party.
- h The right to have a mobile phone.
- i The right to express your opinions.

In the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights: The right to get married. The right to leave your country. The

right to healthcare. The right to express your opinions.

4. Here are 14 of the human rights that have been achieved in the UK. Put the rights in chronological order to match with the correct date they were achieved.

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|------|---|
| 1215 | a Right for middle-class men to vote |
| 1624 | b Right to free medical treatment |
| 1689 | c Right to withhold labour (strike) |
| 1824 | d Right to free state education |
| 1832 | e Right to form trade unions |
| 1833 | f Right to conscientious objection to military service |
| 1870 | g Right for all men and women to vote |
| 1882 | h Right to a trial if arrested |
| 1906 | i Right to go to church other than the established church |
| 1916 | j Right not to be the slave of another |
| 1918 | k Right to free speech in parliament |
| 1928 | l Right not to be caned in state schools |
| 1948 | m Right for all men to vote, and women over 30 |
| 1987 | n Right of married women to own property |

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5. Discussion: How can respect for people's human rights bring 'freedom, justice and peace in the world'?

Students' own answers.

1.6 human rights focus - war & human rights

1. What effect does war have on human rights? Complete the chart to show some more ways war affects, health, food, property, children, movement and speech.

	How war affects human rights
Health	1 Civilians and soldiers are killed in many ways and access to medical care is difficult or impossible for many people during war. 2 Disease spreads more easily during war. With so many injuries and diseases, medicines and other supplies are used up very quickly. Many doctors and nurses are sent to care for soldiers, leaving civilians at risk and hospitals unable to cope. People can suffer from 'shell-shock' and other psychological trauma for years after war. Unexploded remnants of war, like mines and bombs, remain dangerous for decades after war ends.
Food	1 War destroys crops and stores and leaves people hungry. 2 Blockades deny access to food, creating famine and malnutrition. Armies take food for themselves, leaving civilians to go hungry. Agriculture and food transport is disrupted. Water supplies for drinking and agriculture are deliberately or accidentally poisoned.
Property	1 Governments and armies seize or steal people's private property in wars. 2 War destroys property. People are made homeless and can lose, or have stolen, all of their possessions. Refugees may have to sell any property they have to survive and crime and the 'black market' prosper during war. Large tracts of land are unusable due to contamination from military uses or because unexploded bombs and mines remain.
Children	1 Many children become orphans when war kills their parents. 2 Lack of food and medical care hurts children the most in war because they are not as strong as adults. Children often cannot go to school because it has been destroyed, it is too dangerous or there are no teachers or equipment. Children are often so scared during war that it traumatises them for years and affects their adult lives.
Movement & Speech	1 People can be arrested for just for saying the 'wrong' thing in public. 2 People are forced to be soldiers. People are called traitors if they are not patriotic. Secret police and security services follow, intimidate and spy on people. Access to places like beaches, cliff tops and public buildings or spaces can be denied. Certain peaceful demonstrations are disallowed. People can be arrested for printing information the government does not approve of.

2. Which Article in the Universal Declaration refers to the human right to life? Why is this right so important?
Article 3 - 'Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.' Without life, all other rights are meaningless.

3. Which Article is about conscientious objection? Copy out the Article and explain what it means in your own words.
Article 18 - 'Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion... to manifest his [or her] religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance'. We all have the freedom to think and believe what we want and to live according to our beliefs.

4. Activity: Working in groups, choose what you think are the ten most important rights in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Put your chosen ten rights into the pyramid provided. The most important right chosen should go at the top point of the pyramid, followed by the second most important rights in the second row and so on.
The right at the top of the pyramid is likely to be the right to life. If not, ask students to explain their choice further. Ask students to add notes to their completed triangles to explain further what each right means. As a follow-up activity ask students to collate results from all the triangles and produce a graph or chart to show which human rights the class thinks are most important.

5. Discussion: Are there any rights which everyone chose to include in the pyramid? Are there any which nobody chose? Which was the most popular choice for the human right at the top of the pyramid? Which rights were chosen for the second row, and why? Discuss any difficulties you had putting them in order.
Students' own answers.