

CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTORS OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR



REFUSING TO FIGHT



Ann Kramer

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Introduction

People of Conscience

It is hard to believe today just how much the Second World War permeated the early lives of those who were born immediately after it, as I was. Rationing, austerity, bombsites and prefabs were part of the landscape when I was a child in North London. So was the awareness, if not the understanding, that the previous generation had just gone through six years of war. My family did not promote force or fighting but both my parents had served in the war – my father as a doctor, in the Royal Army Medical Corps and my mother as a nurse with the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD). Separately they were posted to India, where they met and married. Their wartime roles were to mend bodies not destroy them and they did not glorify war. Yet, from what I gathered, they clearly believed that the war was one that had to be fought, that it was as many believed a ‘just’ war, and for the first few years of my life it never occurred to me to question this. I accepted it. I had no idea that there was an alternative view, nor did I know that a huge number of people during the Second World War had, for very principled reasons, refused to fight.

I don’t know when I first began to question the need for war, perhaps once I knew about the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but at some point I realised that for me war was an unacceptable and futile way of trying to solve problems. By the time I was 14 or 15, I had joined the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). I went on Aldermaston marches; demonstrated against the Vietnam War; and protested at Greenham Common. I carried on demonstrating – against the bombing of Libya in 1987; against the first Iraq conflict; and again in 2003 with the two million or more who marched against the government’s decision to invade Iraq. It was what I did and it was

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what my friends were doing. So, while I grew up in a home where my parents had taken part in a war, my daughter grew up in a home where people were constantly making placards or arranging to go on yet another anti-war demonstration.

Ironically for someone who has been involved in anti-war activities, I have written a great deal about the two world wars in the last few years, both for children and adults. One of the things I've noticed is just how little has been written about people who have taken a principled stand against war to the extent of refusing to take up arms, compared with those involved in war, both on the home front or on the battlefield. It is fascinating stuff and very valid, although conventionally it is those who participate in war who are highlighted, while those who take the immensely courageous step of resisting the call to war receive very little coverage.

War memorials alone make this point: just about every town and village has a memorial honouring the dead of both wars. Yet pacifists and conscientious objectors have very few and their memorials have only been created fairly recently. In 1994 Michael Tippett, then president of the Peace Pledge Union, unveiled a huge slate memorial to conscientious objectors past and present in London's Tavistock Square. The Peace Pledge Union co-ordinated its creation and today it is a focus for events on and around International Conscientious Objectors' Day, 15 May, when COs are remembered, not just in London, but all around the world. International Conscientious Objectors' Day was not observed until 1982. In Wales, where there is a long tradition of pacifism, the first memorial to conscientious objectors was unveiled as recently as 2005. It stands in Cardiff, in the National Garden of Peace.

Not only do pacifists and conscientious objectors get relatively little attention, but also the conscientious objectors of the Second World War have until recently remained in the shadow of those of the First World War. This is not really surprising, as the story of the First World War conscientious objectors, who numbered about 16,000, is a very dramatic one. These were the first conscientious objectors in Britain. Their trailblazing stand against conscription and war came at a time when jingoism was at its height and thousands of young men were being slaughtered in the trenches. It meant that they were vilified to an appalling extent.

Twenty years later, during the Second World War, well over 60,000 men and around 1,000 women in Britain took the decision to register as conscientious objectors and claim exemption from military service. They refused to fight or to undertake war-related work as a matter of conscience. They came from different backgrounds and social classes and their reasons for swimming against the national tide of war and militarism also varied. But however different they were as people, they all shared one basic belief, that it was wrong, whether for religious, moral, political or humanitarian reasons, to be conscripted for war and to take up arms and fight, no matter how great the danger facing Britain, no matter how much pressure was put on them to change their minds.

Largely because of the courage and determination of First World War COs, attitudes towards and treatment of conscientious objectors during the Second World War were more humane and tolerant than they had been 20 years previously. Even so, it was not easy to be a conscientious objector during the Second World War. The personal costs were very high: conscientious objectors lost their jobs; many were abused; some were ostracised; others were brutalised and many went to prison. There was also a social stigma attached to being a conscientious objector that in some cases lasted until well after the war – hence so few memorials and the lack of recognition outside the peace movement.

