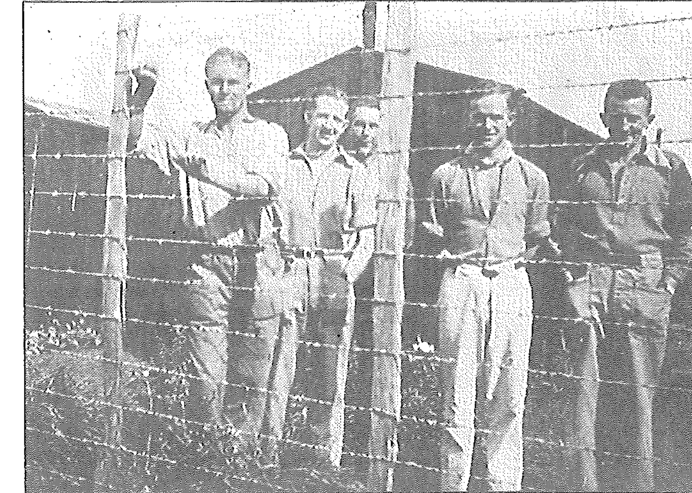
In good conscience



War-time judgments: John Johnson driving for the Quaker ambulance service in China in the 1940s, and conscientious objectors interned at the Hautu military defaulters camp, near Lake Taupo, 1943.
Photos: Alexander Turnbull Library and John Johnson

A heated debate in The Press demonstrates that the passing of the decades has not cooled the feelings over war-time conscientious objectors. MIKE CREAN reports.

John Johnson is proud of his war service. Like many New Zealanders, he went overseas in World War 2. Unlike many New Zealanders, he was a conscientious objector (CO).

Johnson served with the Friends Ambulance Unit. He drove trucks ferrying medical supplies in China. It was perilous work and unpaid. The casualty rate was higher than in some military units, he says.

Johnson felt compelled to tell of his war experience when angry letters to the editor recently appeared in The Press, following John Minto's Anzac Day column depicting COs as war heroes. Minto touched a raw nerve. Many of the letter writers condemned his view in strong terms.

COs attracted public odium, even hostility, when their fellow men marched off to two world wars. The letters suggest such feelings persist. Why should this be — so long after World War 1, to which Minto was referring; so long after World War 2, from which surviving "conchies" are now in old age?

Canterbury University history professor John Cookson says New Zealand's bond with Britain lay behind its commitment to fighting in the world wars and its resentment of COs.

"Imperial patriotism was a very powerful emotion in the period leading up to World War 1. Some of that remained up to the 1940s. 'Home' (Great Britain) meant a heck of a lot and 'Home' was under direct threat in 1940-41," Cookson says.

He notes that fellow historian James Belich showed the 1920s and 1930s to be "a period of recolonisation", when New Zealand's identification with Britain was strengthened.

Ties with Britain spurred the Government to commit New Zealand heavily to World War 2. Leaders such as Peter Fraser and Bob Semple had been imprisoned for opposing involvement in World War 1 but introduced full-scale conscription in 1940. They saw the first war as a capitalist exercise but the second as resisting Nazism's threat to civilisation.

Cookson notes that Australia did not impose conscription for overseas service because of the divisiveness it caused in World War 1. Canada introduced it as late as 1944.

After treating COs inhumanely in World War 1, New Zealand "bungled" their treatment in World War 2, Cookson says. Some members of Parliament were concerned for the plight of the COs and senior minister Walter Nash apologised for it. A review of systems for handling COs, late in the war, was tacit acknowledgement they had been harshly treated, Cookson says.

The resulting improvements minimised problems for men who refused to do compulsory military training in the 1950s.

Cookson estimates that two-thirds of COs detained in defaulters' camps were "religious zealots" from minority sects. Others came from mainstream churches, especially Methodist, while some were non-religious humanitarians. All showed "courage to stand against the moral mainstream of society".

Cookson has been surprised at the vehemence of letters to The Press condemning COs. He feels the letter writers are not representative of modern society. He says New Zealanders have poor understanding of conscientious objection.

Johnson agrees. Few people realise what Quaker ambulance unit members endured, he says. Of his experience in China, he says that distances were vast, trucks unreliable, roads treacherous. The Americans were to the south; the Japanese in the east. Communist forces were preparing for civil war against the republicans in the north.

Johnson was there because of his moral and religious objections to war. Had he not been a Quaker, he might well have been among the 800 COs cutting scrub in defaulters' camps in the central North Island, he says.

Quakers were granted special consideration by boards that heard appeals against military conscription. Quakers were seen differently, because of their long tradition of humanitarian service in wartime. Most were directed to essential work. They were banned from universities and were not allowed to receive more pay than soldiers got. But they did not get too hard a time, Johnson says.

After doing surveying work near Kaikoura, he volunteered for the driving job in China. He worked there from 1943 to 1947.

Will Foote, a retired Christchurch teacher and author, traces development of New Zealand's anti-war movement, beginning with the lone voices who criticised Britain's campaign against the Boers in South Africa, around 1900.

By the time of World War 1, two threads of protest had emerged. One demonstrated a strong Christian non-violence ethic; the other a socialist view of the war as an imperialist exercise to secure markets.

The movement was reviled in World War 1, reveals Archibald Baxter, a well-known CO , in his memoirs. Some COs were "railroaded" overseas to war zones. Many were imprisoned in New Zealand. Their treatment was savage.

Foote was not religious but developed an ethical stance against war during student days in Christchurch in the 1930s. He became active in the Peace Pledge Union, speaking on street corners and distributing pamphlets. He refused his call-up for military service, in obedience to his conscience.

COs felt the Labour Government was "backsliding" from its former pacifist stance to hold on to power, he says.

The treatment Foote received from officialdom varied from sympathetic to abusive. He spent most of the time in defaulters' camps in the North Island backblocks, cutting scrub and weeding flax clumps in swamps.

The worst parts, though, were being judged insincere by the ("farcical") review panel which heard his case, seeing his mother suffer and his family split, having children withdrawn from his school, being dropped from his cricket team, losing his job and being unable to teach again until 1949.

Some returned servicemen and the newspaper Truth pushed the view that COs were shirkers and cowards resting on couches, Foote says. The reality was hard labour, minimal food, cold huts, censorship and remoteness from families.

Critics did not understand that killing, violence and war were not the best way to confront tyranny, says Foote. He argues that evil threats, such as Nazism, are best confronted by peaceful means, and that although the process may take longer, it is less costly in human life.

Foote declined the option of a non-combatant role in the army, as even this would have compromised his principles.

"It was a difficult decision but I saw (the medical corps) as part of the war machine, repairing people to put them back into the slaughter."

He volunteered to work in mental hospitals but was turned down. The authorities needed to show that COs were being punished.

Foote, 86, is still involved in peace groups. He says COs lost touch with one another in the 1950s but many later joined the anti-nuclear movement.

Their type may not be seen again. Only intense propaganda could stir modern New Zealand to conscription for war, says Foote. Besides, he adds, modern warfare does not require masses of combatants.