

The Military Service Acts

The [Military Service Act 1916](#) introduced military compulsion or conscription. This meant that those to whom it applied were soldiers and in terms of the law had to serve where and when they were told to. But this is only the beginning of a more complicated story.

The idea of military conscription was an unpopular one in the early twentieth century. By this time Britain had a long-standing tradition of a professional army supplemented by volunteers in times of war. In fact, conscription was often considered a foreign or even a German thing. In contrast it was assumed British men would not need to be forced to fight for their country, they would willingly do so.

Initially after war was declared men did volunteer in large numbers - and some young boys and older men joined up despite military age limits. But with deaths, injuries and declining numbers of volunteers, soon it was felt that not enough men were coming forward. There were also concerns that the wrong men were coming forward as some workers were essential to the war effort at home.

So, in 1915 moves towards conscription began, with a national census of all men and women in the summer of 1915 to find out about the population. Then, following this National Register, in the autumn of that year a new drive to recruit men for the military was tried. The Derby Scheme meant men could 'attest' or promised their willingness to join the military at some future date if needed and they were paid a small sum for doing so. Some men did so several times in order to pocket the money.

Over the Christmas and New Year period of 1915-16 a Military Service Act was prepared. This was still controversial and in Parliament was resisted by some socialist, liberal, and religious politicians – the Liberal Home Secretary Sir John Simon resigned because he opposed conscription (read his resignation speech [at paragraphs 962-78](#)). The Military Service Act was passed at the end of January 1916 and came into force in March. It applied to England, Scotland and Wales but not Ireland. It meant that all unmarried men or widows without children aged 18-40 were enlisted into the military (meaning they were soldiers) and were required to respond if and when they were asked to report to barracks to begin their military service. The Act included some exceptions (ministers of religion) and exemptions which men could apply for and a tribunal system decided cases where men applied for some sort of exemption (see the information card on this website relating to *The Conscience Clause*).

The [January 1916 Military Service Act came into force in March](#). It was followed by a series of other Military Service Acts. For example, in [May 1916 the law was extended](#) to include married men and widowers with children. In 1918 two Military Service Acts were passed. The second included emergency powers, the upper age limit was raised to 50 but could be raised to 55 if needed, certificates of exemption on all but health or conscience grounds could be withdrawn and conscription could be extended to Ireland.

Conscription sparked demonstrations and mass meetings around the country. For example, there was a demonstration on 9th April 1916 in Trafalgar Square, London. In Wales, a centre of protest was Merthyr Tydfil, which was considered one of a number of hot beds of dissent throughout the war. Undercover government agents were employed to monitor such activities around Britain.

See also the pdf on this website relating to *The Conscience Clause*.