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Social Conflict and Control, Protest and Repression (Great Britain and Ireland)

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This article considers social conflict and protest within the United Kingdom during the First World War and state efforts to exert control. This complex, under-explored topic gained greater attention during the centenary years, although it was not at the forefront of official commemorations. The article brings together and develops existing scholarship, offering new information, connections, insights and painting a more expansive picture. It focuses on one form of dissent, war resistance, by examining the case study of conscientious objection to military service. This analysis is set in the wider context of conflict, protest and control in the early 20th century.

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Introduction

Social conflict was both varied and ubiquitous in the UK during the First World War and an array of strategies and approaches were adopted in order to attempt to maintain control.^[1] Adopting a distinctively legal-historical perspective, this article focuses upon war resistance as one of the key forms of dissention which the state sought to manage. In doing so, it deploys a broad sense of “war resistance.” This means considering those who were for different reasons against the war from the outset as well as those who developed various kinds and degrees of anti-war sentiments during its course. However, it does not go quite so far as to include all individual acts of selfishness and self-preservation as war resistance, although the latter do briefly figure here as indications of a lack of unity of purpose and support for the conflict.^[2]

Limiting the focus to this broadly defined notion of war resistance still entails examining a complicated subject. There were very different motivations for resisting. Resistance took various forms and could be individual and/or collective. There were local pockets of rebellion and national networks of resistance, some of which had links beyond the UK. Consequently, in order to explore the topic, this article utilises a case study of [conscientious objection](#) to military service, with conscientious objection cast as being part of a bigger picture encompassing a range of war resistances and of “communities of resistance.”^[3] This focus on objection, however, means that there is less consideration of the Irish context, as conscription was not applied to the then-united island.^[4]

Even restricting the heart of the analysis to conscientious objection and focusing on [Britain](#) means exploring a far from straightforward topic. This cluster of dissension involved men who, for the most part, when conscripted into the military, in various ways and to different degrees refused to cooperate. They did so for political, moral and/or religious reasons, with many adopting positions which were far from being [pacifist](#), and they came from all walks of life. Numbering around 20,000, conscientious objectors (COs), the group included men who, for example, identified as Quakers, anarchists, spiritualists, atheists, Jews, Plymouth Brethren, humanitarians, Anglicans, Tolstoyans, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Peculiar People and socialists.^[5] This, therefore, was by no means a coherent group of men, making generalisations difficult and any suggestion of a single united resistance movement inaccurate. However, at the same time, neither were these entirely separate individuals who took their decisions about their stances and conduct without consultation, collaboration and support.

In terms of examining state reactions to war resisters and, in particular, to COs, the approach adopted in this article entails a broadening out in order to look at different kinds of control beyond the obvious recourse to repression. This means considering favourable treatment which might sometimes serve as a form of control. For instance, in the context of conscientious objection state efforts to manage the problem included producing [propaganda](#) (aided by the pro-war [press](#) and [Church of England](#)), using surveillance, repression and punishment, as well as more subtle means, such as offering recognition and exemption, the granting of concessions in order to quiet tensions

and seeking to influence public opinion by means of policy shifts. In this context, ensuring that COs were held in low regard (or not in too high regard) and that their perspectives were rejected was of crucial importance. In addition, avoiding treating the men too harshly, lest sympathy or support be aroused for them and their position, could be an important consideration. However, it was also sometimes feared that treating them too leniently might encourage other men to follow their course, thereby risking undermining conscription and, as a result, the war effort.^[6]

In order to contextualise the analysis of war resistance and specifically conscientious objection, other early 20th century instances of social conflict and state attempts to maintain control are briefly highlighted here. Unrest and rebellion were much in evidence within the UK prior to the war. Internal instability was to continue and be amplified during the conflict, with new forms of tension emerging. Moreover, social conflict did not cease with the armistice, nor with the peace treaties which formally ended the conflict. So, an important contribution of this article is to highlight a sense of continuity here, suggesting an unstable setting. In response the state continually attempted to rein in dissent and prevent rebellion using a range of strategies and techniques. The war period, however, meant that additional and more oppressive measures of control could be deployed; threats to the war effort supposedly had to be dealt with for the good of the country. After the war some of these powers and methods ended. However, some did not. For example, the modern secret state grew and developed considerably during the war as did its activities. Afterwards its work continued.^[7]

In closing, additionally the article suggests that, in order to further develop understandings of wartime dissent and control in the context of the UK, it is important to look not only at a broad concept of war resistance and a longer and continuing history of dissent and dissent management *within* the UK but also to consider social conflict and state efforts at control which took place *beyond* the geographical boundaries of the UK.

Background

The years leading up to the First World War were a time of instability within the UK. For example, the fight for the vote for women was becoming increasingly burdensome for the state, with an escalation in militancy by [suffragettes](#), including arson and other forms of criminal damage as well as hunger-strikes in the nation's prisons.^[8] The state responses included the violence meted out by police on Black Friday.^[9] In addition, the torture of force-feeding was carried out by prison staff and doctors. But harsh treatment risked arousing public sympathies and making martyrs of the women. Consequently, as a result of concerns about force-feeding, a new measure, the so-called "Cat and Mouse Act" (Prisoners (Temporary Discharge for Ill-Health) Act 1913), allowed for the temporary release of hunger strikers until they were sufficiently recovered to continue serving their sentences.^[10]

There was also [labour unrest](#) and strike action in the pre-war years, along with attempts to quash

dissent and manage the situation.^[11] For example, in Liverpool a general transport strike involved attacks by the police and military and ended in the death of two men. Here, alongside violence, the use of propaganda was key, with the crowd portrayed by officialdom as criminal types and in racially derogatory terms as Irish.^[12]

As to [Ireland](#), the situation had long been complex and unstable, with the issue of [Home Rule](#) taking centre stage. In the spring of 1914, proposed British military involvement in the situation provoked rebellion within the British Army. Tensions were to some degree pacified but remained and it was clear that the [Government](#) could not rely on the army to enforce the law when it came to Home Rule.^[13]

