

# WE WILL NOT FIGHT



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## Lesson Summary

This session focuses on the Conscientious Objectors of World War I, and draws on examples of young men in Britain who refused to fight in the army due to their religious and political beliefs. It also introduces students to the war resistance of young West African men, and asks students to examine the reasons why it was different to those of young men and women based in Britain. It asks students to think about the morality of these actions, and to consider the extent of the pressure placed on young men to serve in the war effort internationally.

## Learning Objectives

- To learn about the different types of Conscientious Objectors, what their motives were, and what actions they took.
- To find out about how Conscientious Objectors were treated by the authorities and the rest of the population.
- To think about the influence of pro-war propaganda over people and its effects.
- To discover how young women in Britain, and young West African men also took part in the movement against war, and to think about why their forms of protest were different.
- To question the rights and wrongs of the Conscientious Objectors' actions, beliefs, and treatment.

### United Nations Sustainable Development Links

- Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions

### Curriculum Links

- KS 3-4 History

### British Council Core Skills

- Critical Thinking and Problem Solving
- Collaboration and Communication
- Citizenship



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## Activity one: Outline and Slideshow on Conscientious Objectors

**Requires:** Slides 2-7

**No preparation** required in advance

- Begin by going through the brief slideshow (2-6) using the notes below.
- Afterwards, display the question on slide 7 ('Were Conscientious Objectors right to do what they did?') and students to discuss this question in pairs.
- Let the students have a short time to discuss this in their pair, before bringing the group back together and asking each pair to share their views.

### Slide 2

- During WWI, the British Army was short on troops. The war took place in so many parts of the world, and trench warfare proved so bloody, that the British government decided it could no longer rely on a volunteer army, which it had done previously.
- In January 1916, conscription was introduced for all single men aged 18-41, through a law called the Military Service Act. This meant that joining the army to fight was a legal obligation. Within a few months the government decided to widen this act, and conscript married men as well.
- For people who had a moral opposition to the war or joining the army, there was a clause in the law which allowed them to apply for permission to either not join the army, or to take a non-combat role within it. This would make them a Conscientious Objector (CO).

### Slide 3

- There were over 16,000 Conscientious Objectors during WWI, who refused to join the army for many different reasons- religious, political, and even personal. Many were young men who did not want to fight.
- Some religious groups, such as the Quakers, believed that their religion forbade them from taking part in violence of any type.
- Some people didn't want to fight for political reasons; some socialists refused to fight as they felt that British workers and German workers should not fight one another. Some were pacifists who felt that war created more problems than it fixed.
- Some people asked for permission to remain because of personal reasons - for example if they were looking after an elderly relative.



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## Activity one. Cont.

### Slide 4

- There were different types of CO's:
- Some were 'non-combatants'- they joined the army but did not use weapons, instead joining as stretcher-bearers, hospital workers, and drivers.
- Some were 'alternativists' - they refused to join the army but would do other jobs the government considered important for the war, such as working in mines and factories.
- Some were 'absolutists', who were so anti-war that they refused to do any work that contributed to the war effort or the army.

### Slide 5

- Conscientious Objectors had to argue why they should not be made to join the army in front of a military tribunal. They would decide whether you would be made to join the army or not.
- The tribunals weren't known for being particularly fair or sympathetic. Often they refused people's applications, and tried to make absolutists and alternativists take up non-combatant roles in the army.
- If a CO's application was turned down, they would be forced to join the army. If the CO then refused to put on the uniform or follow orders, they would be court-martialled and sent to prison. Some were even threatened with death for refusing orders.

### Slide 6

- Those who were successful in avoiding front-line service were often bullied and mistreated by other people. They were often called 'conchies', and were sometimes publicly given white feathers - a symbol of cowardice - by strangers and friends alike.
- Some CO's and their supporters joined a group called the 'No Conscription Fellowship', which publicised their cause and offered support to those imprisoned for their beliefs.



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## Activity two: Walter Hohnrodt

**Requires:** *Worksheet source 1, slide 8*

**Preparation:** *Ensure that enough copies of the worksheet are printed for all students.*

- Split the students up into pairs, and ask them to read through source 1 (Walter Hohnrodt's statement), and pose them the questions on slide 8 to discuss in their pairs.
- Bring the students back together to share and compare their answers, encouraging dialogue and responses.
- Inform the group that Walter was not successful in getting exemption from military service. The Hornsey Tribunal decided that his objection to the war was political, rather than moral. He was ordered to join the army and when he refused to do so, he was imprisoned in a military jail.

