

The Conscientious Objectors

Around 20,000 men in Britain conscientiously objected to military service in WW1. As you'll see from the range of occupations given in the [sample list of Bristol COs](#) on this website, they came from the upper, middle and working classes. They also conscientiously objected for a range of very different reasons – there were political, moral and/or religious objectors. COs included men who, for example, identified as Quakers, Anarchists, Spiritualists, Atheists, Jews, Plymouth Brethren, Humanitarians, Anglicans, Tolstoyans, Jehovah's Witnesses, Peculiar People, Socialists, and Socialists who were also Christians. This meant that COs were a varied bunch and they took very different views on what they should do in the war. Despite their differences, however, they were by no means entirely separate individuals who took their decisions about their stances and conduct without consultation, collaboration and support, as the materials on this website demonstrate. But it is worth trying to understand some of these differences.

Some were intensely religious pacifists who rejected war entirely. Some of these men, like Quaker and Bristol CO Paul Sturge felt they should do something. Paul joined the [Friends Ambulance Unit](#) (FAU) and undertook other relief work with the Quakers. Another Quaker CO, [Corder Catchpool](#), started off in the FAU but, when conscription came, felt he had to stand up for his beliefs by being an absolutist in prison.

Quaker absolutists were more likely to obey the prison rules than those who went to prison because of their political or even moral conscientious objections. Men like [Frank Merrick resisted and broke prison rules](#), but he was by no means an extremist. There were political objectors who tried to disrupt the prison system, however, not least at [Wandsworth](#). And political objectors could be far from pacifists – when targeted by opponents some would physically fight back and whilst they would not fight what they saw as a capitalist imperialist war, they would fight for their fellow workers.

Given, these differences and complexities, it was not surprising that COs took different routes during the war. Some went into the military as non-combatants, some undertook civilian work of national importance or laboured at specially created Home Office work camps, a few went on the run & were chased by police & secret agents. 1,500 'absolutists' refused to cooperate with the authorities & were handed over to the army. When they refused to obey orders, they were court-martialled & spent their war in prison. Some men ended up serving a prison sentence, followed by a spell on a work camp. Others served repeated prison sentences, as each time they were released they were handed back to the military, refused to obey orders, were court-martialled & sentenced to more time in jail. There were also men who [enlisted but became objectors whilst they were in the military](#) – or took a different view of fighting after the war.

See also the PDFs on this website relating to individual COs including Paul Sturge and Frank Merrick.

The annual [Peace Lecture at Ypres, given on Armistice 2019](#) covers some of these differences and was given by a member of Remembering the Real WW1.