THE FIRST WORLD WAR INTERACTIVE

Conscientious Objectors

By the end of 1915, the supply of volunteers was not enough to replace soldiers being killed or injured.

The government believed it had the right to force people to fight and if necessary, to kill for Britain. Some people disagreed. Their consciences would not let them kill other people and so they objected. They were therefore called conscientious objectors or COs. There were about 14,000 conscientious objectors. A group of local people met as a tribunal to decide if the conscientious objectors had a case. Unfortunately, many of the tribunals were biased against COs. Many tribunals were made up of army officers.

Of the 14,000 who came before the tribunals:-
1400 received total exemption
6000 were sent to do work of 'national importance'
5000 were given fighting duties in the army
2600 had their cases rejected completely and were told they had to join the Army as regular soldiers. Most refused to do so.

From 1916 COs who refused to cooperate were sentenced to prison with hard labour.

TASK
Do you think the treatment of conscientious objectors by the government was fair?

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