

Chapter 4 - Life as a Conscientious Objector

teachers' notes

in brief

This chapter looks at what happened to conscientious objectors after the Tribunals and examines the way they were treated and the dilemmas they faced at each stage.

The first section examines the experiences of those doing alternative service under civilian authority on the land and in the Friends Ambulance Unit. Section two is about the soldier COs of the Non-Combatant Corps, the work they did, the extraordinary lengths the authorities went to to make them into soldiers and their views on military training and discipline. In section three the lives of those who spent time in prison is examined, including the conditions they suffered, the punishments they received and the 'cat and mouse' system of repeated terms of imprisonment for COs who refused to be soldiers. The final section concerns the Home Office Scheme, which enabled some COs to leave prison, but also led to the first death amongst COs and to controversy in the press and local community.

The human rights focus in this Chapter examines the human rights of prisoners. Article 5 of the UN Universal Declaration relates to freedom from torture or any cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. A summary of the human rights abuses many conscientious objectors experienced is followed by a brief examination of how the work of some COs led to prison reform. The importance of respecting prisoners' human rights forms the final part of this human rights focus.

learning objectives by sub-section

Students will be able to:

- 4.1 work of national importance - the alternativists
 - describe the different kinds of work alternativist COs did and some of the dilemmas they faced.
- 4.2 the Non-Combatant Corps - non-violent soldiers
 - describe the role of the Non-Combatant Corps and the treatment its members received when they disobeyed orders.
- 4.3 prison - an absolutist's lot
 - explain why some conscientious objectors were in prison and describe how they were treated there and when they returned to their military units.
- 4.4 the Home Office Scheme
 - identify the purpose of the Home Office Scheme, describe some of the treatment of those on it and discuss the press's, local people's and conscientious objectors' opinion of the Scheme.
- 4.5 human rights focus - prisoners of conscience
 - discuss, in relation to Article 5 of the UN Universal Declaration, the importance of upholding the rights of prisoners.

questions and answers

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).

Land work: forestry, agriculture, repairing railways and canals. FAU: stretcher bearing, dressing stations, transporting the sick and wounded soldiers and civilians, feeding and clothing refugees.

2. What does 'work of national importance' and 'alternative service' mean? Why were COs who did this work called 'alternativists'?

'Work of national importance: forestry, agriculture, repairing railways and canals, work in schools, hospitals etc. 'Work of national importance' is what 'alternativist' COs did. It was an alternative service to military service.

3. Why were some COs in favour of doing 'work of national importance' while others were against it? Which opinion do you agree with?

Some COs believed work of national importance would help the country and its people at a difficult time. Others thought doing 'work of national importance' was supporting the war effort and would take the place of another worker who could be sent to the front line.

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.

Students' own answers.

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?

Students' own answers.

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?

A non-combatant is a person who does not fight in a war. The Non-Combatant Corps was a military unit set up for COs granted non-combatant status by the Tribunals. Men did everything a regular soldier did but did not handle weapons, fight or train to fight. Much of their time was spent preparing equipment and facilities for regular soldiers such as baths or airfields.

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?

Some COs refused to put on a military uniform as this might indicate their willingness to be a soldier. Some COs who refused to put on uniforms were stripped and left on the parade ground or in cold cells in the barracks. For disobeying orders COs were sometimes beaten up, forced by violence to march or drill, or made to stand for hours in the sun on parade until they fainted. Some were sometimes subject to Field Punishment number 1 in which they were tied for several hours on consecutive days, as if crucified, to a fence or cart wheel.

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?

Soldiers tended to understand the awful reality of war, whereas civilians knew little of the reality - only the propaganda.

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.

further **RESOURCES**
Seville Statement

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?

Most people, including soldiers, find killing someone a very difficult and disturbing act to perform. Bayonet practice brings home to soldiers the reality of what they are expected to do to someone and so it is often necessary to 'bully' soldiers into practising with a bayonet. Killing someone standing next to you is probably more difficult than firing a missile at them from a long distance. The psychological consequences for the perpetrator are probably worse if killing with a bayonet rather than missile but for the victim the end result is the same: death.

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?

Students' own answers.

