

***Shirkers! Why did seven million men not enlist voluntarily in Kitchener's army, 1914-1915?*** – STUART HALLIFAX

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The United Kingdom fought the first eighteen months of the Great War with an entirely voluntary army and navy. The recruitment of nearly 2.5 million men as volunteers before conscription was introduced in 1916 was unprecedented in British history and has been greatly discussed since. The question of why more than seven million military-aged men *did not* enlist, however, has rarely been asked. The absence of conscription at the start of the war and the later ability to appeal against service allows the historian a greater insight into British men's feelings about the war and 'duty' in it than is possible in other countries.

A recruiting officer wrote in 1915 that all men should be seen as individuals rather than simply as potential recruits if the attempt to enlist them was to succeed. Likewise, we cannot simply view the men of 1914-15 as potential recruits; rather they were individuals making a decision on how to act in a time of national crisis. In looking at the reasons for non-enlistment, we naturally cannot literally look at every man individually, not least because little written evidence remains about the motivations of non-enlistees beyond conscientious objectors, an important but minor group among the mass of civilians. Through a mixture of national trends and local examples, though, we can gain some insight into attitudes in the period. Looking at reasons for non-enlistment and appeals against military service we can look at these men's decisions as resulting from a variety of factors, albeit under the pressure of wartime, rather than simple acceptance or rejection of the war and military service.

Fundamentally, the reasons given by men appealing against their call-up in 1916-18 reflect many of the concerns that had kept them and others out of the military during the voluntary period. While it was legitimate (legally if not socially) to simply object to the

war and particularly to taking part as a soldier, though, a broader array of factors presented themselves. The foremost among these factors were business and domestic factors, particularly economic; prior to conscription, however, domestic, familial and social pressures could and did act both for and against enlistment beyond financial concerns. Among the most elusive non-enlistees are those men who simply did not want to fight. In addition, it is worth considering the number of men who had been rejected either permanently or temporarily from service, and their position in the remainder of the voluntary period.

By treating non-enlistment as a conscious and often informed decision, rather than simply a rejection of what should be a foregone conclusion, we can understand the feelings of the time in greater depth. In this way we can look beyond ideas of a 'war fervour' and opposition to it, and understand more fully the competing emotions engendered by the start of the Great War.