

THE RIGHT TO CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION IN EUROPE: A Review of the Current Situation



Quaker Council for European Affairs

Preface

Aware of the fact that conscientious objectors are still treated harshly in some European countries and that the right to conscientious objection is not even recognized in all the member states of the Council of Europe, the Quaker Council for European Affairs commissioned this report to highlight the problems which still remain in Europe with regard to the right to conscientious objection to military service.

This report provides an overview of the current situation in Europe. In recent years many developments have taken place with regard to conscription and conscientious objection. Several European countries have suspended conscription although by 2005 most European countries still maintain conscription and most European young men are still liable to perform military service. In many countries, particularly in Eastern Europe, the Balkans and the former Soviet Union, both legal regulations on the recognition of the right to conscientious objection and actual practice are changing quickly. In other European countries, the right to conscientious objection is still not recognized fully or at all and governments persist in harsh treatment of conscientious objectors.

Although there is a wealth of information available about conscription and conscientious objection in some countries, surprisingly little is known about others. Moreover, there is no recent comparative survey on conscientious objection in easily accessible format. The last survey of this kind was published in 1998 by War Resisters' International ('Refusing to bear arms - a world survey of conscription and conscientious objection to military service'), which answered the need of many organisations working on issues of conscription and conscientious objection. This present report - although being geographically limited to Europe - will hopefully answer a similar need.

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The Quaker Council for European Affairs (QCEA) was founded in 1979 to promote the values of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in the European context. Our purpose is to express a Quaker vision in matters of peace, human rights, and economic justice.

QCEA, based in Brussels, is an international, not-for-profit organisation under Belgian Law.

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About the author

Marc Stolwijk (b. 1969) studied political science at the University of Amsterdam, after which he was called up for military service in 1993. Instead he performed one year of substitute service at the office of VD, the Dutch Union of Conscientious Objectors. He has published regularly on conscientious objection since then and he was the co-author of 'Refusing to bear arms - a world survey of conscription and conscientious objection to military service', published by War Resisters' International in 1998. He has worked for various human rights and peace organisations and is currently working for Campagne Tegen Wapenhandel, a Dutch NGO campaigning against arms trade.

About this report

This report draws on many different sources including information published by national governments and ministries of defence; reports published by the United Nations Committee on Human Rights and the Council of Europe; reports of human rights and refugee support organizations; newspapers and other media sources; information published by War Resisters' International and the European Bureau for Conscientious Objection, the two leading international NGOs working on conscientious objection; and websites and publications by national CO organizations. In addition, national CO organisations have been contacted and asked to provide additional information and to correct draft versions of the country reports. All sources are specifically mentioned in the footnotes to the country reports.

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