It has also been said that, given the awfulness of Nazism and Fascism, it was harder to be a conscientious objector between 1939–45 than it had been in 1916–18. Many of the accounts I have read during my research bear this out, providing evidence of considerable soul-searching and anxiety. Deciding to refuse conscription taxed the consciences of some to the very limit; proof of which perhaps is the fact that some long-term pacifists renounced their principles and joined up when war began. Interestingly, one of the things I had not quite realised before I began this book is that ‘pacifism’ and ‘conscientious objection’ are not necessarily one and the same thing. Strictly, conscientious objection is a legal status conferred on someone who refuses conscription on grounds of conscience, pacifism is a doctrine or belief system. Many, though not all, conscientious objectors were pacifists, while not all pacifists became conscientious objectors.

Either way it took immense courage to be a conscientious objector during the Second World War and to maintain that stand throughout

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six long years of war. Many COs had worked hard to prevent war before it happened, and, as thoughtful people with social consciences, they knew the horrors of Nazism but they believed profoundly that war and taking up arms was not the right way. Therefore, when the time came, they took another very principled stand. In the words of Gwylim Newnham, whose father was a Second World War conscientious objector, 'their stories deserve to be better known'.

I need to thank many people who have helped me in writing this book. First and foremost Bill Hetherington and the Peace Pledge Union, who have allowed me to haunt their offices and to spend time going through their archives. Bill is the PPU's archivist and has been for many years compiling a database of conscientious objectors from both world wars. He probably knows more about conscientious objectors than just about anybody else. When I started, everyone told me he was the man to contact and he has never failed to answer my numerous questions and to put me on the right track. I am immensely grateful to him. If I've introduced any errors, they are entirely my fault, not his.

I also want to thank Susannah Farley-Green and Lorna Vahey, both of whose fathers were conscientious objectors during the Second World War. They have generously shared information about their fathers and have given me permission to use extracts from their memoirs as well as photographs. I was fortunate enough to know Fred and Zoe Vahey; they were the first conscientious objectors I had met and were remarkable people. I did not know Eric Farley but his memoirs are a joy to read. Thanks also to Sally Phillips, who arranged an interview for me with her father, Brian Phillips. Sadly Brian died before this book was finished but he was a most impressive man, who gave me an insight into the peace and pacifism of Quakerism. My thanks as well to Jenny Foot and Gwylim Newnham who allowed me to interview them about their father Jack Newnham. I am very grateful to friends and colleagues in the peace movement, such as Phil Steele, Emily Johns, Milan Rai and John Lynes, who provided suggestions, leads and general support. Thanks to Phil, I was able to interview Ifanwy Williams in Wales, which was a bonus. As always staff at the Imperial War Museum have been enormously helpful and their resources are invaluable. I have only been able to interview a few conscientious objectors, but the sound archives at the Imperial War Museum contain a fascinating collection of interviews. These have been of great help and enabled me at least to hear the voices of conscientious objectors.

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Chapter 1

A Flourishing Peace Movement

'I renounce war, and never again, directly or indirectly, will I sanction or support another'

Peace Pledge Union

When Fred Vahey was a young boy of about five or six, he was puzzled by the sight of what he later described as 'a lot of ill people all over the town in pale blue soft clothes – many on crutches or with bandages, or missing limbs. There seemed to be a strange air about it all ... these sick wrecks had survived ... from some outrageous thing that I did not understand.'

Later Fred came to understand that the 'outrageous thing' was the First World War, and the 'sick wrecks' were casualties. He never forgot the sight. Born in Ireland in 1910 the experience caused him to question the whole purpose and value of war – not just the First World War but of all wars. In 1940, arguing that war 'is a crime against humanity' and conscription 'a denial of human liberty', Fred registered as a conscientious objector and refused to take any part in the war effort. He spent the war years working on his smallholding and until his death in 1996 remained steadfastly opposed to war, never doubting his decision to take a conscientious stand against it.

Fred Vahey was not the only person to renounce war during what Robert Graves called 'The Long Weekend' – the brief space between 1919–1939 that separated the two world wars. Thousands of others also did so. The First World War had caused unprecedented devastation and loss of life. Some ten million young men had died in the trenches, more than twice that number had been wounded and about six million civilians had been killed. Families in all the warring countries mourned

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the loss of husbands, fiancés, brothers, uncles, friends and lovers. In Britain, France and Germany virtually an entire generation of young men had been wiped out. Announcing the end of fighting to the House of Commons on 11 November 1918, the then British Prime Minister David Lloyd George described the First World War as 'the cruellest and most terrible war that has ever scourged mankind'; years later in 1934 the Hastings Peace Group estimated that it would have taken three months for 'the vast army who died as a direct or indirect result of the war ... marching day and night at the rate of four per second' to have passed the doors of the White Rock Pavilion on Hastings seafront.

