

Conscription: the First World War

Your Country Needs You

Within a year of Great Britain declaring war on Germany in August 1914, it had become obvious that it was not possible to continue fighting by relying on voluntary recruits.



Lord Kitchener's campaign – promoted by his famous "Your Country Needs You" poster – had encouraged over one million men to enlist by January 1915. But this was not enough to keep pace with mounting casualties.

Conscription introduced

The government saw no alternative but to increase numbers by conscription – compulsory active service. Parliament was deeply divided but recognised that because of the imminent collapse of the morale of the French army, immediate action was essential.

In January 1916 the Military Service Act was passed. This imposed conscription on all single men aged between 18 and 41, but exempted the medically unfit, clergymen, teachers and certain classes of industrial worker.

Conscientious objectors – men who objected to fighting on moral grounds– were also exempted, and were in most cases given civilian jobs or non-fighting roles at the front.

A second Act passed in May 1916 extended conscription to married men.

Effects of conscription

Conscription was not popular and in April 1916 over 200,000 demonstrated against it in Trafalgar Square. Although many men failed to respond to the call-up, in the first year 1.1 million enlisted.

In 1918 during the last months of the war, the Military Service (No. 2) Act raised the age limit to 51.

Conscription was extended until 1920 to enable the army to deal with continuing trouble spots in the Empire and parts of Europe.

During the whole of the war conscription had raised some 2.5 million men.

Conscription: the Second World War

Limited conscription of men

During the spring of 1939 the deteriorating international situation forced the British government under Neville Chamberlain to consider preparations for a possible war against Nazi Germany.

Plans for limited conscription applying to single men aged between 20 and 22 were given parliamentary approval in the Military Training Act in May 1939. This required men to undertake six months' military training, and some 240,000 registered for service.

Full conscription of men

On the day Britain declared war on Germany, 3 September 1939, Parliament immediately passed a more wide-reaching measure.

The National Service (Armed Forces) Act imposed conscription on all males aged between 18 and 41 who had to register for service. Those medically unfit were exempted, as were others in key industries and jobs such as baking, farming, medicine, and engineering.

Conscientious objectors had to appear before a tribunal to argue their reasons for refusing to join-up. If their cases were not dismissed, they were granted one of several categories of exemption, and were given non-combatant jobs.

Conscription helped greatly to increase the number of men in active service during the first year of the war.

Conscription of women

In December 1941 Parliament passed a second National Service Act. It widened the scope of conscription still further by making all unmarried women and all childless widows between the ages of 20 and 30 liable to call-up.

Men were now required to do some form of National Service up to the age of 60, which included military service for those under 51. The main reason was that there were not enough men volunteering for police and civilian defence work, or women for the auxiliary units of the armed forces.