War Resistance and Continuing Instability

Not everyone [supported the decision to go to war](#) in August 1914.^[14] Notable amongst opponents were some socialists, including the Independent Labour Party, and elements of organised labour. For example, the *Labour Leader's* front page of 6 August 1914 was dominated by a large panel declaring "Down with the War!" Other organisations in different ways challenged the conflict. Amongst them was the Fellowship of Reconciliation, which had its basis in Christian pacifism, and the [Union of Democratic Control](#), which included Liberal opponents of the war. Both were founded in the aftermath of the August 1914 declaration.^[15]

The female suffrage movement was split over the war, with some campaigners like [Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence \(1867-1954\)](#) and [Sylvia Pankhurst \(1882-1960\)](#) opposing the conflict. Indeed, women's efforts for peace throughout the war were considerable, including international and local activism.^[16] For instance, in spring 1915 a Women's Peace Congress took place in The Hague, with delegates from the UK including Pethick-Lawrence seeking a negotiated peace.^[17] From 1916, the Women's Peace Crusade sought to bring about a similar goal by influencing opinion at home.^[18]

Pre-existing tensions by no means vanished with the declaration of war and as the fighting persisted there was more evidence of division within the UK. These included continuing instances of industrial unrest. In some cases this dissent amongst workers also demonstrated that there were those who were very much against what was seen as a conflict bred of [imperialism](#) and capitalism, in which workers were called upon to fight against fellow workers. One hive of protest centred upon "Red" Clydeside in Glasgow, Scotland, where the activities included the Clyde Workers' Committee campaigning against the Government, fighting the Munitions of War Acts 1915-17 (and, amongst other things, the industrial conscription which they imposed) and seeking the nationalisation of the munitions industry.^[19]

As the war continued, [events in Russia](#) caused some excitement, with some advocating revolution in the UK. Thus, in May 1917 the *Labour Leader* encouraged its readership to 'FOLLOW

RUSSIA'.^[20] Others from the left also welcomed events, with large numbers attending a demonstration in support of the revolution at the Assembly Hall, Mile End Road, London on 24 March 1917 and another meeting the following day at Camperdown House, Whitechurch, London, for example.^[21]

In Ireland, although the situation remained precarious, with Home Rule a lurking issue, support for the war and volunteers for the military came from all sections of the community, albeit from different motivations.^[22] However, there was anti-war feeling from some Nationalists and views shifted over the course of the conflict. In particular, there were attempts to gain German assurances and assistance^[23] along with the [Easter Rising](#) of 1916^[24] and, as shown below, there was a crisis occasioned by the possible extension of conscription to Ireland in 1918.

Added to the instances of war resistance and instability noted above, there was also evidence of a lack of enthusiasm for the war and of “war weariness.”^[25] There were people who exploited the situation for their own benefit and men who failed to assist the war effort by voluntarily joining up – indeed, most of the men who joined the military during the war were conscripts so had no choice about the matter.^[26] When conscription came there were non-CO men who sought to avoid military service. Some of those seeking to avoid the military paid unfit men to impersonate them at their army medical examination or purchased a certificate of exemption.^[27]

In terms of soldiers, there was evidence of war resistance, avoidance and reluctance. There were men who failed to report or went absent without leave on the home front - and there were those who deserted when at the front, risking severe punishment, including the possibility of execution. Tens of thousands of men acted in these ways and the missing were sought by the authorities. In Britain lists of wanted soldiers were published in the *Police Gazette*, demonstrating the scale of the problem.^[28] There were other means of resistance or avoidance for a soldier – he might feign illness or acquire an injury, for instance.^[29] And there was the “live and let live” approach, whereby men deliberately avoided harming others by refusing to fire or aiming away from the enemy.^[30] In addition, there were also protests and mutinies. Indeed, protests about conditions were common from the very start of the war.^[31]

War resistance, dissent and war weariness were met with a range of responses. Individuals and organisations which opposed the war, whose activities were thought to threaten the war effort or who were suspected of plotting revolution were put under surveillance and groups were infiltrated by agents of the state who sometimes acted as *agents-provocateur*. There was [censorship](#), mail was intercepted and some were prosecuted for overstepping the strict limitations imposed by wartime regulations.^[32] For example, in August 1915 [Alphonso Samms \(1887-1960\)](#), who told a wounded Canadian that this was “a capitalists’ war” and that “the workers would be as well under German rule”, was convicted of three offences under the [Defence of the Realm Acts \(DORA\)](#) and sentenced to imprisonment.^[33]

Responses to strikes were variable, with concessions sometimes being offered instead of repression and punishment. In Wales, for example, the need to maintain both order and production meant that [David Lloyd George \(1863-1945\)](#) intervened in a coal strike in 1915, preventing further disruption by seeking to meet miners' demands.^[34]

Propaganda, along with the pro-war newspapers, often ridiculed, denigrated and castigated those who failed to fully back the war. Thus, women's peace efforts were met with derision from those who supported the war. The pro-war press, for example, mocked the "Peacettes" who sought to travel to The Hague Congress, depicting them as [masculine](#) and spinster-esque and unable to secure a man, echoing the gendered portrayals utilised by anti-suffrage campaigners before the war.^[35]

In relation to Ireland the Nationalist attempt to gain German support resulted in Sir [Roger Casement's \(1864-1916\)](#) trial and conviction for treason. He was sentenced to death, with the Home Secretary of the day taking the political decision not to conditionally pardon him because his execution was judged to be the wiser course politically.^[36] The Easter Rising was met with violence, arrests, trials, executions and reprisals by British troops including extra-judicial killings.^[37]

The response to military indiscipline and protest was sometimes to compromise and seek to address complaints in order to calm the situation but on other occasions it was harsh in the extreme. In 1914, for instance, to avoid the negative publicity about conditions in camps around Britain, the military tried to improve things and in some cases sent men home until problems could be resolved.^[38] Other soldiers faced the full severity of [military punishment](#), meaning informal penalties, field punishments, military detention and execution. Around 300 men were shot following court martial for military offences. However, most executions were not carried out as over 3,000 men received capital sentences.^[39] It seems that the military feared the consequences of appearing too severe but nevertheless sometimes felt that the ultimate penalty should be carried out "for the sake of example".^[40]

Whilst the different sentiments and actions cited above might not all be seen as "war resistance", they are usefully viewed alongside overt forms of dissent as they begin to, at the very least, suggest a more complex picture of attitudes and behaviours during the war than is often portrayed. It is in this context that those who refused military compulsion should be considered.

