“THE VAPOURINGS OF EMPTY YOUNG MEN”

Legacies of their hostility between 1916 and 1918 in British newspaper treatment of conscientious objectors during the German blitzkrieg of 1940

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*In both world wars, British governments depicted tolerance of conscientious objectors as an example of their respect for the principle of individual liberty and contrasted their stance with that of Britain’s enemies. Simultaneously, ministers faced an urgent need to conscript manpower. These conflicting demands presented a dilemma for newspapers. Should they demonstrate editorial independence from state and majority opinion through balanced coverage of this most divisive issue, or should they act as cheerleaders for the patriotic cause? Part of a project to present case studies of newspaper treatment of significant political controversies during the Second World War, this paper considers the reporting and analysis of conscientious objection in a structured sample of British newspapers between Monday, 6 May 1940 and Friday, 14 June 1940. It seeks to identify echoes of prejudices displayed during the First World War in journalism published during this most desperate period of the Second.*

KEYWORDS conscientious objectors; conscientious objection; newspapers; First World War; Second World War

**Introduction**

In the early months of WWI, public enthusiasm for the conflict was genuine and often expressed through hostility toward Germans. Implementation of the Military Service Act of January 1916, Britain’s first conscription act, created a new target for popular loathing: conscientious objectors (COs). These men - for whose religious or moral objection to armed military service the act explicitly provided – faced a barrage of brutal press coverage that was hardly diluted until the autumn of 1917, and then only in elite establishment titles. Kennedy (1973) notes that animosity towards COs grew particularly intense when they organised themselves to advance pacifist arguments, as the most resolute COs did through the anti-war No-Conscription Fellowship (NCF). This was founded in November 1914 by A. Fenner Brockway, editor of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) newspaper, the *Labour Leader,* and his fellow ILP activist Clifford Allen, who would become the NCF chairman. In March 1916 Edward Hulton’s illustrated newspaper, the conservative, populist *Daily Sketch,* blasted the NCF’s pacifist absolutism, insisting: “Theories be damned. Britain is at war. Either we have utterly to crush the oppressor or to be enslaved” (Kennedy 1973, 111). In a front-page picture exclusive on 15 April 1916, the *Daily Sketch* promoted contempt for COs. Beneath the headline “’Percy’s’ Progress in the Army”, the main image depicted a smiling young man wrapped in a blanket accompanied by a stern, uniformed sergeant. The caption explained: “’Percy,’ the Conscientious Objector, who refuses to wear khaki, is making progress. He has had his hair cut – unwillingly, even forcibly, it is true – and has put his feet into Army boots. They may make a soldier out of him yet!” (Reproduced in Rae 1970, 81) The *Daily Express* condemned NCF activists as “peace cranks” and its great rival for the affections of the British public, Lord Northcliffe’s *Daily Mail,* called them “mild-faced creatures mostly thinnish and large-eyed, with rankish untrimmed hair” (Kennedy 1973, 112). In April 1916, when the No-Conscription Fellowship national convention decided to meet universal conscription with total resistance, the *Evening Standard* demanded that “these hordes of cowards…be severely dealt with”. Unspecified severity was not good enough for the *Glasgow Herald* which suggested that COs should be interned until Germany was defeated and deported thereafter. The *Sunday Herald -* Edward Hulton’s London-based title, launched in March 1915 - was reluctant to waste ammunition but concluded that “a few rounds might be spared” to shoot COs (Kennedy 1973, 111-112).

Such hostility remained the dominant opinion in national and regional newspapers until the end of the war. Indeed, *The Times* felt compelled to emphasise its dislike of COs even when expressing a scintilla of sympathy for the most unfortunate among them, those absolutists who were among the “cat-and-mouse” cases condemned to serve successive terms of hard labour because they would not agree to perform non-combatant service in the armed forces or work of national importance. So, in its famous leader column, “Conscience Recalcitrant”,published on 25 October 1917, the voice of the establishment described public opinion towards COs as “indifference, blazing at irregular intervals into spasmodic indignation” and explained that: “We are not pleading the case of the conscientious objector, irrespective of its individual bearings: very much the contrary”, before making a case for tolerance in cases where the individual objector’s motives for refusing to contribute to the war effort were sincere and not an example of “that cloak of conscience which covers, in many cases, an abysmal degradation of selfishness, or of treason, or of mere pitiable physical fear” (*The Times* 1917).

