

## Chapter 2 - Military Conscription

teachers' notes

### in brief

Chapter 2 focuses on the build up to conscription in the 1916 Military Service Act and examines some of the reasons for, and opposition to, conscription.

The meaning of conscription is outlined followed by an examination of the flood of volunteers to the army in the first part of the war, including how young men were encouraged through official and informal means to enlist. The government's first steps to conscription are outlined as well as early opposition to the idea of conscription. The next two sections focus on the growing resistance to conscription, in the form of the No-Conscription Fellowship, and sheds light on the fierce debate in parliament and the country as a whole as conscription finally becomes law.

The human rights section looks at the balance of rights and responsibilities, including the right to freedom of speech and movement and the responsibility not to harm others. By comparing conscription with the debate on ID cards the issue of rights and responsibilities is given a new relevance.

### learning objectives by sub-section

Students will be able to:

- 2.1. what is military conscription?
  - define conscription and explain how and why young men volunteered in huge numbers for the army.
- 2.2 . patriotism, propaganda & peer pressure
  - identify some of the reasons which contributed to the initial flood of volunteers to the army.
- 2.3 . steps to conscription - National Registration Act
  - describe the government's first steps to conscription and some of the early opposition.
- 2.4. the No-Conscription Fellowship
  - describe the setting up and purpose of the No-Conscription Fellowship and some of the opposition to the NCF.
- 2.5 . conscription is introduced
  - understand the new relationship between people and government which conscription brought and describe some of the arguments for and against the 'conscription clause' in the Military Service Act.
- 2.6. human rights focus - rights & responsibilities
  - discuss the balance of rights and responsibilities in relation to conscription as well as some - contemporary issues such as the ID card debate.

### questions and answers

#### 2.1. What is conscription?

1. Write a definition of military conscription in your own words.

*Conscription is a system in which a government orders men (and sometimes women) to join and serve in the armed forces. NB Conscription was only to the army in the First World War -the air force did not exist and there was no conscription to the navy.*

2. How many men volunteered to join the army in the first month, and why? After the initial rush, what reasons were there for the drop in the number of volunteers for the army?

*Over three quarters of a million volunteered in the first month. They were keen to fight for their country, to have an adventure and to get regular wages, proper clothing and food. They also came under pressure from family, colleagues and the authorities. The number of volunteers dropped as news of the high death toll on the battlefields reached home - more than 1,000 per day by the the first Christmas of the war. Poor health amongst volunteers also reduced the number able to enlist in the army.*

3. Describe how Pals Battalions were formed and the advantages and disadvantages of recruiting for the army in this way. *Men were able to enlist with others from the same local area or employer. The advantage to the army was that men were more willing to volunteer alongside their friends, family and colleagues. The disadvantage was that whole communities could be devastated when all the men from the local were killed in a single battle.*

4. What was the lower age limit for active service in the army in the First World War and what is it now? Why did some parents send their son's birth certificates to the War Office during the First World War?

*Eighteen years old during the First World War. Sixteen years old now. Some parents sent their sons birth certificates to the War Office to prove they were underage and in an attempt to have their sons returned.*

5. Writing: Imagine several of your friends have joined the local Pals Battalion. You have decided not to volunteer. Write a poem or short story to describe the contrast between your feelings and the feelings of your friends.

*Students' own answers.*

6. Research: The United Nations has produced a 'Convention on the Rights of the Child'. In the year 2000, an 'Optional Protocol' about children in armed conflict was produced (Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict). Why was the Convention written? What are the main aims of the Optional Protocol'?

further **RESOURCES**

**Convention on the Rights of the Child  
Optional Protocol**

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

*The objective of the Optional Protocol is to limit the use of children in armed conflict. It particularly aims to raise the minimum age for recruitment and actual participation in hostilities to 18; to keep people under the age of 18 from direct participation in hostilities and to take precautions against the voluntary recruitment of people under the age of 18.*

**2.2. patriotism, propaganda & peer pressure**

1. In your own words describe what patriotism, propaganda and peer pressure are.

Patriotism: to love and be proud of your country. Propaganda: selective and exaggerated information intended to promote a particular cause. Peer pressure: pressure from friends and colleagues to conform.