The Coming of Conscription

Opposition to conscription was evident from the start of the war, with fears that the unsuccessful pre-war efforts of the National Service League to get military compulsion onto the statute books might now have more traction.^[41] In November 1914 [Archibald Fenner Brockway \(1888-1988\)](#), the editor of the Independent Labour Party's *Labour Leader* and a future CO, called for men of enlistment age to join an anti-conscription organisation^[42] and soon the No-Conscription Fellowship (N-CF) was

founded. The N-CF's headquarters were in London, with branches across the country, all of which produced propaganda. Full membership was only available to men of military age but there was also a shadow organisation of associate members who could take over operations should key figures be seized by the authorities. As the latter suggests, the N-CF was to become a sophisticated organisation. As an umbrella group it brought together objectors and supporters from a range of political, religious and moral perspectives and it worked, in particular, with the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the Quakers. At first its focus was on opposing conscription but subsequently it supported COs.^[43]

Despite early concerns about conscription, however, in 1914 it was unlikely to be introduced. The National Service League's efforts had failed because compulsion was unpopular and unfamiliar, as by this time the country had a well-established history of volunteerism, whereby a professional military was supplemented by men who stepped forward to serve temporarily when needed. Indeed, for some volunteerism had come to be seen as a part of the national identity.^[44]

The voluntary system was also initially successful in providing vast numbers of males from Britain and Ireland, with men's motivations including support for the war, patriotism, a thirst for adventure or economic necessity. However, these numbers were not maintained to the extent deemed necessary to sustain fighting and replace those killed or injured. Consequently, concerns developed regarding fit and able young men who were holding back. There were also worries about who was coming forward, as men in essential industries could be of more use at home. In this context, arguments in favour of conscription gradually gained strength.^[45]

On 15 August 1915 a form of census, the National Register, was taken in Britain (it was "differentially" applied to Ireland, where relevant information was collected by the authorities).^[46] It sought to catalogue all individuals aged fifteen to sixty-five who were not in the navy, army or territorial forces. The Register was seen by many as a precursor to conscription – it recorded what young men were doing, suggested who might be sent to the forces and provided information about the possibility of a (older male and female) workforce who could take their place.

Whilst the N-CF stance on the National Register was that members should fill out the form but add a statement as to conscientious objection, some men and women refused to supply their details.^[47] These included those whose objection was to military compulsion, meaning that some of the first conscription-related COs were women. Moreover, registration was a legal obligation,^[48] so those who failed to comply found themselves in court, were fined and some were imprisoned.^[49]

The results of the Register were indeed utilised to argue for conscription but first a less dramatic recruitment strategy was tried as compulsion was still considered too divisive.^[50] The Group System or "Derby Scheme" began in Britain (but was not used in Ireland, where voluntary recruiting efforts continued) in October 1915. It encouraged men aged eighteen to forty to attest their willingness to fight should they be needed, with a payment of 2s. 9d. for their efforts and the promise

that single men would be called first. More men did come forward, some no doubt hoping that they could pocket the money but would never be called – a few signed up more than once.^[51] By December 1915, however, the results of the Scheme and the Register were used to demonstrate that large numbers of men had still not come forward.^[52]

The coalition Cabinet was soon discussing drafts of a Military Service Bill. Despite resistance to the measure, as a result of persuasion, amendment and compromise, only the Liberal Home Secretary Sir [John Allsebrook Simon \(1873-1954\)](#) resigned.^[53] In Parliament there were other Liberals, including Union of Democratic Control men, along with some Socialists and Quakers, who did not support the measure, but the vast majority of Members of Parliament (MPs) did. It passed in late January 1916 and on 2 March 1916 compulsion began. On 9 April 1916 a demonstration organised by the Women's Suffrage Federation to be addressed by Sylvia Pankhurst was planned in Trafalgar Square, London in protest against, amongst other things, DORA restriction and conscription. The event, however, was disrupted by pro-war opponents, with the police providing protection for those, including Pankhurst, who were due to speak.^[54]

Large-scale demonstrations against conscription were to continue until the use of military compulsion ended. For example, the town of Merthyr Tydfil in Wales was considered a centre for anti-war feeling, with opposition to conscription frequently evident at meetings. Indeed, the word "Merthyrism" was invented by *The Times* newspaper to describe the context. There were concerns about the stability of the area, leading intelligence officers to be deployed in order to monitor and report back on the situation.^[55]

The January 1916 Act was the first of a series of Military Service Acts. It applied to England, Wales and Scotland but not Ireland. Amongst the reasons for this territorial limitation was the sense that Ireland had provided a good number of recruits, that conscription was too divisive a measure to introduce there and that the Home Rule issue made matters especially sensitive. In Parliament, the fact that the Derby Scheme had not been employed in Ireland was used as a reason to avoid what was feared to be the impact of conscripting the Irish – volunteerism had not been fully tested beyond Britain, so it was to Britain alone that compulsion should apply.^[56] The situation in Ireland was, however, being monitored and attempts had been made to boost recruitment in late 1915 in parallel with the Derby Scheme. Viceroy of Ireland, Lord Wimborne [Ivor Churchill Guest \(1873-1939\)](#) formally reported on the Irish situation in late January 1916, after the first Military Service Act had been passed and prior to the Easter Rising, painting a relatively positive picture.^[57]

The first Act provided that all male British subjects aged eighteen to forty who were ordinarily resident in Britain and either single or childless widowers were deemed to have enlisted (meaning they were soldiers) and were transferred to the reserve to await their call-up.^[58] When directed they would report, be medically assessed and accepted or rejected for service. The Act contained exceptions for men who, for example, were ministers of religion. There was also the possibility of a man applying to a Military Service Tribunal for exemption on grounds of his work being of national

importance, that serious domestic, business or financial hardship would be caused by his call-up or because of his ill-health or infirmity.^[59] The compromises which allowed the Act to be passed, however, meant that this apparently universalist measure included a ground for exemption which some feared might undo it entirely;^[60] a man could claim “a conscientious objection to combatant service”.^[61] The latter phrase was misleading, suggesting that only bearing arms and fighting could be objected to. There was also some ambiguity in the statute as regards the types of exemption available to COs.^[62] Nevertheless, in theory, as a result of a political compromise reached in order to get conscription on the statute books, instead of being repressed, objectors were being recognised. If part of the thinking behind this was that recognition would solve the matter, thereby getting rid of one possible pocket of dissent, it was soon to become clear that the matter was by no means settled.

