

War Resistance

The early twentieth century had been turbulent because of industrial disputes and strikes, the activities of suffragists and suffragettes along with conflict in Ireland. Instability was also very evident during the war. War resistance was a key element of this dissent. COs were not the only people to oppose the war and conscription. Some socialists opposed the war, and campaigners for women to get the vote were split on whether to support the war effort or campaign for peace. Some of these people opposed all war on religious or moral grounds. Some objected to this particular war, seeing it as a conflict bred of imperialism and capitalism in which workers were asked to fight fellow workers.

In the week preceding the declaration of war there were mass demonstrations. For example, on Sunday 2nd August 1914 tens of thousands of people demonstrated across the country against Britain's entry into war. In Bristol an anti-war demonstration on the Downs was followed by a mass meeting of dockers to discuss the worrying situation. You can [watch a re-creation](#) of this event and [read more](#) about it.

Women, including former suffragettes and suffragists campaigned for peace. One key figure was Bristol-born [Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence](#). As a result of this work, the [Women's International League for Peace and Freedom](#) was formed. You can [watch a film](#) about some of these women's efforts. In addition, there were the women, like Mabel Tothill in Bristol, who did far more than merely support COs, organising and running sophisticated networks of activities around the country. Nationally too [women played a major role in peace activism and working with COs](#).

As its website explains, the [Fellowship of Reconciliation](#) was one of the organisations which was set up after the start of the war to oppose it. It has its basis in Christian pacifism. Another was the Union of Democratic Control, which included Liberal opponents of Government policy – you can see its manifesto on the [National Archives website](#).

There were protests and strikes during the war, with pre-existing divisions continuing and evolving during the conflict. There was protest from soldiers right from the early months of the war, with concerns about conditions. Tens of thousands failed to report for military service or went absent without leave. There were strikes and mutinies. Such activities sometimes led to court martials and punishment, including the execution of over 300 men, including [one Bristol man](#), were shot.

In 1917 revolution in Russia led some to call for a revolution in this country and there were demonstrations supporting this idea.

There were efforts to police, prevent and control these activities, including repression but there were also compromises and concessions. Despite all this war resistance continued and social conflict persisted after the war.

An [online WW1 encyclopedia article](#) written by a member of Remembering the Real WW1 gives more detail on conscientious objection, war resistance and repression.

See also the pdfs on this website relating to *Mabel Tothill* and *Support for COs*.