



CONFLICT CONSCRIPTION CONSCIENCE

Tameside and the Conscientious Objector in World War One

World War One began in 1914 but it was not until January 1916 did The Conscription Act come into being. Single men between the ages of 18 to 41 would be called up to fight for their country; by May of the same year this also applied to married men. However, The Military Service Act of 1916 recognised that there would be exemptions from this call up possibly on the grounds of work being carried out of national importance, medical or domestic grounds. In this Act the Government allowed for the possibility on the grounds of Conscience but on the grounds of religious or moral grounds only.

The Military Service Act of 1916 empowered Tribunals on a local level to grant exemptions and absolute certificates to Conscientious Objector (C O) with the intention of using C O's as a replacement for fit men to go to war. However, a belief by The No-Conscription Fellowship; a very active movement, especially in Hyde, which went beyond W W 1 that to appreciate the nature of the C O will inevitably lead to large number of appeals.

On a national level Local Government Tribunals at odds with directive of national Government. "No time to read speeches" voiced by some areas of the country resulting in many Tribunals becoming a law unto themselves. In general members of these Appeal Tribunals had no special qualifications to ascertain exemptions from Military Service. They were usually men of some position in local politics, business or profession, i.e. doctor or solicitor. Always a member of the military would be in attendance. The result being that often decisions made without serious consideration of affect to family or business. In the case of the C O few exemptions given and in many cases outcome a forgone conclusion by the Tribunal.

However, Tameside area appeared more lenient and would listen to a C O's reasons, but would question and sometimes ask C O to complete a questionnaire. Most of the applicants for C O would be on religious grounds; Christadelphians, Quakers, Christian Isrealites; some though would apply on moral grounds either political or humanist reasons.

Tribunals began in late March 1916 and throughout the year many tribunals ranged from one to seven sittings per week in the six towns covered by the Stalybridge Reporter, they being Ashton, Stalybridge, Dukinfield, Audenshaw, Hurst and Limehurst. Two of the towns Stalybridge and Dukinfield sometimes held two sittings in the same week. All appeals for C O status were denied but they did have the right to a further appeal usually Stockport for Stalybridge and Dukinfield or The Salford Hundreds in Manchester for Ashton. The second appeals would not be reported in the

original area of initial appeal and there was a general belief that appeals were a way of delaying decision to delay call up to Army.

In total a 132 Tribunals were held in 1916 in the six towns with Stalybridge and Dukinfield hold the most sessions. Of all the cases for C O as stated none were given absolute exemption but some were allowed to remain in the community provided that they did Non Combatative Service; that is they worked in areas of national importance to the war, for example farm work, medical or Ambulance service. This was on the strict instruction that they remain in this line of work. If they failed to carry out these instructions then they would be handed over to the Military immediately. 1917 and 1918 had far fewer sittings 56 and 46 respectively and none were for C O. Some C O's though refused absolutely to aid the war effort in any way and refused to undertake any form of work considered to be of national importance. For example farm work as this meant they could be helping to supply food for the soldiers in the trenches; they applied this reasoning to the cotton factories as this would be producing cloth which could be used for making uniforms. Equally they also refused to assist in form of medical work either at home or in France in the Ambulance service. It was those C O's who would be handed over to the Military and harshly treated.

In total 45 appeared before Tribunals covered by the Stalybridge Reporter in 1916 added to this is a further 32 C O's recorded by Christine Clayton in her article Pacifism and Socialism in Hyde during the Great War. found in the North West Labour History issue 35. This total of 77 may not be the full one as areas considered today as being in Tameside would not necessarily have been so in 1914 for instance Mossley does not appear in the Stalybridge Reporter in 1916. Also the article by Christine Clayton does included tribunals held in Mellor and Marple. Only one man Herbert Seed a 28 year old accountant from Hyde was granted exemption as a C O on religious grounds.

It is known that two men from the Tameside area died as a result of the harsh treatment received whilst in prison, though they died after being released. They were H M Hirst from Stalybridge and N Stafford from Hyde*. In total some 10 men died whilst still in prison and a further 73 died after being released from prison*. Also 32 men from across the country were sentenced to death and sent to France for the execution to be carried out; none from the Tameside area. However, the sentences were never carried out and all given a 10 year prison instead.

By August 1919 all C O's released from prison with no conditions or obligations. Women were never conscripted into the army but some were imprisoned for their beliefs.

The Military along with the General Public considered that the 'Conchie' to be a lazy, degenerate, ungrateful 'shirkers' seeking to benefit from the sacrifices of others.

*John W Graham, *Conscription and Conscience. A History 1916-1919* p323 to 325

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