

stuff

How conscription changed New Zealand society 100 years ago

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A government conscription poster outlining the requirements of the Military services Act

Penny Douglas recalls her grandfather, James Worrall, as a staunch Methodist with very strong Christian values.

"My memories of him were of a very gentle man, who was very strong in his ethics and his beliefs."

Sticking to those beliefs cost Worrall dearly in the years before, during and after World War I.

SUPPLIED

Conscientious objector James Worrall was among those to feel the force of the Military Service Act after it came into force on August 1, 1916.

As conscientious objectors, he and his brother William were imprisoned on Ripa Island, Lyttelton, in 1913.

They were sent down under "military escort with fixed bayonets" for breaching the Defence Act 1909, which created New Zealand's territorial force and introduced compulsory military training.

But it was another piece of legislation – which took effect 100 years ago on Monday – that would have an equally severe effect on the Worrall brothers and other "military objectors" like them.

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Peter Fraser, prime minister during World War II, was one of those imprisoned for questioning conscription in World War I.

Ancestry.com researcher Nigel Seeto says August 1, 1916 – the day the Military Service Act came into force – marked a significant watershed in New Zealand's World War I experience, and "is one of the most profound single dates of the Great War from the New Zealand perspective". It ushered in an age of conscription.

Before August 1916, the war effort relied on volunteers at Gallipoli, Egypt, and in the early days of New Zealand's presence at the Western Front.

But as fighting continued into 1916, there was a realisation that the war was likely to continue for a number of years.

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Conscientious objectors being put into uniform through "forced dressing" carried out by other soldiers.

Conscription was introduced when the number of volunteers for the New Zealand Expeditionary Force fell below requirements. By then only 30 per cent of men eligible for military service had volunteered.

Ad Feedback

The Military Service Act required all non-Maori men aged between 20 and 46 to register.

They were sorted into two divisions – the unmarried or recently married, and everyone else. Under the act, all registered men could be called upon for compulsory service with the New Zealand Expeditionary Force Reserve.

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"Field Punishment No 1" was a disciplinary tool used on conscientious objectors and others during WWI

Those who objected could appeal to the Military Service Board – on grounds of family hardship, public interest or religious objection – and about half of those called up did so.

Between the introduction of conscription and the end of the war two years later, almost 300 men were imprisoned for refusing military service.

Many more elected to take up non-combatant roles in New Zealand and overseas. Only 73 objectors were offered exemption.

Many conscientious objectors received military punishments, and were beaten and abused for their stance. All objectors not considered genuine were eventually imprisoned, and some, such as Labour MP Paddy Webb, were sentenced to hard labour.

In 1917, 14 of the most uncooperative objectors – including Archibald Baxter, father of poet James K Baxter – were forcibly sent to Europe to

In his memoir *We Will Not Cease*, Archibald Baxter recounted being tied to willow stumps as part of "Field Punishment No 1", which took place at "punishment camps" behind the battle lines.

"[The soldier administering the punishment] was an expert at the job, and he knew how to pull and strain at the ropes till they cut into the flesh and completely stopped the circulation ... I was alternately burning hot and shivering with cold, and the constant pain in my joints woke me whenever I did doze off from exhaustion ... When I was taken off, my hands were always black with congested blood."

DEPRIVED OF CIVIL RIGHTS

About 2000 "military defaulters" had their names published in the *New Zealand Gazette* from 1919 onwards.

But punishment for not serving did not end with being named and shamed. Those on the list were deprived of civil rights for 10 years, including the right to vote or hold public office. They could not be employed by the Crown or any local or public authorities.

Those defaulters outside New Zealand from late 1918 were prohibited from returning for 10 years.

Worrall was among those on the list, having been arrested as a deserter in September 1917 and sent to camp under escort.

But after enduring a decade of rights deprivation as punishment for his stance, he went on to be elected as a councillor for the Christchurch borough of New Brighton in 1933, and again in 1935. He died in 1967.

Douglas says she had been aware her grandfather was a conscientious objector but had not known how badly he and others were treated until she read notes and diary entries about the experience written by James's mother (her great-grandmother), Susan Worrall.

Susan took up the issue of her sons' treatment with the politicians of the day, writing in a letter to Parliament: "Mere boys, because they possess some character, because they hold fast to their principles and religious beliefs, are hauled before the police court, deprived of their civil rights and handed over to the tender mercies of the khaki-coated hypocrites with fixed bayonets."

Douglas says the "heart-wrenching" accounts shocked her. "No Western human rights group would allow that if it had happened today."

DESERTERS' FATE

Running away from the war was no guarantee of freedom or a long life, as three West Coast men discovered.

Vincent Carroll, Thomas Kiely, and Patrick Skinner took to the bush in April 1917 to evade military service. They were camping about 50 kilometres from Ikamatua railway station, south of Reefton, and were said to be working as "bushfellers".

But on November 1, 1917, Carroll was struck on the head by a falling tree limb and died the next day.

Kiely and Skinner took his body to Reefton, and were arrested under the Military Service Act.

Ancestry.com researcher Nigel Seeto says the pair "did the honourable thing".

"It was an incredible act of decency, in that they knew they were essentially sacrificing their freedom to do the right thing by their friend. It paints a different picture of the type of men these guys were."

Kiely was sentenced to three months' hard labour for desertion and sent to Trentham military camp. While there, he was sentenced to a further two years' hard labour for "disobeying commands".

Skinner allegedly deserted again. It is assumed he then began using a false name, and nothing more is known of his fate.

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