## Activity three: Anti-'Conchie' Propaganda

**Requires:** *Slides 9-11*

**No preparation** *required in advance*

- Show students the images of post-cards and recruitment posters in slides 9-11. Emphasise that post-cards and posters of these sorts were very common during WWI, and were used both to encourage people to join the army, and to shame those who hadn't done so, or were attempting to avoid it. As you show them the images, ask the following questions:
- In the postcard on slide 9, why is the CO drawn this way? What is it trying to say about those who refuse to engage in fighting?
- In the posters (slide 10 and 11), what pressures are being used to make people join? According to them who is being let down by the non-fighters' actions?
- What kind of impact do you think these images had on Conscientious Objectors? What impact would they have had on the wider public?



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## Activity Four: Young women and opposition to war

**Requires:** Worksheet source 2, four signs for the corners of the room

**Preparations:** Ensure that enough copies of the worksheet are printed for all students, prepare four signs on large pieces of paper labelled 'Strongly agree', 'Agree', 'Disagree', and 'Strongly disagree'

- Ask your students to read the extract from 'Things a Bright Girl Can Do' (source 2). This is a fictionalised account of a young suffragette who bucked the trends of the time and opposed the war. It demonstrates that women were equally involved in the peace movement, and highlights the conflicts felt by people in progressive campaigns which were divided on the question of war. It also shows how schools and wider society could put pressure people and attempt to stop them acting on their principles.
- While the students read, put a sign in each corner of the room. The four signs should be labelled 'Strongly agree', 'Agree', 'Disagree', and 'Strongly disagree'.
- Once the students have finished reading, pose the following statements to them, and ask them to move to the corner of the room which reflects their opinion, if they are unsure ask them to move to the middle of the room. After each statement has been read and the students have moved, ask one or two to explain why they have done so, and encourage students to respond to each other's ideas.
  - May shouldn't be so upset at the idea of sewing socks for soldiers. She should have just made them like the rest of the class did.
  - The staff at May's school were responsible for her the bullying she received because of her views.
  - I sympathise with Barbara and the other girls' dislike for May's ideas.
  - It was right that May wrote a patriotic essay which called for Britain to try to make peace with Germany.



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## Activity Five: War Resistance in British Africa

**Requires:** Slides 12 and 13, Worksheet source 3

**Preparation:** Ensure that enough copies of the worksheet are available for all students.

- This activity shows that it wasn't just young people in Britain who avoided taking part in military activities due to their moral and political principles. West African Carriers tried to avoid the terrible conditions they were forced to work in through evading recruiters and leaving their regiments. With no legal framework in place to apply for CO status, their methods involved greater risk as being caught could lead to violence and even death.
- Run through the slides on African resistance in the British Empire during WWI (slides 12 and 13) using the notes below.
- Ask two students to read aloud extracts (A) and (B) from Source 3. Then ask the group:
  - How does hearing this make you feel?
  - If you were living in the British Gold Coast during WWI, do you think you would have wanted to become a carrier? Why/ Why not?
- Ask students to read extract (C). Ask the following questions:
  - Why did Captain Nash stop trying to recruit carriers in the region?
  - What were the differences between the way people in Africa avoided military service and people in Britain who tried to do the same?

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## Activity Five cont.

### Slide 12

- It wasn't just in Britain that young people objected to war and refused to take part. In many African colonies, young men avoided joining the war effort.
- The British Army employed many young African men as 'Carriers' - their job was to transport heavy machinery and supplies across warzones, often trekking for days with little rest. Conditions were very harsh for those employed in these roles.
- By the end of the war, West African Carriers in the British Army received less than 1000 calories a day in their rations. Among East and West African carriers, the death rate was 20% - almost double the 11.5% death rate for British soldiers. Few died from contact with the enemy- most suffered from malnutrition, disease, and overwork.
- Carriers received no pensions, no payment if they were disabled by their work, and did not even receive a medal of recognition.

### Slide 13

- Many feared being treated as slaves by the Europeans, or resented the idea of fighting for a country which had invaded their own land and now controlled it. Still others thought the war was remote, and nothing to do with them, and so did not want to abandon their families for a fight that did not affect them.
- Carriers were often described as 'volunteers' in official documents, but in reality many were forced to join due to the threat of violence. They had no legal opportunity to object to their conscription through a tribunal, like those in Britain had. Failure to join could result in immediate death or imprisonment.
- Instead, African war resisters used different tactics. They would hide from the towns and villages where recruitment campaigns were happening. Sometimes they would go to the bush- rural areas which Europeans did not know well. Other times they would cross colonial borders into states run by other powers. Still others would move to remote villages, where colonial rule was hard to enforce.