If accepted, a CO applicant could be granted partial exemption (meaning a non-combatant military role) or conditional exemption (entailing approved work of national importance). In addition, subject to interpretation of the Act, in theory he could receive absolute exemption (he continued in his civilian life).^[63] If an application was rejected by the first tier local tribunal or if a man rejected their decision he could appeal, first to an appeal tribunal and then, with the latter’s permission, to the Central Tribunal. There was also the possibility of challenging a tribunal in the courts by way of a judicial review.^[64]

Each of the subsequent Military Service Acts amended the primary measure. For example, in late May 1916 a second Act extended the application of conscription to all ordinarily resident British men within the relevant age band and included a clarification which stated that absolute exemption was available in conscience cases.^[65] The final Act in 1918 was something of a desperate measure, including emergency powers. It raised the upper age to fifty and allowed for it to be extended to fifty-five. It provided that certificates of exemption could be withdrawn unless they were on ill-health or conscience grounds. Also, it permitted the extension of conscription to Ireland should this be deemed necessary.^[66] This latter issue prompted protests and a “conscription crisis” which considerably heightened tensions and lessened Irish support for the war.^[67] Conscription, however, was never to be applied to Ireland. For the rest of Britain, recruiting under the Acts continued until, following the armistice, it was suspended. The Military Service Acts were eventually repealed in 1927.^[68]

Conscientious Objectors

Initially the local tribunals were snowed under, with around 750,000 men applying for exemption in the first six months,^[69] meaning a large proportion of theoretically available males tried to avoid or at least delay military service. Of these, however, very few were conscience cases; estimates based on surviving records suggest that this category amounted to only 6.5 percent.^[70]

What then of the tribunals? They were supposed to be acting as courts of justice but often failed to live up to such standards in relation to COs.^[71] The latter faced continuing difficulties as a result of the confusing wording of the primary Act as, despite the clarification added later, tribunal members in all tiers remained reluctant to accept that objectors could be granted absolute exemption.^[72] Lack of knowledge and experience, combined with a lack of understanding of objection and a prejudice towards a stance which was often seen as unpatriotic and unmanly,^[73] meant that members could be ignorant of or refuse to accept the law. Applicants were sometimes berated for their claims, called cowards and shirkers, and swiftly dismissed.^[74]

The tribunals' treatment of COs resulted in concerns being raised by those who, like MP [Philip Snowden \(1864-1937\)](#),^[75] supported them but also by others, including lawyers. The *Solicitors' Journal* stated that:

[s]o far as we can judge, many members of local tribunals decline to recognise that there can be any conscientious objection to participation in warfare, and they have attempted to browbeat applicants in the style of the seventeenth century. They forget that conscientious objection is, neither in fact nor under the statute, dependent on religious belief; and that the existence of conscientious objectors has to be accepted without cavilling.^[76]

Consequently, the appearance was sometimes that the tribunals took it upon themselves to police men who claimed to be COs by refusing to recognise or only partially recognise them.

Some CO applicants left the tribunal system with a level of exemption they accepted, taking a role in the Royal Army Medical Corps, the Non-Combatant Corps or civilian work of national importance. A few were absolutely exempted. Those men who ended up with no exemption or who rejected the form granted would be liable to serve. If they resisted, they would be arrested, tried in a police court and handed over to the military. Some such men would not cooperate in any way.

In the early days of conscription disobedience in the army could be met with severe treatment, including beatings, forced drilling and the use of a punishment pit,^[77] as well as court martial and military detention. Thirty-five COs were taken to [France](#) and sentenced to death for their disobedience, although this was commuted to ten years penal servitude; a message had been secretly sent back to Britain and their plight raised in the House of Commons.^[78] In fact, it seems that no men who claimed to be conscientious objectors were executed during the war. However, over 120 objectors have been estimated to have lost their lives during or after the war because of their experiences.^[79]

Objectors were not long to remain under military control; they were unhelpful to discipline and wasteful of resources. Their harsh treatment also raised public sympathies, something that was to be a recurrent concern for the state in its shifting policy decisions relating to the management of COs. The decision was taken that men who refused to accept military authority and claimed

conscience at their court martial would serve their sentences in civilian prisons.^[80] Sentence concluded, they were still soldiers, so were handed back to the military, where, if they continued to refuse orders they would be court-martialled, sentenced and transferred to prison. Around 1,400 “absolutists” spent their war in this loop.^[81]

The prison system still had many of the characteristics of the Victorian age and the COs’ sentence of hard labour meant an initial period of heightened deprivation (a wooden plank to sleep on, work to be undertaken alone in his cell, no letters or visits). If a man was obedient, some restrictions would gradually be slightly relaxed (the provision of a mattress, work undertaken with fellow prisoners, some communication with the outside world). However, the hated silence rule, tended to be applied determinedly to CO prisoners, meant no conversation.^[82] Whilst there were those who felt that absolutists, in particular, should be (seen to be) punished for their stance, as the war progressed, following concerns about conditions and treatment and, again, worries about arousing popular sympathy for objectors, concessions were made and the harsh prison rules were relaxed.^[83]

Not all COs reacted passively to their punishment. Indeed, there were instances of resistance and revolt within prisons. Men communicated by tapping out a code on pipes running between cells and they produced secret newspapers. Some went on hunger strike.^[84] Punishment for disobedience could be solitary confinement and a severely restricted diet. The treatment of hunger-striking COs mirrored that of suffragettes, with strikers initially force-fed but then temporarily released as a result of concerns about the impact their suffering and any deaths might have upon both their fellows and the public.^[85] In Wandsworth Prison there was open rebellion against the system. The response included offering concessions and imposing punishment as well as the instalment of a new Acting Governor who unsuccessfully attempted to tame the COs by means of an intensely repressive regime.^[86]

