What led men to conscientious objection during the First World War?

“War will exist until that distant day when the conscientious objector enjoys the same reputation and prestige that the warrior does today.”- President John F. Kennedy

Objection to war, as a concept, is exempt from the pages of history. Past societies, such as Ancient Rome, were built on militarism and violence, entire populations existed solely for the purpose of destroying other populations. War was not a choice; it was a way of life. The Crusades were a matter of religious importance, the Boer War a jingoistic adventure. However, the outbreak of World War One saw the emergence of a new phenomenon; conscientious objection. Society was fascinated, then appalled at these men, guilty of the “crime” of refusing to fight for something they did not believe in, did not support and did not understand. Societal progression had led these men to question themselves and their government as to why they must fight, and thus, be it due to religion, politics or the human conscience, these men refused to fight.

Religion, it appears, was the most influential decision when it came to deciding whether to fight. In an interview with The Telegraph, Ian Hislop notes how “the Church of England wasn’t the limp and liberal institution it is today”, and yet the Church was often bifurcated as to how to deal with the moral dilemma the war posed. A few preachers wholeheartedly supported fighting to rid the world of “evil Germans”, yet the majority saw the war as an opportunity to further the declining figure of Christian solidarity. Many men were torn between devotion to God and their country, and often felt let down by their beliefs when faced with the horrors of trench warfare. The poet Wilfred Owen, in his poem “Exposure”, notes how “love of God seems dying”, but on the outbreak of war, the main reason for objection was religious beliefs. Organised religion still formed the backbone of society, communities dependent on the local Church, the morals it enforced and the relationships it formed. Ian Hislop, in a documentary for Channel 4, notes how the phrase “Would Jesus bayonet a German?” became the principle argument for objecting on religious grounds, and it was this kind of moral impact that other aspects of society could not match.

However, societal progression was another key reason for conscientious objection. Society had moved on from a time when war was the raison d’être for its inhabitants. The industrial revolution and the emergence of democracy had rendered war an outdated and unnecessary tool in the eyes of the civilian, and yet, paradoxically, was now capable of creating more destruction than ever before through the creation of new weaponry. The society of 1914 had no experience of a major war, the closest conflict being the 1899 Boer War, of which many citizens had vivid memories of British military inefficiency and the atrocities committed. It is not surprising therefore that around 16,000 men became conscientious objectors. These men were simply not prepared to die for a war that they deemed anachronistic and avoidable. Their views were echoed in Sigfried Sassoon’s Declaration that appeared in The Times on July 31st 1917. It states how the war was being “deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it”, and many men in society agreed with this. They did not want to risk their lives for a war that may achieve nothing, and saw better ways to end the conflict.
It is easy to forget that many men refused to fight purely out of the strength of human morals and emotions. Society ostracised these people, handing them white feathers in the street to shame them, yet, for the most part, their courage is to be respected. These men felt that killing, for whatever purpose, was murder, and that war was unnecessary. Pacifism is essentially the refusal to fight and the avocation of peaceful alternatives. A famous anti-war campaigner was Bertrand Russell, who believed “Patriotism is the willingness to kill and be killed for trivial reasons.” It was these sentiments that many men held, and the belief in peace was so deep-rooted that, for some of them, imprisonment was a more acceptable option. Many men had never seen war on such a scale, and had learnt from the Boer War that atrocities and conflict go hand in hand. With memories of scandals such as the treatment of Chinese workers in the Boer War fresh in the mind, these men could not justifiably believe that the conflict they would be involved in was morally sound. Killing a fellow human being was irreconcilable for these men, and saw the violence of war as avoidable and damaging.

It is not inconceivable that many men were simply scared of war. Those not swept away in the jingoistic fervour or indoctrinated by propaganda knew that the horrific stories coming back from the front were to be believed. Pat Barker’s “Regeneration” recounts some of these stories, one of the men landing on a rotting German corpse whose stomach then exploded, “filling my mouth and nostrils with rotting flesh”. Although more difficult to comprehend, many men were simply selfish, and could not see the point in self-sacrifice instead of a comfortable life at home. Whatever the emotions, some men were simply so swayed by their conscience, war became an impossible option to them.

Human free will and its preservation was another factor in the emergence of conscientious objection. January 1916 saw the passing of the Military Service Act, which introduced conscription for men between the ages of 18 and 41. The Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, had previously been criticised for his ruthless and dictatorial attitude to running wartime Britain, introducing many Defence of The Realm initiatives having removed Herbert Asquith from power. For many people, his removal of many social liberties was inconvenient and somewhat over-zealous, kite-flying one of the more abstract pursuits banned under the DORA regulations. Thus, the introduction of conscription was, for many people, a violation of individual freedom too far. Britain is one of the oldest democracies in the world, and many people were outraged at being told what to do by their government. The war was such an immense risk, many men were convinced that such self-sacrifice should be based on free will, not government intervention. Disillusionment was also beginning to take hold. The previous century had been a period of immense poverty for much of the country, with little government intervention to help relieve it. Thus, when the government did finally intervene, it was only to send men to fight. Conscientious objectors realised that this pragmatism and dichotomised values was not characteristic of a trustful government.

Conscientious objection did not mean a categorical abstention from involvement in the war. Many men refused to fight on a military level, as they believed their skills would be better utilised in other areas. The Non-Combatant Corps had a strength of 3,400 conscientious objectors, and was the same as any other military division except the men did not carry weapons or fight. Instead, they performed a variety of physical
labour, relieving pressure upon the regular infantry. Many “conchies”, as the objectors became known, lent their individual skills, such as translators or medics, to the war effort, and saw it inappropriate to waste their skills on learning how to become a soldier. The Quakers and other religious group also became attached to regiments to provide moral and spiritual guidance, as well as caring for the wounded.

Lastly, perhaps a more subtle and psychological reason for conscientious objection was due to an adverse reaction to the torrent of pro-war patriotism manufactured in order to encourage war support. Many people blindly followed government instruction and volunteered, indoctrinated by the mass of propaganda initiatives such as the commissioning of artists and writers to produce propaganda. Jessie Pope, for example, wrote the infamous poem “Who’s for the game?” which encouraged men to “grip and tackle the job unafraid”. The face of Lord Kitchener became ubiquitous and synonymous of the government’s encroachment into personal freedom. Perhaps, ultimately, this flood of patriotism sparked a moral repulsion in many men, and, ironically, turned them against the war. Although this may appear ambiguous, it is not inconceivable that the minds of many men simply refused to comply with the mass of pro-war images, and ignited an anarchic sense within them that revolted against the status quo.

Conscientious objection did not receive status as a human liberty until 1987. Consequently, the men who refused to fight in the First World War were subject to verbal, mental and physical abuse from the media, public and government. However, these men stood their ground for what they believed in; a rejection of militarism. These men had deep-rooted emotions and values that many did not, and were gifted with a level of clarity and analysis that escaped the masses that joined up to fight. Be they cowards or heroes, these men refused to fight, influenced by their religion, their morals, their fear, societal progression or their revulsion to government-induced patriotism. They refused to fight because they had could not support something they did not believe in, and that is why these pioneers of conscientious objection shall always be remembered for fighting their own personal war.

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