

Student Handout 1-Background on Conscientious Objectors

Conscientious Objectors have existed in the United States since its inception and before, and because Pennsylvania was founded by a Quaker as “a religious experiment,” Pennsylvania has had its share of conscientious objectors from the start. During the American Revolution Quakers from Pennsylvania who did not fight were asked to pay a tax the monetary equivalent of the amount of time they would have spent in military drill. If they did not pay, Pennsylvanian Quakers risked the confiscation of their property.

During the Civil War the policy toward conscientious objectors varied. Northern states tended to have more lenient policies, while objectors from Southern states had few alternatives but to run into the hills and hide or to serve. The Civil War was the first time conscientious objectors were given legal notice in the conscription process. Drafted individuals were not allowed to find replacements with the exception of conscientious objectors. They could find replacements or pay \$300 dollars to pay for their replacements. The Lincoln administration also first devised a default of alternative civilian service for conscientious objectors and allowed those drafted to serve as “non-combatants” in hospitals or schools.

During World War I, the Wilson administration appeared less tolerant of conscientious objectors than Lincoln’s Civil War administration. It failed to set up any alternative options for service. While 65,000 drafted men originally claimed to be conscientious objectors, only about 4,000 stayed with their convictions performing basic labor in and around army camps. About 450-2000 (numbers vary according to different sources) individuals were jailed for refusing to participate in the conscription system at all.

Despite the fact that World War II was considered “The Good War” and American public support for the war was extremely high, conscientious objectors continued to act out their beliefs in different ways. Basically there were three types of conscientious objectors.

- (1) Absolutists: Approximately 6,000 men were absolutists. These were people who felt it was wrong to register at all for war. They typically went to jail for their beliefs and served terms for as long as five years.
- (2) Non-Combatants: This was the largest category of conscientious objectors in World War II, totaling about 25,000 men. These men joined the military, but served in positions such as medics or clerics that did not require them to shoot another human being or carry arms. Two of the most well-known non-combatants were medics: Desmond Doss, the first conscientious objector who was the recipient of a Congressional Medal of Honor, and Lew Ayres, a Hollywood film star who received much public criticism and faced divorce by his wife Ginger Rogers when he announced his status as a conscientious objector. After repeated requests to serve in the Medical Corps, he finally received his request. For more of his story and an audio clip of Ayres talking about his perspective see: [PBS-THE GOOD WAR: In the Field](#).
- (3)
- (4) Alternativists: Alternativists were promised work “of national importance under civilian direction.” They worked in non-military occupations of public service during the war. The Selective Service program working together with the National Service Board of Religious Objectors set up Civilian Public Service Camps. About 12,000 conscientious objectors worked in civilian jobs across the United States. Men traveled to the camps and with little to no pay worked on projects for the National Park Service, the US Forest Service, the Bureau of Reclamation, and other agricultural and conservation industries. Many also became care takers for those with mental illness and exposed the terrible conditions patients were facing in Mental Health Institutions in the United States. A few alternativist also were selected for highly dangerous wartime experiments such as those which studied the effects of radon, famine, and polio vaccines. The American Friends Service Committee, originally formed by Quakers from Pennsylvania, provided refugee work for conscientious objectors as well.

Sources: Information for this handout adapted from:
ExplorePAHistory Civilian Public Service Historical Marker Page
Wikipedia-Conscientious Objector at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conscientious_objector

Moskos, Charles C. *A Call To Civic Service: National Service for Country and Community*. New York, NY: The Free Press, 1988.

Alternative Service Images



CPS men join with the unit of WOMEN'S SERVICE IN MENTAL HOSPITALS at the Philadelphia State Hospital in regular discussion meetings each week on current social, economic, religious, and scientific problems which may have a local, national, or international application.

Courtesy American Friends Service Committee



Many conscientious objectors demonstrated their willingness to serve in a non-combative capacity during World War II by offering themselves as human "guinea pigs." They participated in scientific experiments and research, often risking their health and sometimes their lives.

