

Text of Talk from Hannah Brock at the Centenary Conference of Northern Friends Peace Board, held in York on 15th June 2013

Conscientious objection to military service and beyond

The book of Isaiah tells us that there will be a time when we will beat our swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks; when nation will not take up sword against nation, and we will not learn war any more.

I want to pose a question, and come back to it later.

The question is this: How do we learn war?

In this talk I want to give an introduction to War Resisters' International, give updates about the situation for conscientious objectors (CO) to military service around the world now, and look at what it might mean to be a CO today - for you and me in York, in a country that doesn't force us to do military service.

War Resisters' International is an antimilitarist and pacifist network with over 80 affiliates in 40 countries around the world. We've been going since 1921. We're the kind of secular equivalent of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, if you like, although naturally many people working from a faith motivation have been involved, including myself.

War Resisters' International exists to promote nonviolent action against the causes of war, and to support and connect people around the world who refuse to take part in war or the preparation of war. On this basis, WRI works for a world without war.

We currently have two staff members - myself and my colleague Javier. Javier runs the nonviolence programme, which encourages and equips social movements to use nonviolence.

I run the Right to Refuse to Kill programme. This programme focuses on conscientious objection and counter-recruitment. We support conscientious objectors around the world.

Now I've already used a bunch of words that would have my friends in the pub looking confused. I want to explain them so we're all on the same page.

What do I mean by anti-militarism?

Anti-militarism is more than being anti-war.

By militarism, I mean: the idea that armed violence can solve problems; the visibility of machines that can hurt and kill people; and the willingness to use them. More particularly in contemporary Britain, militarism is the belief that we need to maintain a strong armed forces in order to 'defend' us against perceived enemies.

On these foundations are built armies, the justification for waging war, and a militarised culture, which includes heroic ideals of strong and sacrificial males, a respect for blind hierarchy, and the production of an enemy – because for militarism to be most effective, it must have something which it is perceived to be defending us against. In this country at the moment, I would argue that this is often Muslims.

Anti-militarism reject this, and tries to live the alternative, embracing nonviolence.

I also used the words conscientious objection. Most people know what they think CO means. Some people

say it's cowardice. Some people would say it's a luxury that we can ill afford. Some people say it's a human right.

I don't think any of those definitions work. Quite simply, for me it's not just about the right of one person to refuse to kill other people. It's about not wanting other people to kill those people, either.

'The pioneers of a warless world are the young men [and women] who refuse military service' said Einstein. He saw them, and I guess I see them, as prophetic.

Conscription and situation for COs today

Refusing to participate in one of the most obvious manifestations of militarism was once, and in many places remains, conscientious objection to military service.

We haven't had conscription in this country for a very long time. It's hard for some people to believe that conscription is actually alive and well. In about 65 countries worldwide, and many more where conscription can be easily enacted in a state of emergency.

- In Turkey, COs are subject to what they call '[civil death](#)': unable to register a child, to work in government agencies, to leave the country, and at constant risk of arrest.
- COs in Israel are subject to repeated imprisonments. [Natan Blanc](#) has just been imprisoned for the 10th time in quick succession.
- In [Eritrea](#), conscientious objection is not recognised. COs and draft evaders are imprisoned in Sawa military camp, many of them tortured. At least four have been there since 1994.
- In [Turkmenistan](#), families of COs who complained to the UN Human Rights Committee having been tortured, were tortured themselves, seemingly as a reprisal for this action.
- In Colombia – COs are very at risk during [batidas](#) – press gangs – where young men are rounded up on the streets and taken to the military.
- In [Greece](#), since the beginning of the year, seven COs have been arrested

All take place in countries that have conscription, but that do not allow, or have a severely restricted substitute (or 'alternative') service. This is the service that international human rights standards require governments to provide for conscientious objectors. Many Quakers in WWI and WWII have taken up this substitute service, though many also didn't.

Those who do not take up this substitute service are known as total objectors. There are many reasons why someone may become a total objector. These include:

- Sometimes, like in Armenia, the alternative service is actually still run by the army.
- In others, like in Israel, where the Border Police have actually counted as part of the civilian service, are outside of the military, but are still roles using institutionalised violence.
- Moreover, there is the argument that alternative service *only exists* because of compulsory military service – so taking part in it actually perpetuates conscription.
- Others regard such substitute services as essentially forced labour – and argue that no state should have the right to deprive its citizens of the right to where their labour goes.

At the moment, total objectors are under [house arrest](#) in Finland, amongst other countries.

You'll find in our most recent magazine [an article](#) about how boycotting the alternative service really caused the disruption, and eventual end, of conscription itself.

What about in those countries, like the UK, where conscription has ended?

Conscientious objection for professional soldiers

- Firstly, everyone has the right to change their religious beliefs – this includes to develop a

- conscientious objection to military service, having joined the military voluntarily
- Many people in the military have no idea that these rights exist.
- Many of you may have heard of Kimberly Rivera, a CO in the USA. Kimberly wasn't told that conscientious objection existed by the chaplain who she went to to explain her problems with her position in the army during the Iraq war. She like many other, just went AWOL and fled to Canada. She's now in a military prison in the States, pregnant.

What do anti-militarists and pacifists do now?

In most cases, conscription did not end because antimilitarists 'won' the debate. It ended because to wage war, a conscript army was no longer needed.

In fact, in most countries, it was the military that pushed for an end to compulsory military service as part of a drive to professionalise the military. For the desired lean, mobile, and professional military, ready to engage in military operations all over the globe, conscription was seen [not as an advantage but as a burden](#).

Warfare is moving towards highly-skilled – highly and lethal – weapons like drones, usually carried out by small groups of soldiers or paramilitaries.