*The Manchester Guardian* revealed its sympathy for the liberal principles which had persuaded Herbert Asquith to broaden Britain’s conception of conscientious objection beyond the definitions enshrined in law by Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States (Rae 1970, 49-51). This it did by reporting diligently the proceedings of local tribunals, the advice on points of principle offered by the Central Tribunal and, in particular, the often brutal treatment in the army and beyond of “those conscientious objectors to military service who refuse the offer of alternative civilian service” (*The Manchester Guardian* 1916a). It offered extensive coverage of the “cat-and-mouse” scandal which saw 655 of these COs court-martialled twice, 591 three times, 50 five times and three six times (Hayes 1949, 8). For these men, imprisonment between court-martial appearances usually involved hard labour. However, this sympathy, though genuine, did not extend to overt editorial support for conscientious objectors. *The Manchester Guardian’s* position on the issue was defined by C.P. Scott, its editor. Scott had been a Liberal MP between 1895 and 1906, and, when his party won its great electoral victory in January 1906, several friends he had made in the House of Commons became ministers. Through them, Scott retained a level of influence in national affairs his editorship alone could not have conveyed. His position on conscientious objection was informed by his support for Lloyd George’s elevation to the premiership in place of Asquith (Wilson 1970) and by the emphatic shift towards support for military conscription it presaged.[[1]](#endnote-1)

The newspaper’s subsequent ambivalence regarding conscientious objectors was, perhaps, best expressed by its regular columnist Artifex, pen name of Canon Peter Green of the Parish of St Philip’s in Salford. Writing in response to a correspondent who had accused him of “sitting on the fence on the subject of the conscientious objectors”, Artifex protested that he was doing nothing of the sort and, in doing so, demonstrated that his accuser had understood him perfectly. He wrote: “I hope to satisfy my correspondent, but I cannot do as he asks and either blame the conscientious objector or declare him to be in the right” (*The Manchester Guardian* 1917). Artifex believed that the war, though intensely regrettable, was the right response to German aggression. Like his newspaper, he believed the best possible outcome for conscientious objectors was that their rights should be fairly and consistently applied. When they were not, injustices were to be addressed through formal channels, not by strident campaigning of the type many readers craved. This approach required detailed reporting. A significant early example appeared on 6 April 1916 when *The Manchester Guardian* reported advice offered to local tribunals by Walter Long, Conservative President of the Local Government Board in Asquith’s Liberal/Conservative cabinet, that: “Everyone admits that a man who is e.g. a sincere member of the Society of Friends [The Quakers] is entitled to claim that he has a sincere objection to combatant service. On the other hand, there is a variety of other societies which men have joined, and in respect of which they claim the same right as those accorded to the Society of Friends. Whether any such organisation or society is one which merits the same consideration is a matter which might properly be referred to the Central Tribunal as a matter of general principle” (*The Manchester Guardian* 1916b).

Rae (1970, 50) notes that Asquith’s Liberalism “had not been enough to guarantee that the intentions of the Cabinet were clear and consistent in law and that they would be correctly implemented in practice”. They were not. The entrenched views of their members left many tribunals resistant to the idea that conscientious objection could exist apart from religious belief. This dichotomy between respect for objections located in religious belief and distrust for non-religious ones was widely shared in the press. Equally common was the view that, while religious objectors to combatant service might be worthy of respect, absolutist objectors – those who refused to contribute to the war effort in a non-combatant role – were not. In 1940, similar prejudices about religion and absolutists would re-emerge in the work of the Conscientious Objectors’ Tribunals and in the newspapers surveyed here. They were augmented by new resentments made vivid by the nature of the conflict and new legislation. The Government anticipated hostility as the Prime Minister made plain when addressing the House of Commons on the Second Reading of the Military Training Bill, by which the principles of conscription and conscientious objection were reintroduced in May 1939.