Widespread revulsion

Exhaustion, relief and victory parades marked the arrival of peace, and memorials to the 'glorious dead' were erected in towns and villages throughout Britain. In 1921 the first Armistice Day Remembrance Ceremony was held at the Cenotaph in London's Whitehall. According to *The Times*, a 'countless multitude' attended the ceremony, which was intended not just to commemorate 'the sacrifice and suffering of war' but also the 'winning of victory and the dawn of peace'. Interestingly, that same day some 200 delegates from Britain's leading women's organisations met at 8.30pm in Central Hall, Westminster, to demonstrate their support for a reduction in armaments. Key speakers included Lady Astor MP, trade unionist Margaret Bondfield and suffragist Maude Royden.

Given the scale of death and destruction it was hardly surprising that when the post-war dust finally settled, there was a widespread revulsion against war and militarism. This manifested in various ways, not least in a large and unprecedented peace movement that flourished during the inter-war period. It is difficult to estimate the numbers actively involved, but while most people in Britain just hoped that war would not happen again, tens of thousands, many of whom described themselves as pacifists, joined anti-war or pacifist organisations and campaigned in one way or another for peace. Then as now, pacifists, or those who thought they were pacifists, were a minority of the population, but they were certainly a sizeable minority. Their numbers were sufficiently significant by the mid to late 1930s for some people to accuse pacifists of helping Hitler's war aims.

The inter-war peace movement attracted a whole range of people. They included scientists, artists, musicians, politicians, clerks,

students, activists and thinkers. There were high-profile figures who spearheaded the movement, such as Sir George Lansbury, leader of the Labour Party between 1932–35, the poet Siegfried Sassoon, Labour politician Arthur Ponsonby, the Reverend Donald Soper, writer Aldous Huxley, feminist Vera Brittain and the Reverend Dick Sheppard, many of whom were involved in more than one peace organisation. There were former First World War conscientious objectors, such as Harold Bing, Herbert Runham Brown and Fenner Brockway to say nothing of the thousands of younger men and women who came into the peace movement because of what they had seen, heard or read about the horrors of war.

Some involved themselves in the movement because they came from pacifist families, while others were the sons or daughters of men who had been conscientious objectors during the First World War and were brought up to believe that war was wrong. Kathleen Wigham was born in Blackburn, Lancashire in 1919, one of eight children. Her parents were members of the Spiritualist Church and of the Independent Labour Party (ILP). They were convinced pacifists and had assisted First World War conscientious objectors: 'We were certainly against war. My mother and father wouldn't allow war toys in the home and I can remember my mother being appalled when my youngest brother exchanged one of his Christmas toys for a sort of dagger, which was harmless really because the blade part disappeared into the handle when you struck somebody, but the idea of putting your hand up to strike somebody was so abhorrent to my parents that he had go back and get his Christmas toy back.' Kathleen too became a pacifist and was involved with the Quakers. Believing that 'war is wrong and also futile because it doesn't solve the problem, it doesn't bring about the peace that we want', she gravitated to the peace movement during the 1930s. Kathleen joined the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FoR) and ultimately went to prison for making a conscientious objection against being drafted into civilian war work.

Many who became peace campaigners were horrified by what they had seen of the impact of war and were determined to do what they could to prevent another. Some had lost fathers or family members in the war or had fathers return injured or shell-shocked. Even those whose families had supported war and continued to do so found the reality of war impossible to accept. Some were drawn into the peace movement by powerful anti-war literature or inspirational speakers

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such as Dick Sheppard, founder of the Peace Pledge Union. Sheppard and the Reverend Donald Soper, whose speeches denouncing war were delivered in the open air at Speakers Corner, Hyde Park, or Tower Hill, made a lasting impact on those who heard them.

Born in Manchester into a 'very middle-class background', Tony Parker developed his anti-war views largely as a result of the books he read. His father ran a second-hand bookshop and many of the books in the shop: 'were from the mass of material that came out of the First World War – Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, Wilfred Owen and other anti-war writers – and these affected me and I became very anti-war. It was the complete waste of life, the nonsensical way of trying to stop international problems in that way and also the tremendously sad experiences that many of these writers went through.' In 1941, and despite his father's disapproval, Tony registered as a conscientious objector.