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## Activity Six: Writing your CO statement

**Requires:** Paper and pens/pencils for students

**No preparation** required in advance

- Ask students to imagine that they are an 18 year old CO in Britain, 1917. They have received a letter stating that they must now enlist for the army, but instead they have decided to go to the military tribunal. They have to write a statement, similar to Walter Hohnrodt's, which lists their objection to taking a fighting role in the army, before reading it aloud for the group. Ask them to think about :
  - What is their opposition to becoming a soldier? Is it based on religious reasons, political reasons, personal reasons, or a combination of them? What are they?
  - Are there other people who could prove their story?
  - What kind of CO are they? Are they a non-combatant, activist, or absolutist? What would they be prepared to do?

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## Source 1

**Walter Hohnrodt was just 15 when World War I broke out.** When he turned 18 in 1917 he received a letter from the government telling him to enlist in the army, but he decided to apply to the local military tribunal for an exemption, and to be recognised as a Conscientious Objector. Here is an extract from his letter.

**I am the son of a German born in Brunswick and I consider it the very worst form of cowardice and despicability for a man to fight against his father's country and his blood relations.**

I am a conscientious objector and cannot under any circumstances consent to participate in a war, more especially one in which brute force, murder and starvation are the chief weapons used to gain victory, whilst all that is good in man is forced out of existence as something that is a hindrance to successful warfare.

I have been brought up in a socialistic atmosphere and, since I have been able to reason for myself, have been a socialist. A socialist, even if he is prepared to fight in a war against capitalists cannot think of taking up arms in a war in which the working classes of both sides are used as pawns to satisfy the greed and covetousness of the capitalist. I, as a socialist and conscientious objector most emphatically declare that I cannot take up arms and fight and kill for any cause no matter what the cause may be or however good the cause. The greatest works this world has seen and benefitted by are those of peaceful methods; the most mean and contemptible acts have been committed under the guise of war, and therefore I am bound by my own reasoning to do what all men should do, refuse to fight no matter what the consequence.

During the war my father's business (of 15 years standing) has been ruined and besides being made bankrupt he has been unable to obtain employment since then (May 1916) in spite of repeated attempts to do so.

We have had to move down and fown the social ladder until now we are in such a position that further economy is impossible. The only wage earners are myself, my brother, and two sisters, and I am the biggest wage earner with 35/- per week.

(National Archives reference) MH 47/38/82

<http://archive.ppu.org.uk/nomoreNews/worksheets/ws2/worksheet02Source2.html>



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## Source 2

*This is an extract from 'Things a Bright Girl Can Do' by Sally Nicholls. It is a story of three young suffragettes. May, who is 15, comes from a pacifist family who refuse to support the war. Many of the leading activists for women's right to vote had supported the war, meaning anti-war suffragettes often felt isolated from their fellow campaigners as well as wider society.*

**May had always been odd. Somehow, before, it had never mattered.**

People at school had ribbed her, affectionately, about the suffrage badge on her coat collar, and her vegetarianism (which at school meant eating the vegetables and leaving the chop, or sometimes, picking the vegetables out of the stew and leaving the rest). But May knew her own friends liked her, even if they thought her a bit queer, and who cared what the other girls thought anyway? Not her!

But now, things were different. Every girl in May's school, every teacher, even the caretaker and the charwoman, everyone was a patriot. The school newspaper ran patriotic stories about ways a 'Keen Girl Could Do Her Bit'. Handicraft classes were taken over by knitting for soldiers. In English, they all had to write patriotic essays about why Britain had to enter the war.

'It's awful,' May said to her mother. 'It's like... like it's a *game* or something. Don't they realise people are going to be *killed*?'

But even this aspect of the war sounded romantic to the other girls. May's friend Barbara had a brother who was actually a soldier, and Barbara told May solemnly that her brother had said he would be proud to die for his country - that dying on a battlefield would be a much better way to go than dying an old man in a bed, and that he almost hoped he *would* die, and make them all proud. This way of looking at things was baffling to May, but apparently it wasn't to the girls in her form who had all nodded and agreed that were they men, they would all feel exactly the same way.

May refused to take part in any of the patriotism. She refused to knit for the soldiers, working doggedly on the embroidered handkerchiefs she was making for Mrs Barber's birthday present instead. She wrote a patriotic essay on the idiocy of refusing to even consider a negotiated peace until thousands of men had been killed - a *ironic* idiocy, she wrote furiously, since the final peace would have to be negotiated *anyway*, so why not just do it *first*? She told Barbara she thought her brother was a twit, and she bet he would change his mind when he actually found himself on a battlefield surrounded by *corpses*.

**This stance unsurprisingly, did not win her any friends.**

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## Source 2 cont.