**Conscription Returns**

In describing his Government’s plans for the treatment of conscientious objectors, Neville Chamberlain made it plain that its range of options would be greater than the crude choice that had confronted its predecessors. Local tribunals would have power to assign successful applicants to three categories of exemption: (i) unconditional registration; (ii) registration conditional on acceptance of some work of national importance as defined by the tribunal; (iii) registration for military service subject to a guarantee that they would be assigned duties of a non-combatant character. If a tribunal concluded that an application was not genuine, the applicant’s name would be deleted from the CO register and he would become liable for military service. Chamberlain revealed that his experience as a member of the Birmingham tribunal between 1916 and 1918 had left him with particular concerns about the treatment of absolutists. Such people were not numerous, he told the House:

But it often happens that those who hold the most extreme positions hold them with the greatest tenacity. We learned something about this in the Great War, and I think we found that it was both a useless and an exasperating waste of time and effort to attempt to force such people to act in a manner which was contrary to their principles… (Hansard 1939a)

The Prime Minister set down general guidelines according to which the Government wished local tribunals to proceed, explaining that: “[W]here scruples are conscientiously held we desire that they should be respected and that there should be no persecution of those who hold them” (Hansard 1939b).

The 1500 absolutist COs who had suffered so intensely for their principles in the Great War had not suffered in vain. When war began Chamberlain and his successors stuck fast to their promise of fair treatment. The National Services (Armed Forces) Act that became law on 1 September 1939, within hours of Germany’s invasion of Poland, enshrined the principles contained in its pre-war predecessor. William Beveridge, then working for the Ministry of Labour, defended tolerance of conscientious objection as an extreme example of British freedom, declaring that: “It makes Britain stronger in war rather than weaker” (Hayes 1949, 6). But it soon became plain that conscientious objection remained easier to defend in principle than to profess in person. Hayes notes that in March 1940 Mass Observation estimated that “for every registered CO there were two latent objectors whose ‘private doubt’ was largely concealed by social pressure” (1949, 7). This was real and unsurprising. Calder (2008, 494) notes that COs had been unpopular in the First World War, but their case had not lacked justification and events after the war had enhanced their reputations. Government was more tolerant in the Second World War but it was harder for individuals to justify conscientious objection to their families and friends and, perhaps, to their own consciences. Even before the liberation of the concentration camps, the nature of Nazism persuaded leading anti-war campaigners of the 1930s, such as C.E.M. Joad and Bertrand Russell, that it must be resisted by force.

**Initial reactions**

*The Economist* responded to the Military Training Bill in a leader column entitled “Issues of Conscription”. It admired: “The Prime Minister’s strong denial of any intention to persecute pacifists.” But its tolerance of COs was limited and echoed prejudices common at First World War tribunals. “The only true objectors,” it explained, “are those who are pacifists on moral or religious grounds” (*The Economist* 1939). Newspapers of the populist right took a less thoughtful approach. Thus, in October 1939, Charles Graves of the *Daily Mail* wrote a column attacking COs, in which he reinforced his own views with those of Sir James Baillie, a member of the London local tribunal, who had told him “that in his opinion many of the conscientious objectors really mean that they are afraid of being killed themselves when they say that they don’t want to kill other people” (Hayes 1949, 43). Denis Hayes, who worked from 1941 to 1947 as publications editor to the Central Board of Conscientious Objectors and later emerged as a meticulous historian of conscription and objection, was in no doubt about the press’s role in generating hostility to the new generation of COs. Newspapers offered detailed coverage of tribunal hearings and, Hayes explains,

[T]he bark of many tribunals was worse than their bite. But the “bark” was of great importance because the public impression of COs was based as much upon newspaper reports of tribunal hearings as on any other single factor… It was inevitable, perhaps, that in time of war the attitude of the press should be hostile, and that most reports should select the eccentric cases and generally show COs in a poor light. (Hayes 1949, 43-44)

Denis Hayes believed tribunals gave newspapers ample opportunity to portray “these conchies” unfavourably. Their biggest opportunity to stereotype, lampoon and stigmatise came when tribunals reached a peak of activity. This occurred in the early summer of 1940 and coincided with a mood of bitter hostility to COs following the British withdrawal from Norway and the German invasion of France. At this time many companies dismissed pacifist employees, 119 local authorities dismissed or suspended all COs and 13 more forced them to accept soldiers’ wages (Calder 2008, 496).

