

Anarchists before the military tribunals, 1914-1918



A short account of the hearings of two anarchists in front of the courts during World War One

Because of the decision in 1921 by the Ministry of Health to destroy all records of exemption at the Military Tribunals including those of all objectors much archival evidence has disappeared. A few caches of documents, including those in solicitors' files, still exist and of course there is still the testimony from the British press of the period, both national and local.

Below are two examples of anarchist opposition to the First World War as illustrated by newspaper reports. The first example is the hearing for an active anarchist at the Newcastle Military Tribunal, which became infamous for its harsh rulings. Unfortunately the name of the appellant is not included in the newspaper report.

The Newcastle Daily Journal of Tuesday March 28th 1916 carried a report on the hearing the day before of an active anarchist in front of the Newcastle Military tribunal under the title "Anarchist As Conscientious Objector".

The appellant was described as an attendant cook on the dining cars of the North Eastern Railway. He is described as an absolutist, i.e. an objector who refused any alternative employment connected to the war effort. He said that he could not take human life, and could not, under any circumstances, help in any war. He objected to helping the wounded, because that would free someone else for the military effort.

He was asked by the Chairman of the Tribunal: "Do you object on Christian grounds?". To this question he replied: "I am not a Christian. I object on moral grounds." It was commented on that it was late in the day to voice such opinions, to which he replied: "I held the same opinions during the Boer War. I have been attached to the anarchist groups in the various towns in which I have lived".

The appeal was turned down and he was recommended for non-combatant service.

Another case concerns the Burnley weaver and anarchist Arthur Riley, born in 1887 .This is a particularly heart rending scenario and highlights the hardheartedness of the officials of the Military Tribunal. At the Burnley Borough Police Court , Riley described as 30 years old and formerly of 115 Abel Street, was charged with being an absentee from the Army Reserve since June 28th. The Chief Constable testified that Riley had had four notices sent to him to appear. He was sleeping outside Burnley to avoid arrest. He told the special constable who arrested him at 77 Barden Lane on June that “ I suppose you know I have very strong opinions on the military service question”. He asked if it was necessary to arrest him that day as he had some arrangements to make for his brother.

In court Riley objected to being sworn, saying that he did not believe in a God. He was allowed to affirm. He then made a long statement , saying that he was the sole support of his family. One brother was only able to work occasionally. Another was crippled and could not work whilst Riley’s mother had been afflicted with chronic rheumatism and under these circumstances he had applied to the Tribunal for exemption on two grounds, domestic and as a conscientious objector. This was withdrawn the previous March when cases of single men under 30 years of age were reviewed. At that time the brother who was occasionally able to work left home and all the responsibility for his mother and disabled brother fell on him. He said that the proceedings at the Military Tribunal had been a farce and he was not even allowed a hearing. His objections as a conscientious objector were refused.

The magistrates’ clerk stated that since then Riley’s mother had died, so there were no grounds for his exemption. Riley said that he had written to his local M.P. and received exemption until May. He had arranged to sell the family house worth £35 but for which he only got £5.10 shillings. In the meantime his mother had died in the infirmary of neglect and shock. He had to find a home for his crippled brother. He could not attend his mother’s funeral because he had no assurance from the military authorities that he would not be arrested there. it would have been unfair for those who attended if a scene had been caused by his arrest. (“Anarchist and Atheist”, Wednesday September 5th, 1917, Burnley Express and Advertiser) He then described himself as an “anarchist absolutely” and as an atheist. He was then fined 40 shillings and handed over to the military authorities.

Riley was later a founder member of the Communist Party. He was a founder of the Burnley Worker’s Students Association and often spoke for it as well as being a tutor for the National Council of Labour Colleges for a long time.

Nick Heath