Whilst absolutist COs remained in this *army › court martial › prison* loop, some took the opportunity to leave prison resulting from another policy change prompted by concerns about public sympathy for COs. The Central Tribunal would re-examine court-martialled COs in prison and offer those they felt to be genuine (they were directed to lower assessment standards as far as genuineness was concerned) and willing to take it a place on a Home Office Scheme. As a result, around 5,000 COs were sent to work around Britain, including at the “deprisoned” Dartmoor Prison which became a COs’ labour camp.^[87]

There were COs who took other paths. Some volunteered for civilian relief or assistance work, like the Friends Ambulance Unit. Men undertaking such work could be granted exemption from conscription.^[88] There were also objectors who, before their call-up papers arrived, following a tribunal decision, while awaiting their arrest or at some point when the authorities’ hold over them lessened, went on the run. Touring the countryside, they camped or stayed in safe-houses run by an underground network of supporters. Some objectors evaded capture, with a few making it to Ireland

where there were attempts to retrieve them and others ending up in the [US](#) (some of these secret places and routes already existed, having been created to assist suffragettes or Irish Nationalists).^[89] In addition, there were COs who travelled in a different direction, although this route seems to have only been possible for officers. One or two soldiers managed to claim conscience and leave the military, although the army tried to direct attention away from such cases.^[90]

What then of those who supported COs? The N-CF's membership and supporters were monitored and there were attempts to undermine the organisation or at least hamper its operations, including searches of premises and efforts to seize the printing press on which its organ, *The Tribunal*, along with other propaganda, was produced.^[91] There were prosecutions of members under DORA for what were perceived as activities prejudicial to the country's interests and, more particularly, the war effort.^[92] Notwithstanding all this, the Fellowship managed to continue its activities throughout the war.

Agents-provocateurs were also used against anti-conscriptionists, most notably in the case of [Alice Ann Wheeldon \(1866-1919\)](#), whose conviction in 1917 for conspiracy to murder the Prime Minister is currently being reviewed.^[93] In addition, the pro-war press took every effort to encourage the ridicule, suspicion and hatred of objectors.^[94]

Conscientious Objectors after the Armistice

After the armistice there was the issue of when COs should be allowed to return to their lives. Unsurprisingly, they were not prioritised and delays led to protests in prisons. For example, [Evan Charles Meredith \(1895-1973\)](#) led a 1919 hunger-strike in Carmarthen Prison and the twenty CO prisoners being held there were temporarily released. They then seem to have been forgotten, perhaps on purpose, as they were not recalled.^[95] Gradually COs were let go, with most absolutists leaving prison in April 1919.^[96] Bringing up the rear, the last were discharged from the Non-Combatant Corps in 1920.^[97]

As a final punishment, the Representation of the People Act 1918 (which granted some women the vote for the first time) disenfranchised COs who had not assisted the war effort.^[98] The measure was, however, not fully implemented.^[99] Moreover, some COs who technically could not vote were soon elected. N-CF founder, DORA offender and absolutist [Walter Henry Ayles \(1879-1953\)](#) was re-elected to Bristol Council in 1919 and was one of fifteen COs who became MPs in 1923.^[100] Former COs could suffer because of their stance though. Absolutist [Alfred Ernest James \(ca. 1878-1959\)](#), an atheist and a socialist, felt that his family endured hardship and [Eric Alwyn Crompton \(1892-1991\)](#), a political objector who worked at Dartmoor Camp, found it difficult to obtain employment.^[101]

Aftermath

As to the nation's stability, social conflict and protest continued and was a concern for the authorities after the armistice. Indeed, the need to transition to a post-war society added a new uncertainty and potential volatility to an already unstable situation. Consequently, maintaining control by some means remained a high priority. For example, the decision to grant the vote to some women meant that any resurgence of suffragette militancy was avoided.^[102] At the same time, divisions in and over Ireland continued, leading to bloody conflict, partition and more conflict.^[103]

Worker unrest was another issue for the authorities, with worries about Russian influence continuing. 1919, in particular, was a year of unrest of various sorts and has been referred to as "Britain's Year of Revolution."^[104] Indeed, even the police went on strike – in 1918 (when the issues were swiftly settled) and again in 1919 (when the introduction of higher wages, increased benefits and an additional payment of ten pounds defeated the protest). In addition, the responses included the removal of strikers and the stopping of attempts at unionisation.^[105]

A significant problem was also posed by men who had joined the military for the period of the war. They needed to be demobilised and this process caused considerable unrest. After the truce of November 1918 there were mutinies and strikes within the military around the UK, with complaints about delays to demobilisation, conditions, work and pay key issues. Soldiers refused to obey orders, turned up at local headquarters or the town hall, with some heading for the War Office in London to make their demands known. Significantly, the authority's response was to make concessions; executions on UK soil were less likely to be borne by the populous and fears of the possibility of revolution meant that some form of compromise was needed in order to pacify men who were armed, who in many cases were very used to using those arms and who had been brutalised by the horrors of their wartime experiences.^[106]

Conclusion

Managing different forms of social conflict and protest in the UK was a key concern for the state in the early years of the 20th century. During the war forms of dissent and resistance expanded to include war resistance, including conscientious objection. At the same time, some of the underlying tensions which pre-existed the conflict continued for its duration, in some cases combining with war resistance, and were still in existence after it ended. State responses to individuals and groups who posed a challenge to the authorities were not just a matter of exerting control by repression as managing the situation could involve other means of policing dissent. So, alongside prosecution, surveillance and punishment there were, for example, concessions and attempts to shape attitudes towards rebels. These techniques evolved during the war and continued after its end.

