Conscientious Objectors in World War II

When Congress passed the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940, which established the draft for military service, it exempted persons "conscientiously opposed to participation in war" from combat. As an alternative, these persons, "conscientious objectors" or "COs," could be assigned to noncombatant service or, if conscientiously opposed to any military participation, "work of national importance under civilian direction." Only men aged 18 to 44 were subject to the draft during the war.

To qualify as a CO during World War II, a man had to show "religious training and belief" as the reason for objection to combat or military service. Men who opposed war on non-religious grounds could not be classified as COs or qualify for alternative service. Although COs included people from over 200 religious denominations, the majority were members of one of three major churches with a history of pacifism, or teaching peace: the Mennonites, the Church of the Brethren, and the Society of Friends (Quakers). These three religions were often referred to as the "peace churches" for their long-standing opposition to any participation in war. A sizeable number of Methodists also qualified as COs.

The 1940 Act was different than earlier draft laws in America. During World War I, for example, only members of the three peace churches could qualify as conscientious observers, and these citizens were required to take the military oath and serve noncombatant roles. For many conscientious objectors, their religious beliefs prevented them from performing any kind of military service. Those refusing to enter the military were sentenced to prison or even to death. According to Sareyan (1994), 17 conscientious objectors received death sentences and 142 were sentenced to life in prison in World War I. After the war, most of the prison sentences were reduced. No one was executed for refusing to join the military during the war.

During World War II, an estimated 25,000 draftees served in noncombatant military roles as COs. Designated by draft boards as "1-A-Os," these men did not participate in weapons handling or training. Many of these soldiers served in the medical corps. Some died in the war.

Approximately 12,000 men opposed to any military participation served as COs in the Civilian Public Services or CPS. The National Service Board for Religious Objectors was established by church and peace organizations to coordinate the CPS with the government

Selective Service. Individual churches sponsored specific public service projects and provided for COs' room and board. Most projects were sponsored by Quakers, Mennonites, or the Brethren; groups representing the Methodists, American Baptists, Catholics, and others also were involved. COs worked without pay.

The CPS was modeled on President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps, a public relief program established in the 1930s to put unemployed men to work on environmental projects. Initially, COs were assigned to the Soil Conservation Service, the National Park Service, and the Forest Service and were involved in fighting forest fires, planting trees, park preservation, and fire prevention. Some risked their lives by diving out of airplanes to fight fires.

By 1942, the CPS had expanded to include forms of alternative service beyond environmental projects. A combination of the labor shortage caused by the war and the desire of COs to be involved in humanitarian efforts lead the Selective Service to approve COs to perform a variety of forms of public service. Some COs were assigned to agricultural schools and farms; others were sent to rural communities to build sanitary facilities to fight infestation by parasitic hookworms[1] of farm workers and others.

COs served as "guinea pigs" in medical experiments sponsored by the Office of Scientific Research and Development and the Office of the Surgeon General. These experiments used COs to study the effects of high altitudes, extreme temperatures, and unusual diets as well as exposure to diseases (malaria, jaundice, pneumonia) and parasites (lice).

The Selective Service approved the first assignment of COs to state mental hospitals in 1942. State institutions, which were understaffed and overcrowded prior to the war, faced critical staff shortages during World War II due to the draft and the transfer of workers to higher paying defense industries. Between 1942 and the end of the war, approximately 3,000 COs worked at 40 state mental hospitals and 16 state institutions for people with mental retardation, in addition to a small number of other institutions[2].

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[1] Hookworms infest the digestive system. Many people in rural areas in the 1940s and earlier years had parasites like this.

[2] Different sources report different numbers on COs at institutions (2,000 to over 3,000) and the institutions at which they served (56 to 65). Sociologists and historians understand that official statistics can be misleading, because different experts might define things in different ways and because they might have access to different sources of information. Most sources place the number of COs at institutions at around 3,000. The difference in the number of mental hospitals and training schools reported by different sources probably reflects the fact that some sources included non-state-operated institutions. Many COs were assigned to many mental hospitals and training centers. All sources support these facts.

Not all persons opposed to war during World War II served in non-combat military roles or performed public service. Some conscientious objectors believed that it was wrong to cooperate with the draft in any way. An estimated 6,000 men were convicted of violating the Selective Service law and served time in prison. Many of these were Jehovah's Witnesses who claimed that they were ministers and not subject to the draft law.

It was extremely unpopular to be a CO during World War II. Many people viewed the COs as cowards, "slackers," or "yellow bellies." In some communities in which the COs served, local stores refused to serve them. COs at the mental hospitals often were resented by regular attendants. In the case of COs who were not members of the peace churches, family members and friends sometimes rejected them.

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