**Methodology**

This essay offers a qualitative content analysis of the treatment of COs in a structured sample of British newspapers between Monday, 16 May 1940 and Friday, 14 June 1940. It seeks to identify echoes of attitudes displayed during WWI in journalism published in this most desperate period of WWII, during which Hitler’s armies swept across the low countries and conquered France, the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) was evacuated from Dunkirk and General Mason-Macfarlane, the BEF’s Director of Military Intelligence, told correspondents: “I’m afraid there is going to be a considerable shock for the British public. It is your duty to act as shock-absorbers…” (Gardiner 2004, 211). My sample includes the market-leading popular daily newspapers of left and right, the *Daily Mirror* and the *Daily Express,* the establishment’s favourite broadsheet, *The Times*, *The Manchester Guardian,* voice of the liberal intelligentsia, and the *Yorkshire Post*, a regional quality title which though staunchly conservative, had made a name for itself in the late 1930s as a steadfast critic of appeasement. I searched each of these titles for appearances of the terms “conscientious objection”, “conscientious objector” or “conscientious objectors”.

***Daily Express***

In early May 1940, the *Express* nailed its colours to the mast with a report about the government of the Isle of Man’s decision that it would “not give dole to anyone of military age who is medically fit and has not volunteered for service”. It noted that: “Islanders are proud that among the 3,000 men sent to the colours there has not been one conscientious objector. Two Manxmen have applied for exemption on conscientious grounds, but it is hoped they will change their minds before they face the tribunal” (*Daily Express* 1940a). During the period of this analysis, Lord Beaverbrook’s market-leading, right-of-centre title published 14 articles about conscientious objectors. Each made plain its disapproval, applying the social pressure Mass Observation identified in vivid manner. For the *Express*,COs were eccentric and disreputable. Thus, on Friday, 17 May, it published a snide piece about identical twins from Dursley in Gloucestershire who had applied for exemption from service simultaneously. It explained,

Twin brothers, Harold and Reginald Powell walked together to the front of Bristol Conscientious Objectors’ Court [sic] today and applied for exemption. They looked identical. They wore similar clothes. Both wore glasses. Both based their objections on religious grounds. And both smiled as they walked from the court having been granted unconditional exemption. (*Daily Express* 1940b)

In a leader warning that Norwegian fifth columnists might attempt to infiltrate the UK following the German conquest of their homeland, the newspaper made it plain that it considered “conchies” only slightly less dreadful than Nazi sympathisers. “It is easy enough to sneer at conscientious objectors as inverted martyrs who refuse to face death because of their beliefs,” it wrote, but Quislings were even more dangerous because: “They do not advertise their activities” (*Daily Express* 1940c). Room was frequently found in the *Express*’s columns for reports showing that COs around the country were facing punitive measures. So, the newspaper reported that Chatham Town Council had “decided without discussion that all persons in the service of the council known to be conscientious objectors should be asked to resign” (*Daily Express* 1940d). It noted that Torquay councillors had refused to employ any (*Daily Express* 1940e) and trumpeted the success of women workers at a bacon factory in Calne, Wiltshire who refused to work until their managers sacked a CO who worked alongside them (*Daily Express* 1940f). It championed a campaign to ensure that no CO could earn more than a serving soldier, noting with glee that Sir Robert Snedley Crooke MP (Conservative, Deritend) was cheered in the House of Commons when he asked the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Labour whether he was aware “of the growing indignation because objectors are put in work where they can get wages of £5 or £6 while our brave soldiers go through hell for 2 shillings a day?” (*Daily Express* 1940g)