Anti-war literature

There was an outpouring of anti-war literature during the inter-war period, much of which had a powerful impact on shaping the anti-war views of young men and women. Key works included memoirs of those who had fought in the First World War, notably Edmund Blunden's *Undertones of War* (1928) and Robert Graves's *Goodbye to All that* (1929). Other influential works included Erich Marie Remarque's poignant and powerful anti-war novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) and Aldous Huxley's anti-war polemic *Ends and Means* (1937). Two other powerful anti-war books were Beverley Nichols's *Cry Havoc!* (1933), which sold some 75,000 copies and A.A. Milne's *Peace with Honour* (1934). To the disappointment of many pacifists, Milne had completely renounced his pacifism by 1940.

Peace groups

For those who wanted to work for peace or the avoidance of war, there was a wide range of peace or anti-war groups. The Fellowship of Reconciliation (FoR) was founded in 1914 by a German Lutheran Friedrich Schultz and an English Quaker Henry Hodgkin. The FoR was a Christian pacifist organisation that supported First World War

conscientious objectors, then in 1919 it became an international organisation and was active during the inter-war period, attracting Quakers, Anglicans and Methodists to its ranks.

By June 1940, the FoR had about 11,000 members, including some notable pacifists such as Donald Soper, Welshman George M.L. Davies, social worker Muriel Lester, and Alex Wood, who went on to become closely involved with the Peace Pledge Union. Doris Nicholls (né Steynor) worked with pacifist relief organisations during the Second World War and was a member of the FoR. Interviewed by the Imperial War Museum in 1980, she remembered: 'I was working in peace shops. Very much as Oxfam and War on Want have done recently, we would hire an empty peace show and put up posters ... and we'd have leaflets ... we would sit in the shop and just talk to people, sometimes stand outside and hand out leaflets.'

Muriel McMillan (né Smith) was another member. Born in London in 1920 into a Methodist family, she worked as a secretary before the Second World War. In about 1937, she recalled, 'a gentleman came to the church to give a talk on Christian pacifism that aroused interest. Together with a lot of other young people in the church ... we eventually formed a group who felt they were committed to Christian pacifism [and] we became members of the Fellowship of Reconciliation.' Muriel's pacifism was 'based entirely on the belief that it was the way of Christ to overcome evil with good ... we did have regular meetings ... we would go to meetings around the district and in London, all of which helped to strengthen our belief in Christian pacifism.' Stella St John, who later went to prison for her conscientious stand, also joined the FoR. A socialist and a Christian, she believed that pacifism and Christianity were inseparable: 'If I wasn't a pacifist, I wouldn't have any time for Christianity.'

A whole raft of religious pacifist organisations came into being after 1918. The Society of Friends, or Quakers, was already well known for its pacifism, which had its roots in the Peace Testimony of 1661, but individual Christian denominations also set up their own peace groups. These included the Anglican Peace Fellowship, the Methodist Peace Fellowship, the Welsh Congregational and Peace Society, which was in marked contrast to the action of churches during the First World War, most of which had effectively acted as recruiting pulpits.

The No More War Movement (NMWM) was launched in 1921. Its name clearly described its aim – no more war. The NMWM was a

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successor to the No-Conscription Fellowship, which had been formed to oppose conscription in 1916 and assisted First World War conscientious objectors until it disbanded in 1919. Fenner Brockway, who had been a conscientious objector during the First World War, chaired the NMWM, which included pacifism and socialism in its programme. Meeting with other conscientious objectors after the war, Brockway felt they should continue 'with an organisation which should serve the cause of peace all over the world – a No More War organisation ... we had marvellous demonstrations all over the world.' Members signed a declaration not to take part in any war, to actively work to remove the causes of war and to create a new social order based on co-operation. Based in London, it made international links and attracted some leading pacifists, among them scientist Albert Einstein, who later famously argued that if two per cent of the male population refused to fight, wars would never happen. Einstein was also involved with the War Resisters International and the Peace Pledge Union.