2. Read 'Dulce et Decorum est' by Wilfred Owen. What is the author's view of patriotism? What is his view of war? Use examples from the poem to make your answer clear. Find out more about the poem and the author here:

further **RESOURCES**

**Dulce et Decorum est  
Poetry of war and peace**

*Wilfred exposes the lie of patriotism (that it is a sweet and honourable thing to die for one's country - 'Dulce et decorum est') and his horrific description of a gas attack in the trenches (he plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning/ white eyes writhing in his face vile incurable sores on innocent tongues) suggests Wilfred was completely against war, despite serving as a soldier.*

3. What do the following posters from the First World War say about the expected roles of men and women during war? What do they encourage you to think about British people and German people? What effect do you think posters like these were intended to have?



*British men were expected to be brave, strong and eager to 'protect' British women by fighting. British women were expected to be caring and supportive and to encourage men to enlist and fight. German men and women were portrayed as barbaric savages, unwilling even to give water to help a wounded man. In contrast, British men and women were portrayed as proud, honourable people who would always help those in need. The intention was to make a distinction between 'them' (German) and 'us' (British) to encourage more men to enlist in the army.*

4. Research: Collect newspaper articles about a war the British armed forces are involved in at the moment. Find words in the articles which describe the British armed forces and those which describe the people they are fighting against. Make two lists of the words and compare them. Are there any differences or similarities? What conclusions can you draw from the kinds of words used to describe the opposing forces?

*Students' own answers.*

5. Writing: Military recruitment posters and many poems about war romanticise and glorify war. Write a poem or design a poster which encourages people NOT to join the army or to fight in wars.

*Students' own answers.*

### 2.3. Steps to conscription - National Registration Act

1. What effect did the Dardanelles Expedition (Gallipoli) in February 1915 have on the number of volunteers to the army?

*The very high death toll for no military advantage resulted in a drop in the number of volunteers.*

2. What did the 1915 National Registration Act make everyone between 15 and 65 years old do? Why did they have to do this?

*They had to put their names on the National Register. This enabled the government and military to target those men who had not yet volunteered for the army. It also prepared the ground for industrial conscription, however, this was not implemented in the First World War.*

3. Why did the military authorities visit all the men between 18 and 40 whose names were on the National Register? How do you think would you have felt if you had been visited?

*To put pressure on them to enlist in the army.*

4. Discussion: Fred Sellar was sent to prison for handing out leaflets which criticised the government's plan for a National Register. Read the leaflet and consider why the government were so concerned by Fred's actions. What are/should we be allowed to say or write in public? What, if anything, aren't/shouldn't we be allowed to say or write in public? Is it acceptable to say or write things now that were unacceptable at the time of the First World War?

All those who sign the proposed National Register will render themselves liable to be called up to serve the State. Men will be sent to the battlefield (after being trained) there to fight other men with intent to kill or be killed. All those women and young persons above the age of 15 years who sign the register will render themselves liable to be called up and taken away from their homes and their present employment, and forced to work on the production of war materials.

Though they are now encouraged to state what work they are doing, and what other work they would like to do, they may find when too late, that there will be no escape from forced work for the State so that the war may be carried on; in many cases, perhaps, to take the places of men who will be pressed into the army and navy.

Mr Asquith [the Prime Minister] has recently stated that we are spending three millions of pounds daily and losing three thousand men a day! And he further declared that the Government, if necessary, will send the last man and spend the last farthing before they will give in; this will need compulsion, and that is why the whole nation are asked to sign away their freedom, and are being told that this Compulsory Registration is not for Conscription!

Those who object to Compulsory Registration are invited to send name and address to the undersigned without delay, so that in the event of its being necessary to call meetings of protest they may be informed when and where to attend.

*Fred H Sellar Secretary, ILP. 12 South Side Wincanton*

*The government were concerned about the leaflet because it revealed the true purpose of the National Registration Act: to prepare for conscription. It also exposed how much money was being spent on the war and numbers being killed every day: information the government did not want publicised. Furthermore, the leaflet encouraged those who objected to compulsory registration to make themselves known to the author to facilitate a campaign against compulsory registration: more unwelcome news for the government.*

*NB Today, we are not allowed to incite people to violence, hatred or to break the law. We also cannot libel or slander someone. At the time of writing there is a public debate about 'glorification' of violent acts.*

5. Writing/Drama: Imagine it is 1915 and you are at home with your parents and elder brother. You hear a knock at the door and find a military recruiting officer outside. Produce a short play about what happened when the recruiting officer encouraged your father and older brother (18 years old) to join the army. Your brother wants to join the army but your father doesn't want him to, and refuses to join himself. What reasons might they have given for joining and refusing to join the army? How would the recruiting officer react?