The Government’s decision to organise COs for work in agriculture, a measure intended to provide urgently needed labour to increase food production, offered a new opportunity to snipe: “There is likely to be some opposition among farmers to the employment of conscientious objectors” wrote the *Express’s* agriculture reporter on 3 June. “To meet this it is likely Mr Hudson [R.S. Hudson, Minister of Agriculture] will organise COs into gangs to work on farms country committees take over, and on the draining and cultivation of large tracts at present derelict” (*Daily Express* 1940h). Such hostility to COs on farms was sustained in star writer William Barkley’s column on 4 June. Barkley lamented that agricultural workers had long been treated with contempt and now, just as government was offering them a better deal – the Minister for Agriculture’s new plan increased their wages to 48 shillings per week - “The conscientious objector is told he will be exempted if he takes up agricultural employment. There is never a question whether he knows anything about the job. But it would be as wise to let a lunatic loose with a spanner in an aircraft factory as trust a city clerk to look after livestock” (*Daily Express* 1940i). For the *Daily Express*, an even more attractive opportunity to stigmatise COs, while appealing to its lower- middle-class readers, arose when Count Henry Noel Bentinck of King’s Road, Chelsea appeared before the South Eastern Tribunal. Count Henry who: “holds the hereditary title of count of the Holy Roman Empire … and is a kinsman of the Duke of Portland” had absconded from the Royal Military College at Sandhurst in May 1939. Now he told the tribunal that his experience at Sandhurst had appalled him: “I saw young men as yet unable to view the Army system and principles objectively being trained from youth as professional killers … I base my attitude of conscientious objection to military service on a positive belief in the underlying unity of man.” He was registered for non-combatant service. The accompanying image depicted this posh, Catholic CO in an expensive, open-necked white shirt flapping a limp right wrist (*Daily Express* 1940j).

***Daily Mirror***

During the phoney war, the *Daily Mirror* had shown concern that COs and Communists might work together to undermine the war effort. A loyal but critical friend of the Labour Party, the *Mirror* despised the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). It reported prominently Cardiff City Council’s decision to ban Communist meetings from parks and open spaces and noted allegations that CPGB and Peace Pledge Union activists were distributing “subversive literature, including advice to conscientious objectors” (*Daily Mirror* 1940a). During the period of this analysis, the *Mirror* offered scant coverage of conscientious objection, publishing only five stories on the subject, four of which were single paragraph NIBs (*i.e.* in the news-in-brief column). One of these dealt with the religious dimension, revealing that: “Only two Christadelphians throughout the country have been refused registration” and confirming the title’s lingering adherence to the WWI prejudice that sincere objection must be based on religious belief (*Daily Mirror* 1940b). The remaining three reported aspects of COs’ experience at work, reporting the fate of CO employees in Torquay (*Daily Mirror* 1940c), Amersham (*Daily Mirror* 1940d) and East Ham (*Daily Mirror* 1940e). The only longer report, a two-column story published in bold type, also dealt with employment, this time in Colne, a Lancashire mill town with a Labour council and a pacifist MP. This hinted at editorial tolerance of COs, revealing that here two employees of Colne Council had “asked to receive the same pay as soldiers” at a time when other COs were having such wage cuts imposed upon them (*Daily Mirror* 1940f).