Neither social conflict nor efforts to manage dissent in the early 20th century were confined to the UK though. Consequently, in order to understand the war resistance of which COs formed a part, a still wider view should be taken. For example, in terms of the war period this should encompass the

military strikes, mutinies, protests, refusals and lack of war enthusiasm by the soldiers and labourers who “fought” for the UK whether they occurred inside or outside the UK’s boundaries. In addition to the fleeting references to such activities in the text above, this should include consideration of the mutiny at the Etaples training camp in France, for instance, which has become (inaccurately) infamous in popular culture^[107] and of the case of the British West Indies Regiment’s 1918 mutiny in Taranto, Italy. In the latter instance, having patriotically volunteered for service these men were treated appallingly, given the most filthy and hazardous jobs and were discriminated against in terms of pay. In the end they had had enough and rebelled. As a result, around sixty men were tried for mutiny and sentenced to terms of incarceration. One was executed. The remaining men were distributed to other battalions.^[108]

The broader perspectives adopted to understand war resistance explored and suggested here depict a starkly different view both of the UK in the early 20th century and of the war than is usually presented. Moreover, the stories told reveal complex, under-explored material which attracted barely any attention during the centenary of the conflict.^[109] These stories are, however, crucial to any understanding of the period and serve to complicate and challenge more well-trodden narratives.

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Notes

1. ↑ Useful introductions to these subjects are provided by Hochschild, Adam: *To End All Wars. A Story of Protest and Patriotism in the First World War*, London 2011 and Millman, Brock: *Managing Domestic Dissent in First World War Britain*, London 2000.
2. ↑ Benjamin Zieman’s exploration of “resistance against the war” in Germany via [Jaroslav Hašek’s \(1883-1923\) *The Good Soldier Švejk*](#) is an influence here. Zieman, Benjamin: *Resistance to War in Germany 1914-1918. The Traces of the German ‘Schweikiade’* in: *Český Časopis Historický* 114 (2016), pp. 717-734.
3. ↑ Pearce, Cyril: *Communities of Resistance. Mapping Dissent in Britain during the First World War*, London 2020.
4. ↑ Moreover, the complexities of Irish history in this period mean that justice cannot be done to the topic within this short article. However, other encyclopedia entries read alongside the present article provide fuller UK-wide coverage.
5. ↑ Pearce Register of WW1 British Conscientious Objectors. A version of the register can be accessed online: *Lives of the First World War*, issued by Imperial War Museum, online: <https://livesofthefirstworldwar.iwm.org.uk/> (retrieved: 25 October 2019).
6. ↑ Bibbings, Lois S: *Telling Tales About Men. Conceptions of Conscientious Objectors to Military Service during the First World War*, Manchester 2009, pp. 151-156.

7. † This is one of the ideas developed by Richard Thurlow in Thurlow, Richard: *The Secret State. British Internal Security in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge 1995.
8. † For different accounts of militancy see Purvis, June: 'Deeds, Not Words'. *The Daily Lives of Militant Suffragettes in Edwardian Britain*, in: *Women's Studies International Forum* 18/2 (1995), pp. 91-101; Monaghan, Rachel: 'Votes for Women'. *An Analysis of the Militancy Campaign*, in: *Terrorism and Political Violence* 9/2 (1997), pp. 65-78.
9. † See Morrell, Caroline: 'Black Friday'. *Violence against Women in the Suffragette Movement*, London 1981.
10. † See Purvis, June: *The Prison Experiences of the Suffragettes in Edwardian Britain*, in: *Women's History Review* 4/1 (1995), pp. 103-113; Miller, Ian: *A History of Force Feeding. Hunger Strikes, Prisons and Medical Ethics, 1909-1974*, London 2016, chapter 2.
11. † See, for example, Sires, Ronald V.: *Labor Unrest in England, 1910-1914*, in: *Journal of Economic History* 15/3 (1955), pp. 246-266; Dangerfield, George: *The Strange Death of Liberal England*, London 1935, part II, chapter 4, Part III, chapter 4.
12. † See Davies, Sam / Noon, Ron: *The Rank-and-File in the 1911 Liverpool General Transport Strike*, in: *Labour History Review* 79/1 (2014), pp. 55-81.
13. † For example, see Kee, Robert: *The Bold Fenian Men*, London 1976, chapters 10-12, especially pp. 191-194; Dangerfield, *Strange Death* 1935, part III, chapters 1-2, especially chapter 1.
14. † For an account of early opposition see Carsten, Francis Ludwig: *War against War. British and German Radical Movements in the First World War*, Berkeley 1982, chapters 1-2.
15. † See Brittain, Vera: *The Rebel Passion. A Short History of Some Pioneer Peace-Makers*, London 1964; Swartz, Marvin: *The Union of Democratic Control in British Politics during the First World War*, Oxford 1971.
16. † Wiltshire, Anne: *Most Dangerous Women. Feminist Peace Campaigners of the Great War*, London 1985.
17. † See Bussey, Gertrude / Tims, Margaret: *Pioneers for Peace. WILPF 1915-1965*, London 1980, chapter 1.
18. † See Ronan, Alison: *The Women's Peace Crusade 1917-1918. Crusading Women in Manchester and East Lancashire. The 'Real Rebels' of WW1*, Manchester 2017.
19. † See, for example, *Clyde Workers and Mr Lloyd George*, in: *Labour Leader*, 23 December 1915, p. 7. For the context see Kenefick, William / McIvor, Arthur J. (eds.): *Roots of Red Clydeside, 1910-1914*, Edinburgh 1997.
20. † *FOLLOW RUSSIA!*, in: *Labour Leader*, 31 May 1917, p. 5.
21. † *Meetings*, in: *Daily Herald*, 24 March 1917, p. 8. *The Russian Meetings*, in: *The Woman's Dreadnought*, 31 March 1917, p. 712.
22. † See, for example, Kee, *Fenian* 1976, pp. 182-183, chapter 14; Pennell, Catriona: *More than a 'Curious Footnote'. Irish Voluntary Participation in the First World War and British Popular Memory* in: Horne, John et al. (eds.): *Towards Commemoration. Ireland in War and Revolution, 1912-1923*, Dublin 2013, pp. 38-46; Callan, Patrick: *Ambivalence towards the Saxon Shilling. The Attitudes of the Catholic Church in Ireland towards Enlistment during the First World War*, in: *Archivium Hibernicum* 41 (1986), pp. 99-111.
23. † See, for example, Kee, *Fenian* 1976, chapter 16.
24. † See, for example, *Ibid.*, chapter 17.