*Students' own answers.*

## 2.4 the No-Conscription Fellowship

1. Describe the No-Conscription Fellowship (NCF) in your own words. How did it start and what were its aims? Who were its members and how many were there?

*The NCF campaigned against conscription and supported conscientious objectors and their families. It started by Fenner Brockway inviting men between 18 and 38 who objected to fighting to send their contact details to him. The NCF soon had 10,000 members, mostly socialists and Quakers but including many other groups.*

2. Why was the No-Conscription Fellowship unpopular with the government and some parts of the media?

*Because it opposed conscription and the war itself.*

3. What happened at the first large meeting of the NCF in Bishopsgate, London? Why did it happen? How did the NCF Chairman try to pacify the situation?

*There was almost a riot outside - a mob of angry civilians and soldiers tried to batter down the door, trying to get to the NCF members inside. The Chairman asked those inside to wave handkerchiefs rather than clap to quell the crowd outside.*

4. Discussion: Read the article from the Daily Sketch and the letter from seven COs in Hounslow Barracks, then discuss the questions below.

### TREASON AND MUTINY ARE STILL RAMPANT

#### Authorities Should Put Their Foot On No-Conscription Party

##### *Its Insidious Propaganda*

The country is at present discussing the question of all-round compulsion.

And while we are debating whether or no every man with wife and family and home duties should be compelled to fight, a certain organisation is allowed to preach treason and mutiny in the broad daylight, to incite young unmarried men to evade service, and to incite soldiers to disobey all military orders.

That organisation is the No-Conscription Fellowship. Its chairman is Clifford Allen; its secretary is Fenner Brockway; its organiser is W.J. Chamberlain. Among the list of sympathisers figure prominently the names of Philip Snowden MP, and James Ramsay MacDonald MP.

The Fellowship has its own newspaper, The Tribunal, now in its sixth number, published by the Fellowship at 8 Merton House, Salisbury-court, Fleet-street, and bearing the imprint of the National Labour Press Ltd, 74 Swinton Street, London, W.C.

##### *Its Flouting Of Authority*

An unsigned article mentions with gratification that 'in practically every case our members have refused all military orders', and you are invited to view as grossly unfair the treatment of Private Everett, E.J., who refused to obey all orders, was court-martialled, and sentenced to two years' hard labour – instead of being shot, as he deserved.

There is also a letter from seven soldiers now confined to Hounslow Barracks, commenting on the methods by which they were urged to put on khaki. Nothing more is needed to convict the Fellowship and its officers of treasonable conspiracy and of inciting soldiers to mutiny.

*Daily Sketch, 21 April 1916*

'We, seven conscientious objectors, would like you to know our present condition. In all cases the tribunals have refused exemption from military service. We have been arrested by the police, imprisoned in the cells, brought before courts, and handed over to the military. We have, as politely as possible, refused to obey all military orders, but they have forced us into solitary confinement, dragged us to be forcibly examined by the doctor. Today our clothes have been wrenched off our bodies and a uniform forced on. When we removed it on principle, they took us from the cells to the detention room, and left us with only an undershirt for four and a half hours, with no heat-

ing. We were made to stand thus naked before officers in front of the door and in view of the public highway, while certain particulars were taken for a court-martial to be held, probably on Friday at 11am. We demanded counsel, but Mr. Larkman, to arrange for it, was obliged to cross barrack yard with only a blanket.'

*Signed: Templeman, Larkman, Jones, Jones, Ebeling, Forrester, Moat. Hounslow Barracks.*

- Was it 'grossly unfair' to sentence E.J. Everett, a conscientious objector, to two years' hard labour for disobeying military orders?
- Do you agree with the Daily Sketch's view that he should have been shot, 'as he deserved'? Give reasons for your answer.
- Were the seven COs from Hounslow Barracks treated fairly? How would you feel if you were treated this way?