***The Manchester Guardian***

This voice of intelligent liberalism offered an emphatic statement of editorial policy regarding conscientious objection in a leader column about agriculture published on Tuesday, 4 June 1940, the final day of the Dunkirk evacuation. Its main purpose was to celebrate the Government’s adoption of an evidence-based agricultural policy. It was pleased that: “A great push is to be made to provide agriculture with labour power”, and that: “conscientious objectors are to be formed into an agricultural force”. It believed “this expedient should help to solve the practical difficulty of securing respect for conscience without inflicting an injustice on those who undertake their military burden” (*The Manchester Guardian* 1940a). In identifying tension between concern for conscience and fear of injustice, the leader writer balanced his newspaper’s sympathy for the former with its sensitivity to public concern about the latter. A similar balancing act was being performed daily at conscientious objectors’ tribunals, not least in *The Manchester Guardian’s* home territory. Readers knew all about it because their newspaper paid close attention to proceedings in the tribunals. In *The Manchester Guardian* my searchfound65 articles mentioning one or more of the terms, more than in any of the other titles and frequently more than one mention per day during these critical weeks in which the Wehrmacht raced into France. One reason for the particular prominence of conscientious objection was the newspaper’s determination to record every application to the Lancashire Tribunal. It published a complete list of the decisions made at each sitting. Accompanying these lists were news reports in which it focused on individual applicants. Many of these fall firmly into Denis Hayes’ category of “eccentric cases” that portray COs unfavourably. Thus the newspaper reported that Arthur Cuffin told the tribunal he would not serve in the army unless his wife were guaranteed an income of £2 and 2 shillings per week while he was in uniform and a generous pension if he were killed (*The Manchester Guardian* 1940b). It recorded that a witness speaking on behalf of Douglas Haynes, a market retailer, revealed that his friend’s study of spiritualism and metaphysics had persuaded him that he could not kill. His pacifism presented no threat to national interests however because: “[Hitler’s] life on the other side would be so terrible that he would get his punishment” (*The Manchester Guardian* 1940c). Each of these claims was dismissed. The same fate befell the application submitted by Arthur Hands, a young man who had moved north from London to avoid bombing. Hands told the Lancashire Tribunal that, “he did not think England has an enemy”. More fortunate was Douglas McGrath, an applicant who had visited Spain during the Civil War and been convinced that war could never be justified after witnessing at first hand the consequences of bombing and machine gunning. However, in the report in which it recounted McGrath’s successful application, *The Manchester Guardian* also reported an equally successful, but plainly eccentric, application by Gerald William Beedle, a former salesman for a tailoring firm, who had given up his job because his conscience would not allow him to repair soldiers’ uniforms (*The Manchester Guardian* 1940d). That eccentricity was not to be treated as a barrier to registration as a conscientious objector was revealed in comments made by the temporary chairman of the Lancashire Tribunal, Judge R.C. Essenhigh. At the tribunal’s first meeting after German troops entered Holland and Belgium, Essenhigh told an applicant:

When one realises the Germans are within a short distance of this country and that fast planes may be over here dropping parachutists, and here is a man who says he will not raise one finger to help men, women and children or have anything to do with the war, it staggers me that men should have such views. We can but come to the conclusion that those views arise from his conscience. (*The Manchester Guardian* 1940e)

On his return to work following his stabbing by a man to whom he had denied exemption from military service, Judge Burgis, the permanent chairman of the Lancashire Tribunal, revealed equal if not greater sympathy for eccentric opinions. The newspaper reported that Burgis registered for non-combatant service Herbert Butterfant, a member of the Plymouth Brethren who confessed he would “fight if ordered to do so” because the Bible demands obedience to rulers, but admitted that such obedience would “sear his conscience”. *The Manchester Guardian* approved of Judge Burgis’ views. Its report on Butterfant’s application emphasised that in granting him exemption from combatant service the judge was expressing the will of Parliament (*The Manchester Guardian* 1940f). *The Manchester Guardian* made plain its support for sincere conscientious objectors through its leader column and its selection of news from the Lancashire Tribunal. A particularly poignant example involved the registration of John Albert Rudd, a printer, on condition that he accept forestry work. Rudd explained that his father had been a CO in WWI serving as a non-combatant in the Royal Army Medical Corps. In one German attack he was handed a rifle and ordered to defend his position. He refused, was court-martialled and sentenced to death only to be reprieved when standing in front of the firing squad. Rudd’s father was now a pacifist preacher and his son shared his views (*The Manchester Guardian* 1940g).

In its portrayal of political activity surrounding conscientious objection, it offered insight about the range and complexity of the issue. It reported sackings of COs by councils and private employers, but it also noted examples of attempted persecution such as the Liverpool councillor who sought information about teachers who are “members of subversive organisations” (*The Manchester Guardian* 1940h) and protests by members of the British Legion against pacifist students at Aberystwyth University College (*The Manchester Guardian* 1940i). It opened its letters page to defenders of conscientious objection, including Fenner Brockway, Chairman of the Central Board for Conscientious Objectors, who wrote in support of John Mitchell of Oldham. Mitchell’s application for CO status had been rejected by local and appellate tribunals and his subsequent refusal to obey call-up had resulted in his conviction at court martial. Military detention meant he could not exercise his statutory right to apply once more to the appellate tribunal. Brockway described his dilemma as “a violation of the promise given by the Government … that it was their intention to avoid the cat-and-mouse treatment of objectors which took place in the last war” *(The Manchester Guardian* 1940j).

