

conscientious objection

THE TRIBUNAL

Task

Here is a group of documents that explore censorship and Press freedom during the First World War. They are centred around a newspaper produced by Conscientious Objectors and their supporters called "The Tribunal". The Tribunal was a newspaper that was printed under constant threat from the government, but still ran from 1916 to 1919.

Soon after Britain's declaration of war in 1914, a group of politicians, philosophers and reformers formed the "No-Conscription Fellowship" (NCF) in response to the possibility of Conscription, which threatened to force men into the army. Despite widespread opposition Conscription was introduced to Britain for the first time in 1916 and continued for the duration of the war. To keep their members up to date on what was happening to men who refused to fight for moral and ethical reasons - Conscientious Objectors (COs) - the NCF published "The Tribunal", which contained news, updates and opinion articles discussing what conscription was, the experiences of COs and how to peacefully end the war.

In 1918 printing press The Tribunal made on was destroyed by the government, but it continued to be printed until the end of the war. The British government said they believed in the "Freedom of the Press", which meant that Newspapers to print articles - so shutting down a newspaper was an unusual action.

Using the background material and sources write about what happened when the Tribunal was censored in 1917. Why was it censored? How did it happen? How and why did it carry on being printed?

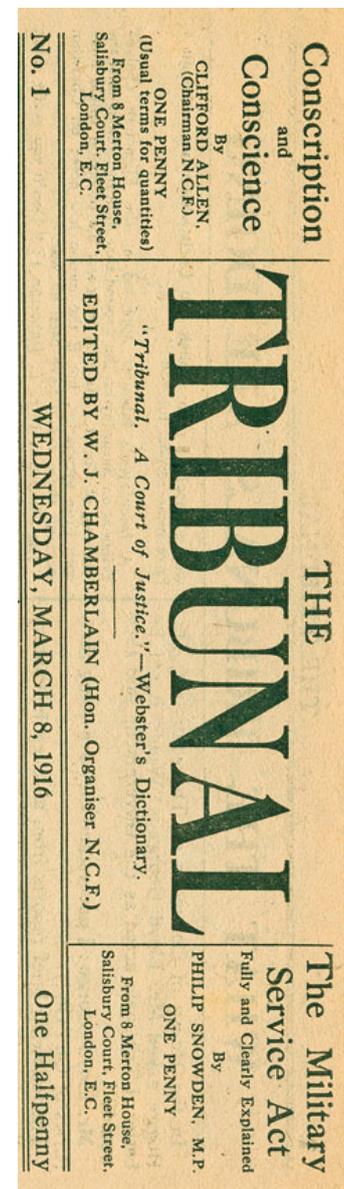
Following these points will help you get started:

1. Look through the sources and background material provided, making sure you understand what each source is, why it was made and who it was made for. Make a note of any different attitudes in each source.
2. Use the documents to answer the following questions:
 - What did the Tribunal Print?
 - What laws was it accused of breaking?
 - Why was it shut down?
 - How was it shut down?
 - What happened after the raid?
3. Based on the sources, and using your own judgement:
 - Did The Tribunal break the law?
 - Should it have been shut down, whether breaking the law or not?
 - How do you think the actions of the government affected the NCF?
 - What would you have done in their place?
4. Write an explanation of why The Tribunal was shut down. Do you think it should have been? Who do you think was right - the NCF for carrying on, or the Government for trying to stop printing?
5. "Freedom of the Press" is an important issue being discussed in Britain today. Using the sources and your own knowledge, can you explain:
 - Why do people consider "Freedom of the Press" to be important?
 - Is "Freedom of the Press" being threatened today?
 - Is press censorship a good or bad thing?

Was The Tribunal shut down for the same reasons as papers are today? (eg the "News of the World")

Documents:

- The Tribunal
- Censorship
- The Tribunal raided!
- Debates in Parliament
- The Tribunal returns



Background

Conscription and the No-Conscription Fellowship

At the beginning of the war in 1914, the British Army was entirely made up of volunteers - men who had joined the army for their own reasons. As the war ground on longer and longer huge numbers of British soldiers died or were seriously wounded. Though many men had volunteered at the start of the war, by 1915 the army considered that the numbers were no longer enough. As a result Conscription - forcing every man between 18 and 41 into the army - was introduced to increase army numbers in 1916. This was known as the "Military Service Act", which stated not just that men would be forced into the army, but they were already considered to be in the army, regardless of their positions or opinions!

Conscription was deeply unpopular. People from all over Britain with many different opinions on the war believed that conscription was wrong, and something that should be ended as soon as possible. Even pro-war politicians did not like conscription and were shocked when it was introduced (for the first time in British history) in 1916. Conscription was a huge change in British society. For the first time, a young man's life was not their own to live. Whatever his plans, hopes or dreams for the future, he would have to report to the army. Tens of thousands of these men died on the battlefields of the First World War.

Conscription was especially unpopular with people and groups that believed in civil liberties - that no-one should be forced to join the army - and with the many thousands of people who believed the war itself was wrong who would become Conscientious Objectors (COs). Many of these people joined the "No-Conscription Fellowship" (NCF) in 1914. The NCF was set up to try to stop the introduction of Conscription and carried out many protests and campaigns in 1914 and 1915. Unfortunately for the NCF Conscription was introduced despite their best efforts and, in 1916, the organisation changed its focus - to support Conscientious Objectors. One of these ways to support COs was the publication of a newspaper called "The Tribunal".

The Tribunal: a court of Justice

The Tribunal newspaper was published from 1916 to 1919. It contained news and updates on Conscientious Objectors and the laws that were passed in Parliament about COs and about Conscription. It was not just a news-sheet but a politically active paper that asked questions about whether or not conscription was right and exposed the harsh and illegal treatment of Conscientious Objectors. Published every week, it managed to keep running through donations and subscriptions to the NCF. With a circulation of around 10,000, what was written in The Tribunal was read across the country and it provided a valuable service in printing news about Conscientious Objectors that no other paper would print.

Censorship and the Tribunal

The Tribunal was under constant threat of censorship and suppression. The government used various laws (some are in the sources above) to try to find ways to stop the paper being printed. Its first editor was arrested and put in prison, and the offices were frequently raided and printing materials were seized. At the time newspapers were printed by setting text blocks to spell out the words - a police raid could result in not just copies of the newspaper being confiscated, but the type and printing machines themselves! On one raid, the printing press was stolen and broken up for scrap iron. As the police dismantled the machinery and again ransacked the NCF offices, one said 'We've done for you this time'. But three days later the next issue of 'The Tribunal' was published! The sources above tell the story one of the raids that the NCF suffered during the Government's attempt to shut down the newspaper.