

## Chapter 4 Life as a conscientious objector

### Chapter 4

Some 400 men out of 16,000 who regarded themselves as conscientious objectors were granted absolute exemption; 6,500 COs were given conditional exemption from military service and told to perform 'alternative service' by finding 'work of national importance'; 5,000 were granted non-combatant status and enlisted in the Non-Combatant Corps, while about 2,500 applications from COs were turned down completely resulting in forcible enlistment in a combatant regiment.

1,200 men refused even to apply to a Tribunal and about 6,000 of the 16,000 men who did apply refused to accept the Tribunals' decisions - and as a result spent much of the war in prison. This Chapter looks at what life was like for COs doing alternative service, those in the army as non-combatants and those who were imprisoned.

#### work of national importance - the alternativists

Most conscientious objectors who did work of 'national importance' or 'alternative service' worked on the land doing farming or forestry work. Others worked in medical units such as the Friends Ambulance Unit, helping injured soldiers and civilians.

There was much debate amongst COs about whether it was right to do alternative service. For many COs, alternative service was a good way to help other people and they could live with a clear conscience, knowing they were not harming anyone. Others, particularly absolutist COs, were concerned that it was helping the war effort and believed doing alternative service was taking the job of another man who could then be sent to fight in the trenches - to kill or be killed. It was one of the many dilemmas which COs faced.

#### land work

Roy Scott describes his time as a conscientious objector doing alternative service on the land.

*'The great compensation of farm-work is that it is in the open air. Thinking of it now makes me long for the sunshine, wind, and rain of my brief spell on the land; and I feel I should like to be back on it again. It is far from a holiday, and it would be foolish to neglect the seamy side. A few weeks of wet, chaff-cutting, the mud and cold of winter, some twelve-hour days of harvesting, and other trials of this kind, are by no means pleasant. At the harvest-time, when we were reaping the blown corn with reap-hooks, life just consisted of eating, sleeping and working.'*

*I found my fellow COs on the farm very pleasant mates. We were generally put to work together, and our tongues and brains had plenty of work, when the opportunity offered. Moreover, they were quite old hands by the time I joined them, and they could not have been more considerate than they were to the newcomer. I think permanent friendships have been formed in this way, and our mental and spiritual outlooks have been widened by the helpful discussions which ensue when people of widely different outlooks meet. We always had the one thing in common - the hatred of warfare and the determination to have nothing to do with it. This bond unites us in a happy comradeship.*

*We had companions of widely different character. The staff was divided roughly into three equal parties - old men, soldiers, and COs. The soldiers were certainly the more friendly, and seemed to feel very little bitterness against us. Some of the old men growled and cursed a bit at that - nay, we should expect it when we consider the position of comparative safety in which we were placed. The natural feeling is one of jealousy, and persecution is bound to take place under the circumstances.'*

Harry Wilson also worked on the land doing alternative service. His role was as an agricultural adviser in Lincolnshire, helping farmers to produce the most food possi-

was worried about intrusive policemen and wondered how to make the signal stand out from the leaves. She devised a scheme to fly white kites, and sent some children with Lydia Smith to fly them. Somehow the kites always managed to stick in this third tree of the avenue outside the prison. It was just in time to stop the proposed revolt by the CO prisoners.

### Going to prison

Violet Tillard, who ran the publications department, also, with Ada Salter, helped organise support for the families of CO prisoners through coordinating the relief work of local branches. Violet was willing to do anything, always calm and unselfish. As honorary Secretary she was charged under regulation 53 of the Defence of the Realm Act for refusing to reveal the name of the printer of the News Sheet used to communicate internally with officials of the NCF, and was sent to prison for 61 days. She stayed on at the NCF office until the very last CO prisoner was released. Violet was a nurse, and after the war she served with the Quakers in famine relief work in Russia where she died in 1922 of typhus.

### Hide and seek with the police

Lydia Smith, Joan Beauchamp and their colleagues were involved in an elaborate game to keep the NCF paper *The Tribunal* being printed in the last two years of the war. They knew the police were watching them, raids were constantly carried out on the printers, and both women faced possible arrest. They agreed, with the approval of the committee, that Joan would be the named publisher (as she was already being closely watched by the police) and Lydia the editor (after the previous male editors were sent to prison).

Joan was prosecuted several times. Firstly she was taken to court in 1918 along with Bertrand Russell, for an article written by Russell about the potential use of American troops to intimidate strikers. This attack on American allies could not be tolerated. Russell was sentenced to 6 months jail and Joan Beauchamp to a £60 fine plus costs. Joan refused to pay her fine and was sentenced to one month in prison. Then she was prosecuted for publishing a letter from a CO who had just been released from prison and taken back to the army, in which he said that 'The fellows here have a great respect for COs who defy the authorities; they trust us a great deal and admire our stand. I have found a marked alteration in their attitude: all of them do not hide their opposition to the continuance of the war, and feel that the COs are the only persons who are really bringing peace nearer.' This infuriated the authorities who couldn't let a hint of the state of army morale circulate. They dropped the charge when Joan's lawyer said he would produce some of the soldiers in her defence.

Finally she went to Bow Street to answer charges that she was responsible for the 4-25 July 1918 issues of *The Tribunal*. After various appeals she was convicted in January 1920 of contempt of court for refusing to tell the judge the name of the actual printer. She served 8 days of a 21-day sentence. Her struggle 'helped *The Tribunal* to survive long enough to report the outcome of her case in its final edition'.

Lydia meanwhile was organising the continued production of *The Tribunal*. After police raids on previous printers and dismantling of their presses, the detectives who ransacked the NCF offices told Lydia "We have done for you this time." However the office had secretly purchased a small hand-press and type, and hidden stocks of paper in various places. *The Tribunal* appeared again three days later as a one page leaflet, proclaiming defiance: 'The press in this country is no longer free, it is...the servile tool of those who would fasten militarism upon us. But...we are not daunted. We shall go on with the message we believe it is our duty to deliver. We are trying to show the world – Scotland Yard included – the vision of that new way of life in which the methods of violence have no part. We have no fear of the ultimate results of the



Lydia Smith, who played an elaborate game with the police to protect the NCF paper falling into their hands.