***The Times***

*The Times* also used a leader column about agricultural policy to comment on the issue of conscientious objection. It was pleased that COs were to be compelled to work on the land and that their wages were to be set at 48 shillings per week. It thought they should be pleased too: “This last step should be most welcome to the genuine conscientious objector – and also to the public who find it difficult to understand why curious opinions of this kind should be rewarded not only by comparative security but actually by the assurance of a much higher income than any obtainable by men in the services” (*The Times* 1940a). *The Times* took an additional opportunity to editorialise about COs in its report of a speech by the Bishop of Ely. In the first week of June 1940 Dr Bernard Heywood addressed Ely Diocesan Conference on the subject of pacifists and COs. He explained that, while he had never regarded Christianity as compatible with war, “I cannot bring myself to believe that the men who would let Hitler rob and kill to his heart’s content are more virtuous than the men who, perhaps at the cost of their own lives, resolve to stand in his way.” To make peace with Hitler would be “little short of insanity” (*The Times* 1940b). Despite the newspaper’s record of support for appeasement, its readers can have been left in little doubt that it now agreed with Dr Heywood. They would also have understood that it approved of the Chief Rabbi’s declaration that Judaism offered no religious basis for conscientious objection (*The Times* 1940c), and that it was pleased that: “There has once again been a decrease in the proportion [of men called up for military service] registering as conscientious objectors, the figure being the lowest since compulsory registration began” (*The Times* 1940d). In total, *The Times* mentioned conscientious objection on only twelve occasions between 16 May and 15 June 1940. Four of these mentions involved the treatment by local authorities of CO employees. It reported: that the Lord Mayor of Newcastle had received protests from ratepayers about their employment there (*The Times* 1940e); that Torquay Town Council had agreed to dismiss them (*The Times* 1940f); that Rugby Town Council had decided to suspend all COs and none would be reinstated “before men who have served with the forces” (*The Times* 1940g); and that Manchester City Council decided “by six votes” not to dismiss employees who were COs (*The Times* 1940h). It did not cover the CO tribunals but it reported the criminal trial of Frederick Winding of Brixton Hill, London who was charged with having in his possession documents that would be of value to the enemy. The documents in question were maps of gas supply lines belonging to the Tottenham Gas Company on which were also displayed the locations of Air Raid Patrol posts. *The Times* noted that Winding was a Communist, a member of the Peace Pledge Union and a CO (*The Times* 1940i). He was plainly also an innocent victim of the invasion panic then sweeping the country: at the Central Criminal Court on 3 July 1940 he was found not guilty and discharged (*The Times* 1940j).

***Yorkshire Post***

The *Yorkshire Post* celebrated the paucity of COs in Yorkshire, noting that, “At Leeds, Armley and Stanningley Employment Exchanges, 3,800 men registered. Only 47 were conscientious objectors. At Rothwell, there was only one conscientious objector among the 162 men who registered” (*Yorkshire Post* 1940a). It trumpeted a speech to the Western Baptist Association, meeting in Taunton, in which Douglas Jackman protested about the conduct of a parson who had “done all he could” to persuade a young soldier to become a CO. Mr Jackman said it was utterly wrong for a parson to shelter behind his occupation while “enjoying his privileges at the expense of someone else’s life” (*Yorkshire Post* 1940b). That the *Yorkshire Post* reported a speech delivered so far from its home patch may be taken as evidence of its sympathy for Jackman’s stance. That sympathy was confirmed when it selected for publication on its letters page the views of “A Soldier’s Mother” who complained that: “It seems terrible that in these anxious times grown men should be obliged to sit at the conscientious objectors’ tribunals day after day listening to the vapourings of empty young men.” She asked: “Why this pampering of a section of the community whose opinions are not worth listening to? The tribunals should resign in protest.” Beneath this missive appeared another from a Mr E.T. Harvey of Harrogate demanding that the conscription of fighting men be accelerated (*Yorkshire Post* 1940c). In common with the other titles considered here, the *Yorkshire Post* reported decisions to expel COs from public employment, in its case at Goole (*Yorkshire Post* 1940d) and Wakefield (*Yorkshire Post* 1940e). It offered details of a motion passed by Horncastle Urban Council that: “A resolution be sent to the Government demanding that all conscientious objectors shall receive soldiers’ pay and no more, and should be compelled to wear white armlets marked CO” (*Yorkshire Post* 1940f). In total, the *Yorkshire Post* mentioned COs twelve times during the study period. Its reports included complete records of decisions made at the North-Eastern Conscientious Objectors’ Tribunal.