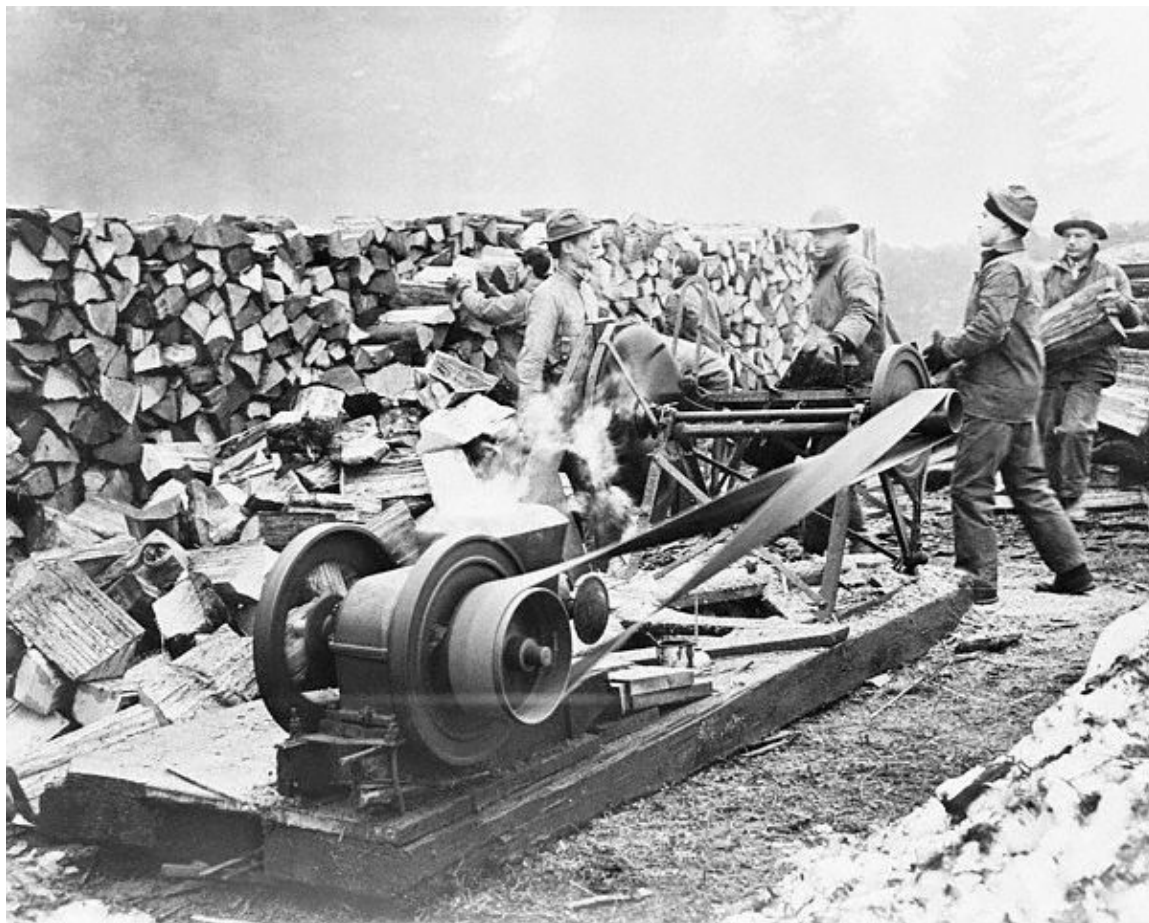
Courtesy the American Friends Service Committee

Jaundice Army experiment, February 27, 1945.



Former Yale Law School student who opposed the war, contracted hepatitis for the sake of science, bares his arm for the nurse's blood taking needle. One of 50 COs who voluntarily submitted to Jaundice Army experiment undertaken at A University of Pennsylvania fraternity house taken over by the Army Epidemiological Board, February 27, 1945.

Courtesy of Temple University, Urban Archives, Philadelphia, Pa.



Conscientious Objectors working with log cutting machinery
Image donated by Corbis-Bettmann



First American Friends Service Committee Camp, Westmoreland, Pennsylvania
Courtesy American Friends Service Committee



Among the first humans to attempt to live on a sustained diet of food exposed to atomic radon.

Image donated by Corbis-Bettmann



The AFSC is recognized worldwide for its humanitarian efforts. Shown here is a committee member helping in France in the 1940s

Courtesy the American Friends Service Committee