In 1914 few wanted war. Some realised that dangers were building and worked to prevent it; most gave it little thought. 50 years of relative peace in Europe had led to a false calm as tensions that made war more likely were largely ignored. When Britain declared war on Germany, it was both expected and in some ways a surprise. Many who previously opposed it now felt they had to ‘stand by their country’ and give it support but enthusiasm for the war was never as great as we are often led to believe.

Before August 1914 there was a Europe-wide movement of people who were not content to sit and wait for war. Through public meetings, protest and petitions, they made their voices heard. Britain had a long tradition of anti-war activism and only 12 years before large numbers had protested against Britain’s aggression in the Boer War. Anti-war activists came from many backgrounds. Non-conformist Christians were a large group within the anti-war movement but many also came from a secular political background.

What united all the groups was a desire to work for peace. Anti-war protesters argued that the Government was taking steps that would lead to war. They argued for another way through education, protest and understanding between nations. Despite their best efforts British anti-war activists’ worst fears were realised when Britain declared war on the 4th of August.

Before the war some groups sought to introduce pacifism as a system of conscientious objection that would bring the whole male working class population under the military control of the ruling classes.

The reaction to the British declaration of war was mixed. Peace campaigners felt dismayed while others greeted it with enthusiasm and a promise of opportunity. In many people’s minds war was exciting and noble with brave cavalry charges, and heroic deeds just as in the books and magazines. For others it was an escape from a dull job and grinding poverty, the chance of a wage and even a decent meal. Patriotism was a motivation for some. In any case they said it would all be over by Christmas. Now as then few understood what war really meant.

As the war carried on into 1915, not enough men were joining the army to replace the huge numbers killed and injured on the front. Politicians and military leaders decided that if not enough men joined the army voluntarily they would have to be forced into it. Stopping the war was not an option to those determined to win at all costs.

The real issue is whether we are to begin an immense change in the fundamental structure of our society. Sir John Simon MP’s January 1916 the day conscription became law.

The preamble to exclude married men and men older than 41 from combat was soon abandoned as casualties continued to mount.

In many people’s minds war was exciting and noble

Edwardians lived in an increasingly militarised society. Many young boys vacillatly absorbed the military values of the Boys Brigade and similar organisations.

Conscription comes to Britain

Britain declares war

Conscription begins

The real issue is whether we are to begin an immense change in the fundamental structure of our society.

Sir John Simon MP’s January 1916 the day conscription became law.