In 1921 a small group of war resisters formed in Bilthoven, Holland. Calling itself 'Paco' (Esperanto for 'peace') the group united pacifists in Britain, Holland, Germany and Austria. Two years later, Paco moved its headquarters to London and re-launched as the War Resisters' International (WRI). The group adopted a broken rifle as its symbol and its founding declaration stated: 'War is a crime against humanity. We are therefore determined not to support any kind of war and to strive for the removal of all causes of war.' The first secretary of the WRI was Herbert Runham Brown, a former First World War conscientious objector who, during two years in prison for his beliefs, had dreamed of uniting war resisters worldwide. From 1926 a number of leading British pacifists were elected to the chair, including Fenner Brockway, George Lansbury and Arthur Ponsonby, a remarkable man and key figure in the inter-war peace movement. In 1926, Ponsonby sent a letter to the press – the so-called Peace Letter – inviting the public to sign up for peace and pledge to refuse to support moves towards war. Within a year Ponsonby had amassed 40,000 signatories, reflecting the widespread public disillusionment with war. In 1923 an American branch of the WRI was established in the United States called the War Resisters' League and by 1939 the WRI had affiliated branches in 24 countries, although its greatest strength was in Britain and the United States. Throughout the inter-war years, the WRI held

international conferences on peace and disarmament and also worked to co-ordinate moves to abolish conscription and support conscientious objectors in countries where compulsory military service existed.

Then as now, women were extremely active in the peace movement and there were some very influential organisations, including the Women's International League of Peace and Freedom (WILPF). The WILPF emerged from the Congress of Women in 1915, which had come together to try and find means of stopping the 1914–18 war. The Congress did not succeed in its aims but re-organised as WILPF, continued to work strenuously for peace and disarmament during the inter-war period, with the support of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. In 1932 WILPF gathered some six million signatures for a World Disarmament Petition to be presented at the World Disarmament Conference in Geneva. The petition ultimately contained about eight million signatures from women in 56 countries and was delivered to the conference in truckloads.

In Britain the Women's Co-operative Guild, a formidable and radical campaigning group of mainly working-class women increasingly adopted a strong pacifist programme. During the 1920s and 1930s Guildswomen campaigned for disarmament and lobbied local education authorities to end military training in schools. In 1933 the Women's Co-operative Guild, wanting to disassociate itself from what it saw as the increasingly militaristic nature of the annual Armistice Day ceremony, introduced the white poppy as a 'pledge to peace that war must never happen again'. It could be worn on its own or with the red poppy. At the time the white poppy was contentious and in 1937 two members of the Peace Pledge Union were sacked from their jobs for wearing it. Even so, for Armistice Day 1938 sales of white paper poppies reached a record 35,000. The Guild held pacifist services and public meetings throughout the 1930s. When war became almost inevitable, a Guildswoman wrote to the then Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain in May 1939, saying: 'I have not nurtured a son for twenty years on the principles of Christianity and good citizenship ... for you or any other Government to claim him now to be a cog in the wheels of a military machine which threatens mankind with annihilation ... I mean to see that he shall have the life which I thrust upon him and not the living death which you seek to offer him ... if you choose to collect him, you will first have to collect me.'

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In Britain there was also considerable support for the League of Nations Union (LNU), which was formed in October 1918 with the aims of promoting international peace and co-operation on the principles of the League of Nations. By 1931 the LNU had a membership of more than 400,000. Until the mid-1930s, with its emphasis on negotiation and co-operation the LNU had all-party support. It was not a pacifist organisation, yet its existence and the numbers who supported it clearly indicated that for much of the inter-war period people wanted to avoid war whether they were pacifists or not.

The Peace Pledge Union

In the mid-1930s a new peace organisation emerged that would bring thousands into the peace movement and set the agenda for anti-war activism right up to the outbreak of war. It was the Peace Pledge Union (PPU). Its founder, Canon Richard (Dick) Sheppard, vicar of St Martin-in-the-Fields, was by all accounts an extraordinarily charismatic and inspirational individual. Sheppard had served as an army chaplain in a military hospital in France during the First World War. What he saw appalled him. He believed that Christianity and war could never be compatible and became a convinced and highly active pacifist, strenuously putting the case for disarmament and protesting about the increased militarism of the Armistice Day ceremonies. In 1933 Sheppard heard about a sermon on Armistice Day preached in New York by Dr Harry Emerson Fosdick, which ended with the words: 'I renounce war for its consequences, for the lies it lives on and propagates, for the undying hate it arouses, for the dictatorships it puts in place of democracy, for the starvation that stalks after it. I renounce war, and never again, directly or indirectly, will I sanction or support another.'

Influenced by these words and against a background of growing international tension, on 16 October 1933 Sheppard wrote to what was then the *Manchester Guardian* and other newspapers, inviting 'those of my sex who have so far been silent but are of this mind [to oppose violence and war]' to 'send a postcard to me within the next fortnight to say if they are willing to be called together ... to vote in support of a resolution as uncompromising as the following:- We renounce war and never again, directly or indirectly, will we support or sanction another.' Sheppard's first appeal was to men, not because he was sexist