**Conclusion**

The newspapers under consideration here all published articles that fall into four broad categories: stories in which COs are depicted as eccentrics; those in which the COs’ religious or moral convictions are considered or tested; those in which COs are presented as benefiting materially from their status, *e.g.* earning more than soldiers; and stories about COs dismissed from their jobs or otherwise punished for their stance. Despite broad political consensus that tolerance for COs was a shining example of British exceptionalism, the suspicion that conscience was a cloak for cowardice, expressed so forcibly in *The Times* leader of 1917, remained vivid in British newspapers in May and June 1940. Scepticism about COs was expressed in the popular and quality titles and in newspapers of left and right. The greatest hostility now tended to be snide rather than savage, but it was indelibly apparent. Additional echoes are discernible. The religious issue that was prominent between 1916 and 1918 was less so in 1940, but it endured. The statutory position that sincere conscientious objection need not be based on religious conviction was broadly understood in a way that it had not been between 1916 and 1918, but it was not universally welcomed. Even the liberal *Manchester Guardian* took care to publish tribunal testimony in which presiding judges challenged religious claims and expressed exasperation with claimants who professed faith-based objections. For the other titles, the question of whether believers had a religious duty to fight Nazism was now added to the old recognition that some sects, Quakers in particular, were genuinely pacifist. *The Times,* *The Manchester Guardian* and *Yorkshire Post* gave prominence to the views of religious leaders who defended the use of armed force against the Nazis. The quality right-of-centre *Times* and *Yorkshire Post* exploited their celebration of increased recruitment to the armed forces to stigmatise objectors by comparison. The *Daily Express* made the same comparison with no pretence of subtlety. Each of these titles selected for coverage councillors’ decisions to dismiss COs to signal their sympathy for such decisions. The *Daily Express* was broadly contemptuous of all grounds for conscientious objection. These Conservative newspapers all paraded versions of WWI antipathies that had appeared petty-minded at the apex of appeasement and pacifism but which now assumed new relevance. These included hostility to absolutist objectors. Limited coverage in the *Daily Mirror* reflected its long-standing hostility to Nazism, a large and growing readership among servicemen and their families and intense ideological hostility to the Communist Party. The *Mirror* did not regard conscientious objection as a cause that justified any risk of offending its intensely patriotic working class readers. *The Manchester Guardian* remained as determined as it had been in the First World War to be a newspaper of record on the subject of conscientious objection. It sponsored debate on the issue and its editorial stance reflected less ambivalence than Artifex had expressed on its behalf in 1917. In this People’s War, *The Manchester Guardian* would defend sincere conscientious objectors, even during Britain’s darkest hour, but it did not depict them as moral or political leaders. The game had changed: this was a just war.

1. **NOTE**

   C.P. Scott was a friend and confidant to David Lloyd George. They were in frequent contact throughout Lloyd George’s manoeuvrings towards the premiership. Scott used his newspaper to support his friend and was rewarded days after Lloyd George became Prime Minister on 6 December 1916 with a letter from the new PM which began “Your article yesterday was tip-top and most encouraging to a poor fellow who has undertaken the biggest task that has ever fallen on the shoulders of a British Minister” (Wilson 1970, 252).

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