

Personal Experience with Conscientious Objection

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When I decided to object to military service, this was in the context of the Cold War in the late 1970s, in a neutral country (Austria) with mandatory conscription for all young men. Alternative service (Zivildienst) had only become a possibility a few years before (1974), and the image of COs in society in general was that of “cowards”, no “real men”, trying to escape their “duty towards society and the state”. It was also at a time when the first concepts of “comprehensive defense” were introduced in Austria, adding economic, civilian and mental national defense to the dominant military defense. And when I finally was called up to do my alternative service (in the office of FOR Austria, by the way), a new one-month course for COs in preparation for civilian defense became mandatory.

After many discussions in FOR Austria and with a group of like-minded colleagues I refused to attend part of the course and went to the peace week at the Austrian Study Center for Peace and Conflict Resolution instead. This was an experience that contributed strongly to my wish to work for active nonviolence and peace since then.

The number of conscientious objectors has increased up to 40% and their image has changed significantly in the past 40 years.

I wrote an article last year for the German magazine "FriedensForum" about "Voluntary Services as an Alternative to Military Service" which is available here <https://www.friedenskooperative.de/friedensforum/artikel/freiwilligendienste-als-alternative-zum>)