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?

The silence rule drove many COs to the edge of insanity - and some beyond. COs communicated using a kind of Morse Code on the water pipes between cells and by producing tiny prison newspapers which they hid from the

prison warders.

2. What was the food like in prison? Why did some COs go on hunger strike? What happened to these men?

The food was very poor. There was very little of it, it had little nutritional value and often had mice droppings in it. Prisoners were punished by being put on a diet of bread and water. Some COs went on hunger strike to protest against mistreatment and abuse by prison staff. These men were brutally force-fed, leading to injury and in one case death.

3. What was the 'cat and mouse treatment'? What kind of 'treatment' did COs receive?

The 'cat and mouse treatment' was the process of being returned to the military unit where the CO had initially refused to obey orders. On return most COs refused to obey orders again, were mistreated and abused and then returned to prison. At the end of their sentence they would again be returned to the same military unit for the same 'treatment'.

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.

Students' own answers.

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

Students' own answers.

4.4. the Home Office Scheme

1. What was the Home Office Scheme? Which COs were eligible for the Home Office Scheme?

The Home Office Scheme was open to COs in prison who were deemed to be genuine in their beliefs. The Scheme allowed genuine COs to be released from prison to a Work Camp or Centre where they would have to do 'work of national importance'.

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?

They lived in tents and huts in Work Camps and in former prisons and asylums in Work Centres. The work was usually penal in nature - breaking rocks, sewing mail bags. They also built roads and reclaimed farmland from the moors. Differences: COs were not locked in and could leave their accommodation to visit local towns and churches within 5 miles. Similarities: COs were not free to do what they wanted, they could be punished and they had to do work of a penal nature.

3. What dilemmas did COs face when working under the Scheme? Why did some COs choose to stay in prison?

COs on the Home Office Scheme faced the same dilemmas as other COs doing work of national importance. Some felt that by doing work for the government they were contributing to the war effort. As a result, some COs, despite being offered the scheme, refused it and chose 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?

Similarities: poor living conditions, poor food and inadequate clothing as well as death and insanity. Men wanted to return home to their families.

Differences: much greater danger of death, injury and insanity (shellshock) in the trenches. Soldiers were (initially, at least) widely regarded as heroes. Many suffered psychological trauma during and after the war as a result of the things they had seen and done. COs (initially, at least) were widely regarded as cowards. Although some suffered psychologically, most had the satisfaction of being true to their conscience and not having killed anyone.

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?

Students' own answers.

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.

Article 5. It means that everyone, everywhere, no matter what the circumstances or what crime they may be accused of, must be treated with respect and must not be intentionally hurt or kept in inhuman conditions.

2. What is a 'prisoner of conscience'? Were COs in the First World War prisoners of conscience?

A prisoner of conscience is someone imprisoned solely for the peaceful expression of their beliefs. The term was coined by Amnesty International's founder, civil rights lawyer Peter Benenson, who launched Amnesty International with an appeal on behalf of six prisoners of conscience. It refers to anyone imprisoned because of their race, religion, colour, language, sexual orientation, or belief, so long as they have not used or advocated violence. Imprisoned conscientious objectors are 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?

It is important to respect everyone's human rights and especially important to respect the rights of vulnerable people and those in our care, such as prisoners. It is vital for the well-being of the individual prisoners concerned and by openly upholding their rights it helps to build greater awareness and respect for human rights around the world. Two COs, Fenner Brockway and Stephen Hobhouse wrote a report for the government. Their report led to a range of reforms to make prison less cruel and inhuman.

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?

Freedom from torture is an inalienable right and the prohibition against torture is absolute; no 'exceptional circumstances', including state of emergency, war, or an order from a public authority, can justify it. Information gained under torture is unreliable and people are usually willing to admit to anything at all when being tortured.

It is clear that actions such as random and systematic acts of brutality, the use of punishment cells and the imposition of Field Punishment Number 1 represented activity that was indistinguishable from a definition of 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.

Suggestions include supporting Amnesty International campaigns, write to your MP, write to the press, sign or start a petition, join or organise a demonstration, and boycott goods from countries/companies involved in torture or the sale of torture equipment.

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