# THE CENTURY OF TOTAL WAR

## *Resistance by disobedience as a British tradition*

*In this series of* Peace News *articles, Hugh Brock describes some of the people and movements involved in non-violent civil disobedience in Britain during this century. He takes as his starting point the revolt against the Military Service Act in World War I, in which such veteran Aldermaston marchers and direct actionists as Fenner Brockway, Bertrand Russell, J. Allen Skinner and Harold Steele were involved.*

THE extent to which the present-day non-violent civil disobedience movement has its roots firmly planted in a revolt against Government policy during World War I is probably unknown to many in Britain today. That such is the case I shall be showing in this series of articles, based on notes made during my two months in Brixton Prison last year and brought out with me on my release.

**By**

**Hugh Brock**

At the beginning of World War I the Society of Friends (Quakers) was notably the body ready and organised for radical action. Three hundred protest meetings against the war were held in the first five months, and a Service Committee, composed largely of young men of military age, was appointed with the dual function of helping and advising all who desired to take up relief work or engage in peace activity.

When in July, 1915, National Registration (a forerunner of conscription) was ordered by the Government, the Quaker Service Committee recommended members to register, but to add these words:

> " Whilst registering as a citizen in conformity with the demand of the Government, I cannot conscientiously take part in military service, in any employment necessitating the taking of the military oath, nor in the production of materials the object of which is the taking of human life."

Full scale non-violent civil disobedience came when Regulation 27C—which ordered that no pamphlet dealing with peace or war should be issued without first being passed by the Censor—was promulgated.

### Disobey it

The Government was told the Quakers would disobey it :

> " We realise the rarity of the occasions on which a body of citizens find their sense of duty to be in conflict with the law, and it is with a sense of the gravity of the decision that the Society of Friends must on this occasion act contrary to the regulation, and continue to issue literature on war and peace without submitting it to the Censor. . . (The Society) is convinced that in thus standing for spiritual liberty it is acting in the best interests of the nation."*

The Government ran into trouble in trying to enforce the law against the Quakers. Proceedings taken against two women who distributed *A Challenge to Militarism* were dropped when the Government found that 20,000 members of the Society of Friends were ultimately responsible for its publication and that most of the Committee involved in its publication were already in jail for civil disobedience against the Military Service Act.

Ultimately proceedings were taken against the Chairman and two Acting Secretaries of the Service Committee.

The main revolt in World War I, however, centred around opposition to the Military Service Act. Quite early in the war the possibility of conscription led to the formation of the No Conscription Fellowship.

Principally composed of young Socialists and Quakers who had responded to a letter sent to the *Labour Leader* by 26-year-old Fenner Brockway in 1914, the NCF declared that in the event of conscription members would refuse to bear arms and would " oppose every effort to introduce compulsory military service into Great Britain."

### If arrested

In its organisation the NCF drew on the experiences of the Sinn Fein and the Suffragists (some of whose young women were prominent in the new body).

As with the Direct Action Committee in 1959, all responsible officials were provided with " shadows " who could take on their duties at a moment's notice if they were arrested.

The Fellowship's first convention, held after the introduction of conscription, was attended by 2,000 young men, most of whom were " deemed to be enlisted."

The press had done its best by inciting mob violence to prevent the gathering. A hostile crowd gathered outside Devonshire House, the then Quaker headquarters near Petticoat Lane and London's East End.

Shouts coming through the windows almost drowned the presidential address by Clifford Allen, a former student of University College and Exhibitioner at Peterhouse, Cambridge, as he moved the adoption of the following declaration:

> " We, representing thousands of men who cannot participate in warfare, and are subject to the terms of the Military Service Act, unite in comradeship with those of our number who are already suffering for conscience' sake in prison or the hands of the military.
>
> " We appreciate the spirit of sacrifice which actuates those who are suffering on the battlefield, and in that spirit we renew our determination, whatever the penalties awaiting us, to undertake no service which for us is wrong. We are confident that thus we are advancing the cause of peace and so rendering such service to our fellowmen in all nations as will contribute to the healing of the wounds inflicted by war."

To avoid provoking the crowd further delegates waved their handkerchiefs instead of cheering the speakers.