25. ↑ For challenges to the myth of 'war enthusiasm' see for example Ferguson, Niall: *The Pity of War*, London 1998, chapter 7; Pennell, Catriona: *A Kingdom United*, Oxford 2012.
26. ↑ *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire in the Great War*, London 1920, p. 364.
27. ↑ See further Bibbings, *Tales* 2009, pp. 176-185.
28. ↑ I am grateful to Julian Putkowski, [Cyril Pearce](#), Emma Byron and Trevor Houghton for their research and observations.
29. ↑ For an overview of some of these issues see, for example, Bibbings, *Tales* 2009, pp. 213-219.
30. ↑ Ashworth, Tony: *Trench Warfare 1914-1918. The Live and Let Live System*, London 1980.
31. ↑ Putkowski, Julian: *British Army Mutineers 1914-1922*, London 1988, pp. 12-13.
32. ↑ For example, see Agents-Provocateurs, in: *Labour Leader*, 22 March 1917, p. 2; Millman, *Dissent* 2000, pp. 183-184. On the work of the security service see Hiley, Nicholas: *Counter-Espionage and Security in Great Britain during the First World War*, in: *English Historical Review* 101/400 (1986), pp. 635-670.
33. ↑ *Defence of the Realm*, in: *The Scotsman*, 7 August 1915, p. 10.
34. ↑ See Eirug, Aled: *The Opposition to the Great War in Wales 1914-1918*, Cardiff 2018, p. 92.
35. ↑ See, for example, *A Little Fit of the (H)ague*, in: *Daily Express*, 28 April, 1915, p. 7.
36. ↑ See Gearty, Conor: *The Casement Treason Trial in Its Legal Context*, in: *Irish Jurist* 36 (2001), pp. 32-42; Rubin, Gerry: *Posthumous Pardons, the Home Office and the Timothy Evans Case*, in: *Criminal Law Review* (2007), pp 41-59, 46, 57.
37. ↑ See Kee, *Fenian* 1976, chapter 17.
38. ↑ *Ibid.*
39. ↑ See: Putkowski, Julian / Sykes, Julian: *Shot At Dawn. Executions in World War One by Authority of the British Army Act*, Barnsley 1989; Oram, Gerard / Putkowski, Julian (ed.): *Death Sentences Passed by Military Courts of the British Army 1914-1924*, London 1998.
40. ↑ Babbington, Anthony: *For the Sake of Example. Capital Courts Martial 1914-18. The Truth*, London 1983.
41. ↑ *Hayes Denis: Conscription Conflict*, London 1949, pp. 36-50.
42. ↑ *In Case of It*, in: *Labour Leader*, 12 November 1914, p. 6; *In Case of Conscription*, in: *Labour Leader*, 19 November 1914, p. 6.
43. ↑ For an in-depth account of the N-CF see Kennedy, Thomas C: *The Hound of Conscience. A History of the No-Conscription Fellowship, 1914-1919*, Fayetteville 1981.
44. ↑ See, for example, Nevinson, Henry W.: *The Conscientious Objector*, in: *Atlantic Monthly* (1916), pp. 686-693; *Review of the Week. Is It Conscription*, in: *Labour Leader*, 12 November 1914, p. 4. There were also those, such as F. J. C. Hearnshaw, who focused on a longer history to support the case for compulsion, see Hearnshaw, F. J. C.: *Compulsory Military Service in England*, in: *Quarterly Review* (1916), pp. 416-437. More broadly, volunteerism and conscription might both be seen as being part of a different tradition, see Beckett, Ian: *Amateur Military Tradition, 1558-1945*, Manchester 1991.
45. ↑ For example, see Bibbings, *Tales* 2009, pp. 27-28.
46. ↑ *National Registration Act 1915*, s. 15; *House of Commons Debates* 21 September 1915 vol. 74 cc. 323-4.
47. ↑ Kennedy, *Hound* 1981, p. 62.

48. † National Registration Act 1915, s. 13(3).
49. † For example, see No Vote, No Register, in: *Woman's Dreadnought*, 9 October 1915, p. 1; National Registration Sequel, in: *Woman's Dreadnought*, 6 November 1915, p. 1; News in Brief, in: *The Times*, 6 October 1915, p. 5.
50. † See National Archives (NA), PRO 30/57/73/30, Asquith to Kitchener, 16 October 1915.
51. † On the Scheme see Earl of Derby: Report on Recruiting, Cd. 8149, 1916.
52. † NA, CAB 37/139/26, Memorandum on Recruiting.
53. † House of Commons Debates 5 January 1916 vol. 77 cc. 962-978.
54. † 'Suffrage' Meeting Broken Up, in: *The Times*, 10 April 1916, p. 5.
55. † See Eirug, *Opposition 2018*, pp. 78-89.
56. † House of Commons Debates 5 January 1916 vol. 77 cc. 954, 1036-1046.
57. † Report on Recruiting in Ireland (1914-1916) XXXIX Cd. 8168. For the context see Kee, *Fenian 1976*, chapter 14.
58. † Military Service Act 1916, s. 1.
59. † *Ibid.*, s. 2.
60. † For example, see House of Lords Debates 25 January 1916 vol. 20 c. 996.
61. † Military Service Act 1916, s. 2(1).
62. † On the drafting and passage of this first measure in relation to COs see Rae, John: *Conscience and Politics. The British Government and the Conscientious Objector to Military Service 1916-1919*, Oxford 1970, chapters 2-3.
63. † Military Service Act 1916, s. 2(3).
64. † For example, see *M'Intyre v Dollan* 1917 2 S.L.T. 118.
65. † Military Service Act 1916 (Session 2), ss. 1, 4(3).
66. † See Military Service (No.2) Act 1918, ss. 1(1), 1(1)(a), 2 respectively.
67. † See, for example, Ward, Alan J: Lloyd George and the 1918 Irish Conscription Crisis, in: *The Historical Journal* 17/1 (1974), pp. 107-129; Morrissey, Conor: Protestant Nationalists and the Irish Conscription Crisis 1918, in: Barry, Gearóid / Dal Lago, Enrico / Healy, Róisín (eds.): *Small Nations and Colonial Peripheries in World War 1*, Leiden 2016, chapter 4.
68. † Statute Law Revision Act 1927, Sch. Pt. 1.
69. † Edmunds, James Edward: *Military Operations, France and Belgium 1916*, volume 1, London 1932, p. 152.
70. † Rae, *Conscience 1970*, p. 98.
71. † *Copartnership Farms v Harvey-Smith* [1918] 2 K.B. 405, 408-11.
72. † See further Rae, *Conscience 1970*, pp. 120-123.
73. † On gendered attitudes to COs see, for example, Bibbings, Lois S.: Images of Manliness. The Portrayal of Soldiers and Conscientious Objectors in the Great War, in: *Social and Legal Studies* 12/3 (2003), pp. 335-58 and Bibbings, *Tales 2009*.
74. † See further Graham, John W.: *Conscription and Conscience. A History 1916-1919*, London 1922, chapter 3; Bibbings, *Tales 2009*, pp. 29-31, 71-74, 100.

