

Conscientious objection: some key points of historical development and the impact on politics and society

Speech by Dr. Guido Grünewald at the International Summit for Peace in Ukraine, Wien 10.06.2023, working group 9 “living with war, struggling for peace: The (violation of the) right of conscientious objection to military service during the Russian-Ukrainian war”

Due to time constraints, I can only highlight a few key points since the beginning of industrial society. Conscientious objection is essentially the decision and action of individuals; for a long time it was primarily religiously motivated and closely associated with pacifist denominations such as the Quakers or the Christian anarchism of Lev Tolstoy. In the 1st decade of the 20th century, a first secular campaign of young socialists for conscientious objection developed in Norway and Sweden; it contributed to Norway being able to break away without war from the union with Sweden in 1905, which was increasingly perceived as coercive. During World War I, there were larger numbers of conscientious objectors in the Netherlands and England; in England, the 1916 Conscriptio Act contained legal regulations on conscientious objection. There, the No Conscriptio Fellowship was the first conscientious objector organisation; it campaigned, among other things, for the numerous absolutists who also refused alternative service and received harsh prison sentences.

In the years up to 1923, conscientious objection was recognised in the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries. In the 1960s and 1970s, Catholic-influenced countries such as France, Italy and Spain followed suit, and after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Eastern European states did the same. At the international level, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe recognised the right to conscientious objection in 1967, and in 1987 the United Nations Commission on Human Rights declared conscientious objection a human right.

Even though conscientious objection is ultimately an individual act and there have always been very different motives even in larger movements, conscientious objectors have certainly had an influence on politics and society. Here are some examples:

Gene Sharp (1928-2018) served 9 months in prison for conscientious objection during the Korean War in 1953. In the following years he studied intensively the research fields of civil

non-military defence and nonviolent action. Sharp took a pragmatic approach. In his major work "The Power of Nonviolence", published in 1973, he described 198 forms of nonviolent action and became an influential advisor to social movements and some governments. Among the pioneers of direct nonviolent action were quite a number of conscientious objectors.

Vietnam War: In the USA, millions of people protested against the US war effort in Vietnam, with a peak in 1967-1969. The movement failed to end the war, but shook the support of the majority population and the morale of the troops. 170,000 men were classified as conscientious objectors, and another 60,000-100,000 fled abroad, mainly to Canada and Sweden. Many sabotaged the conscription system, for example by burning draft cards and conscription papers. There were also acts of resistance against the war in the troops, including collective refusals to fight and the killing of superiors.

Federal Republic of Germany: As a lesson from fascism and militarism, conscientious objection was enshrined as a fundamental right in the West German constitution in 1949. From the late 1960s onwards, the number of conscientious objectors rose steadily to 150,000 annually in the 1990s. While they were viewed sceptically by the population until the mid-1970s, they gained increasing acceptance from then on, especially since almost everyone had positive experiences with the work of those doing alternative service in their everyday lives. In connection with the large movement against the NATO missile decision in 1981-1983, the mentality of large parts of the population changed: military interventions were rejected by the majority, non-military conflict solutions were preferred.

And last but not least, in Spain a massive civil disobedience movement lasting more than 10 years forced the abolition of compulsory military service in 2002. Approximately 50,000 young men refused the punitive alternative service, about 1,000 went to prison. You can find an article on the beginning of this movement here: <https://ebco-beoc.org/node/479>

Additional section (not included in the original talk): In the 1990s, there was a campaign for the reception of deserters and conscientious objectors from the states of the former Yugoslavia in Europe. The European Parliament passed a resolution to this effect in October

1993, and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe called on states not to deport these people in July 1994. In June 1994, civil society called on cities and municipalities in the Basel Appeal to follow the medieval tradition of hospitality and to invite deserters and objectors as guests; several German cities (Münster, Osnabrück, Bonn, Rostock, Freiburg) did so.