It might look, then, that militarisation has decreased – since compulsory military service was the most obvious and ubiquitous way in which the military was a presence in most peoples' lives for a very long time.

But does this mean that pacifists and conscientious objectors can shut up and go home now conscription has finished? Very much no.

In the UK and across the world today there are new forms of militarism to work against. Some of these forms are more subtle, more dangerous, than conscription ever was.

Simone de Beauvoir famously wrote that 'One is not born but become a woman.'

I'd like to suggest that 'One is not born but becomes a soldier' – even in places where we are not ourselves conscripted bodily. Our minds many still be conscripted.

So how does this happen? How are we 'taught war'?

With the end of conscription, the armed forces now have to ensure that we learn war, since they face the challenge of recruitment.

The armed forces' presence in the lives of young people is now crucial.

- This means that in Harringey, near where I live, army cadets in their uniforms help shoppers pack their bags and request donations for the Royal British Legion.
- This means that in Germany magazines for teenagers publish advertising for boot camps, run by the military, that promise white water rafting, extreme camping, and other excitements.
- This means that, according to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the free-to-play computer game "America's Army" – which was developed by the U.S. Army – was, in 2010, a more effective recruiting tool for the Army than all other Army advertisements combined.

The presence of the Armed Forces in the public sphere more generally – through advertising on TV, public billboards, magazines and newspapers, but also through use of public space for military parades and ceremonies – and especially the presence of Armed Forces in educational institutions – schools, colleges and universities – is crucial for the military to create a culture and environment favourable to recruitment.

As the head of the UK's army recruitment strategy put it: '*Our new model is about raising awareness, and that takes a ten-year span. It starts with a seven-year-old boy seeing a parachutist at an air show and*

thinking, "That looks great." From then on the army is trying to build interest by drip, drip, drip.' (Colonel David Allfrey, New Statesmen, February 2007).

So, this presence of the militarisation in different parts of our lives: **entertainment, fashion, education, media, charities**, etc, etc – also has the effect of normalising and making the military uncontroversial. A sort of neutral, even benevolent, institution.

I would include in this things like the charity Help for Heroes. Criticising groups like this can make one extremely unpopular, but it is possible, and it needs to be possible, to say that people who have been hurt and maimed in war should have the best of care – but that this can take place outside the realm of an uncritical support for armed conflict. Affirming the role of the armed forces - not asking why these people are getting hurt and killed in the first place - is one of the impacts of charities like Help the Heroes and The Soldiers' Charity.

To return to the issue of the militarisation of youth: WRI has a new stream of work that we call [countering the militarisation of youth](#). This looks at the many and diverse ways in which young people around the world are encouraged to accept the military and military values as normal, and worthy of their uncritical support.

This week we've launched a book called '[Sowing Seeds: The Militarisation of Youth and How to Counter It](#)'.

The seeds of militarisation are planted and replanted long in advance to yield the crop of conflict and war and provide a supply of human and material resources to the world's armies.

We called it 'sowing seeds' as it a book about these seeds of war, planted in the minds of children – a kind of fertile earth.

It is also a book about another kind of seeds — the seeds of resistance to this military drip — which, we hope, it will help disseminate around the world.

I confess that I was also inspired to suggest this title by Advices and Queries 31:

31. We are called to live 'in the virtue of that life and power that takes away the occasion of all wars'. Do you faithfully maintain our testimony that war and the preparation for war are inconsistent with the spirit of Christ? Search out whatever in your own way of life may contain the seeds of war. Stand firm in our testimony, even when others commit or prepare to commit acts of violence, yet always remember that they too are children of God.

Our work is not only about documenting the militarisation of youth, it's also about taking direct action against it. As in all our work, we exist to connect and support the people that are already doing it, in order to make them more effective.

For instance, in Germany, students have protested against the presence of the military in their schools. Students when I was at the University of Durham took part in direct actions at careers fairs when arms manufacturers were. This is the youth protesting itself, not older people rejecting the militarisation of youth on their behalf.

Yesterday was the [International Day of Action For Military-Free Education and Research](#). Activists in around 11 countries took action to highlight and oppose the militarisation of education and research. These ranged from film showings, to street theatre, to public demonstrations, to going to talk to students in schools about like in the military.

We hope that this first day of action will next year be a week of action, with even more countries taking part.

So **resisting the militarisation of young people** is one way in which pacifists can reject militarism now.

There are of hundreds course others.

These include:

- Tax resistance – or to give it its full title 'CO to tax for military purposes'. I'm reminded of being told recently that 'They no longer need to conscript us in person, they conscript our money.' We may not be there in person, but our money contributes to drones, Trident, and those army recruitment campaigns I've described.
- It also relates to how you earn your living. What does your company, school, charity or other organisations contribute towards? And what does it invest in? You can also encourage others to consider these issues. The [Action AWE](#) campaign regularly leaflets workers at Aldermaston and Burghfield nuclear weapons facilities, telling them 'Talented people need useful jobs', and encouraging them to put their engineering skills in particular towards green energy.
- Also include your political life: campaign against the arms trade, military interventions from Western power, and the like.

I'm going to stop there. I want to leave you with the idea that conscientious objection can go beyond military service, into our everyday lives.

I'll finish with the words of Moriel Rothman, a 'traditional' CO, who refused to join the Israeli military last year, and after leaving prison for the second and last time last year, wrote:

"I affirm and expand my belief in love and humility and honesty and gentleness as methods of change and revolt, and also a hope that the respectful discourse generated around my action will continue, and that our society and world will become a drop less violent and militaristic and myopic and hateful, and that we shall beat our rifles into stethoscopes, place our bombs in sealed glass cases as tragic memorials of times in which burning other human beings seemed normal, and we shall learn war no more, or at least a little less."