75. ↑ For example, see Snowden, Philip: *British Prussianism. The Scandal of the Tribunals. Full Reports of Two Speeches Delivered in the House of Commons, on March 22, and April, 6, 1916*, London 1916.
76. ↑ *The Conscientious Objector*, 18 March 1916, p. 348.
77. ↑ For example, see Bibbings, *Tales* 2009, pp. 124-126.
78. ↑ See further Boulton, David: *Objection Overruled*, London 2014, appendix.
79. ↑ See *The Men Who Died*, issued by Peace Pledge Union, online: https://www.menwhosaidno.org/context/context_menWhoDiedNames.html (retrieved: 25 October 2019).
80. ↑ 'Army Order X' (AO 179/1916).
81. ↑ For the most accurate and comprehensive list of COs and of what happened to them see the Pearce Register.
82. ↑ On prisons see, for example, Hobhouse, Stephen: *The Silence System in Prisons*, London 1918 and Hobhouse, Stephen: *An English Prison from Within*, London 1919.
83. ↑ See further Bibbings, *Tales* 2009, p. 34.
84. ↑ See, for example, *Ibid.*, pp. 169-170.
85. ↑ See, for example, *Ibid.*, pp. 34, 156.
86. ↑ See Rae, *Conscience* 1970, pp. 230-231 and *Inquiry Held into the Allegations Made against the Acting Governor of Wandsworth Prison*, Cmd. 131, 1919.
87. ↑ See NA, MH/47/3/1, *Report of the Central Tribunal*, 1919, pp. 20-27.
88. ↑ See Tatham, Meaburn / Miles, James Edward: *The Friends Ambulance Unit 1914-1919. A Record*, London 1920.
89. ↑ Pearce, *Communities 2020, Afterwords, On the Run*.
90. ↑ For example, see Plowman, Max: *Bridge into the Future*, London 1944, pp. 29-130.
91. ↑ See, for example, Bibbings, *Tales* 2009, pp. 148-151.
92. ↑ See, for example, *Undergraduate Sent to Prison*, in: *The Times*, 18 March 1916, p. 5; £880 in Fines, in: *Daily Mirror*, 18 May 1916, p. 2.
93. ↑ Rowbotham, Sheila: *Friends of Alice Wheeldon. The Anti-War Activist Accused of Plotting to Kill Lloyd George*, London 2015; *Family Work to Clear PM Plot Suffragette's Name*, issued by BBC, online: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-derbyshire-50490558> (retrieved: 25 October 2019).
94. ↑ For example, see Bibbings, *Tales* 2009, pp. 61, 64-65.
95. ↑ See Bibbings, Lois S.: *Fearne Cotton. Who Do You Think You Are*, issued by BBC, online: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b092p034> (retrieved: 30 March 2020); Meredith, Evan C.: *No Other Way*, in: Meredith, Keith E. G. (ed.): *Seeking Meredith Ancestry Worldwide*, Nailsworth 2002, pp. 267-269.
96. ↑ See NA CAB 23/10/1 (WC 553), *War Cabinet Minutes*, 3 April 1919, para. 1.
97. ↑ NA, WO 32/54901919-20, *Employment of Military Forces. Mobilisation and Demobilisation (Code 5(E)). Problems arising out of Demobilisation of Non-Combatant Corps*.
98. ↑ *Representation of the People Act 1918*, s. 9(2).
99. ↑ NA, MH 47/3/1, *Supplemental Report of the Central Tribunal on their Proceedings Under the Representation of the People Act 1918*.

100. ↑ On Ayles see Thomas, Colin: *Slaughter No Remedy*, Bristol 2016.
101. ↑ *Remembering the Real World War 1: Refusing to Kill*. Bristol's World War 1 Conscientious Objectors, Bristol 2019, p. 27.
102. ↑ Representation of the People Act 1918, s. 4.
103. ↑ For example, see further Horne, John: *Ireland and the Wars after the War, 1917-1923*, in: Horne, Commemoration 2013.
104. ↑ Webb, Simon: *1919 Britain's Year of Revolution*, Barnsley 2016.
105. ↑ See King, Joseph F: *The United Kingdom Police Strikes of 1918-1919*, in: *Police Studies. The International Review of Police Development* 11/3 (1988), pp. 128-138; Webb, *Revolution 1919*, chapter 7.
106. ↑ See, for example, Webb, *Revolution 2016*, chapter 3; Rothstein, Andrew: *The Soldiers' Strikes of 1919*, London 1980. Thanks to Roger Ball for his insights on this topic.
107. ↑ See, for example, Gill, Douglas / Dallas, Gloden: *Mutiny at Etaples Base in 1917*, in: *Past and Present. A Journal of Historical Studies* 69 (November 1975) pp. 88-112; Putkowski, Julian: *Toplis, Etaples and 'The Monicled Mutineer'*, in: *Stand Ho!* 18 (1886), pp. 6-11.
108. ↑ Elkins, W. F.: *A Source of Black Nationalism in the Caribbean. The Revolt of the British West Indies Regiment at Taranto, Italy*, in: *Science and Society* 34/1 (1970), pp. 99-105. *Mutiny (1999)*, issued by Sweet Patootee, online: <http://www.sweetpatootee.co.uk/work/mutiny> (retrieved: 25 October 2019).
109. ↑ This approach was deployed at the 2019 Commemoration, Conflict and Conscience festival which the author of this article led, see *Commemoration, Conflict and Conscience*, issued by Commemoration, Conflict and Conscience, online: <https://www.conflictandconscience.org.uk> (retrieved: 9 December 2019).

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