The Government set out to smash the movement. The whole National Committee, with the curious exception of the Chairman, was summoned for issuing a leaflet *Repeal the Act*. Eight members were fined a total of £800. It was agreed that five should refuse to pay the fines, and on July 17 Fenner Brockway (Secretary), W. J. Chamberlain (Editor of the weekly *Tribunal*), W. H. Ayles, A. Barratt Brown, and John P. Fletcher surrendered to the police.

### ' Underground '

B. J. Boothroyd became acting editor of the *Tribunal*, subsequently produced " underground " after the police had smashed up a printing plant with sledgehammers. Copy for each week's issue left the NCF office enveloped in the clothes of a baby whose mother was a surprisingly frequent visitor, and the paper continued to reach 100,000 readers.

Later the Hon. Bertrand (now Earl) Russell was fined £100 for writing a leaflet describing the victimisation of a conscientious objector.

The civil prisons and military guardrooms filled—prisons in which conditions were appalling, for the reforms of the Twenties were yet to come.

For their first month civilian prisoners spent 23 hours 10 minutes out of each 24 in solitary confinement and hunger, with the silence rule as the crowning terror of the regime. (" That must have been a terrible experience," the Governor of Brixton Prison was to say in 1960, deeply moved when J. Allen Skinner told him that he had been in prison 43 years previously.)

By various subterfuges the silence rule was broken by both prison officers and prisoners. But Stephen Hobhouse informed the Governor that he did not intend to obey the silence rule. As a consequence he lost all privileges—all visits and letters—and was kept in solitary confinement.

### Eight months

Fenner Brockway did the same, earning eight months solitary with three months bread and water.

" Solitary " and " bread and water " were given freely by Governors caught up in the nation-wide wave of patriotic hysteria and ready to inflict the maximum punishment on these young rebels — many of them already physically exhausted from previous experiences at the hands of the military.

From the close of 1917 deaths in prison or after release on medical grounds became a common event, finally totalling 71. Many escaped death only to have their health ruined.

Clifford Allen was at one time kept in an underground cell in Newhaven Fort, a candle stuck in a bottle revealed mildew walls, dripping with damp, the only ventilation a small opening near the ceiling giving into the guardroom of the fort. He was to be released in 1917 suffering from TB.

Another whose life was suspended on a slender thread for some years was J. Allen Skinner. (A post office clerk for ten years before imprisonment, he had never lost a day's work through illness.)

Sentenced to 253 days imprisonment in Wormwood Scrubs in 1916, he suffered terribly from hunger and cold throughout a bitter winter, collapsing after exercise from faintness.

His sentence completed in March, 1917, he continued his civil disobedience when called up again for military service. He reached Wandsworth prison to serve a second sentence on April 12.

" At Wandsworth," John W. Graham wrote in 1921, " he began to have a festering sore in the palm of his hand. The doctor ascribed it to a strained tendon. He was put into a hospital cell, locked up by himself. He was almost incessantly hungry. He began to have an inflamed arm and knee. These were both wrongly and persistently diagnosed as rheumatism. He served his second sentence of one year—commuted to 141 days—and was taken by ambulance, under escort, to a London hospital.

### Suffering

" Finally surgical TB was confirmed. Amputation of the elbow would have taken place but that the knee would have continued as a centre of the trouble. The elbow was operated upon twice, next year the knee joint also. In January, 1920, on crutches and wearing a heavy splint, he obtained work; at the end of February, 1921, operation on the other leg was necessary. . . . What the end of this prolonged suffering will be we do not know. Surgical TB is a poverty disease, due to underfeeding and lack of light, air and exercise."

The festering sore in his right hand flared up again just before he entered Brixton Prison in 1959. He protected his paralysed left arm and its fragile elbow joint with a sling when taking part in the Ministry of Defence sit-down on February 18, 1961.

