

what is a conscientious objector?

If you are called for military service but you refuse to go because you believe it is wrong to take part in war, or preparations for war, you are a conscientious objector (CO). Conscientious objectors are deeply opposed to war and killing. It is not simply that they prefer not to do military service, that they are scared to fight, or that they have something better to do with their time: they believe it is wrong to hurt or kill other people.

Arthur Creech Jones was a conscientious objector in the First World War and later went on to be a government minister. At his Court-martial he stated his views about the stupidity of war - views which many COs shared:

'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.

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This is how the Reverend Fuller Gooch saw it. *'What do we mean by conscientious objector? Is a shirker a conscientious objector? Is a coward a conscientious objector? No; a man is not a conscientious objector unless he has principle or religion behind him. That man I would stand by with all my heart and power... If a man's convictions are honest, sincere convictions, he ought to be honoured for them.'*

21 May, 1916.

In the First World War 16,000 British men refused to fight for the British army because they believed fighting and killing was wrong. These conscientious objectors were followed in the Second World War by another 60,000 who refused to fight and a further 10,000 in the period of compulsory national military service up to 1960 following the Second World War. This book is about the conscientious objectors of the First World War and human rights.

It was not easy to be a conscientious objector during the First World War. You had to be willing to stand out from the crowd no matter how unpopular it made you or how hard life would be as a result. To dare to be different you had to be convinced you were right to stick to your principles. You also had to be willing to accept both physical and mental hardship.

Most conscientious objectors in the First World War were treated quite well, but some suffered terribly due to the harsh treatment they received in prisons and work camps. The full number of COs who died during their term has not yet been established though a figure of around 100 is the current best guess. We do not know how they all died but we do know that many died as a result of the appalling conditions they were placed under as well as from serious neglect including by prison doctors. Despite this, they continued to refuse to fight or to follow military orders. They knew they could be sent to prison where they could be forced to do hard labour and almost starved to death, but they preferred to suffer themselves rather than to make other

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