**Students' own answers.**

5. Writing: Imagine you were at the NCF meeting in Bishopsgate, London, where there was a violent demonstration outside. Pretend to be EITHER an undercover police officer OR one of the members of the NCF. Write a short report about what happened, what you saw and the feelings of the people inside and outside the meeting. Think about how the NCF member's report might be different from the undercover police officer's report.

**Students' own answers.**

## 2.5. conscription is introduced

1. What was the Military Service Act? What was the 'conscience clause'?

**Military Service Act: the new law which introduced conscription. Conscience clause: the part of the new law which allowed conscientious objectors exemption from fighting if they were proved to be genuine in their beliefs.**

2. Describe the relationship between government and people in Britain before conscription. How did the relationship change with the introduction of conscription?

**Before conscription: a loose relationship - apart from taxes, neither expected much of the other. After conscription: a much closer relationship - the government expected loyalty and military service; in return, the people expected a say in the choice of government (universal suffrage) and assistance from the government (healthcare for the poor, housing, education etc.)**

3. What does 'deemed to have enlisted' mean? Which people were 'deemed to have enlisted' from from 2 March 1916?

**Regarded as having enlisted voluntarily, despite not signing any papers or swearing an oath. All unmarried men aged 18-41.**

4. Reading/Discussion: Read W.P. Cahill's Court-martial statement and discuss the questions below.

'I am a Pacifist. The Military Services Act is a direct challenge to the principles I have held firmly and practised for years. My principles, far from being weakened by a state of war, are actually strengthened to the extent that I have been long removed from the realm of fear, and can face with calmness, and I hope with dignity, all the terrors that Tribunals, Police Courts, Courts-Martial and Prison, aye, and Death itself, have to offer.

*To me the killing of a man is murder, and in my opinion all the conceit and vanity of society expressed in terms of Victoria Crosses, Military Crosses, and medals and the like cannot remove the guilt of so grave a crime.*

*It may be that you will conceive it to be your duty to pronounce judgement against me. I, on my part, must continue my course, meeting violence and force with the only weapons a Pacifist can handle – passive resistance and the unconquerable power of reason: the proudest possession of man and that which alone can rescue him from falling to the level of the brute beast.*

Time will show how discredited the military ideal has become; but I take this opportunity of recording my deep regret that there are to be found in this country (which once boasted of its freedom) men willing to assist in the operation of a Parliamentary sham, ushered in after a campaign of intrigue and dishonesty that can hardly be paralleled in the history of England.

I am not concerned with what may happen to me in the future; that responsibility must remain always yours according to the decision at which you may arrive.'

*25 November 1916 W. P. Cahill at his Court-martial*

- 'To me the killing of a man is murder' Say why you agree or disagree with W.P. Cahill's statement. Do soldiers 'kill' or 'murder' people? Describe any similarities or differences. What other words for killing someone are there?
- What are 'the only weapons a Pacifist can handle'? Describe these 'weapons' in your own words. Do you think they can be effective? For a list of 198 methods of non-violent action.

