

## Chapter 4 - Life as a Conscientious Objector

questions and activities

### 4.1. work of national importance - the alternativists

1. Describe some of the work conscientious objectors did on the land and the work they did with the Friends Ambulance Unit (FAU).
2. What does 'work of national importance' and 'alternative service' mean? Why were COs who did this work called 'alternativists'?
3. Why were some COs in favour of doing 'work of national importance' while others were against it? Which opinion do you agree with?
4. Writing: Imagine you are a conscientious objector who has just arrived in France to work for the FAU. Write a letter home describing what you find when you arrive, the kind of work you have to do and the reaction you receive from soldiers.
5. Discussion: Alternativists faced a dilemma. Should they do work of national importance, which will help wounded soldiers and help feed the country? Or should they refuse to contribute at all because it indirectly helps to fight the war and releases more men to be soldiers? What might you have done if you were a conscientious objector?

### 4.2. the Non-Combatant Corps - nonviolent soldiers

1. What is a non-combatant? What was the Non-Combatant Corps (NCC) and what kind of work did its members do?
2. Why did some COs refuse to put on an army uniform? What happened to COs in the NCC who refused to obey orders? What kind of punishments did they receive?
3. One member of the NCC, Horace Eaton, said, 'one did not find many in khaki who wanted or gloried in the war - this was generally left to many who were in civilian life'. Why do you think this happened?
4. Research/Discussion: One CO, Horace Eaton, said 'the practice of bayonet fighting alone is utterly detestable and disgusting. The young fellows I have seen being trained in this way - or most of them - were evidently sickened and shocked at such methods. They had generally to be cursed or bullied into it.'

In 1986 a group of scientific experts wrote the 'Seville Statement on Violence'. It states that people are not biologically 'programmed' to fight wars, which is why they have to be trained in order to kill people. Is it 'human nature' to fight wars? If fighting war is human nature, why do soldiers have to be 'cursed or bullied' into it? How does killing someone affect the perpetrator?

Do some research to find out about the Seville Statement on Violence'. Do you agree with the Statement? What can we learn from it?

further **RESOURCES**  
**Seville Statement**

5. Drama/Writing: Some COs (the 'Frenchmen') who refused to obey military orders were sent to France. They were sentenced to death but the sentence was reduced to 10 years in prison. Write a short story or play about what happened to the 'Frenchmen' COs. How did they feel knowing they could face the firing squad? What did they talk about on the way to France? How did the regular soldiers treat them? What was the atmosphere on the parade ground when their sentences were announced?

### 4.3. prison - an absolutist's lot

1. What effect did the 'silence rule' have on COs in prison? How did they communicate with each other when they were not allowed to speak?
2. What was the food like in prison? Why did some COs go on hunger strike? What happened to these men?
3. What was the 'cat and mouse treatment'? What kind of 'treatment' did COs receive?
4. Create your own secret prison newspaper. You could include news from inside and outside the prison, jokes, descriptions of guards and other prisoners, poems etc. Remember to think of a name for your newspaper.
5. Writing: Imagine you have just finished your second month in prison and you are now allowed writing materials in your cell. Write a letter or poem describing why you are in prison, the conditions you are kept in, and what you will do when you are released to face the 'cat and mouse treatment'. Read the following poem to give you some ideas.

## C.O.'s in prison

Who PUT them in prison?  
 'We' say the Court Martial-  
 'Our judgement is partial,-  
 Our job will be gone,  
 And we shan't carry on  
 If we listen to conscience  
 And that sort of nonsense.  
 Away with their tale!  
 Just clap them in jail,-  
 At the horrors we hear of the stoutest will quail!

Who'll STARVE them, in prison?  
 'Oh, we!' say the warders,  
 'For such is our orders,-  
 Reducing the ration  
 Is now all the fashion  
 And ill-flavoured gruel  
 Is left,- something cruel!  
 Black beetles and Mice  
 Spoil the oatmeal and rice,  
 And the 'Objects' ob-ject, they're fearfully nice!

Who sees them DIE?  
 'Not I,' says the Nation,  
 'A pure fabrication!  
 They've lost weight, we know-  
 A few stones, or so,-  
 And some have gone mad  
 With the tortures they've had-  
 But if some have died  
 Such cases we hide-  
 And no one, you'll notice, for Murder is tried!

Who'll HELP the C.O.'s?  
 'I can't,' says the Church-  
 'My scutcheon 'twould smirch,-  
 All war I abhor, it is not in my line,  
 But this war is diff'rent, it's holy, it's fine!  
 Now I can't explain, but you'll see, in a minute-  
 Although it's so holy, why I am not in it;  
 The Government thought it would look very ill  
 The Cause notwithstanding, for Clergy to kill!  
 So this kind of exemption of course I requite  
 By 'talking up' fighting, -although I don't fight!  
 Thus you will perceive, though I feel for their woes  
 That I can't say a word for the dear C.O's!

by the mother of a CO.  
 25 October, 1917  
*The Tribunal*

## 4.4. the Home Office Scheme

1. What was the Home Office Scheme? Which COs were eligible for the Home Office Scheme?
2. Where did COs on the Scheme live and work? What kind of work did they do? How was life on the Scheme different/similar to being in prison?
3. What dilemmas did COs face when working under the Scheme? Why did some COs choose to stay in prison?
4. Discussion: Some COs on the Home Office Scheme lived in cold, muddy conditions. They worked long and hard, often with little food or medical attention. Some died as a result and others went insane. Compare life as a CO on the Scheme with life as a soldier in the trenches. What are the similarities and differences?
5. Writing: Imagine you witnessed some local people attacking a group of COs from Princetown Work Centre on their way to work in a quarry on Dartmoor. Write a short report for the local newspaper describing what happened. Remember to include how the attack started, how the COs and local people behaved and some of what they said. Be aware of bias: is your report objective, in favour of the COs, or in favour of the people attacking them?

#### 4.5. human rights focus - prisoners of conscience

1. Which Article in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights is about freedom from torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment and punishment? In your own words, explain what this Article means.
2. What is a 'prisoner of conscience'? Were COs in the First World War prisoners of conscience?
3. Why is it important to respect the human rights of all prisoners everywhere? How did some COs improve conditions for prisoners after the first world war?
4. Research/Discussion: What is torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment? Is it ever acceptable? Is it a useful way to get genuine information from people? Do some research to find out more about these issues. Do you think COs in prison during the First World War experienced torture?
5. Research/Design: What can you do to help protect the human rights of conscientious objectors in prison today? Produce a poster to show what action people can take to help stop torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment of prisoners of conscience around the world.

#### further **RESOURCES**

**UN Treaty on Torture**

**Human Rights Watch**

**Freedom From Torture**

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