Reclaiming the lost voices of the conscientious objectors

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The Peace Pledge Union has been awarded a Heritage Lottery Fund grant to help undertake the Objecting to War project.

Over 16,000 men registered their commitment to peace after the introduction of conscription in 1916. Many were imprisoned for their beliefs, subject to threats of execution and to torture. Over 100 would die as a result of their objection. After the war they were often shunned and their experiences untold, but their contribution to the causes of human rights and prison reform as well as their tireless campaign for peaceful solutions to world problems ensures they are an important part of 20th-century history.

Objecting to War will focus on unearthing the lives and stories of these Conscientious Objectors who came from all walks of life and all areas of London. Each individual had their own reasons and motivations for refusing conscription and we want to discover what those were. Was it for religious reasons? Was it for political beliefs? What happened to them, during and after the war? Why were they so dedicated to their refusal to kill?

Ben Copsey, Project Officer of Objecting to War, commented: "Objecting to War will help volunteer researchers to uncover the relevance of these forgotten stories to the world today through our focus on the narrative of the life of a CO during the First World War, from surveillance, harassment and unfair trial, to imprisonment, torture and - in some cases - death. We will focus on the stories of these brave men and women who stood up to be counted as against militarism, conscription and the atrocities of war."

Carole Souter, Chief Executive of HLF, commented: "The First World War is an incredibly complex and multifaceted part of our national story - a collection of millions of experiences brought together as a result of this momentous conflict.

"The forthcoming Centenary provides the ideal opportunity to examine all those stories and HLF is committed to enabling as many to be explored as possible through the funding of projects – big and small. Little is understood about the experiences of many conscientious objectors and we are pleased that the Peace Pledge Union will be working on new research that will help us all to understand this better."

Objecting to War will provide research skills training to interested groups through the provision of workshops and public meetings. They will work with the wider public in order to involve local communities in the stories of Conscientious Objectors from their areas and connect the stories of individuals to the wider issues raised by anti-war activism from 1914 to 1918.

The project will work with interested schools and teachers to produce resources to accompany the history curriculum, allowing the story of conscientious objection to be explored in schools, providing a view of this relatively unknown part of the First World War.

Objecting to War will highlight the experiences of those conscientious objectors who lost their lives due to their refusal to

take another's. An exhibition centred on the existing memorial plaque to these men will focus on the narrative of the life of a CO during the First World War.

Alongside the exhibition, an accompanying website will explore the fascinating story of men and women such as politicians Fenner Brockway and Alfred Salter, and suffragette Sylvia Pankhurst who supported conscientious objectors through political, media and financial campaigns.
working for peace without violence.

Notes to Editors

HLF awarded this grant of £95,800 in July 2013.

About the Peace Pledge Union
The Peace Pledge Union (PPU) is the oldest non-sectarian pacifist organization in Britain. It arose partly from base laid by the No Conscription Fellowship during the First World War and is committed to renouncing war and militarism while campaigning for a better, peaceful world. Visit the PPU website for further information.

HLF is deeply committed to helping people to learn about and tell the stories of the First World War and has already invested more than £35m into projects – large and small - marking the Centenary. Projects include £4.5m to the Imperial War Museum for its new First World War Galleries and £12.5m to secure the future of the last survivor of the Battle of Jutland, HMS Caroline.

Further information

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