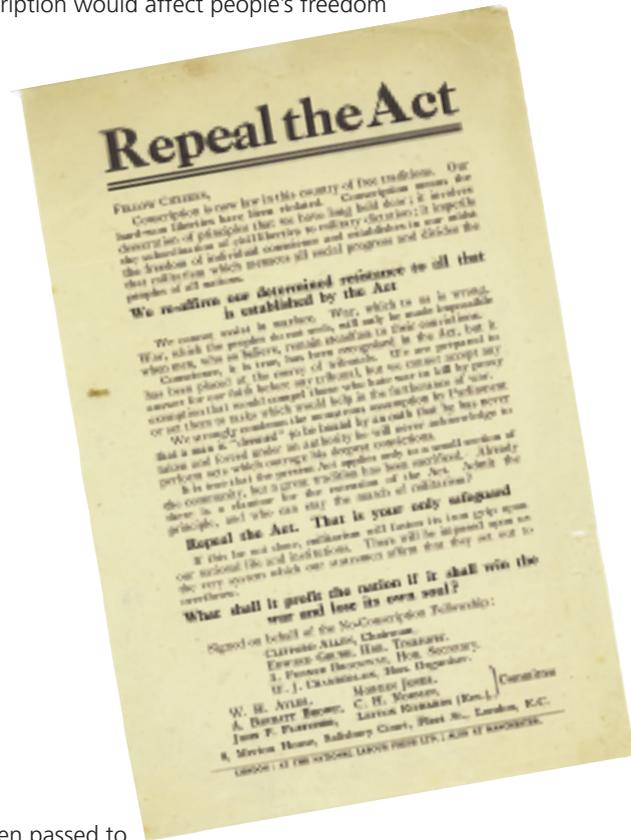
### further RESOURCES

**Albert Einstein Institution**

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

*Students' own answers.*

5. Design: The No-Conscription Fellowship produced a leaflet called 'Repeal the Act'. They wanted the Military Service Act to be cancelled (repealed) and wanted to tell people how much they objected to being made into soldiers without their agreement. They also wanted to warn people about how conscription would affect people's freedom and the country as a whole.



Imagine that a new law (choose a name for it) has just been passed to introduce conscription for all men and women in Britain. From next week all men and women aged 18-41 will have to go to an army barracks and become a soldier. You are very disturbed by this news and object to being a soldier.

Design your own leaflet or poster called Repeal the Act. The leaflet should:

- explain how conscription will affect people and change their lives;
- describe your feelings at being forced to fight and kill other human beings who you have no argument with;
- say what people should do if they want to join with you to resist the new conscription law. You could add pictures, illustrations and colour to your design.

*Students' own answers.*

## 2.6 human rights focus - rights & responsibilities

1. Every human right has a corresponding responsibility. Choose 5 rights from the Universal Declaration and write the corresponding responsibility to complete the chart.

[short version of UDHR](#) [hrsimple.pdf](#)

2. What new responsibility did the 1916 Military Service Act impose on men aged 18-41 in Britain? What right did the Military Service Act give conscientious objectors?

*New responsibility: to enlist in the army. New right for COs: not to take part in fighting.*

Rights	Responsibilities
Freedom of speech	Not to tell lies about other people
Right to a free and fair trial	To ensure people accused of a crime have a free and fair trial to assess their innocence or guilt.
Freedom from torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.	Not to torture other people or treat them in a degrading way.
Right to life, liberty and security of person.	Not to kill or harm other people.
Freedom from slavery.	Not to make others into slaves and to help those who are slaves or are at risk of becoming slaves.
Freedom of peaceful assembly	To ensure people are allowed to meet peacefully as they choose.

3. 'defending human rights through war is like trying to put out a fire by throwing petrol at it'.

In your own words, describe what this means. Say why you agree or disagree with the statement.

*Students' own answers.*

4. Discussion: Should the rights of a large group of people (a majority) outweigh the rights of a small group of people (a minority)? Or should the rights of a minority be respected whatever the situation? Examples of minorities include conscientious objectors, cigarette smokers, Sikhs, children, and people who object to compulsory ID cards.

After reading about ID cards and minority rights, discuss the questions above. You could refer to identity cards, seat belts, smoking in public places, crash helmets and conscription to help your discussion.

### minority rights

In certain circumstances exceptions are made so that individual's or a minority group's human rights are respected.

Think about wearing a crash helmet on a motorcycle. Should individuals have the right to choose to wear, or not wear, a crash helmet? Surely in a free country people have the right to wear what they like, don't they? But what happens if the person has a serious accident without a helmet on and it costs the NHS £30,000 to care for them in hospital? Should that one person cost so much in taxpayers' money simply because they object to wearing a helmet? And what if someone else dies in the meantime because the doctors and nurses are too busy looking after the motorcycle accident victim?

The current law in the UK is that individuals must wear crash helmets – a sign that the rights of all taxpayers override the right to choose what you can wear on your head. But it is not as simple as that. If your religion (e.g. Sikhism) requires you to wear a turban you are legally entitled not to wear a crash helmet. A special exception is made because it would offend Sikhs so much to have to remove their turban (and deny the right to follow one's own religion) that they do not have to wear a crash helmet on a motorcycle.

*Students' own answers.*

5. What rights and responsibilities do pupils in school have? Produce a poster called 'Our Rights and Responsibilities in School' to display on the wall.

*Students' own answers.*