*Next week: The Aldermaston marchers who were once sentenced to death.*

---

**Meeting for Sufferings, December* 1917, *later endorsed by the Quakers' Yearly Meeting.*

Dortmunder Tageszeitung

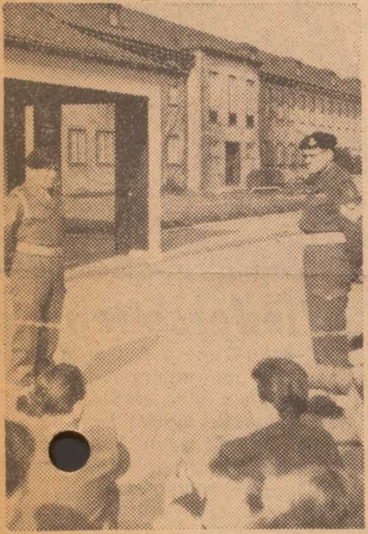
16/3/59 west deutsche allgemeine (spd nahe)

# General mit Totenkopf führt Protestmarsch an

# 50 Demonstranten legen sich vor Kasernentor

## Britisches Unterhausmitglied nimmt am Sitzstreik teil – Ein Mann festgenommen

**Immer schärfere Formen nehmen die Protestaktionen der Dortmunder Bevölkerung gegen die Raketenstationierung an. Nach einem Protestmarsch durch Brackel und einer Kundgebung auf dem Marktplatz demonstrierten am Samstag etwa 50 Teilnehmer auf eigene Faust vor dem Flugplatz. Vor dem Kasernentor traten sie für etwa eine Stunde in den Sitzstreik. Erstmals seit Beginn der Protestwelle nahm die Polizei einen Demonstranten vorläufig fest.**



*UNBEIRRT schaute die englische Wache den Demonstranten zu, die eine Stunde lang vor dem Kasernentor sitzenblieben.*

Über 500 Männer und Frauen, überwiegend Mitglieder der „Internationale der Kriegsdienstgegner", nahmen an der Kundgebung und dem polizeilich genehmigten Protestzug durch Brackel teil. An der Spitze des von einem starken Polizeiaufgebot begleiteten Zuges trugen vier Männer auf einem Holzgestell eine lebensgroße Puppe in Generalsuniform mit einem leuchtend weißen Totenkopf. Unter dem Arm hielt die Gestalt eine Atomrakete.

Sprechchöre forderten immer wieder: „Raus mit den Raketenwaffen, wir wollen für den Frieden schaffen!" und „Höre uns, Minister Strauß, aus Deutschland die Raketen raus!" Während der Kundgebung und des Protestmarsches kam es nicht zu Zwischenfällen.

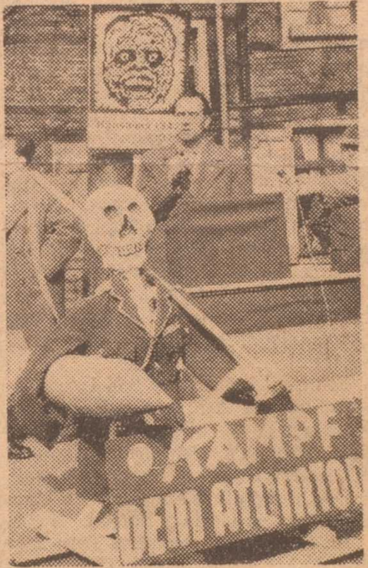
### Ansprache verboten

Nachdem sich der Zug auf dem Marktplatz aufgelöst hatte, marschierten etwa 50 Demonstranten zum Flugplatz. Dort kam es dann zu dem „privaten" Sitzstreik. Der englische Unterhausabgeordnete Stuart Morris, der an der Tagung der „Arbeitsgemeinschaft deutscher Friedensverbände" im Reinoldi-Saal teilgenommen hatte, versuchte, vor dem Kasernentor, über einen Lautsprecherwagen eine Ansprache zu halten.

Die Dortmunder Polizisten hinderten ihn jedoch daran, worauf sich Morris stumm zu den Streikenden setzte. Als einer der Demon-

Friedensverbände" waren am Samstagnachmittag 300 Zuhörer in die Reinoldi-Gaststätte gekommen. Eine Vertreterin der Weltorganisation der Mütter forderte dabei die Frauen auf, ihre Gewissen gründlich zu prüfen, bevor sie es zuließen, daß ihre Söhne zum Kriegsdienst herangezogen würden.

Oberkirchenrat Kloppenburg forderte ein neues politisches Klima, das von Haß und Verketzerung frei sein müsse.



*AN HIROSHIMA mahnten bei der Kundgebung Plakate und Handzettel. Vor dem Rednerpult, von dem gerade der Bundesvorsitzende der Internationa-*