**People started to whisper things in the halls.** An older girl, who May did not even know, tripped her up in the corridor, and laughed when all her books went flying. Arriving in her form room one morning, she found the word TRAITOR! scratched into her desk. From the giggles and whispers amongst the other girls, even May particularly friends, it was obvious that they all knew all about it. The form mistress sighed when May had complained, and said, 'Well, May, you do rather ask for it don't you?'

The girls at school had been fired up with lust to attack someone - anyone - and since Brightview School for Girls regrettably did not contain any actual Huns, they turned on May. Girls she had never spoken to before hissed, 'Traitor!' and 'Coward!' at her as she passed.

'What would you do if a Hun was attacking your mother?' they demanded, at break time. 'What would you do if the Huns invaded and killed us all? That's what would happen if everyone was a pacifist.'

'No, it wouldn't,' said May. If *everyone* was a pacifist, the Germans would be pacifists too, and they wouldn't do anything of the sort.'

'Huns aren't pacifists,' said Barbara scornfully. May said heatedly that her mother knew several *very nice* German suffragists who were, and Barbara knew nothing about it. But that turned out to be a mistake too. The girls added 'Hun-lover' to their list of cat-calls, and taunted May with lewd suggestions about what she wanted the Huns to do to her. This was as baffling as it was hurtful. Arguments May could cope with, even arguments where every girl in her form room was against her. Not for nothing had she stood in the street while passers-by threw rotten vegetables at her mother. But the violence and the cruelty of this hate campaign was outside of her experience. You couldn't argue with it. You couldn't fight it. All you could do was put down your head and endure...

**[May's mother]** manage[d] to find a morning to go down to the school and complain. This had not been a success either. The form mistress had listened politely, and explained that Brightview School for Girls was proud of its patriotic history, and that May should consider supporting her fellow countrymen like her classmates. Men in France were desperately under-equipped, and if May thought making handkerchiefs was more important than keeping a fighting man's feet warm - well! What could the form mistress do? May's mother said furiously that she would take May out of that disgusting school at once, and send her to one of the Quaker schools, Sibford, or Sidcot, but May begged her not to. Sibford and Sidcot were both boarding schools, and May knew how stretched their household finances were. Besides, she didn't want to go to boarding school. She didn't even want to stop going to Brightview, exactly. It felt like a failure. It felt like giving up. And if May gave up, what sort of person would she be then? It would be just the same as knitting their beastly socks, and she was dashed if she was going to do it.



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## Source 3

*Extracts from articles on the topic of West African carriers in WWI*

### **(A) A British Colonial Official reflects on their treatment of African recruits during WWI**

A British Colonial Official said that the treatment of Africans during the war “only stopped short of a scandal because the people who suffered most were the carriers – and after all, who cares about native carriers?”

*Edward Paice, Tip and Run: The Untold Tragedy of the Great War in Africa, Orion, 2006,*

### **(B) A former Carrier reflects on how he was recruited**

Carrier #1475, recruited in Southern Nigeria in 1914 said: “We came back one night from our yam farm. The chief called us and handed us over to a Government messenger. I did not know where we were going to, but the chief and the messenger said that the white man had sent for us and so we must go. After three days we reached the white man’s compound. Plenty of others had arrived from other villages far away. The white man wrote our names in a book, tied a brass number ticket round our neck, and gave each man a blanket and food. Then he told us that we were going to the Great War to help the King’s soldiers, who were preventing the Germans coming to our country and burning it. We left and marched far into the bush. The Government police led the way, and allowed no man to stop behind.”

*David Killingray and James Matthews, ‘Beasts of Burden: British West African Carriers in the First World War’, Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines, Vol. 13, No. 1/2 (1979), pp. 5+7-23*

### **(C) British colonial and military officials often tried to get local chiefs to recruit Carriers, rather than doing it directly. Here a historian discusses the impact that this had.**

“In March 1917, Captain Nash, the Commissioner of the Navaronga-Zaurungu District [in the British Gold Coast, now Ghana], was told by the chief of Sandana that he had been unable to find recruits. Nash told the chief: ‘I did not come all the way to Kanjarga, and tell all the chiefs that I wanted recruits, for nothing... if he had not got me some recruits by the time I visited Kanjarga next week he would catch trouble’... Five months later Nash was urging that recruiting should cease ... as chiefs were making themselves unpopular by using subterfuge in order to get men and a chief’s messenger had been assaulted at Lungu while trying to collect recruits. Young men required for government carrier work had fled to the bush while men enlisted for the Regiment had deserted in considerable numbers. Unless recruiting was stopped, concluded Nash, he could not hold himself responsible for the peace of the district.”

*David Killingray, Military and Labour Policies in the Gold Coast During the First World War in Melvin E Page (ed) Africa and the Cold War*





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